



Welcome to Bet She'arim National Park

Flanked by green Mount Carmel on one side and the mountains of Lower Galilee on the other is a soft landscape of rounded, whitish hills. Here and there, Mount Tabor oaks grace the slopes, remnants of a once-great forest. On one of these hills, Sheikh Abreik Hill, was the ancient city of Bet She'arim. But most interesting here is not the hill – it's what's inside it: magnificent catacombs hewn by the ancient inhabitants with skill and talent that inspires us to this day.



The Bet She'arim hills, with Mount Carmel in the background

The number of burial caves here is vast; many have probably not yet even been discovered. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has prepared some of these impressive caves for visitors, installing electricity, planting and caring for trees and lawns and building an information center at the beginning of the visitor trail. Picnic tables have been installed around the parking lot. Landscaping in the national park combines planted species of trees with wild ones. At the height of winter the beautiful pink blossoms of the Judas trees appear along with abundant and colorful wildflowers. They all make the visit a unique experience. Landscape architect Lipa Yahalom, who planned the national park in the 1950s, won the Israel Prize for his work.

In July 2015, UNESCO inscribed the caves of Bet She'arim as a World Heritage Site.

History of Research and the Excavations

First to study the caves was Claude Conder in 1871, but his explorations revealed very little. In 1926, Alexander Zayid settled on Sheikh Abreik Hill as a guard for lands belonging to the Jewish National Fund. Ten years later, in 1936, he chanced upon an opening in one of the caves and found ancient Jewish artifacts. It was after this discovery that the site was identified as Bet She'arim.

From 1936 to 1940 the site was excavated by Prof. Benjamin Mazar for the then-Jewish Palestine Exploration Society. The excavations were renewed from 1953 to 1958 by the Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the direction of Prof. Nahman Avigad. These excavations revealed the ruins of the ancient town, with an area of about 100 dunams (10 hectares), encompassing a synagogue, public structure (basilica), study house, dwellings, a wall, gate and olive oil press. About 30 catacombs were also discovered, among the most magnificent in Israel, hewn into the hillside, creating a great necropolis.

In 2014, Dr. Tsvika Tsuk Tsuk and Dr. Iossi Bordowitz of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, under the auspices of Israel Antiquities Authority, excavated a huge reservoir known as the "Slik Cave" (slik is Hebrew slang for a hidden weapons cache). From 2014 to 2015 excavations were renewed in the town of Bet She'arim, directed by Dr. Adi Erlich under the auspices of the University of Haifa's Institute of Archaeology.

Access to most of the caves is via an open courtyard. Each cave opening features an impressive façade inspired by Classical architecture, with a stone door on hinges in the façade's center. These doors lead to subterranean burial chambers where burial places were hewn as troughs, loculi tombs and pits in the floor. There were also large sarcophagai (stone coffins). The large catacombs had hundreds of burial places, and the smaller ones – dozens. The coffins and the walls revealed decorations and hundreds of inscriptions in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and

Necropolis of Bet She'arim World Heritage Site

In 2015 the necropolis of Bet She'arim was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and became part of the World Heritage Site List in keeping with the Convention on World Culture and National Heritage.

Membership on the prestigious list of World Heritage Sites confirms the outstanding universal value of this cultural site, worthy of protection for the benefit of all humanity.

