

seasoned with the spice of life

the MIX

Mishpacha

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ON SITE

True North

Think Jewish history in Eretz Yisrael, and Jerusalem is obviously central. But Jews were banned from Jerusalem for centuries after the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, leaving the far-away Galil the new frontier. And Tzippori became the place to reframe

GREEN LIGHTS

I love Israel's north. It's not just the magnificent green mountains, valleys, streams, and fields, but the richness of the history of this area. Most tourists who come to Eretz Yisrael base themselves around Jerusalem — after all, it's the holiest city, the capital of our country, the *makom Hamikdash*, the place we invoke in our prayers three times a day. Yet from a historical perspective, vibrant Jewish communal life in Jerusalem was essentially nonexistent from the time of the Bar Kochba revolt, which came on the heels of the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash, until around the 1700s. Rome banned the Jews from coming back to settle in Jerusalem, and over the centuries, although Jerusalem was never completely abandoned, there were never more than a few dozen families who lived there for any significant period of time. Even though

there were thousand years of Jerusalem history prior to that, post-Churban Jewish Jerusalem isn't more than a few hundred years old — and anything we find in Israel that isn't at least 400 years old doesn't even make it to the Antiquities Authority.

But the Galil, in the north of Eretz Yisrael, was a different story. Even after the Jews were banned from Jerusalem, the northern communities continued to flourish, while so much of the early history of our People — especially during the Mishnaic and Talmudic eras — took place in this incredible region. And Tzippori, the city we're heading to today on our virtual tour — the place where Rabi Yehudah Hanasi settled for the last 17 years of his life as he compiled the Mishnah — was one of the most important.

FAIR TRADE

If you've been touring the Galil, coming from the Haifa area or perhaps Meron, in order to get to Tzippori you'll probably pass through the Somech intersection, located in the valley between two hills where stood two great cities in the period of the Mishnah: Usha and Shefar'am. These are two of the five cities mentioned where the Sanhedrin rested after moving up north from Yavneh after the Churban. It was in this valley that Rabi Yehudah ben Bava clandestinely came to give semichah to five students during the period when the Romans passed a decree prohibiting the teaching of Torah under penalty that the cities caught violating the decree would be destroyed. Rabi Yehuda ben Bava therefore went outside of the cities so that the towns wouldn't suffer retribution. The scholars were caught, however, and Rabi Yehudah ben Bava was killed right here, in the Somech intersection, by 300 spears that pierced his holy body.

