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CYCLISTS NEAR Beersheba. (Reuters)

# The ignored transportation failure and the forgotten traffic jam

• By JEHUDA HADDAD

Anyone familiar with the close to one-hour traffic jam between Omer/Lehavim and Beersheba, the bumper-to-bumper traffic at the Emek Sara or Neot Hovav junctions, or the western entrance to Beersheba during rush hour, is well aware of the problem. In the Beersheba metropolitan area, getting to work in the morning and home in the afternoon entails spending at least one hour in traffic each way.

Hundreds of thousands of Israel's southern residents spend long hours in traffic, without any suitable public transportation alternatives available to get to work, to cultural events or to medical treatments.

I call this "the forgotten traffic jam" because the state, which invests billions of shekels building infrastructures to bring the periphery closer to the center, does nothing to solve the transportation crisis within the periphery. The state forgot the acute need to first and foremost attend to the transportation infrastructure in the periphery itself.

In the center of the country, the state is involved in various efforts to ease traffic congestion by expanding the

light rail and providing public transportation and carpool lanes. However, in the periphery it is busy investing in roads that will connect the area to the center, but will not allow for normal life within the periphery itself.

Take Beersheba for example, which is intended to serve as the central anchor of the southern periphery, the capital of the South. Yet the state encounters difficulty developing the city as a significant metropolitan area. The light rail in Tel Aviv is already under construction, as are the metro lines in Gush Dan (Tel Aviv metropolitan area) and in Jerusalem. In Beersheba, however, time has stopped, and the light rail is not even in the planning stage.

The bus line that leaves once every hour from the main bus station in Beersheba to the towns and villages in the area do not provide a suitable transportation solution. The government must be required to plan a transportation infrastructure in the periphery comparable to that in the center that will include commuter (suburban) trains, increased frequency of public transportation, carpool lanes and more.

Over the years, a family in the periphery will have to purchase more cars than those who live in the center,

simply in order to get to work, to recreational and cultural activities, to receive medical treatment, or simply to visit friends or family.

In my opinion, these issues must be examined differently and from a broad national perspective. The time has come to dispose of routine thinking patterns, to replace the premise that the center of the country, and Gush Dan in particular, are the focal point, and to stop treating all other areas as "the periphery" that steps must be taken to bring it closer to the center.

We must recognize that every area has its own way of life, character and uniqueness. Therefore, there is no need to bring the geographically distant areas closer to the center, but rather to strengthen them in and of themselves, each area with its distinctiveness.

Strengthening the periphery means fostering quality of life in these geographic areas, including culture, recreation, education, health and proper transportation infrastructures.

If residents find themselves receiving below-quality services, wasting their time and spending their days in traffic, ultimately, like many other good people before them – they will also leave the periphery and move to the cities between Gedera in the South and Hadera in the North.

Therefore, the next government should invest, not in bringing the periphery closer, but in strengthening the Beersheba metropolitan area. This means building a transportation infrastructure from the satellite towns to the large metropolitan cities in the South - Beersheba and Ashdod. It must significantly improve education and health services and formulate plans to help these areas develop advanced industry and transportation. This in turn will increase the standard of living in the southern localities, empower the residents, foster economic growth and improve overall quality of life.

An advanced and suitable "intra-periphery" transportation infrastructure is a timely necessity. Such an infrastructure will attract the residents of the nearby localities to the southern metropolitan cities, and perhaps even residents from the center who will choose to move to the South. Thus we will be able to realize David Ben-Gurion's vision of making the desert bloom.

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