



**FIRST PERSON**  
• ARI Z. ZIVOTOFSKY

## Visiting Jericho

**Dodging potential curses and bullets, a family takes advantage of a monthly opportunity to pray in an ancient synagogue**

**W**hen it was built, the synagogue was probably the pride of the not-insignificant local Jewish community. The best artisans were brought in to design a magnificent mosaic, and to help defray the costs a separate mosaic that lists the donors was placed near the entrance. It has now been about 1,500 years since those benefactors made their contributions, but Jews are still drawn to the site. It is located in the Palestinian-controlled city of Jericho and is today known as the Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue after an inscription at the center of its well-preserved 10-meter x 13-meter mosaic.

Accessing the site is unfortunately politically complicated, but thanks to the efforts of one devoted woman, Erna Covos, we were fortunate to be able to visit and pray there this past Hanukka. After a decades-long absence, it was a profoundly emotional experience for me to visit both Jericho and its most well known synagogue.

The synagogue was probably used during the sixth and seventh centuries (although some scholars date it as early as the third century), and then the Jericho Jewish community disappeared and it was forgotten. In 1936 it was rediscovered by D.C. Baramki of the Antiquities Authority. Jews were denied access to it from 1948 until 1967, when Israel liberated the area and Jews returned to the site.

In an unusual twist, for the first years following its liberation, visitors, including Jewish worshipers, were charged admission by a clever Arab who built his house atop the archeological site. Finally, in 1986 the National Parks Authority worked out a deal that allowed free access, which led to regular prayers and eventually a small yeshiva at the site.

In 1994 as part of the Oslo Accords, Jericho became the first city in Judea and Samaria to be handed over to Palestinian Authority control. Owing to the sanctity and uniqueness of the synagogue site, then chief rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau and MK Hanan Porat persuaded prime minister Yitzhak Rabin to negotiate a special status for the synagogue, and unhindered Jewish access and prayer continued.

That all came to an explosive halt with the igniting of the second intifada on September 27, 2000. Shortly thereafter Jews were barred from Jericho, and then on the night of October 12, the synagogue was van-



(Curt Brown/Minneapolis Star Tribune/MCT)

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dalized by Arabs who torched and destroyed most of the building, burned holy books and relics, but thankfully left the mosaic relatively unscathed.

For more than eight years no Jew was permitted to set foot in the Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue. Then, on February 25, 2009, a joint patrol of IDF soldiers and PA police escorted a high-ranking delegation of rabbis and military officials to inspect the site. In anticipation of the visit, the PA painted and cleaned the site. Although there were no official plans to allow continued visits, that visit broke the ice and now escorted visits are permitted approximately once a month, thanks to Covos.

Having heard about the possibility of praying in the synagogue, I contacted her about arranging a family trip for Yosef's pre-bar-mitzva first experience of putting on tefillin. Unfortunately the army canceled the trip that month and another year would pass before we were able to make the pilgrimage.

THE BUS began its journey at 6:30 a.m. from the Jerusalem International Convention Center. We, three generations of Zivotofsky men, boarded the bus and were surprised to find only a handful of other passengers, mostly young haredi yeshiva boys. We picked up a few more yeshiva boys at the French Hill junction and then headed toward the Dead Sea. We were going to be circling around and entering Jericho from the north, but we first had to pass the southern entrance.

As we did, we saw the one modern, tall building, the casino that many remember. The building is now the five-star Intercontinental Jericho that was built at a cost of \$300 million and opened in September 1998, essentially as a hotel built around a casino. Before the renewed Arab violence in late 2000, the casino serviced approximately 6,000 patrons a day, almost all Israelis. The hotel and casino shut down in October 2000 and just the hotel reopened in 2005. There are 181 rooms, costing about \$70 a night.

After passing the southern entrance of Jericho, we continued to Route 90, where we turned north for a few kilometers and then stopped at the entrance to Beit Hogla, where Covos lives. She, coordinating with the IDF, for the past year or so has been arranging the Jewish visits approximately once a month, usually on Rosh Hodesh. From there we continued around to the north of Jericho.

