

After rockets, farmer races to recover before going fallow

With the agricultural sabbatical year looming, Boaz Boyman scrambles to harvest his vineyard with a little help from some city folk

BY MELANIE LIDMAN | September 15, 2014, 10:02 pm |

There's an advantage to having an Iron Dome air defense battery parked right next to your vineyard: the loud whoosh from a launch as it sets out to intercept rocket fire from Gaza gives you a few seconds' head start before the Code Red siren begins to wail.

For Boaz Boyman, who owns a 60-dunam (15 acre) vineyard in Tkuma, a religious moshav seven kilometers (4.3 miles) from the border with Gaza, that was the routine this summer: hear Iron Dome launch, dash for safety, listen for the siren and hope the rocket won't strike your property (if Iron Dome missed it or allowed it to fall in unpopulated "open areas," which sometimes include agricultural fields).

The rocket fire has since stopped, but Boyman now faces another challenge from above: the biblical decree to let his field lie fallow, a once-every-seven-years tradition that will come into force when the Jewish calendar year starts on September 24.

With Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, looming, Boyman and other farmers around the south who observe stringent *shmita*, or sabbatical year, practices are scrambling to make up for a summer lost to the Gaza conflict.

"All night there were explosions because the Israeli tanks were next to the area, and inside the moshav itself there were 150 soldiers staying here, so there really was an atmosphere of war," Boyman recalled. "It was a really difficult time, a lot of anxiety and pressure, and because of these difficulties it created even more pressure on the schedule after the war."

Boyman was able to keep working most of the summer, though not at full power. He had trouble getting full teams of workers because many refused to show up, and had to pay higher wages to those who did show up due to the danger of working in open fields during the fighting.

"The workers — some of them were really scared, you see it in their eyes," he said. On days when the rocket barrage from Gaza was especially fierce he canceled work altogether.

Farmers are still assessing their damages across the south so it's hard to know the extent of the setback, said Amnon Liebermann, spokesman for Agriculture Minister Yair Shamir (Yisrael Beytenu). Farmers submitted claims for war damage until early September, and the ministry is still examining those claims, he said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already allocated NIS 200 million (\$55 million) for the agriculture sector on the Gaza periphery as part of his NIS 1 billion aid package for the south.

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“Farms that were really on the border with Gaza, they stopped working,” Boyman explained. Since Tkuma is not on that first line of farms adjacent to the Strip, it kept working throughout the summer. “We would try to let the workers go early, but we tried to stay in our routine as much as possible.” He still hasn’t calculated how much money he lost during the summer, but it’s clear to him that it is a significant amount.

Boyman was lucky since neither he nor his workers suffered physical injuries during the conflict with Gaza. Their closest call came when a rocket crashed through a greenhouse just 20 minutes after some of his workers left.

The timing of the shmita year, though, is less fortuitous for him.

This year is the seventh year in a septennial cycle when Jews observe the tradition of a sabbatical year called “shmita,” which means “to release.” According to tradition and the Torah, farmers have to let their land lie fallow for a year, to allow the earth to rejuvenate. Some farmers do continue to work with their crops during the sabbatical year, relying upon a legalistic loophole — a complicated temporary transfer of ownership approved by rabbinical councils. Boyman observes more stringent laws for a number of reasons, including the fact that some people especially prize wine made from grapes grown “in holiness” during a sabbatical year.

During the shmita year, farmers must do the minimum possible to keep their crops alive. For example, Boyman is allowed to water his vineyard, but may not prune it.

Vineyards need dramatic pruning in the winter in order to produce grapes the following year. Normally, Boyman prunes his vineyard over a leisurely three-month period from January to March. The grape harvest is in July and August. But this year, Boyman has to finish the winter pruning by Rosh Hashanah.

In addition to the funds lost to the war, the summer before a sabbatical year he always loses money, because he begins harvesting the grapes before they’re fully ready in order to try to get all of the pruning done before Rosh Hashanah. Boyman gets paid for his crop based on the quality of the grapes, and grapes harvested before they are fully ripe have less sugar and are therefore considered lower-quality, he said.

