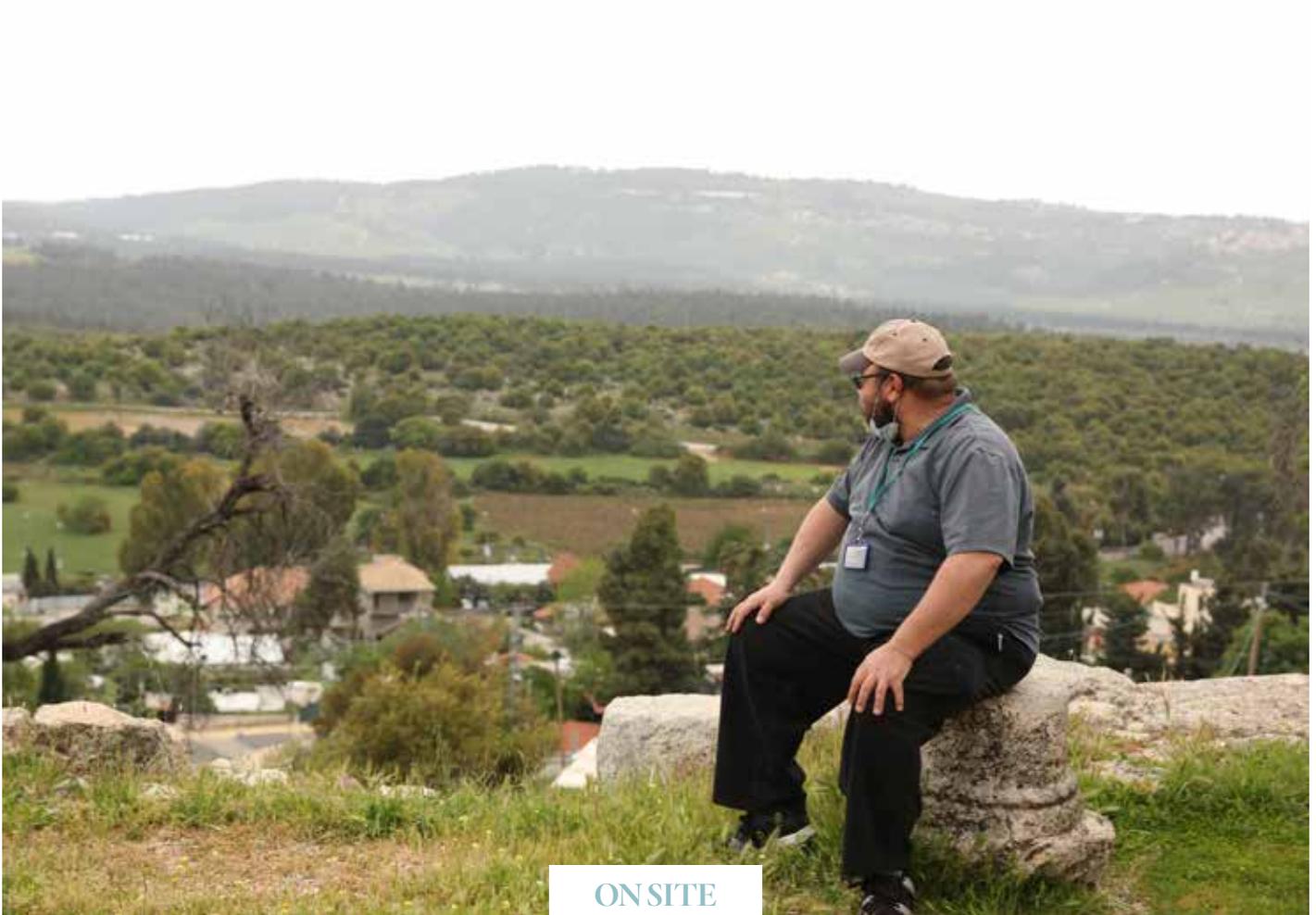


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ON SITE

The Hills Are Alive

The gates to Meron might be locked, but quarantine couldn't stop us from exploring the secrets of these mountains that so many travelers often miss

If you think you've seen all there is to see in Meron, this virtual tour may surprise you

I'm not Ari and Ari. I don't guide tours in dangerous places. I stick to Eretz Yisrael, the safest place in the world, where "Einei Hashem" are always upon it. Yet this morning, heading out to the coronavirus-infested world, I feel like I'm entering some exotic unknown territory.