Our last stop before picking up military escorts was the small town of Mevo'ot Yeriho which, following two years of concerted efforts by Covos and several other activists, was founded in 1999 as a station for agricultural experiments known as Havat Ha'iklum and became a farm community in 2000. It is home to 24 families, who grow lemons, dates, figs, grapes, sweet potatoes, passion fruit and other crops, and are also the guardians of the Torah scroll that was housed in the Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue before 2000. It is the final outpost before the entrance to Jericho. We picked up the Torah and some additional people. These included a large group from the Shiloh hesder yeshiva and an American reporter.

We then met our IDF escort and crossed into PA territory, where we were able to see in the distance to our right an additional synagogue, also located in Area A under PA control, the Na'aran synagogue, but were not permitted to visit. It was discovered in 1918 after the Ottoman Turks fired a shell at a British army unit camped at the site, and it was dated to the early Byzantine period, the third century CE. There is a mosaic which is even larger than the one in Shalom al Yisrael and has several sections, including a large wheel of the Zodiac, the story of Daniel in the lion's den and drawings of utensils from the Temple. In recent years the area has been effectively abandoned by the state and the mosaic is deteriorating, ➡



**ROSH HODESH** prayer was joyously led by students from Shiloh.

(Photos: Ari Z. Zivotofsky)



**ENTRANCE AND** exterior of the Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue, circa 1967 and today (below).



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ISRAELI SOLDIERS joined in some of the prayer service with the worshippers.

A reading of the conquest of Jericho in the Bible presents a puzzle: Immediately following the 'battle,' Joshua issued two proclamations, the second a curse upon any person who would rebuild the city

although there are groups of youths who visit regularly.

The modern settlement of Niran is named after the ancient city of that name, although it is located several kilometers to the north. It was established in 1971 as a Nahal settlement, was converted to a civilian kibbutz in 1977 and as of 2006 had a population of 52. It has an industrial area which includes factories for producing stretch film and other plastic materials. Information about Na'aran and many of the other sites was provided by Covos during the bus trip into and out of Jericho.

There is possibly an even older synagogue in the Jericho area, but we were not successful in visiting it. It was discovered in 1998 and is known as the Wadi Kelt synagogue or the Jericho synagogue. If the archeological remains are indeed a synagogue, as the lead archeologist at the site, the recently deceased Ehud Netzer, asserted, it is the oldest synagogue in the world. It was found as part of the Maccabean royal winter palace complex just west of Jericho, and is dated to the first century BCE, about 50 years older than the synagogue found in Gamla on the Golan Heights.

The remains suggest a simple structure unlike the large, artistic Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue. Netzer claimed to have identified within the small area a main hall, a niche for the Torah scrolls, a mikve and a dining hall. Others archeologists are not convinced that it is a synagogue. Also unlike Shalom al Yisrael, it was short-lived, being destroyed together with the palace in an earthquake in 31 BCE.

ONE OF THE first things that one notices upon entering Jericho is the cable car. It seems out of place in the otherwise sleepy town and did not exist the last time I was in the city. The cable car links Tel Jericho to the Mount of Temptation, site of a

19th-century Greek Orthodox monastery still occupied by six monks. Built as a result of post-Oslo investments at a cost \$12 million, the 12-car system opened in September 1999 and offers a five-minute ride along its 1,330-meter length.

We made our way to the synagogue, at which point the IDF made sure it was safe and formed an inner perimeter around the building. The PA policemen, looking significantly more relaxed, formed an armed outer perimeter. We disembarked and made our way into the PA-built structure that stands atop the ancient mosaic. After a short hiatus in which we had a chance to take in our surroundings, a joyous Hanukka/Rosh Hodesh service led by the Shiloh students commenced. It was truly an inspirational event in which Hallel was recited to song and dance, and Yosef received an aliya.