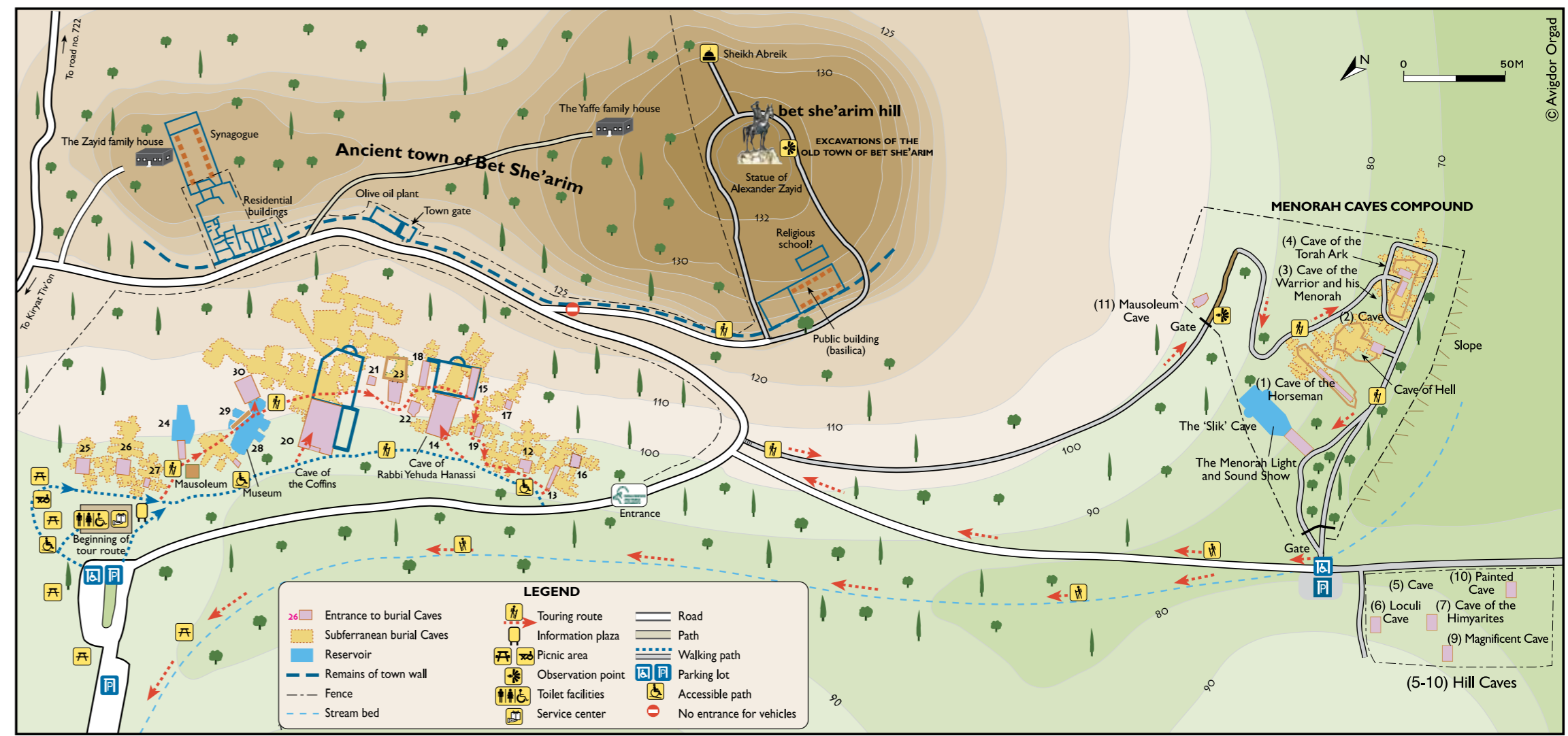
The necropolis includes a network of 30 underground catacombs. It is the largest of its type in Israel and one of the densest burial compounds in the Roman world. In the heart of the site is the tomb of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, compiler of the Mishnah, whose interment here led many Jews from the Land of Israel and the Diaspora to seek it as their final resting place. This is a supremely important ancient Jewish cemetery featuring a great variety of architectural burial styles. These represent a rich and diverse combination of Eastern Roman Classical art and popular art, and include hundreds of inscriptions in four languages – Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and Palmyrene, all attesting to the origins of the departed.

The burial caves were inscribed as a World Heritage Site after having met two criteria: One is the **interchange of human values** including architecture, technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design. The second is its **unique testimony of a cultural tradition** that is living or has disappeared.

