

Mishpacha

Back to Life

Hidden Treasures For thousands of years, Jews everywhere have longed to be buried on Har HaZeisim, the spot where, according to tradition, the Resurrection of the Dead will begin. But while we all anticipate *techiyas hameisim*, isn't paying a visit now ... well, kind of dangerous?

That is probably the most popular question asked of Meir Eisenman, a licensed tour guide and resident of Maaleh Zeitim, one of the new Jewish enclaves built on the Arab-populated Mount of Olives.

"Har HaZeisim is the ultimate connection to Yerushalayim," he says, noting the *kvarim* from the time of King David's rule, the First and Second Temple eras, graves from 300 years ago and graves from last week.

Like so many Jerusalem residents, I'd seen the view so many times from the window of the bus on its route to the Kosel: the distinctive, rock-hewn tombs of Yad Avshalom, Bnei Chezir, and Zechariah ben Yehoyada; the grandeur of Har HaZeisim, with its thousands of graves, a silent testimony to Am Yisrael's unwavering connection to Jerusalem and Eretz Yisrael throughout the ages. But what's it like to stand on top of the opposite mountain, and see the view from there? And what treasures are hidden on that mountain, perhaps behind one of those thickets of trees halfway up the mountain — giving glimpses into our past, when the Beis HaMikdash still stood and there was no doubt in the world as to whom this sacred place belonged to?



Well-Connected I got my chance to find out one recent sunny morning. My guide was Meir Eisenman, the son of Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman, *rav* of Passaic's Congregation Ahavas Israel and author of the popular *Mishpacha* column "Shul With A View." Meir was born in Passaic, but when he was 19 he came to Eretz Yisrael to learn in Yeshivas Ponevezh. He immediately felt at home, and it's no wonder why. His family's connection to Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem go back nine generations.

"One of my ancestors, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Tzoref, came here 201 years ago," he explains. "He's buried on Har HaZeisim close to the *kever* of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Shklov, one of the *talmidim* of the Vilna Gaon. They were part of the group known as the Perushim, who arrived in Eretz Yisrael between 1809 and 1812."

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Tzoref was instrumental in the building of the Menachem Zion Synagogue and, later, in the rebuilding of the Churvah. Another of Meir's illustrious ancestors buried on Har HaZeisim is Yoel Moshe Solomon, a founder

of Nachalat Shivah, one of the first Jewish settlements built outside of the Old City walls. Later, he helped establish Meah Shearim and Petach Tikvah — today a city, but back then it was the first moshavah established in Eretz Yisrael.

"My dream is to bring more tourists to Har HaZeisim," he confides. "It's true that people are afraid, but security has improved, thanks to people like Avraham and Menachem Lubinsky and their International Committee for the Preservation of Har HaZeisim. Today, there is a visible police presence in the area and security cameras, as well as private security guards from the Chevra Kadisha. But it's a push-pull situation: the more Jewish visitors that come to Har HaZeisim, the more pressure there will be on the police to keep the area safe."