The service was followed by a short history lesson in the now unused second-story study hall, which included interesting details about the founding of Petah Tikva in 1878 by religious settlers from Europe as the first modern Jewish agricultural settlement in the Land of Israel. The original intent was to establish the settlement in the Jericho area, and the group originally purchased land there.

The name was chosen based on the verse (Hosea 2:17): "And I will give her vineyards from thence, and the Valley of Achor [an area in Wadi Kelt near Jericho] for an opening of hope [Petah Tikva], and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt." However, the Turkish sultan canceled the purchase and forbade them to settle there. They were eventually permitted to purchase swamp land near the source of the Yarkon River, but the name Petah Tikva was retained.

It is not only the synagogue, but the city as well that has special significance

and motivated us in wanting to visit, or more accurately, make a pilgrimage. Jericho is one of the oldest and lowest (244 meters below sea level) cities in the world, and its Jewish history dates back to the famous biblical story of its miraculous capture by Joshua.

Also known as *Ir Hatemarim*, the city of palm trees, Jericho is blessed with the abundant waters of the Jordan River a mere six kilometers to the east and underground springs that feed its famous oasis. The result is a lush green patch in the midst of an otherwise barren desert. Its natural resources, beauty and climate made it a favorite for rulers throughout history, and its strategic location along trade routes and desirable location commanding a ford across the Jordan led to continuous competition for its control.

A READING of the conquest of Jericho in the Bible presents a puzzle: Immediately following the "battle," Joshua issued two proclamations, the second a curse upon any person who would rebuild the city: "And Joshua charged the people with an oath at that time, saying: 'Cursed be the man before the Lord, who rises up and builds this city, Jericho; with the loss of his firstborn shall he lay the foundation, and with his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it'" (Joshua 6:26).

Joshua's curse on rebuilding Jericho was eventually fulfilled when, some 500 years later, Hiel rebuilt it and all of his children died (I Kings 16:34), starting with Abiram his firstborn and concluding with his youngest son Segib. The motive and parameters behind this curse have been the subject of much discussion, but however it is understood, the puzzle is clear: Was there not a Jewish presence in the city throughout the biblical and talmudic periods, and what were the Jews doing there when they built this magnificent synagogue?

The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 113a) codifies the curse and even seems to have expanded it by stating that the prohibition includes "building Jericho, even if it is called by another name, or building any other city and calling it Jericho." This second half led me to ask then chief rabbi Shlomo Goren in 1981 about the propriety of the name Mitzpe Yeriho that was being used for a new town being built overlooking the Jordan Valley. He responded that it was not a problem because Jericho was not to be the name of the city but merely a geographical reference as part of a larger name.

Various rationales are offered for the absence of the building prohibition from all the religious legal codes. The 19th century Rabbi Haim Berlin explained that once Jericho was rebuilt, there is no longer a prohibition to live there. Similar explanations were given by Rabbi Meir Simha Hakohen of Dvinsk and Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg. Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch said that only building a complete city is prohibited. Others suggest that only an individual may not build the city, but the Jewish community may.

Taking note of the significance of Jericho



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**SON YOSSI** holds up the synagogue's sign (above). The building's exterior, circa 1967.

as evidenced in the Joshua story, the miracles of Elisha and the continuous Jewish presence there for millennia, the talmudic sages saw fit to highlight the special holiness of the city and its intimate link to Jerusalem. Although the city lies 48 kilometers east of and about 1,100 meters lower than Jerusalem, many of the rituals taking place in the Temple were said to have been sensed in Jericho. We are informed that the sounds of the flute, cymbals, *magrefa* and shofar and the Levites' daily song were heard there.

The voice of the Temple sexton was also heard, as he roused the priests with his cry of: "Arise, priests, to your service; Levites to your pulpits and Israelites to your stands." And after he finished, the sound of the opening of the great gate of the Temple was heard. Some say that even the voice of the high priest as he intoned the divine name on Yom Kippur was heard in Jericho.