Nine World Heritage Sites have been inscribed in Israel to date: Masada and Akko (2001); the White City of Tel Aviv (2003); the Biblical Tells, the Incense Route – Desert Cities in the Negev (2005); the Baha'i Gardens (2008); the Carmel Caves (2012); the caves of Maresha and Bet Guvirn (2013); the Necropolis of Bet She'arim (2015).



Facade of the burial cave of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi



Palmyrene. The inscriptions attest to the origin of the deceased, their professions and familial ties. This information sheds light on the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora at the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Among the decorations carved into the walls Jewish symbols were found including the seven-branched menorah, lulav (palm branch), ethrog (citron), the shofar (ram's horn) and a Torah Ark.



Artist's rendering of the Cave of the Coffins

History of Bet She'arim

Some scholars believe that Bet She'arim ("house of gates") was named after the gates in the town's walls. Others say it was inspired by the fields of barley (se'orah in Hebrew) that surrounded it. In Aramaic the city is called "Beit Sh'arei" and "Beth Sh'arein," and in Greek "Besara," the latter attested by Greek inscriptions discovered at the site, which confirmed its identification. Bet She'arim is mentioned by name for the first time by Josephus Flavius as the center of an estate belonging to Berenice, the daughter of King Agrippa I. The earliest remains of construction at Bet She'arim date from the second century BCE.

Bet She'arim became renowned as a great center of Torah study after Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (Judah the Patriarch), best known in the ancient sources simply as "Rabbi," took up residence there. Yehuda Hanasi, who was the head of the Sanhedrin, the religious, spiritual and political leader of the Jewish world in the late second and early third centuries CE, moved his study house and the Sanhedrin from Shefar'am to Bet She'arim. The Roman authorities granted him tenant status on many estates, one of which was at Bet She'arim. This is apparently the reason he chose Bet She'arim as his final resting place (220 CE), although he spent the last 17 years of his life in Zippori (Sepphoris), where he compiled the Mishnah. As described in the Talmud: "Rabbi was lying [on his sickbed] at Sepphoris but a [burial] place was reserved for him at Bet She'arim" (Ketuboth 103b).

After Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi was buried at Bet She'arim, the cemetery became sacred and many people sought it as their final resting place, both because of the proximity to "Rabbi" and because the authorities had prohibited Jewish burial in Jerusalem.

The Bet She'arim cemetery is considered one of the most fascinating finds in the archaeology of the Land of Israel. People from all over the country and beyond were buried here.

Inscriptions mention people from Palmyra in Syria, the Phoenician coast, Himyar in Yemen and other distant places. More than 300 inscriptions have been found here, the majority in Greek and the rest in Hebrew, Aramaic and Palmyrene. The new excavations in the ancient town of Bet She'arim shed light on Jewish life there and on the ties between the "city of the living" and the "city of the dead."

The glory days of Bet She'arim were dimmed when the Sanhedrin moved to Zippori, and at the end of the third century CE the quality of construction declined. However, the tombs continued to proliferate, albeit in simpler forms.

Bet She'arim was destroyed and burned in the fourth century CE. The Muslims called the hill of Bet She'arim "Sheikh Abreik" after a sheikh's tomb still found at the site. A few shepherds used the caves for shelter, but the remains were slowly covered with earth and vegetation. In the Middle Ages, when Jews wanted to worship at the tomb of Yehuda Hanasi, they mistakenly sought out the tomb of his grandson, Rabbi Yehuda Nessiya, in Zippori – and that was the way things stayed until scholars redeemed Bet She'arim from oblivion.

Tour of the Bet She'arim Caves

Archaeologists gave each of the caves a consecutive number. The numbers are still in use, but each cave has now been given a name based on its inscriptions, reliefs or character. The tour begins at the information plaza near the model of the ancient city of Bet She'arim. From there, turn left toward three caves (25, 26, 27). Begin with the northern cave (the farthestmost) and from there return to the information plaza to continue your tour.

