

Planning for Generations to Come

By Dan Rabinowitz

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In May of this year Nira Lamay, an employee of the Coming Generations Commission, was invited to a conference in Hungary. The conference was devoted to the possibility that the European Union will establish an ombudsman for the issue of coming generations. In Brussels, too, they realize that every day throughout the world, thousands of actions are taken whose effects will be felt only in the distant future, and that the cost-benefit calculations that guide these decisions take into account only their immediate costs. Part of the price will be paid in the future by successive generations - that is to say, the children of today, or even by future generations that have not yet been born.

The organizers had good reason to invite Lamay: Israel is the first country in the world to have recognized the government obligation to coming generations, and has even established for them by law an office in the present: The initiator of the idea, Yosef Lapid, at first wanted to establish a statutory corporation, on the model of the National Council for Civil Research and Development, a body that would advise the government and the Knesset in every case in which a governmental action could affect the coming generations.

The most recent State Comptroller's Report, incidentally, also recommends the establishment of an advisory body on matters of coming generations alongside the one that exists in the Knesset. In practice, when the legislative process began to roll in 2000, the vision shrank and instead of a government corporation, only a commission in the Knesset was set up. Now this relative weakness appears critical: Knesset Speaker Dalia Itzik is working toward eliminating the commission or burying it as a sub-unit of Knesset research unit.

Israel is a strange phenomenon. It is a country that arose Advertisement as a historical rectification for thousands of years during which the Jewish people lacked a state entity, but it behaves in the shortsighted worship of getting things done right away. On the one hand, it embarks on panicky enterprises that will be mourned for generations, such as the draining of the Hula Valley or unnecessary wars in Lebanon. On the other hand, it drowses over important projects that will serve many generations, such as the underground transit system in Tel Aviv, a solar power station in the Negev or a national program to conserve water.

It is not clear why Itzik is acting to eliminate the commission. What is clear, however, is that if she succeeds, she will deliver a mortal blow to

long-term planning in Israel. One of the groups that is especially worried about this possibility is the environmental community, which sees in the Coming Generations Commission a key element in the effort to institute a sustainable development policy in Israel.

"Sustainability" is a key concept in contemporary environmental thinking, which in Israel has yet to win the recognition it deserves. The concept is economic in origin and it is relevant to a society that is profitable today but is not sustainable.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, the human race has stopped living off the interest of the earth's assets and is biting into the capital - a practice that in effect is transforming it into a biological species that is not sustainable. Some of the core human activities even harbor a paradox: the more profitable the activity from the economic perspective - for example, the production and consumption of vehicles - the more it bites into the earth's resources, in this case the atmosphere, which is harmed by greenhouse gases. Another example is the cutting down of the forests, which does yield profits for corporations and governments but depletes the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere, damages the global ability to absorb carbon oxides and accelerates global warming.

The principles of sustainable development, which have been adopted by the United Nations and most of the countries of the world, enable economic development that is based on the interest, rather than the capital, of global resources. In many cases this is possible, but it requires significant shifts in awareness, planning and implementation. If Itzik's move to eliminate or weaken the Coming Generations Commission succeeds, the Knesset will be sending the message that Israel is continuing to act like a short-distance runner. It is necessary to strengthen the Coming Generations Commission, to focus its operating methods and to expand the obligation on the part of the government, local government and the business sector to listen to it. It must not be the case that for the sake of several hundred thousand shekels that will be transferred from the commission to the Knesset's operating budget, Israel will relinquish a unique tool of such great practical and symbolic significance.