As he was racing against the clock to get his vineyard ready for the sabbatical year and reeling from the events of this summer, representatives of a new organization approached Boyman and made a strange offer: 40 young Tel Avivians were willing to come down and work for a few hours for free, armed with shears and sunscreen, to try to make some headway on his winter pruning.

OneDay Social Volunteering, which launched in February this year, has created a community of young people who can drum up a large amount of manpower for one-day service projects. The Tel Aviv branch of the group has painted a women's shelter, volunteered at an animal shelter, beautified a south Tel Aviv community center, and packed 1,500 crates of supplies for soldiers during the war, said co-founder Guy Seemann, a 29-year-old immigrant from New Jersey. There are currently branches in Beersheba, Haifa, and Sydney, Australia, in addition to Tel Aviv.

"Elad [Blumental, the co-founder] was in New York for a year, and when he got there he was looking for a way to make friends, and he also wanted to learn about the community," said Seemann. "He built his own little group of volunteers they would go around and hang out, and when he got back to Israel he knew it would be really effective here as well." Blumental approached Seemann, who had recently organized a grassroots voter education movement for immigrants called "Kol Oleh," and the two started working on organizing OneDay. Now they have grown to a volunteer staff of more than 25 people with 600 participants in Israel. They briefly had branches in Jerusalem and San Francisco, but those branches are currently going through a rebuilding process.

The organization is filling a sincere need. As the war raged in Gaza this summer, donations poured into the Jewish National Fund: food, clothes, toiletries, anything concerned citizens thought the soldiers could use. JNF had truckloads of supplies, but no way to organize it. That's when the group approached OneDay, which showed up at a Tel Aviv hotel with 50 volunteers. Within three hours, the goods were packed into 1,500 crates and on their way down south. OneDay runs about three events a month, and is holding its first fundraising event on September 19 at Rosa Parks, a bar in Tel Aviv.

Generally OneDay partners with established organizations, which provide equipment and transportation. OneDay provides the manpower. The goal is twofold: fill a concrete need while creating a community of like-minded people, especially for immigrants to Israel who are having trouble connecting to a large network of friends.

On Friday morning, as the first rays of the sun peeked over the Arzolorov parking lot, 40 bleary-eyed volunteers got on the bus for Tkuma for a OneDay event sponsored in cooperation with Nefesh B'Nefesh. At Boyman's vineyard, he passed out the pruning shears, showed the volunteers where to cut — "one sprout, two sprouts, snip" — and sent them to work.

'I wanted it to be a small group. I was worried that I

Boyman said in the beginning he was hesitant to turn over his crop to a large group of people who had never worked in a vineyard before. "I was really worried," he said. "I

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wanted it to be a small group. I was worried that I didn't have enough pruners, that it might be hard to control. But people were really serious," he said.

For two hours, they attacked the grapevines, snipping their way down the rows in pairs, chatting in Hebrew and English and Hebrish about life in Tel Aviv and books and video games and life as the row of shorn vines grew.

For many, it was a chance to express support for a battered southern Israel. "I have been in the south during rocket attacks, so I know the feeling [of sirens]," said 29-year-old Or Golan, a regular volunteer with OneDay. "I was in the center [of the country] for the war; we had a few sirens, but not like down south where they had something every few minutes."

"Even though it was really hot and it was physical work pruning the vines, it was trip with an important goal," he added. "It's like a type of therapy. Me and my girlfriend had a competition with the other rows; we wanted to do it as fast as possible."

All in all, the group pruned about five dunams (out of 60) in those two hours.

Boyman isn't sure if he'll finish pruning the entire vineyard before Rosh Hashanah, though other volunteer groups have also approached him after hearing about the OneDay event. "Still, it's a push in the right direction," he said.

'I'm a teacher, but for my soul, I own a vineyard'

Despite the difficulties of the summer, the financial uncertainties, and the stress of preparing for the sabbatical year, Boyman, who is also a Jewish texts teacher and administrator at a middle school in Netivot, wouldn't trade his vineyard work for anything. "We have a sabbatical year so the land can rest, but also so the farmers can rest as well, like Shabbat," he told the group. "I'm a teacher, but for my soul, I own a vineyard."