Face mask? Check!

Gloves? Check!

Press credentials, showing I have permission to travel for work? Check!

Joining me on this perilous journey just 20 minutes from my house in Karmiel is my son Tully (Naftali), who will be acting as my assistant and model tourist. Our destination, in honor of Lag B'Omer, is Meron — the off-the-beaten-track Meron that most annual Lag B'Omer pilgrims never get to experience.



One of the Tribe

We head up Mount Meron, the highest point in the Upper Galil, on roads that are usually packed this time of year, but are now as desolate as a kiddush club in a yekkish *shtibel*. Along the way we stop at an awesome lookout over the hills of the Lower Galil.

The contrast between the Upper and Lower Galil is amazing. The Lower Galil consists of small rolling hills and valleys that almost look like waves — *galim* — going up and down. The Upper Galil is part of a geographic region with a high elevation that extends all the way up through Lebanon and Turkey. In times of peace, most of our Tanaaim and Amoraim lived in the Lower Galil, where it's easier to travel and grow crops. The Upper Galil was inhabited in times of persecution, when Torah scholars needed to flee and hide from the Romans.

There are a few settlements along the way up. Parod, the first one, got its name because it separates the upper and lower regions. Next are Amirim and Shefer. I stop by the road sign to give my tourists a pop quiz. Today, that's you. So here's the question: Which *shevet's* portion are we in?

Can't figure it out? Do the names Amirim and Shefer help? No? What if my son Tully was standing next to the sign?

You got it! Shevet Naftali! You knew that, of course, because the blessing of Yaakov to Naftali was "*Hanosein imrei shefer* — He offers beautiful words." This whole region is the portion of Naftali, and here's a word to the wise: When you drive around Israel it's worthwhile to pay attention to the names of the cities and villages, as there is a whole government department that creates these names to connect the places to Tanach and their historical roots.

Locked Out

When we arrive at Meron, we're greeted by the *shomer* of the *moshav*. For the first time in my experience, he has the key handy to the gate. But despite our *Mishpacha* press credentials, which by law should allow us entry anywhere, he refuses to let us in, claiming that entry by car is only for moshav residents. If we want we can hike up, he tells us.

Other people, after being cooped up in their homes for a month, might have jumped at the opportunity to hike up a mountain. It is even said that when the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh came to Meron, he climbed on his hands and knees up the mountain because the kedushah emanating from Rabi Shimon was so overwhelming he couldn't stand. But I'm not other people — and especially not the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh. We have a lot of gear and, frankly, I'm a guide who doesn't climb mountains needlessly. I'm the one who knows where all the good *mehadrin* restaurants are.

Fortunately, Hashem sends us a *malach*. Reb Yosef Viner, a resident of Meron and member of Yedidim, has seen our plight and he offers to drive us in and around. We smile as we wave goodbye to the guard.

The "Kosel of the North," as I like to refer to the *kever* of Rabi Shimon with its around-the-clock minyanim, is closed. In the center of the country, if you need to daven, you go to the Kosel. For us northerners, Rabi Shimon's *kever* is the place. But today there is only a token minyan davening outside, because the doors are bolted shut. We knew this before we came, but it's still sad to see.

This gives us the opportunity, though, to visit some of the other sites in Meron — the ones most people never get a chance to see.



Hillel's Holy Water

Our first stop is the cave of Hillel Hazakein and his wife and students, which is just down the stairs, below Rabi Shimon's *ohel*. Hundreds of years before people began coming to Rabi Shimon, which didn't become popular until the period of the Arizal, travelers came to Hillel, as we know from their testimonies.

It always astounds me that people don't visit here. Hillel lived a few hundred years before Rabi Shimon, during the period of the Second Beis Hamikdash. The leadership of Klal Yisrael continued through his line for over 400 years. It would be like not visiting the grave of the

Vilna Gaon if he was buried next to Rav Steinman. (He's not. It's just an example.) Yet Hillel's *kever* is usually locked up and unvisited. Today, though, we receive a pleasant surprise: The *kever* is open! I point out the burial alcoves, with the distinctive *Even Hagolel* — huge sarcophagi coverings carved from rock in the shape of a "W"— which were traditionally used during that period. They lay on top of the alcoves where the bones were placed to rest.

