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***The Struggle Against the Trans Israel  
Highway***  
***Documenting an Environmental Struggle***  
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**The Struggle Against the Trans Israel Highway  
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## Abstract

This study surveys in detail the moves taken in opposition to the Trans-Israel Highway project over the years 1993—2002. Many bodies, mostly environmental, took part in the resistance, which comprised actions in numerous fields – planning, professional, legal, public, political, and economic, as well as direct actions.

Features of the Trans-Israel Highway project, as powerful economic forces massed behind the project, being a part of a national scheme and a government company specially established for advancing the project, had made the struggle against the project extremely difficult.

The struggle against the Trans-Israel Highway is unique among social-environmental struggles in Israel, in its complexity, scope, duration and character.

Missing from this struggle were an organized, long-term action plan; a coordinating body focused exclusively and continuously on opposition to the highway; effective collaboration among the various bodies opposing the highway; an organized knowledge base; and continuity of action.

Despite the struggle's failure to halt construction of the central section of the Trans-Israel Highway, it did score some long-term achievements in: changing public opinion and influencing decision makers over the issue of investment in paving roads versus investment in public transportation; introducing innovative tools for the environmental movement's activities in Israel; creating inter-organizational connections; creating a linkage between environmental and social issues; and placing the environmental issue on the public agenda.

Even though this study is, in essence, an accurate documentation of the campaign, including all its stages and details, the conclusions presented in the discussion can be used to outline several guidelines for future environmental campaigns: “keeping a finger on the pulse” by examining long-term construction and development plans in order to respond on time; defining a clear and agreed upon objective for the struggle and a plan of action to achieve it; continuity of action and “struggle recollection”; coordinating the actions of all organizations involved in the struggle through a coordinating body or through effective

communication between the organizations; maintaining a clear and organized knowledge base; and higher professional standards in political, planning and professional activities.

### **Conclusions: Guidelines for the Next Struggle — Possible Lessons for the Future**

- 1. Keeping a finger on the pulse** — Examining long-term construction and development plans in order to respond at the right time, instead of too late. It seems that this point has been evident in the activities of the environmental movement in recent years.
- 2. Defining a clear message for the long-term struggle, until the goal is achieved** — unequivocal agreement regarding the goal, the ability to achieve the goal and the means for doing so, together with a time table for promotion.
- 3. Continuous, ongoing activity, and documenting the “struggle’s memory”** — when a decision is made to define an issue that is important enough to warrant a struggle, a long-term plan of action must be organized as well as preparations for its continuous achievement. Such continuity is also reflected in having a “struggle memory,” to preserve the knowledge accumulated during the struggle thus facilitating its use in the future.
- 4. Uniting forces of bodies active in the field** — Coordinating actions through a coordinating body or through effective communication between the organizations; avoiding power struggles resulting from unrealistic expectations among colleague organizations or other behaviors that frustrate successful collaboration.
- 5. Clear and organized knowledge base** — The core of the struggle, its motives and methods for achieving its goal, previous actions and professional information must be continuously documented and be accessible to all bodies and the public at large.
- 6. Planning committees** — Becoming allied with coalitions within the committees in order to successfully deal with ruling authorities.

7. **Work among professional decision makers** — More sustained, professional activity that bases itself, when needed, upon the guidance of research institutions – by planners, functionaries in relevant organizations (for instance the Jewish National Fund or National Parks Authority), and officials in relevant government ministries.

# The Trans-Israel Highway — Status Assessment

Yossi Shak<sup>1</sup>

The Trans-Israel Highway has opened for traffic and is now an established fact. In conversations with people, mainly with those who travel the route, again and again one hears that the highway is an Israeli transportation success story. The road is straight and wide with abundant interchanges and bridges, and there are almost never any traffic jams; therefore, traveling the route is fast and saves a lot of time. The scenery is beautiful, and the landscaping at the sides of the road is extremely impressive.

This is a thought provoking reality that begs for a new and updated assessment of the situation—mainly by advocates for the preservation of nature and the environment (including me), who have opposed the paving of the highway and have waged a sustained and sometimes aggressive public and media struggle. It is also the appropriate time to reexamine the key questions that stood at the base of our struggle against the decision to develop the highway: Will this highway indeed solve transportation and traffic congestion problems, particularly entrance to cities? What influence will this highway have on the quality of our lives and health from the aspects of noise, air pollution, and water sources? Is it not preferable to invest in the widespread development of rail transportation – the train – before investing in the development of new highways? Are there not some public and social shortcomings to the paving of a toll route—for the rich only? Is not the designation of land that supports the overpopulation of the last remaining open areas in central Israel for the sake of income producing real estate ventures an irreversible planning and environmental error?