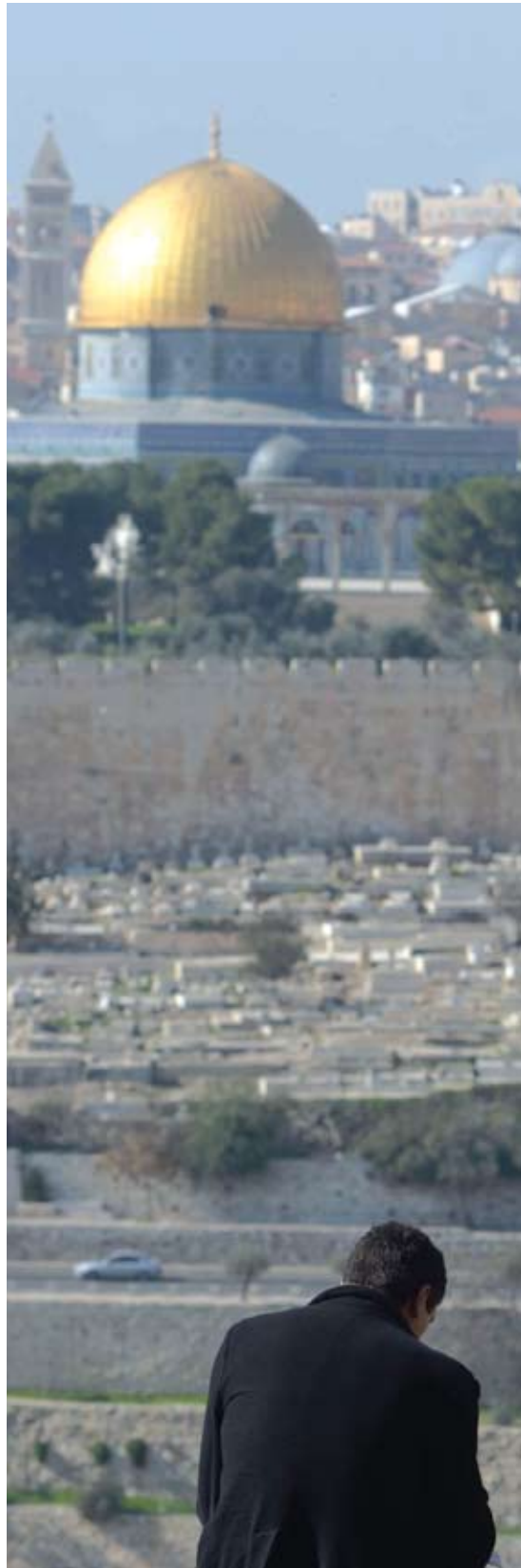
Meir adds that there is nowhere else in the city where you can fully see and comprehend what Har HaBayis was. "Today everyone wants to take the Kosel Tunnels tour," Meir explains, "and although it's fascinating to see the original structures, you're underground, seeing the bottom

layers." On Har HaZeisim, it's all wide open from the top.

He adds that Har HaZeisim is unique in yet another way: "This is a mountain of *achdus*. *Gedolei Yisrael* — Sephardic, chassidic, and *litvish* — are buried here, as well as soldiers who fell in Israel's War of Independence and ordinary Jews. Almost every Jew in the world has a connection to Har HaZeisim, has someone who is buried here; if not someone in their family, then a *rav* or a leader of their community, or someone else they can identify with."

But where are all the Jewish tourists? Right now, the only Jews we see standing at the top of the mountain are Meir, our photographer Ouria, and me, plus a few Israeli policemen. Which is not to say that the spot is empty; several groups of Christian tourists are taking photos, while an Arab man and his camel wait for customers.





Stored Ashes As we made our way down the mountain, we visited many historic *kvarim*, including those of Rav Gershon of Kitov (brother-in-law of the Baal Shem Tov), Rav Shmuel Salant (chief rabbi of Jerusalem for almost 70 years), the Alter of Slabodka, the Nesivos Shalom, the Boyaner Rebbe, and Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg.

But as I had suspected, there was more to see on this holy spot. Something was hidden behind a thicket of trees that lay on the other side of the road, and an open door in an iron gate beckoned us onward. Once through that door we were in an open area that today belongs to a church called Dominus Flevit. When the church was being built during the mid-1950s, an ancient Jewish cemetery dating back to Bayis Sheini was found. But there were other surprises in store.

"This is the site where we think the *parah adumah* [the red heifer] was burned," says Meir. "Even after there wasn't a *parah adumah*, the ashes were stored here — at least until the time of the Gemara." He then begins to state his proofs, based upon research done by Israeli archaeologist Rabbi Yonatan Adler. "A *gemara* in *Yoma* tells us that they burnt the *parah adumah* on Har HaZeisim and that the spot was exactly opposite

the Kodesh HaKadoshim, and the same height." He points across the valley to a spot on Har HaBayis where three arches can be clearly seen. "That is where Sha'ar Nikanor stood," he says, referring to the gateway that led to the Temple courtyard. "We're standing on the spot that is exactly facing Sha'ar Nikanor and which is the same height."

