

**X. Interview With Tzemah Ishai, Former Water Commissioner
August 25, 1991**

1. Personal background: immigrated from Tunisia in 1946, high school education in Tunisia. After immigrating he was involved in the small moshav movement of the Progressive Party called the Zionist Worker Moshav movement. He was among the founders of the Ihud Haklai, which included moshavim of the Zionist Worker and private farmers. His background in water issues: represented the Ihud Haklai moshavim in the Water Council, and the various water committees and hearings. When Simcha Erlich was appointed as the Minister of Agriculture, he was picked to be the Water Commissioner (Sept. 8, 1981). He replaced Meir Ben-Meir.

2. This was a political appointment, but according to Tzemah Ishai, he was supported by the entire agricultural sector, although he did not come from the Labor party. It should be emphasized that some of his strongest supporters came were from the Mapam kibbutzim (Yoram Tamari, the representative of the Hashomer Hatzair and others). He was also supported by the agricultural right: the Ihud Haklai and the Farmers Association. Pesah Gruper was the President of the Farmers Association and he was also a Knesset Member, largely active in water issues.

3. He had a friendly relation with Moshe Nissim for more than 30 years. (Moshe Nissim the senior politician from the Liberal section of the Likud party) was the major sponsor of Tzemah Ishai. It was Nissim who recommended Ishai to Erlich when he was Minister of Agriculture and Nissim continued to defend him against his various critics). Ishai defined his relation with Nissim as friendly but not extremely close, they did not meet on social occasions, but they would invite each other to weddings and other family ceremonies). According to Tzemah Ishai, Nissim supported him because of his professional qualifications.

4. According to Tzemah Ishai he implemented all the plans for utilizing marginal and additional water resources, including the Gush Dan reclamation project, the Lower Galilee Project and also build the "fourth unit" in Kinnereth. All these projects added to the water potential of Israel, was not specific how much.

The reservoirs on the Golan add some 20 MCM.

5. Pointed out that there have been frequent debates between various experts about the water potential of Israel. For instance, after his appointment, in 1981 there was a big discussion among Tahal, the Hydrological Survey and academia, as to the water potential: they variously estimated it between 1.6 billion CM and

2 billion CM. The variable estimates made it hard for him to make allocation decisions.

6. The "debate with the professors" in 1986 followed the draught in this period. The professors wanted him to cut 400 MCM, but "we went to the government" and reduced it to 200 MCM. We managed to beat the professors. The professors are part of the counter-lobby that, according to the former Water Commissioner, fought against him. The other elements in this lobby were the media, the Tsomet party, and the ecological groups. On the other hand, the representatives of the local authorities have always supported the Commissioner.

7. The Water Commissioner hear "something" about the green house effect, but he never thought about including it in long or short term calculations. Could not comment on the possibility that the frequent and unprecedented draughts may be related to global changes.

8. All the figures are included in his response to the Comptroller's Report (the blue book). He does not see himself as responsible for the degradation of the aquifers, asked to comment on the question as to who might have been responsible for the situation in the aquifers, he responded " the professors" , but would not elaborate.

9. The water consumption in the West Bank is 70 MCM for agriculture and 40 MCM for domestic use. In the Gaza strip 80 MCM goes for agriculture and 15 MCM for domestic use. The overall production capacity of the Gaza aquifer is 50 MCM, thus the number represents almost 100% of overpumping. The Israeli authorities offered subsidies to stop pumping of water in the Gaza strip.