There is a very old *mesorah* mentioned by Reb Binyamin of Tudela and Reb Pesachiah of Regensburg, two 12th-century travelers to Eretz Yisrael, about a mystical spring that would only give water when someone righteous came into the cave. Both Jews and Arabs would drink from this water and it was known to bring all types of *yeshuos*. The few times I've been in the cave in the past I've never seen this water. But today the pool is full, and it's definitely a treat. Perhaps it's in the merit of you, our virtual tourists, or our photographer Menachem or Tully.



No Place for a Thief

Next we head to the *matzeivah* and pillar of Rabi Yochanan Hasandlar. The *kever* looks a bit like there is a chimney on top of it. According to travelers' testimonies from the past, there was a cave under this hill where this great Tanna and student of Rabi Akiva would prepare leather for the shoes and sandals he made that provided his livelihood — although some commentaries suggest he was called Hasandlar because he was originally from Alexandria.

Further off the beaten track, we come to the opening of the cave which has inspired many legends and stories. *Chibas Yerushalayim*, an account of life in Eretz Yisrael written by Rabbi Chaim HaLevi Horowitz in 1844, mentions one about an Arab who took care of the cave and lit candles by the grave of the tzaddik because he personally experienced miracles there. He would store his tobacco crop at night in the cave, after harvesting his field, to protect it from thieves. One night three thieves came into the cave to steal his tobacco. When they tried to leave, they found they had become paralyzed and couldn't move. Terrified, they unloaded their loot. Two of them were able to move and they escaped, but one was still frozen. When the Arab returned in the morning, he discovered the paralyzed thief. He



interrogated him and discovered the thief still had a bit of tobacco in his pocket, which was why he had remained paralyzed. The Arab had the thief arrested and sent to prison.

It's a good tour guide story. But there is a "behind-bars" connection to Rabi Yonasan as well. The Gemara tells us that when Rabi Akiva was incarcerated by the Romans, Rabi Yochanan would dress up as a merchant and visit him, using the opportunity to ask halachic questions that needed answers.

More recently, this cave was used as home for one of the most legendary criminals in Israel: Nachman Farkash. Farkash was a professional boxer who fell into a life of crime after he was injured. He was repeatedly arrested and repeatedly escaped from prison. His most famous robbery was stealing a leopard cub out of its cage in the zoo. He loved Eretz Yisrael and even when he fled to Egypt (where he was imprisoned as well, until they released him) he came back home because he couldn't bear to be out of Israel. He lived in this cave, right under Rabi Yonasan, for the last ten years of his life.

Perhaps Farkash felt at home here because Rabi Yochanan also had a deep love for Eretz Yisrael. The Gemara relates that Rabi Yonasan and some of his colleagues were going to travel to Bavel to learn Torah. When they came to the border, Rabi Yochanan began to cry that he couldn't leave a land where there is a mitzvah to live in it every moment and which is equal to all other mitzvos. So Rabi Yochanan returned home.



Nachman Farkash



A Deep Mystery

Our last *kever* is a little further down the road. After we park our car, we hike a few meters along a dirt path and climb up some ancient stone steps, until we see some small burial caves from the period of the Mishnah. These are *kevarim* for students of Tanaaim who lived in Meron. According to Rabi Yosi ben Kisma, he wouldn't trade this city of Torah for all the money in the world.

Rabi Yosi's cave is on the top of this hill. I'm not sure what Rabi Yosi would say about our visit to his grave in these times. The Talmud tells us a story about Rabi Chananya ben Tradyon and Rabi Yosi, who lived after the Churban, during the time of the Roman persecutions and their prohibition of Torah study. Once, Rabi Chananya visited Rabi Yosi when he was sick. Rabi Yosi asked him why he was teaching Torah when it was dangerous; the Romans were a plague sent by Hashem and one had to be cautious. Rabi Chananya responded that Shamayim will have mercy on him. Rabi Yosi wasn't impressed.

In the words of the Gemara, Rabi Yosi told

him: "I am speaking words of reason to you and you tell me that Heaven will have mercy? I won't be surprised if you and your Torah get burned up together."