The Cave of Yitzhak Ze'ira son of Shim'on (25) – This small burial cave is typical of many of the caves at Bet She'arim. In front of it is a courtyard, accessed by descending a staircase. The impressive stone door in the facade still has the original metal ring to pull the door open on its hinge. Designs of bands and tacks carved into the door imitate the metal reinforcements that were used on wooden doors at the time. On the left side of the cave is a hall beyond whose destroyed ceiling you can see four rectangular burial benches. This form of burial was very common at Bet She'arim.



The door of the Cave of the Sidonian Head of the Jewish Community

Cave of the Sidonian Head of the Jewish Community (26) – This burial cave has a basalt door in the facade. The door features an inverted-cone-like decoration, imitating a metal door-knocker. An inscription, incised in Greek on the wall of the cave, gave it its name.

Cave of the Breach (27) – This cave is named after the opening above the door. This opening shows how grave robbers avoided the stone door and found a weak point by which to enter.

Return to the plaza and continue left, following the signs to the upper path. On the right is the mausoleum and on the left is a cistern.

The Upper Path

The mausoleum – To the right of the path are the built foundations of a square structure that was apparently the podium of a mausoleum.

Large cistern (24) – The cistern, whose walls are plastered, was originally used as a burial cave. Excavations revealed findings from the Byzantine period – hundreds of pottery vessels, glass vessels and coins, some bearing Christian symbols.

Small cistern (29) – This cistern and the two next to it (one of them is number 28), were situated alongside the road from the cemetery up to the city. These cisterns contained the water supply for Bet She'arim.

Unexcavated cave (30) – The door was moved only slightly by grave robbers, but the cave has not yet been excavated. The entry courtyard, which is lined with ashlar, contains a large sarcophagus.

The next stop is the **bench structure**. This is a large courtyard surrounded by stepped benches in a U shape. This was apparently where memorial ceremonies were held; the opportunity for study, homilies and prayer. Each year on the anniversary of the death of a prominent person, followers would gather here, perhaps in memory of those interred in the graves under the courtyard (the Cave of the Coffins).

Sarah's Cave (21) – A four-chamber cave arranged around a central courtyard. On the basalt lintel of the right-hand chamber is a Greek inscription reading: "Burial place of Theodosia also called Sarah of Tyre." The Jews of the Diaspora commonly had a Greek name as well as a Jewish name. A marble tablet found in the courtyard is also inscribed in Greek: "The tomb of Caliope the elder, who is also the freedwoman of Procopius, of blessed memory." The inscription attests to the existence of slavery among the Jews. However, Procopius, Caliope's owner, is remembered fondly, and Caliope evidently rose to prominence after she was freed and hence was buried at Bet She'arim.

Cave of the Single Coffin (23) – This catacomb includes a large courtyard with benches, a burial chamber and the remains of a superstructure. It was originally planned to hold burials in coffins, but only one sarcophagus was found. At a later stage rooms with vaulted ceilings were hewn, creating more space for burials, in the form of rock-cut rectangular tombs.

From here the trail ascends left to the Cave of the Engaged Columns.

Cave of the Engaged Columns (22) – The cave consists of one hall with two sculpted engaged columns (columns attached to the wall). This cave is not currently open to the public.

The Lulav Cave (18) – This cave, on the left side of the trail, consists of two chambers. On the lintel of the doorway is a Greek inscription: "God, remember your servant Sarcados." On the

doorpost of the second arch, on the right and left, two lulavs (palm branches) are carved.

The trail crosses another bench structure above the tomb of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (14), which was apparently connected to memorial ceremonies for Yehuda Hanasi and his family.

“Here Rests the Loved One” Cave (15) – A catacomb with a special shape because it is hewn as a narrow corridor. Flanking the main hall are four *arcosolia* (burial benches topped by an arched ceiling) the height of a man. On the plaster that covers the far-right arcosolium an inscription was found in Greek, painted in red, only part of which survived, reading: “Here rests the loved one....” The door is decorated with two rosettes within circles. Part of the metal handle can still be seen in the door.