Let me first say that the answers to most of these questions are neither simple nor unequivocal; some will become apparent only over time. In any case, I will try to examine some of them.

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Indeed, traveling from the Afula or Haifa areas in the direction of Beersheva via the Trans-Israel Highway – avoiding the traffic jams of *Gush Dan* – is a pleasure; you quickly arrive at your destination and save a lot of time. However, from the standpoint of the national interest in developing transportation infrastructure, the burning issue that requires a thorough and immediate solution is, ironically, traffic overload and congestion at the entrance to cities. This continues to be a daily nightmare for thousands of drivers and employees arriving late for work. Throughout the struggle against the highway we have emphasized this point at every opportunity. And what does the future hold, as more and more new cars take to the road? But here, take a look at what is happening with train travel – it’s a true success story! It is a fact that more and more people are commuting by train – to Haifa, Tel Aviv, Beersheva, and Ben-Gurion Airport. It’s too bad that Jerusalem, the capital, is still not accessible by train. It is truly remiss that in Tel Aviv there is no public rail transportation.

Another matter, offensive in the public sense, is the private business sector’s glorification of the highway as an economic success story. The truth is that most of the highway’s commuters who willingly pay the high toll charge are in fact well-to-do, or receive refunds for their daily commute to work. Many others who pay the toll out of their own pockets are forced to cut back on their use of the highway, and are forced to continue crawling along the “regular” roads.

Regarding the influence on the quality of the environment by paving a major highway abounding with cement and asphalt: How can we measure the cumulative negative effect—from the contamination of land, air, and sources of water – on our future health? How can we come to terms, realistically and with clear conscience, with the loss of a variety of plants and wildlife, habitats and greenery? How can we accept the Trans-Israel Highway’s solution of “replaced nature,” planting and landscaping along the length of the highway and at interchanges – as pretty and successful as this may be?

Take a look at the declining status of established cities resulting from the development of suburban settlements, gas stations, stores and shopping centers, which have sprouted up near new expressways like mushrooms after a rainfall. The result: An “epidemic” of small business and store closures in city centers, and the continued degeneration of the city street as an essential, lively setting for social encounters.

There are those who gauge the success of an environmental struggle by the public's involvement and identification with its cause. Indeed, in this struggle against the highway we have invested much thought, resources, and means – mainly through the help of young activists who have devoted themselves tirelessly and selflessly to the cause. We attempted to raise a struggle that would assume its place on the public and media agenda, sometimes successfully and occasionally less so.

In my opinion, analyzing and understanding the struggle against the Trans-Israel Highway by comparing it to classic “nature preservation” struggles seeking to protect Israeli nature and scenery (like the successful struggle to protect wildflowers, or the struggle to protect public beaches in Israel, which happily resulted in the passing of the Beaches Law in the Knesset) – is problematic. This is mainly due to the real difficulty in broadcasting a clear and incisive message explaining, “why this highway is bad” along with the reasons for opposing its construction. Any sort of comparison between the results of this struggle and the results of other environmental struggles in which there was no such public relations difficulty necessitates, I believe, a deeper and wider examination. This examination must come from other directions and clarify the starting points and public relations realities – so complex and frustrating at times – of all the organizations and groups who opposed the highway throughout the struggle.

The first important matter that arises from this aspect is the global reality and the extent of Israel's affiliation with this reality. The Trans-Israel Highway served its initiators and supporters – in government, public authorities, and mainly people within the Trans-Israel Highway Company, responsible for paving the highway; this is a powerful expression of the desire to be part of the larger, modern and multi-system global world. The highway served the Israeli need and legitimate desire to successfully execute, here at home, a giant infrastructure project that seemingly is in tune with this fascinating world. Our planet is constantly teeming with activities and mutuality between the needs and interests of nations, corporations, and individuals within several influential dimensions, national and international – the political dimension, security, economics and finance, and the innovative technological dimension. All this ties in with the Government of Israel's decision to establish the highway while simultaneously promoting the enactment of a special law (1994) for developing and paving the highway.

The Trans-Israel Highway, due to its very existence, granted its initiators and those responsible for paving it their longed for sense of identification and connection with the modern day global world. This sense was at the base of the sweeping claim, unjustified and irrelevant, that all those who oppose the highway are opposed not only to the need to establish the highway, but are also against the idea of a global world; therefore, the struggle of these objectors, they say, is illegitimate and misdirected, the actions of a band of agitators predisposed against progress and development.