Rabi Chananya was arrested on his way back from Rabi Yosi's funeral. The famous story we read on Tishah B'Av and Yom Kippur about the Asarah Harugei Malchus tells us that he was wrapped in a Torah scroll and put to death by fire.

So, what would Rabi Yosi say about our visit today? Hopefully, he would recognize the validity of my press credentials.

As we enter his *kever*, I point out how deep in the cave it is. This is unlike the other ones, which seem to be just shelves dug out of the hill. It's always nice for a tour guide when we have a Chazal that clarifies an archeological anomaly, as is the case here. In his will, Rabi Yosi told his students to make sure to bury his coffin deep down because "There will not be a tree in Bavel that won't have a Persian horse tied to it. And there will not be a coffin in Eretz Yisrael that won't have those Persian horses using it as their trough." It seems Rabi Yosi was worried about the desecration of his grave and therefore asked that it be dug deep into the cave.





Mashiach's Gate

Perhaps the only site in Meron that isn't a *kever* is the famous shul of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai. It isn't far from Rabi Yosi, so we hike up the hill to the highest part of the mountain. The placement of the shul isn't coincidental. In fact, it's a fulfillment of the halachah that a beis knesses should be built at the highest point of the city.

Not much of the actual shul remains; it was probably destroyed by one or more of the many earthquakes that have taken place in Eretz Yisrael over the years. But it's the largest shul from that period that has been found in Eretz Yisrael so far, and we can still see a tremendous ornate archway and the large unnaturally smooth stone floor, as well as the remains of small fallen columns and pillars. The door to the shul faces toward Jerusalem, as did most shuls in the period of the Tanaaim. That meant that if you came late, everyone saw you walk through the front door, as that was the direction they were davening toward. There was no sneaking in through the back door.

A legend mentions that when this archway falls it's a sign that Mashiach is on his way. The basis for the legend

is a Gemara in *Sanhedrin* that discusses Rabi Yehoshua ben Levi meeting Eliyahu Hanavi by the cave of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabi Yehoshua asks Eliyahu when Mashiach is coming. Eliyahu directs him to ask Mashiach himself, who is sitting by the gates of the city and bandaging up the wounds of the sick and poor people. Mashiach answers that he is coming today. When the day ends and he hasn't come, Rabi Yehoshua complains. Mashiach then clarifies his timeline, telling him: "I am coming today, as it says in the *pasuk*, 'Hayom im b'kolo tishmau' — Today, if they will listen to My voice."

This Gemara places Mashiach in Meron (and on a regular day one can bump into quite a few people here who will claim to hold that title). The following Gemara connects us directly to the archway. It tells us that students of Rabi Yosi ben Kisma also asked their rebbi when Mashiach is coming. His response was cryptic: "When this gate will fall and be rebuilt and will fall and be rebuilt and it will fall again and they won't have time to rebuild it, because Mashiach will be on his way."

Some commentators understand that

this gate is in Rome. Some modern ones suggest the Gemara is referring to the stock market crashing (*sha'ar* is the Hebrew term for "market price"). But throughout the generations pilgrims to Meron have always said the Gemara is referring to this shul's entrance gate and archway.

When Israel had a major earthquake in 1837, the Bas Ayin, who then lived in Tzfas, commented that *ra'ash* (the Hebrew word for earthquake) has the same letters as *sha'ar* (gate). Legend has it that the first time the shul's gate fell and was rebuilt was in 1492, when Spanish Jews first started coming here after the Inquisition. When Israel's Antiquities Authority excavated here in the 1960s and reinforced the archway with beams, some Jews saw it as a nefarious plot to prevent the gate from falling and bringing Mashiach. Oy, nothing is ever simple in this country!

Our visit to Meron ends here. Today we couldn't go to the *kever* of Rabi Shimon, but we can daven in this holy shul, where he and his son once davened and where pilgrims and modern tourists have been coming for hundreds of years.

Rabi Shimon could certainly appreciate the challenge of being in quarantine. After all, he was in "lockdown" in a cave for 13 years while he hid from the Romans. We therefore asked Hashem that in the *zechus* of Rabi Shimon we should merit to see Klal Yisrael once again dancing and singing around the bonfires of this holy mountain.