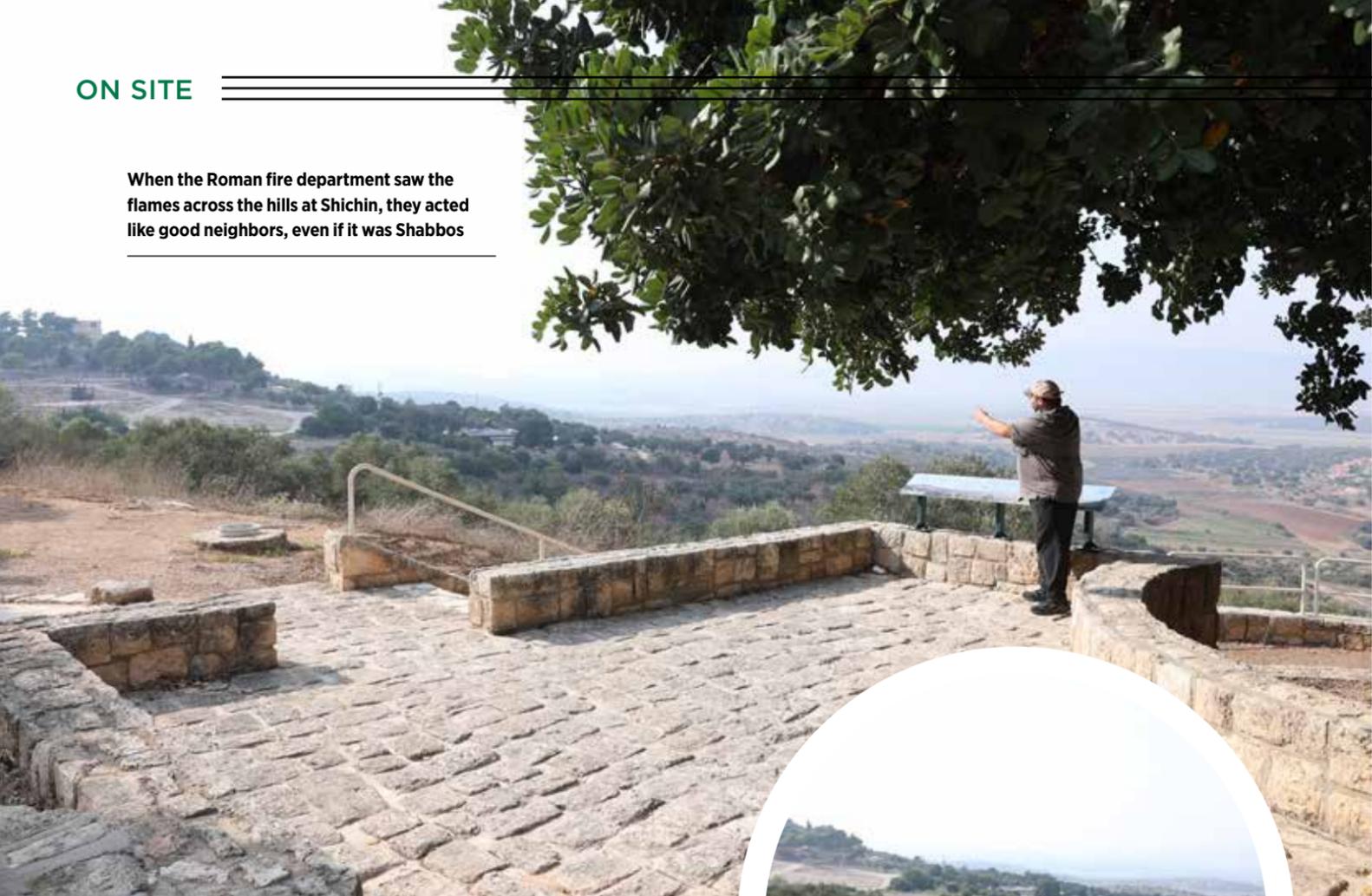
Along this highway, which stretches down to Teveria, we pass lush fields, vineyards, and olive orchards. The Gemara shares a story of the great Amora, Rabi Yochanan, who was traveling down this very road with his student and he pointed out these wheat fields, olive groves, and vineyards and noted that they had all once belonged to him, but he sold them so that he would be able to study Torah. *"I traded possessions and a world that were created in six days for Torah, which was given in 40 days,"* were the words he used to console his student who was mourning their rebbi's financial loss. And where did he go to learn? To the holy city of Tzippori.

Our first stop in this national park, built to preserve the remains of the ancient city, is the visitor center, where we can examine a model of the archeological site. We notice that there are really two cities here, an upper city and a lower city. While the Jews primarily lived in the upper city of this post-Temple metropolis, and the lower city was a bustling Roman commercial center, Rabi Yehudah Hanasi in fact taught Torah classes in the lower section, where the Romans lived and where the market was located (perhaps implying that he didn't wait for the Jews to come to him, he came to them on their business turf).

The Gemara tells us that the Amora Rabi Elazar ben Padas was so engrossed in his learning Torah that one day he went down to study Torah in the lower city while leaving his cloak behind in the upper city. Someone once tried to steal the cloak, but there was a snake that was guarding it for him. What are the lessons to be learned? One, don't try to snatch a rabbi's cloak. Two, Rabi Elazar was so devoted to his learning that he didn't realize he didn't have his coat with him. For archeologists though, this Gemara is another proof, along with their excavations, that Jews lived in the upper city but their place of study was in the lower one.



When the Roman fire department saw the flames across the hills at Shichin, they acted like good neighbors, even if it was Shabbos



ALL FIRED UP

As we move to a lookout over the area, we notice that Tzippori is very clearly perched, like a *tzippor* (a bird), on top of a hill. It's obvious from the view that this was a strategic city for the Romans — from here one can overlook all of the small settlements and farms that lie below in the valleys of the lower Galil. About 70 years before the Churban, in the chaos that followed the death of Herod the Great, in what was known as the Varus revolts, the city had rebelled against the Roman governors of Eretz Yisrael, only to be destroyed and rebuilt again. In the Great Revolt that led to the Churban, it seems the town learned its lesson and surrendered to the legions of Vespasian and Titus and was spared.