Next, he pulls out his pocket Mishnayos and turns to *Parah* 3:6-7. "The Mishnah tells us that there was a *mikveh* on the site, and we can see the remains of it today. The Mishnah also tells us that they built a ramp leading from Har HaBayis to Har HaZeisim using a two-tiered arch construction, so that if there was a grave underneath, the *tumah* wouldn't come up to the upper level and interfere with the *taharah*. That same system was used on the site where they burned the *parah adumah*, and where we are standing now is actually a hollow courtyard — there is a cave underneath us."

Meir shows us two entrances to the cave and the site of the former *mikveh*. The ramp that stretched across the Kidron Valley disappeared long ago, and yet ...

Suddenly I can visualize the eastern Shushan Gate opening and the *parah adumah* being led across the ramp to the spot where I am now standing.



Dry Bones Next we take a look at the small cemetery, an example of burial practices that were common toward the end of Bayis Sheini. In the days of the Second Temple, the body was laid on a stone shelf inside a cave for a year. Afterwards the bones were collected and put in a little box called an ossilegium or ossuary. The ossuaries were often decorated on the outside with carved geometric patterns, such as rosettes. When this site was first excavated, some fragments of Hebrew inscriptions were also found. Those fragments, like the remains of the Jews who were buried here, have hopefully since then found a safe home.

