



A cyclists' paradise near the Isaac Ochberg Birdwatch

Israel's Central Park

Megiddo is a hidden paradise of history and greenery

By Ruth Wasserman Lande

*"The kings came, they fought;
then fought the kings of Canaan,
at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo"*
(Judges 5:19)

FROM THE dawn of history, Megiddo has played a central role in the most influential and groundbreaking events. Its first urban characteristics were adopted during the Bronze Age, around 2900 BCE. In the 15th century BCE, Megiddo witnessed the first documented battle in human history, between the kings of Canaan and the Egyptian Pharaoh, after which the Megiddo junction became an important passageway used by great civilizations.

In fact, the Via Maris, connecting ancient Egypt, Syria and Phoenicia, converged at Megiddo, emphasizing its centrality and importance. Records show that as early as 2000 BCE, Megiddo was established as a strong and rich state.

This hidden historic treasure holds significant value for both Christianity and Judaism. As Christian belief details in the prophecy of St. John in the Book of Revelations 16:16, Armageddon (Megiddo) would be the site of the final battle between the forces of good and evil during the "End of Days."

Among the archaeological sites found in Megiddo are an ancient Roman temple dating back to the third century BCE, a

Christian mosaic and the Roman Sixth Legion's camp. Remnants of Christian religious buildings from this period are not common in Israel, while inscribed mosaics from the third and fourth centuries are extremely rare.

This structure is also key to understanding the origins of Christianity as an official religion, given that this particular mosaic includes inscriptions representing archaeological evidence of the existence of an ancient Christian community, whose members, both men and women, served in the Roman army. The site also portrays early coexistence between a Christian community alongside a Samaritan and Jewish settlement, adjacent to a Roman military camp.

Furthermore, the name Megiddo appears in the Old Testament no less than 18 times. In the "Song of Deborah," for example, it is mentioned as the place where the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, Menashe, Zevulun and Naftali attacked the army of Canaan in the 13th century BCE.

Megiddo's archaeological and religious significance were formally recognized in 2005. That year, the Megiddo region was declared a UNESCO "World Heritage Site."

Yet this pearl, in the heart of Israel, is not only a cradle of ancient history and religious significance. The modern battle of Megiddo, which took place during the latter half of 1915, ended in a significant British

victory and marked the end of Ottoman rule in Palestine. This, in turn, made it possible for the dream inherent in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 to become a reality, and for the modern State of Israel to be established in 1948.

During Israel's War of Independence in 1948, the Mishmar Ha'emek battles between the IDF and the enemy's Qawuqqi forces paved the way to Jewish control over the entire Megiddo region and greatly influenced the Haganah and Palmach's general victory during the war.

The Jo'ara Camp, adjacent to Kibbutz Ein Hashofet operated as the army squad commanders' barracks, as well as an officers' course base for the Haganah and the Palmach before the establishment of the State of Israel. Here, the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin trained his troops during his long stint in the IDF, of which he finally served as chief of staff. Currently, this site is being transformed into an interactive educational heritage center, promising to serve as yet another attraction for those who seek fun activity coupled with history.

Today's Megiddo Regional Council comprises 13 communities – nine kibbutzim, one farming community and three cooperative settlements (moshavim), constituting a home for some 12,500 people. It stretches over a territory of some 2,000 square feet, comprising breathtak-



COURTESY

Megiddo Regional Council head
Izhak Holavsky

ing landscapes of nature, woods, rivers, agricultural fields and plantations.

The Megiddo Regional Council’s “road-map” is based on designating the entire area as “the Israeli Central Park.”

This surprising pearl of greenery offers a beautiful walking path along the Shofet River, which is completely accessible to visitors with disabilities and dotted with picnic venues. It is also the home of many beautiful and safe-to-visit caves and the remnants of an old flour mill, all drenched in nature and greenery. Not far away, one may also find a playground for small children.

The Isaac Ochberg Birdwatch is yet another largely unknown venue, adjacent to a quadrupled three-mile bicycle path. This site serves as a memorial to Isaac Ochberg, who saved 187 Jewish orphans during the pogroms in Eastern Europe in the first half of the 20th century and flew them to South



RAN PERETZ

The Tel Megiddo National Park

Africa. Some 187 metal plaques may be seen throughout the area naming each of these orphans.

Adjacent to Kibbutz Gal-Ed, within a beautiful grove of eucalyptus and pine trees, one may find a magical spread of wild flowers, which come into full bloom every February. West of this flower hill, visitors may continue to visit the well-known Alligator River.

The aforementioned dip into nature should not be concluded without a must-visit to the Tel Megiddo archaeological site, depicting the unique historical significance of the site.

To complete this interlude in paradise one may enjoy the kosher Tanduca restaurant in the Yokne’am Moshava village, which –

despite its name – is within the jurisdiction of the Megiddo Regional Council.

In 2011, the Regional Council of Megiddo also received UNESCO’s “Biosphere Reserve” recognition, being the only completely Biospheric region in Israel and one of few such sites worldwide. Moreover, the biospheric issue is deeply ingrained in the educational system within the regional council, and supported as such by the Education Ministry, being the first ever Biospheric educational program worldwide.

In fact, Megiddo offers top-quality education and its schools regularly win countrywide excellency awards. One of the schools is uniquely famous for its success in educating mixed student groups, comprising both secular and religious students. The Megiddo Regional Council is currently headed by Izhak Holavsky, son of the late Dr. Shalom Holavsky, a partisan commander during World War II and world-renowned researcher of the Jewish opposition movement during this period. The visionary Holavsky’s future plans comprise several tourist attractions, including the opening of the ancient Roman temple with its Christian mosaic; completing the excavations of the Roman Sixth Legion’s camp; renovating the ancient Roman amphitheater that will also host the “Armageddon Experience” customized shows; and converting an old British police building to serve as a visitor center, boutique hotel and restaurant. ■



Yael Barnier

Visitors enjoy hiking on the Tel Megiddo National Park trail

The writer is CEO of 'Ruth- Global Innovative Advisory' and a former adviser to president Shimon Peres