Looking out at the view makes us appreciate another story in the Gemara. A hill in the distance, currently the archeological site of Tel Hanaton, was in the times of the Mishnah a village called Shichin. The Gemara (*Shabbos* 121a) tells of how a fire once broke out in the fields of Yosi ben Simai in Shichin and the Roman garrison in Tzippori saw the fire and sent firefighters to

put it out. The simple Jewish villagers, however, sent the Romans away, claiming that out of *kavod Shabbos* it was prohibited for them to put the fire out. Hashem then made a miracle and it started to rain, which extinguished the fire. Even so, after Shabbos the people of the city sent some money to thank the firefighters for the efforts, as it's always a good idea to keep your Roman neighbors happy. The *chachamim*, however, were very upset, as the halachah is that if a non-Jew comes to put out a fire for you, you don't have to tell him not to put it out. So this view in the distance is really the source for the original "*Shabbos goy*" law!

KEEPING THE HOPE ALIVE

Making our way down to the city, our first stop is at an ancient shul on the outskirts of the lower city, where we can also see the remains of an ancient mikveh right outside. The Gemara tells us that when Rabi Yehudah Hanasi was *niftar*, he was taken to 18 shuls in Tzippori and they were *maspid* him in each of them. Yet this is the only shul with much of it having remained intact. This shul had undergone various rebuilding campaigns back in its day, the latest being from the fifth century. Originally the *batei kneset* were built with the entrance in the front of the shul, which meant that if you came late, everyone knew. Later on, they decided to switch the entrance to the back, from where we now enter.

This shul, like many shuls from the Mishnah and Talmud period, has an elaborate mosaic floor that has endured to this day. The person who donated it, Yosef ben Yudan, certainly got his money's worth as his dedication plaque, with a brachah for him and his daughter thanking them for their contribution, is still here 1,700 years later. The motifs on the floor of the shul are elaborate. There are incredible pictures of the *avodah* in the Beis Hamikdash, many of the *keilim*, and even a lulav and esrog. There's a large zodiac with pictures of all of the *mazalos* — many of them spelled wrong, which tells us a bit about the lack of literacy in an era long before the printing press and the availability of siddurim and Chumashim for the average layman. We also find some historical Tanach images, such as the Akeidah and Sarah Imeinu welcoming in the *malachim*. It's incredible to think of the holy people who davened here in this shul, listening to the *shmuessen* Rabi Yehudah Hanasi might have given on this very floor, and establishing the many *takanos* of Tzippori quoted in the Gemara.

From the shul, we make our way up the hill to the Jewish Quarter. Archaeologists discovered that there was a mikveh in almost every house, a quite unusual find, considering that private mikvaos generally only existed in Jerusalem near the Beis Hamikdash, where the Kohanim lived. Researchers believe that perhaps a large contingent of Kohanim who served in the Beis Hamikdash before the Churban took up residence in Tzippori, keeping themselves and their progeny in ritual purity in anticipation of a rebuilt Beis Hamikdash. In fact, the Yerushalmi tells us that the family members of the *mishmeres* (work shift) of Yedayah, who returned from Bavel with Ezra, were exiled here.

The only remaining shul, with its incredible preserved mosaic flooring, and the remains of the upper city's Jewish Quarter (bottom), fire up the imagination: Just picture Yehudah Hanasi walking through these parts



Mishpacha



THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

On the slope of the hill in the primarily Jewish upper city stands the remains of a large theater, which is estimated to have seated about 4,500 people. The theaters were an ongoing source of diversion for the masses, in order to keep them constantly entertained. In the Roman Empire, theaters were perhaps the most critical component to remaining in power for so long. How do you keep a population of millions, including psychopaths, barbarians, and murderers spread out in countries all over the empire, under control? The answer is pretty much the same way they keep people sane on a 12-hour flight to Israel: Put a little screen in front of them with entertainment playing the entire time, and they forget they're cooped up in a 200,000-pound hunk of metal tens of thousands of miles in the air. (They do the same in the prisons to keep inmates under control: Give them cable TV and no rebellions or revolts.) That's one thing the Roman theaters were for: to keep everyone distracted enough so they didn't think about rebelling.

Chazal speak out repeatedly about the prohibition of going to theaters, and in Tzippori it was no different. One can imagine the *pashkivilim* that went up on the walls of the communities decrying them. Perhaps it was that very fact of assimilation that pushed Rabi Yehudah Hanasi to relocate to Tzippori and compile in writing the *Torah sheba'al peh* in the form of the Mishnah so that it wouldn't be forgotten. This way the Jews would have Torah to learn and occupy their time, instead of morally decadent forms of entertainment.