The link between the two cities was olfactory as well; the scent of the incense burning in the Temple was not only per-

ceptible, but was pervasive in Jericho. It is said that the goats would sneeze from the smell of the incense. In addition, the women, even brides, had no need for perfume, for the same reason.

Ra'avad explained that Jericho, just like all "firsts," be they grain, fruits, shearings or male children, are consecrated. Thus, Joshua consecrated the first section of the Land of Israel he captured. And to emphasize this point, God performs these daily miracles which produce a tangible link between Jericho and Jerusalem.

A rabbinic teaching says that when the Land of Israel was originally divided among the various tribes, it had not yet been revealed where the Temple would be constructed, and hence which tribe would have to give up some of its land for that purpose. Since the site of the Temple Mount in the Second Temple period was 500 x 500 *amot*, a 500 x 500 *ama* area was set aside as part of the original allocation in the outskirts of Jericho and would be given to the tribe in whose territory the Temple would eventually be built, in exchange for the land it would give up.

I RECALL visiting Jericho years ago. The first stop was the national park at the site of the tel where 23 strata have been identified by archeologists, principally the British Kathleen Kenyon in the 1950s. The site has yielded pottery and building samples spanning millennia. There are ancient cemeteries which have provided human remains for study and also shed light on ancient burial practices, including those of early Jews. Documents and mikvaot from the biblical and talmudic periods have been unearthed.

The tel is not the middle of the city because, unlike pre-Roman settlers who constructed their new cities on the ruins of previous ones, after the Romans destroyed the city in the first century, the Christian Byzantines, to whom it was also

holy, relocated it to its present location about 1.6 kilometers east. Nearby is the Spring of Elisha, where he is said to have sweetened the water (II Kings 2). This is the source of the water for the oasis.

As in much of Israel, earthquakes have played a role in the history of Jericho. For example, in 743, during the Umayyad period, Caliph Hisham Ibn Abd el-Malik built his winter palace there. But just four years later a massive earthquake leveled the city and he did not rebuild it, leaving it deserted. The last major earthquake in Israel was on July 12, 1927 and its epicenter was near Jericho. Current estimates are that more than 200 people died, most of them in Jericho.

The Jewish community seems to have disappeared after the Roman destruction of the city, but a Jewish community was reestablished in the seventh century, possibly by Jews fleeing from Muhammad. The Shalom al Yisrael Synagogue, oriented toward Jerusalem and containing the mosaic floor with the Jewish symbols of the time – menorah, shofar and lulav – is possibly from that period. The Jewish presence dwindled in the early Middle Ages, during which the town was fought over by Crusaders and Muslims. After Jericho was entirely burned by the Crusaders, it was practically uninhabited until the 19th century. The most recent destruction was in 1840 by Ibrahim Pasha in a punitive expedition against the Beduin.

At the beginning of the 20th century, only 40 to 50 Muslim families lived there, while by the 1940s the town had expanded to about 3,000 residents. In 1967, the Israeli census indicated a population of almost 7,000, with another 2,000 living in the surrounding area. Its current population is estimated at about 15,000.

On the day that we visited Jericho, about 50 teenagers visited the Herodian palaces without army permission or coordination in a protest to demand that Jews be permitted to live in the region. Many of them were members of Garin Yeriho, which advocates the renewal of Jewish settlement in the city.

It is truly a special city. Much credit goes to Covos for arranging these trips and it is important that Jericho not fall off the Jewish and Israeli radar screen. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, one of this generation's greatest sages and known for his work *Tzitz Eliezer*, wrote 40 years ago: "There is no prohibition from Joshua to weaken our efforts to do all we can to prevent this important city from leaving our authority... All this [the many connections between Jerusalem and Jericho] teaches us that Jericho should never again leave our possession, just as, God willing, the holy city of Jerusalem will never again leave our possession." ■

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*Those interested in future trips or other Jericho related activities can see <http://www.jewishjericho.org.il/english/>.*