Another matter, which for two decades has been associated with the global world, is the environmental dimension, whose importance is rising from a worldwide aspect. The environmental dimension is the central theme of the struggle against the highway. The Trans-Israel Highway and the decision to establish it express the conflict that arises each time between the two extremes: the need for construction and development on the one hand, and the need to protect the environment, nature, and scenery on the other. This conflict has been amplified due to the huge scale of the highway, its layout, and its impact on open areas running along the entire country.

The paving of the highway, for both its supporters and detractors, is a classic Israeli example of an issue that is nationally significant and controversial. On one side stands an infrastructure/technological creation of imposing dimensions, tying together interests that serve transportation, economy, and security; and on the other side stands the uncertainty linked with the highway's future environmental impact. Like any other multidimensional global issue which becomes an arena for conflicting interests, the participants in this particular struggle – supporters and detractors alike – have become representatives of more than merely a battle over “yet another highway,” but of a clash between two worldviews.

Thomas L. Friedman, in his fascinating book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, provides a description of global environmental dilemmas: “Once when I was in Jakarta, I met with the Indonesian head of the World Wide Fund for Nature and Environmental Quality and I asked him: “*How does it feel to be an environmentalist in an expanding market? Doesn't it feel like being the loneliest man in town?*”

“*We are in a constant race against development,*” he sighed, “*and we unable to convince the public at large that prudent development, from an environmental aspect, is a viable method of human activity. But plans for building roads, factories*

*and power stations are greatly overtaking us. Here we suffer from unemployment, so any entrepreneur that spreads around promises of jobs is immediately supported. When this happens we are immediately branded as being against jobs and development, and are treated like we just don't understand anything. But the destruction and ruin is spreading fast and is often irreversible,"* he added.

*"If you've lost a mountain, you've lost the mountain – you can't grow a new one. If you cut down forests, you could try to grow them again, but you'd lose the biological diversity – the plants and the wildlife. I'm afraid that within a decade we'll all finally be environmentally aware, but there won't be anything left to protect."*

An essential and interesting question is: "What would be the correct thing to do today if the struggle would begin anew?" For struggles such as the one against the Trans-Israel Highway, in which the strength of the establishment and the power of the rich private sector have seemingly overcome arguments in support of nature and scenery, the important lesson for advocates of nature and the environment is: they must act and respond swiftly. It is important to develop capabilities and cultivate familiarity, not only with environmental matters, but also in the areas of politics, public relations, economics, and business; all these will refine and improve abilities to effectively and swiftly confront opposing sectors, government and private, interested in paving and developing the highway.

The struggle against the Trans-Israel Highway should serve as a lesson and basis for future action, meant to exploit the processes of globalization (which necessitate combining funding, politics, and technology with environmental issues), and which must be channeled towards advancing environmental struggles. Green organizations must become more sophisticated and multifaceted, and develop the capacity to run a media and public relations campaign that also requires fundraising; such organizations stand the best chance of influencing decisions of ruling authorities and corporate firms, perhaps even changing those decisions. They could create a new dynamic, where environmental protection and the preservation of nature become shared and advantageous goals whose achievement *also* reward corporate firms, with environmental goodwill and profitability. This would increase the likelihood of creating a convergence of interests – between decision makers in ruling institutions, corporate firms, and entrepreneurs who engage in investment

and development, and environmental organizations and bodies interested in the preservation of nature and the environment.

The paving of the highway and its subsequent operation are perceived by many as proof of the total failure of environmental organizations in their struggle against it. In retrospect, many say (including supporters of the struggle from its inception) that instead of a generalized and multi-argument struggle – doomed to failure – against the building of the highway, it would have been better to oversee a struggle that was more focused, and simpler for explanation and persuasion; a struggle focused on protecting those areas in the path of the highway that are especially sensitive from a landscape aspect, e.g., the beautiful Ramot Menashe area (“Israel’s Toscana”) over which another section of the highway (section no. 18) will be paved in the coming months.

There are others who view matters differently, and I am among them; the Trans-Israel Highway has been paved and is an established fact. But this is not the sole indicator of the success of the struggle against the paving of the highway. Decision makers and society, mainly its younger members, have to a great extent internalized the need for balanced development that encompasses long-term and comprehensive vision – necessitating an intelligent and sensitive attitude towards the protection of nature, landscape, and the environment. I am confident that our struggle against the Trans-Israel Highway has played no small role in this.