



‘The light rail [seen here at the Ammunition Hill station] could save Emek Refaim Street: Give the road back to the neighborhood and reverse the problems caused by the through traffic.’
(Marc Israel Sellem)

Triple benefit

Why I support the light rail on Emek Refaim

• By JOEL HABER

Two weeks ago, this publication printed a piece in which city council member Fleur Hassan-Nahoum explained her opposition to running the light rail’s new Blue Line along Emek Refaim Street. While I know and respect Hassan-Nahoum both personally and as a dedicated legislator, I believe that she and the others who oppose this plan are shortsighted and misguided. The Blue Line on Emek Refaim would be good for the city overall, would improve the lives of residents in the area and would even benefit the businesses along the German Colony’s main street.

Emek Refaim was never designed for the use it sees today. When it was first built as the central road of the Templar neighborhood in the 1800s, there was nothing to the south of it, and even well into the 20th century the road primarily served to connect the area to the center of the city to its north. Countless photos even well into the 1990s attest to its character as a quiet, unclogged street with shops that served the neighborhood that surrounded them.

As the southern neighborhoods grew in the second half of the 20th century, the road gradually grew into a through street. When the Second Intifada brought terrorism to the center of town, Jerusalemites found Emek Refaim to be a safer alternative, which led to its growth in popularity. This, too, brought more congestion.

Today, what was designed as a neighborhood center has turned into a major thoroughfare, bringing people through the area, not to it. As I write this piece, I’m sitting at one of the many cafes that line Emek Refaim. And while I’d love to be writing at an outdoor table, enjoying the weather and the quaint, historic character of the neighborhood, I can’t. The traffic makes the street noisy, polluted and unsafe.

The street and the neighborhood residents give up a pleasant road but get nothing in return from those who simply pass through. Why should the neighborhood service the city while only suffering negative consequences?

The light rail, however, could save Emek Refaim. Many opponents have focused on the fact that the middle section will be closed to vehicular traffic, preventing cars from driving its full length. I say, Exactly! Give the road back to the neighborhood and reverse the problems caused by the through traffic. Few would deny that Jaffa Road of today is a more pleasant street to be on than it was before the light rail replaced vehicular traffic. The same benefits would be seen on Emek Refaim. It would again become a quiet, pretty street that would be pleasant for shoppers and pedestrians.

Opponents worry about the effect this plan would have on the side streets off Emek Refaim. Hassan-Nahoum wrote that the plan would “force all the traffic onto even narrower side streets.” But rather than forcing “all” the traffic there, the light rail would push most of it away from the neighborhood. Mesila Park would not be turned into “a major traffic artery.” It would serve as an access road for local traffic only. The plan would return the neighborhood to its residents and business owners.

But how would the city overall also benefit from running the Blue Line on Emek? Won’t it cause more traffic elsewhere?

Well, in addition to other arteries (including the soon-to-be-completed Begin Highway) picking up the slack, why overlook the light rail itself? With the line connecting the city’s outer neighborhoods to the center, fewer people will need cars to get downtown. And by increasing those outer areas’ accessibility, they will become more desirable places to live, reducing rent pressure in the central neighborhoods.



Joel Haber: Fear has been a major motivator against the plan. (PR)

Still, if people from the southern neighborhoods of Jerusalem would travel through Emek Refaim via the light rail, doesn’t that mean that the neighborhood will still be “giving without getting”? No, because the Blue Line’s stops on Emek Refaim would bring new visitors and shoppers to the road – those who now avoid the area since there is nowhere to park.

Walking down Emek Refaim today, you’d think everyone is against the light rail there. Signs and banners hang everywhere, declaring that any other option is better. But does this actually reflect neighborhood attitudes, or is it just a well-funded campaign by a few loud and interested parties?

I live a six-minute walk from Emek Refaim, and I’d bet that I eat and shop there more than the average area resident. Far from a disconnected outsider, I can think of nothing more pleasant than a short walk to the light rail, followed by a trip to Tel Aviv without sitting in traffic (the new railway station, scheduled to

open in 2018, will be on the Red Line). I can’t promise that my opinions are the majority, but I also don’t have the money to try to make it seem like they are. Nor can I afford to scare others into believing I’m right.

And fear has been a major motivator here. Business owners saw many shops on Jaffa Road close during the light rail construction there, and they fear the same will happen to them. But the two situations are quite different. Emek Refaim is 1.2 kilometers long, with major stretches sporting residences on both sides. Jaffa is 2.7 kilometers, with businesses along its entire length. Train work on Emek Refaim should cause problems for the shops there for a much shorter period of time.

The opponents have also tried to scare others into supporting them. Many saw a popular online video about a fence that would run down the middle of the street. Never mind that such a fence was nowhere in any plan, nor would it be required under any existing laws or regulations. But propagandist scare tactics often work. When they don’t, however, the opposition spends more money to come up with another silly plan: let the train pass Emek Refaim via a tunnel!

A tunnel’s construction would obviously also hurt businesses on the street, and for a much longer period. This is not like the planned tunnel under Mea She’arim, a neighborhood on a hill. For a better idea of what tunneling under a flat area would require, just look at the light-rail-related chaos taking place in Tel Aviv at the moment. More importantly, however, the tunnel would still bring people through the neighborhood, but it would not bring anyone to it. Thus, businesses along the street would gain nothing.

With this idea, the plan’s opponents have shown their true motivation: avoiding a little inconvenience.

And while I don’t believe that was Hassan-Nahoum’s motivation in opposing the Blue Line plan, I do believe that she may have been more easily swayed after her party moved into the opposition. Mayor Nir Barkat supports the plan, so Yerushalmim must be against it. She asked, “Is the transportation system here to serve its residents, or are the residents here to serve an expensive transportation system?”

The Blue Line on Emek Refaim would serve the residents of the neighborhood, and would also serve the residents of the entire city. The alternatives would hold the majority of the city’s residents hostage to the self-motivated whims of a few.

The writer is a tour guide and central Jerusalem resident who loves the city and dreams of seeing it develop into an ever more pleasant place to live.