Textile Merchants Cave (19) – A cave with three chambers, in which six inscriptions were found. The inscription in the easternmost chamber, in Greek and painted red, reads: “Benjamin, the son of Julius, the textile merchant, son of the most excellent Makrobios.” Another inscription in the same chamber reads: “Sabirius son of Sabinus, the chief textile dyer.”

This tomb belonged to a family of textile merchants. On the lintel of the western chamber’s doorway a relief is carved depicting a human head, next to which is a menorah, and an inscription reading: “of Socrates.” The name of the deceased is Greek, but the menorah and the burial place show that he was Jewish. On a white marble plaque set in a special niche about 80 cm above the lintel, alongside a seven-branched menorah with a tripod base, is a bilingual inscription. The Greek portion reads “Daniel son of Ada of Tyre,” and in Hebrew the word “shalom” appears



Aramaic inscription in the Cave of the Curses

The Lower Trail

The trail reaches a courtyard; go down the stairs on your left to the **Cave of the Syrian Jews** and the **Cave of the Curses (12)**. The Cave of the Curses, in front of you, has four chambers. On one of the walls an eagle is carved. There are 12 inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic in the cave, some of which contain curses such as: “Anyone who opens this burial upon whomever lies inside it shall die an evil end.”

The Cave of the Syrian Jews is to your left. A large menorah is carved to the right of the entrance. At the base of the menorah is a point where grave robbers breached a wall separating this cave from the Cave of the Curses. Farther inside on the left you’ll see an inscription in Greek: “Apse [tomb] of Edesios, head of the council of elders of Antioch.” Next to that inscription are the names of Edesios’ family – his wife and two daughters, who were buried alongside him.

The trail continues to the **Cave of the Steps (13)**. This catacomb consists of an elongated courtyard around which 12 chambers are hewn on two levels. About 20 inscriptions in Greek and Hebrew were found in these chambers. One of these, in Hebrew painted red, reads: “This is the resting place of Yudan, son of Levi, forever in peace. May his resting place be [set] in peace.” On the lower level, opposite the staircase descending inward, is a chamber with a Greek inscription commemorating “the lady Miki.”



Cave of the Steps

From here, head back to the plaza, visiting three large caves on the way.

Cave of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (14) –This large catacomb consists of a courtyard, cave and superstructure. The entrance to the cave features an impressive façade, with three doorways



Presumed tomb of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi

topped by an 8-m-high triple arch. In the first chamber, on the left, is red-painted inscription in Hebrew: “Rabbi Shim’on.” In the southern corner of that hall is a stone bearing the facsimile of an inscription that disappeared long ago: “Anina [Hanina] the younger.” On another stone is a bilingual inscription executed in black paint reading: “of Rabbi Gamaliel.”

In the southwestern corner of the back room are two rectangular graves hewn into the floor next to one another – an unusual phenomenon at Bet She’arim. This double tomb was covered

with heavy stone slabs. No inscriptions were found, but we may assume that this was the tomb of a husband and wife. They are in keeping with Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi’s command that he be buried in the ground and not in a coffin. Names identical to those of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi’s sons – Rabbi Shim’on and Rabbi Gamaliel – were also found in this cave, and Anina, mentioned above, is the name of a rabbi whom Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi made head of the Sanhedrin. This grouping of names, the double tomb and the bench structure above the tomb are reasonable evidence that this was the burial cave of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi.

Cave of the Coffins (20) – This large and impressive catacomb, measuring 75 x 75 m, also had a magnificent, three-arched façade. The cave was found to contain 135 coffins, 20 of which bore fine decorations taken mainly from the animal world, including bulls,



The lion sarcophagus in the Cave of the Coffins

eagles, lions, birds and fish. The “mother of all menorahs” was found in this cave – measuring 1.9 m high, 1.25 m wide and protruding up to 36 cm from the wall. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority, in cooperation with the Israel Antiquities Authority, has preserved the menorah, saving it from deterioration.

