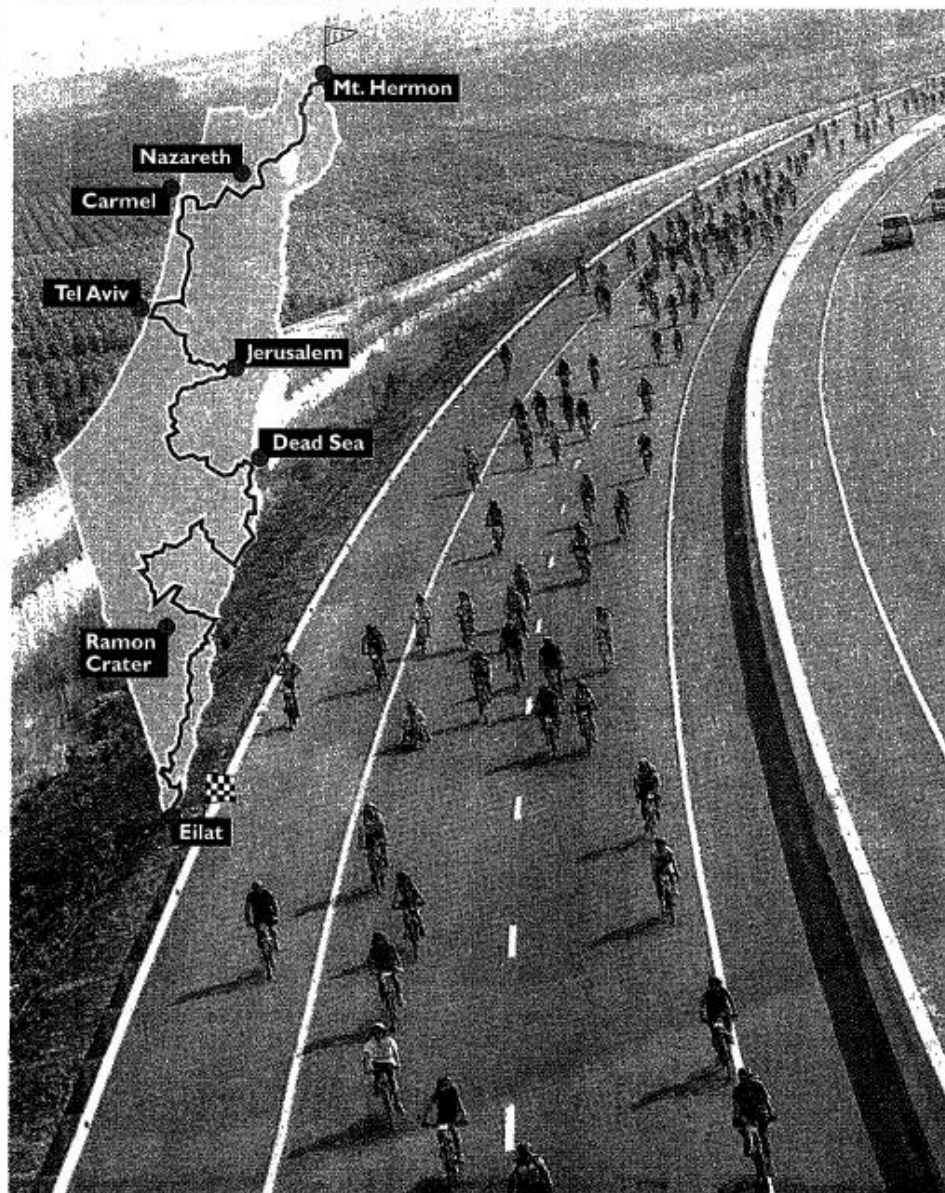


Israel Bike Trail gets ready to roll

The Plan: Cross-Israel on two wheels

By Yoav Kaveh



Bicycle riders near Binyamina last week

Photo: Nitzan Schorer

The detailed planning and operational stages of the Israel Bike Trail (IBT) are due to start within days. The 1,200 km. bicycling trail, from Mt. Hermon to Eilat - via Lake Kinneret, the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea - should be completed within two or three years. It will be built in sections, starting with the northernmost and southernmost segments: from Mt. Hermon to the Hula Valley and from Paran to Eilat, respectively.

According to the map, which is being published here for the first time, the trail will pass through 40 local authorities, and will include every type of community in Israel and every variety of landscape and topography. It will begin in Mt. Hermon, passing through the Golan Heights, the Hula Valley, the Jordan hills, the Lower Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, the Carmel, the Sharon and Hayarkon regions, the Jerusalem hills, the Judean Desert, the Northern Arava, the Ramon crater, the Eilat mountains and the Gulf of Eilat. The trail, whose basic route was designed by Menahem Markus and Aviad Shar-Shalom, will also pass through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The IBT is not necessarily associated with or identical to the Israel National Trail, the cross-country hiking trail dedicated by Uri Davir and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) in 1995.

The Israel Nature and

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Parks Authority and the Jewish National Fund are the main bodies behind the IBT project. They are joined by many government ministries - tourism, agriculture, environmental protection, interior, industry, trade and labor, infrastructure, housing - as well as the SPNI, the Israel Cycling Federation, the World Cycling Federation and other bodies. Each section of the trail is being planned by a separate team - consisting of project officials, municipal employees, representatives from relevant bodies and local riders - which studies maps of the area and makes recommendations.

"The goal is not to forge new routes," project director Hillel Zussman says. "We want to take existing dirt

roads and make them narrower, so they will only be suitable for bicycles. There is an endless number of superfluous dirt roads in Israel. They can be narrowed using vegetation, boulders and other means. The aim is to separate bicycles and [motor] vehicles so the trail will be pleasant and safe for riding. The separation between bikes and pedestrians is another issue that is still open," Zussman said.

Like the Trans-Israel Highway, the IBT is envisioned as a main north-south route through Israel, but for bicycles only. Dozens of east-west trails will feed into it. According to Shai Schecter, head of planning and supervision at the JNF, work on the trails will begin within days. The planners hope to turn the IBT into a magnet for bicycle tourism from around the world, taking advantage of a growing travel niche.