The fact that the theater was located in the Jewish section of the city might have been a purely topographical issue, as it's easier to build a theater on the slope of a mountain. Yet perhaps it indicates just how important Rabi Yehudah Hanasi felt his move to Tzippori from Beit She'arim in the last years of his life was: It is suggested that the Sanhedrin would gather in the theater, demonstrating to their kehillah the ultimate use for such an honorable edifice. Seems that our Siyumei HaShas in sports stadiums and entertainment arenas may have an ancient *mesorah*.



SEE YOU EVERYWHERE

To the right of the theater are the remains of the impressive governor's mansion, and we notice that someone has already recreated the floorplan. The hallway is called the *prozdor*, and the main room is called the triclinium, or *traklin*. The Mishnah in Avos tells us that this is a *mashal* for Olam Hazeh and Olam Haba. We have to prepare ourselves in the *prozdor* before we enter into the main room.

As we look at this elaborately designed mosaic floor with over a million tiny naturally colored stones, we notice that the three other sides of the room have no designs at all. This is because this is where the couches would be placed for the Romans aristocrats to sit and dine. No point in expending the money and labor on mosaics that would be covered up anyway. The word *traklin* in fact is made up of two words: "tri" ("three") and "cline" ("to recline"). At the Pesach Seder we have a mitzvah to recline, but one look at how the Romans did it and you'll get that it doesn't mean taking a pillow and leaning awkwardly on the side of your chair with it. (If you want to do it the right "Roman" way, come on over to the Schwartz Pesach Seder, where we put our couches up on bricks to raise them up to the table, and then lean back the way they did it. The first time I tried this I was out cold before the Mah Nishtanah — as soon as I hit the couch, the game's over.)

Perhaps the most fascinating picture on this mosaic floor — filled with images of Greek gods and pagan feasts — is an image known as "The Mona Lisa of the Galil." Like Leonardo Da Vinci's most famous picture, painted 1,500 years later, no matter where you stand in the room, you feel her eyes are looking directly at you. What makes this even more incredible is a midrash on the *pasuk* in Devarim telling that Hashem spoke to us face to face. How is it possible to speak face to face to the millions of people standing around Har Sinai?

Says the midrash, "It is like the face of that icon, that thousands are looking at her and each one says that she is looking at them. So

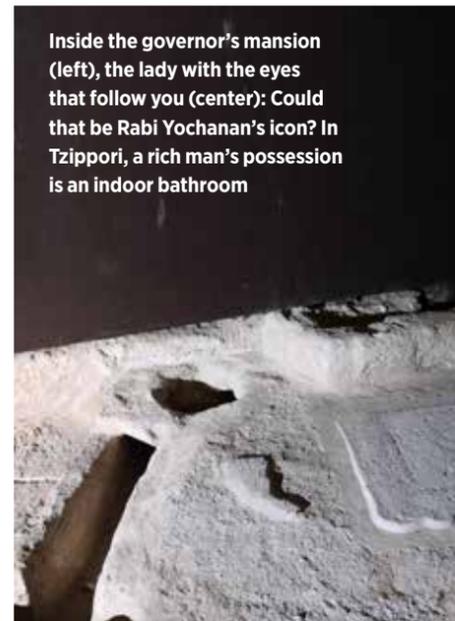
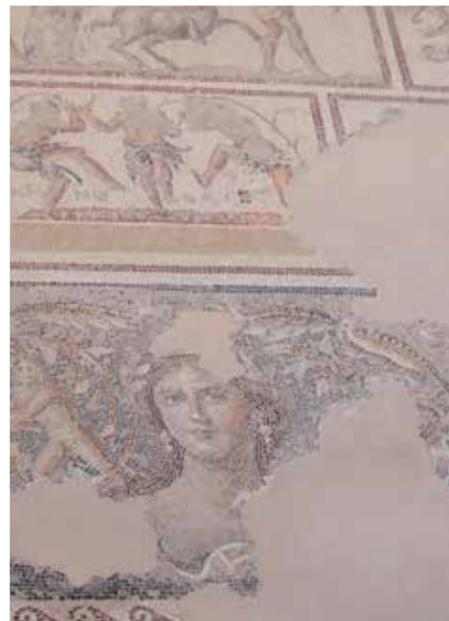
too, Hakadosh Baruch Hu was looking at each and every one of Bnei Yisrael as He said *Anochi Hashem Elokecha*."

Was this the icon that the midrash was talking about? I don't know, but the author of that *maamar* was none other than the great Rabi Yochanan, who lived in this very city.