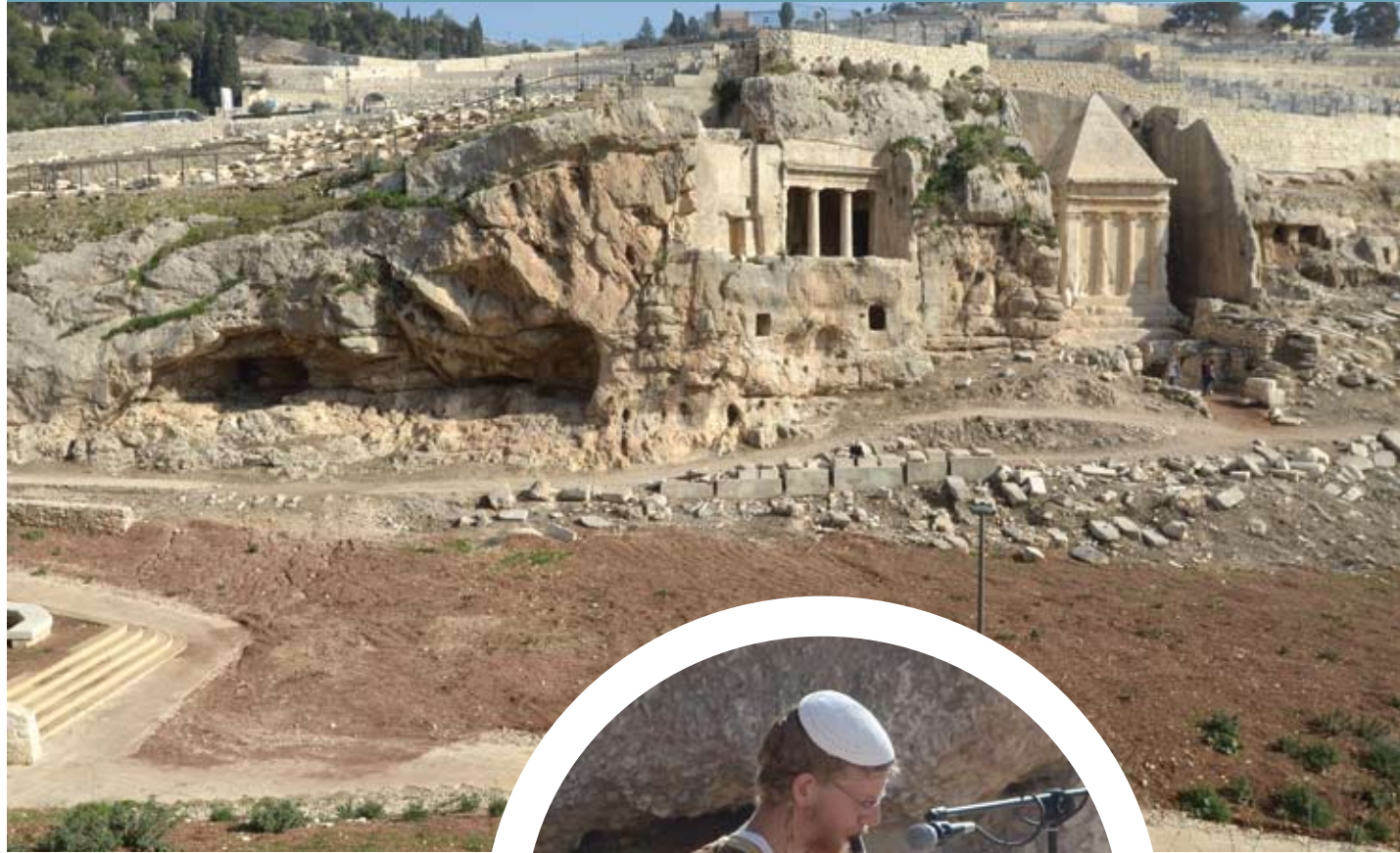


Images of Destruction ... Har HaZeisim is divided into many different sections, and when we reach the area where the Perushim are buried it is still possible to see the destruction that occurred during the two decades when the Jordanians were in control of the area.

"About 70 to 80 percent of the *matzeivos* were destroyed by the Jordanians between the years 1948 to 1967," says Meir. "When the Chevra Kadisha came here after the Six Day War, they began to repair the gravestones. What happened here was the largest destruction of any Jewish cemetery in the world."

Among the gravestones that were smashed were the ones belonging to Meir's ancestors, Rabbi Yoel Moshe Solomon and his wife, Fruma. "She was also an amazing person," he comments. "She came to Yerushalayim when she was in her teens and made a vow to never leave Eretz Yisrael. And she never did. She lived to be over 90."

The family paid to have new gravestones for their progenitors Yoel Moshe and Fruma Solomon, but there are still numerous gravestones lying broken and forgotten.



... And Renewal When we reach Nachal Kidron, the valley that lies between Har HaBayis and Har HaZeisim, the still-scarred landscape is replaced by an amazing site: an impressive, newly paved pathway, lined with security cameras, which follows the path of the Valley of the Kings.

Meir explains that the renovated pathway — part of an archaeological park that Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat hopes will further elevate Jerusalem's reputation as a world-class tourist destination — stretches all the way from Mt. Scopus in the north to the Hinnom Valley (between Har Zion and the Cinematheque) and the Mount Zion Hotel. Not far from Yad Avshalom, which despite its name is *not* the tomb of David HaMelech's wayward son, is a brand new visitors' center where tourists can get information and maps of Har HaZeisim. The city has also hired musicians to play in front of Yad Avshalom during the day.



Life at the Top There are close to 100 families living in Maaleh Zeitim, Meir explains. Currently his community, which is located on the southern slope of Har HaZeisim, consists of just six buildings. But two more properties are being readied so that another 20 families can move in.

"The two properties had been Jewish-owned properties for over 100 years," he says. "One was owned by the Chabad Chevra Kadisha and the other by the Bucharim Chevra Kadisha. They bought the land with the idea of turning it into a cemetery, but the Ottoman officials wanted to keep the Jewish cemetery on the other side of the street. The Moskowitz family bought the property from the Chevra Kadishas so they could build on the site."

The presence of other Jewish communities, such as Beit Choshen and Beit Orot, has helped improve security for both residents and visitors to Har HaZeisim, says Meir. "Before the neighborhoods were here, security was much worse. Policemen were afraid to come investigate when incidents of grave vandalism were reported. The only way to keep Har HaZeisim ours is to have people living here. So we feel we're on the front lines of building Yerushalayim and keeping it Jewish." ●

If You Go Meir says it's safe to visit Har HaZeisim during the day, but if you feel uncomfortable wandering around on your own, go with a licensed tour guide. The Chevra Kadisha can arrange for a security guard to escort you as well. It's also possible to arrange a special grave-free tour of the area for Kohanim. If you plan to walk down from the top of Har HaZeisim to the Kidron Valley, be sure to wear comfortable walking shoes.

Since most of the security problems come from Arab school kids who live nearby, the best hours to visit are from 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., when they are in school. Although Meir has led tours on Fridays without encountering any problems, he suggests scheduling your visit on a different day, if possible, since on Fridays many Muslims are off from school and work and go to Har HaBayis.