The Museum Cave (28) – This cave was originally a reservoir that was subsequently turned into a glass workshop. An **interpretive center** has now been set up here. In the center of the room is a giant slab of glass weighing 8.8 tons, created in the Early Islamic period (ninth century CE). In antiquity, large blocks of glass were manufactured from which smaller pieces were broken off to be sent to workshops. It seems that this slab was left here because of some defect in the glass. The museum displays some of the finds from the Bet She’arim excavations.

The Menorah Caves

In 2009, another cave complex was opened at Bet She’arim National Park – the Menorah Caves. This is a complex of six burial caves found at the foot of the western side of Bet She’arim Hill. These caves are rich in carved decorations, inscriptions and reliefs including dozens of reliefs of the seven-branched menorah – which became the symbol of the State of Israel. Because of the symbolic significance of the menorah, the Knesset contributed special resources to preserving these caves, which enabled some to be opened to the public. Near the Menorah Caves a secret weapons cache from the Mandate era was discovered in what had originally been a large reservoir (the Slik Cave). Because of the special value of these caves and concern for the safety of visitors, visits are made with a parks authority guide only. Please make a reservation by calling 04-9831643 or see notices on the Israel Nature and Parks Authority website: www.parks.org.il.



The “mother of all menorahs” in the Cave of the Coffins

Arriving from the upper trail, first we’ll visit the **Mausoleum Cave (11)** and then continue to the **Torah Ark Cave** and the **Cave of the Jewish Gladiator (4)** and the **Cave of the Warrior and his Menorah (3)** on the slope. Next we’ll visit the **Cave of Hell** and the **Cave of the Horseman (1)**. We’ll end at the **reservoir** where we’ll see a new presentation that tells the story of the menorah in Bet She’arim and Israel.

The Mausoleum Cave (11) – located in the upper part of the cave complex, this cave once featured a magnificent structure – the tomb monument – its façade rich in reliefs depicting animals.



Façade of the Mausoleum Cave

That structure collapsed; some of its stones are now on display in the Museum Cave and some are arranged nearby. This cave had a beautiful mosaic floor at the entrance and contained stone coffins and *arcosolia*.

The Torah Ark Cave (4) – This cave contains four chambers and about 100 burial places. The main hall (on the left) features an incised decoration of a Torah Ark, lions, an altar and a seven-



Relief of the Torah Ark

branched menorah. In the hall opposite the steps the figure of a Jewish gladiator is incised. Next to it, in Greek, are the words “Germanos son of Isaac the Palmyrene.” On the far wall the incised figure of a man diving can be seen, perhaps a symbol of passage to the world of the dead.

Cave of the Warrior and his Menorah (3) – This five-chamber catacomb has about 80 burial places. In the main hall a number of seven-branched menorahs are carved, along with a conch shell in



The relief of the warrior and his menorah

relief. The most impressive menorah, with a tripod base, can be seen on top of a warrior’s head. The relief, which was badly damaged by vandals, has been successfully restored. The inscriptions in the cave show that the deceased were from Palmyra.

Cave no. 2, located under the Cave of Hell, is closed because the few inscriptions on its walls disappeared over the years.

Cave of Hell – Depictions of two merchant ships were found incised on the walls of this cave, evidence of Jewish seafaring in antiquity. There are also geometric designs, cut within rectangular panels. An 11-line funerary poem dated to about 900 CE was found in excavations here, inscribed in Arabic in black paint. It has since disappeared.

The guardsman Alexander Zayid entered this cave in 1936 and through a hole in the wall, reaching Cave no. 1. Zayid summoned Prof. Benjamin Mazar and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (Israel’s future second president) to the site. Mazar proposed that the site was ancient Beth She’arim, and excavations began shortly thereafter.