Now, if that wasn't enough to bring *maamarei Chazal* to life, we turn the corner right next to this *traklin* and find a small ornate seat on the floor in the adjacent room, with what seems to be little channels for water to flow through it. The writing on the mosaic says in Greek: "To your health!" If you haven't yet figured out this bit of indoor plumbing, it's an indoor bathroom, a true rarity in homes during this time. In fact, this bit of indoor plumbing is the only one of its type found in Eretz Yisrael from this period. But what makes it even more awesome is the Gemara in *Shabbos* that tells us "*Eizeh hu ashir* — who is a rich man?" I'm sure most of us would answer that question with the classic teaching that it is someone who is satisfied with his portion. Yet, the Gemara mentions the opinion of Rabi Yosi, who tells us that a wealthy man is someone who has a bathroom near his table.

Is this the bathroom that Rabi Yosi was talking about? One thing we do know, is that Chazal tell us that after the incident in which Rabi Shimon bar Yochai spoke negatively about the Romans and was forced to flee for his life, Rabi Yosi — who was at the same discussion and remained silent — was taken to the city of Tzippori where he lived out his days under administrative watch.

As we leave the upper city, we note a large tower, built by the Ottamans in the 18th century on the remains of a Crusader tower that was built on top of the original Roman tower. This well-fortified city is in fact mentioned as one of the walled cities all the way back from the time of Yehoshua, and I've heard that there are those who come here to read the Megillah on the same day as in Jerusalem, the halachah for cities that were walled in the time of Yehoshua.



Inside the governor's mansion (left), the lady with the eyes that follow you (center): Could that be Rabi Yochanan's icon? In Tzippori, a rich man's possession is an indoor bathroom

FLOORED

We descend to the lower Roman part of the city, and as we walk along the ancient Roman *Cardo*, we spot a reconstructed wagon and notice the ruts in these ancient stones, indicating the wheel span of those wagons. An interesting factoid: The span is 4 feet, 8.5 inches (1.4 meters) — the space for two horses between the wheels to pull the Roman wagons — and was adopted as the standard measure over 1,800 years later when they built the train tracks in England.

We come to the remains of a bath house, and although there's not much left of it, we do see the small pillars that were used to hold up an elevated floor that had little fires underneath it to heat the water. It actually helps us understand a Gemara about Rabi Avahu, a *talmid* of Rabi Yochanan, who was in a bathhouse when the floor collapsed and how he stood on the pillars and saved his students by grabbing on to them. Looking at these pillars, we can actually envision Rabi Avahu holding on to his students for dear life.

Again, in this Roman part of the city, we're taken by the

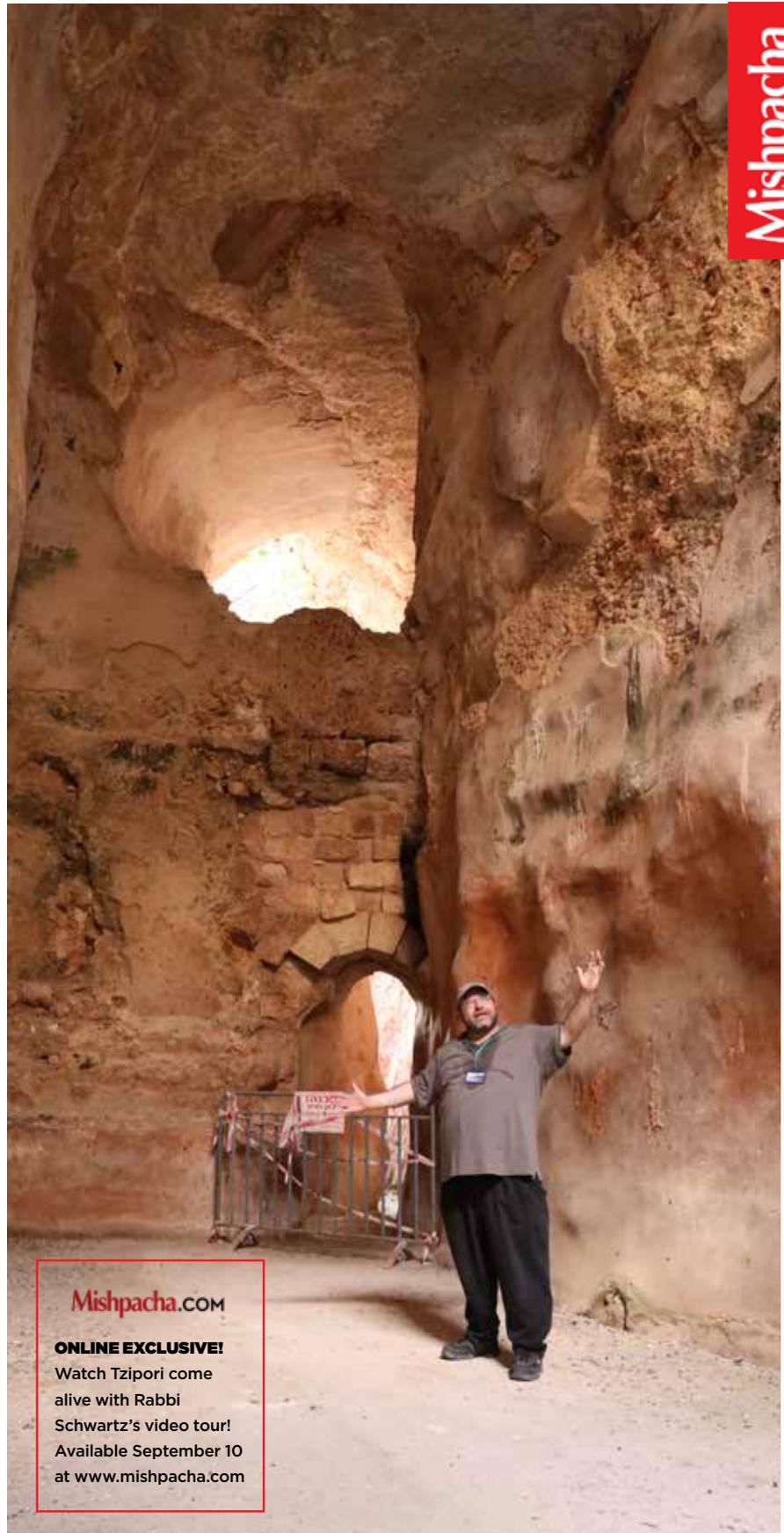
elaborate mosaics — mythological creatures, a castle in Alexandria, the Nile river with violent scenes of animals attacking one another. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the Roman caesar who was close with Rabi Yehudah Hanasi, had ties to Egypt and it seems that their culture made it here to the Roman *shuk* in Tzippori as well. In fact, the Gemara tells us that Antoninus had tunnels built from Rome to the house of Rebbi through which he would come to secretly visit him. Rome, however, is quite a distance from here across the sea. But not far from Tzippori, next to the town of Beit Rimon, there's an Arab village called Rumanah where there are the Churbat Roma ruins — a Roman city from the period of the Mishnah. There they uncovered some tunnels that may have led in the direction of Tzippori. Perhaps this was the "city of Rome" in Eretz Yisrael that the Gemara is referring to. (If modern Israel can have a Jorge Washington street, an Avraham Linkolin boulevard, and even the newest "Ramat Trump" in the Golan Heights, why not a Rome in Israel as well?)

LIVING WATERS

Our last stop brings us to an elaborate water system, constructed to provide enough water for the thousands of residents and many travelers who passed through this central city of international commerce. Tzipori was strategically located above the Jezreel valley, and was the main highway in ancient times for those coming from Egypt, or for those traveling from the coast going east to Bavel, Persia, Jordan, or Syria. Yet taking the city to the next level would require bringing enough water to provide for everyone — and collecting rainfall in cisterns the three months a year it rains (in a good year) was not going to be enough. The problem was that Tzipori is a high hill about 250 meters above sea level and water doesn't usually travel uphill. And so, the ancient Roman engineers came up with a complex channel system that would transport water from the various springs around 15 kilometers away along the slopes of the surrounding higher mountains and down into the city.

We walk down about 70 steps into immense manmade caverns that were dug and plastered to retain the water that was brought here. These engineering wonders are about 650 feet long, 30 feet high, and 10 feet wide, and could hold over a million gallons of water — enough to provide for a city of 15,000 people for two weeks. And the water would be continuously flowing all year from these natural springs. Now the cisterns are dry, although in the winter months they'll be full with water.

As we emerge back into sunlight and I look out at the breathtaking landscape, I can't help but feel that the story of Tzipori is the story of Klal Yisrael after the devastating Churban. It's the ability to reestablish and flourish once again in Eretz Yisrael, even amid a backdrop of destruction, decrees, and in a time of *galus haShechinah*. Yet, facing assimilation under a foreign occupying force, our leaders then revealed that, like a *tzipor*, we have the wings of Torah that can uplift us even in the most dismal of times. May this be the year we merit to see Divine revelation and *Geulah sheleimah*. ●



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