Incised depiction of ships in the Cave of Hell



The horseman relief

Cave of the Horseman (1) – This is the largest catacomb in Bet She’arim, with some 380 burial places in 16 chambers branching off a long corridor at various levels. The entrance to the chambers was through a heavy stone door that turned on a hinge. Many doors remain in their original place. The great density of the tombs shows that optimum use was made of the cave over a few generations.



Entrance to one of the halls in the Cave of the Horseman

Various types of burials were discovered in the cave: (1) *Arcosolia* – the most common type. Short tombs of this type were found that were used for the interment of children, the collection of bones or to place ossuaries in which bones were kept; (2)*Arcosolia* with two burial benches raised above the floor and a narrow passageway leading to a third burial bench; (3) *loculi* tombs; (4) pit graves hewn into the floor of the chamber.

The cave walls feature many carvings and reliefs, among them a rosette, concentric circles, menorahs, a shofar (ram’s horn), lulav (palm branch) ethrog (citron), oil jug, horsemen, ships, lions, arches and inscriptions in Hebrew. Inscriptions in Palmyrene in four of the halls reveals the interment there of Jews from Palmyra in Syria.

The Slik Cave (the reservoir) – the weapons cache – menorah presentation. The reservoir, which is 26 m long, 6 m deep and has a volume of more than 1,300 cubic m, served Bet She’arim at its peak from the second to the fourth centuries CE.

During the British Mandate (1917–1948) apparently in the early 1940s, a concrete floor was cast in the reservoir, a door was installed and the space was used by the Haganah, the pre-state Jewish underground, as a firing range and secret weapons cache. In 2014 the entire reservoir was excavated and exposed, its large dimensions revealing something of the size of the ancient town and its water consumption.

Bet She’arim Hill

Near the top of Bet She’arim Hill are the remains of a public structure (a basilica) built during the time of Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi. The walls of the structure, which was about 40 m long, are built of large, well-dressed ashlars. The western wall, and the edge of the slope, was preserved to quite a height and served as part of the city wall of Bet She’arim.

At the top of the hill is a bronze statue of the guardsman Alexander Zayid, astride his horse, overlooking the fields of the Jezreel Valley. Zayid came to live in this country in 1904 and was among the founders of Bar Giora, a group that established the organization known as Hashomer – the Guardsman. Zayid was murdered in 1938 by Kassem a-Tabash, a Bedouin from the al-Khilaf tribe. The murderer was caught by members of the Palmah (the Haganah strike force), summarily tried and executed.

The area around the statue offers a spectacular view of the Jezreel Valley, Mount Carmel, northern Samaria and the Lower Galilee.

Near the statue is the tomb of Sheikh Abreik, a double-domed structure next to which is a small spring. Local tradition ascribes medicinal properties to the spring.



Artist’s rendering of the Alexander Zayid statue

The Community and the Park

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority, in cooperation with the Kiryat Tivon Local Council, has operated a community project at Bet She’arim National Park since 1997, with residents of Kiryat Tivon and nearby communities trained as volunteer guides in the park. They offer tours for families and individual visitors on weekdays at 10 A.M., 11 A.M., 12 noon and 1 P.M. Organized groups seeking a guided tour should contact the Carmel Information and Education Center (04-9841750/2).

Nighttime Tours and Events

Lighting installed in the park makes possible exciting nighttime tours of the caves (by reservation). Events, such as bar/bat mitzvah celebrations, weddings and conferences can also be held (by reservation).



The breach in the northern wall of the Cave of Hell

Rules for Visitors

- Walk only on marked trails.
- Do not enter places that have not been prepared for visitors.
- There are dangerous open pits at the site.
- Slipping is a danger in fall, winter and spring.
- Visitors are permitted in the park only during opening hours.
- Do not damage the antiquities or other objects.
- Do not take mementos from the park.
- Do not bring animals into the caves.
- Do not throw or roll stones.
- Absolutely no candles are allowed in the caves.
- Do not pick flowers or fruit in the park.
- Do not climb walls.



Fish on the mosaic floor in the Mausoleum Cave

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