

Visiting Yerushalmi Central...and Yerushalmi Forgotten in Jerusalem and a Question from the Bottom of My Heart

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I visited Israel for the first time since 1995. I have to confess that that trip was a bit of a bust. We took all three of our kids and our youngest was in her “terrible twos”. She *really* did not appreciate having her routines disrupted and I had to leave early to take her home to see Barney, I kid you not.

This time, I went alone and I went with a different purpose than I’d ever had before. This time, I wanted to visit Yerushalmi Central: Tiberius, Sepphoris, the Arvel Caves, Hamat Tiberius and points north. I saw the towns and places where our guys...Rabbi Yohanan, Reish Lakish and Rabbi Zeira and the whole crew... lived. It is a place of varied geology, chalk on one hill, and volcanic rock on the next. It’s part of its own sort of “Pacific Rim of Fire” with an earthquake every 80 years or so, so they’re actually due for one at any time.

In Tiberius, the Kinneret, aka the Sea of Galilee, was at its highest level in years. They’ve had an astonishing amount of rain in Israel this year. The cranes gathered on the shores. And so did the cats. I had forgotten that in Israel cats are as common as squirrels...but a bit pushier than squirrels. They aren’t shy about demanding part of your dinner.

The Roman ruins in the area have been excavated extensively and are highly worth a trip. Jerusalem was off limits to Jews at the time and the north of Israel was Romanized as well. Synagogues had beautiful Roman-style mosaic floors and towns had amphitheatres for plays and coliseums.

The tomb of Rachel, Rabbi Akiba’s wife, is there as is that of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi. What we’re doing...bringing their Talmud back to the foreground, where it belongs, is what they’d like, I think.

Which brings me to Jerusalem. Oddly, almost no one in Jerusalem is studying Yerushalmi. I went to several batei midrashim. The students were almost all on break but you can tell a lot just by looking at a library. Bavli, Bavli everywhere...but scarcely a volume of Yerushalmi to be found. It’s ironic...so little Yerushalmi in Yerushalayim. I caught two students in Pardes and managed to get one to look at some Yerushalmi for 5 minutes. He was shocked at how meaningful and easy it was...he’d been struggling away at Bavli...in the Vilna Shas no less. If putting in the vowels and some commentary is good enough for Rabbi Steinsaltz, personally, it’s good enough for me. Bavli’s hard enough...you don’t have to work to make it harder.

HUC-JIR, my alma mater, has changed almost beyond recognition. When I attended school (1980-1981), it was almost a fort, facing the Old City. When the land was purchased and the school was originally built in the 1950’s, the Jordanians could look down at the school from the Jaffa Gate...and shoot. So the school presented a solid wall toward the Old City. Now, palatial halls with breath-taking views of the Old City gleam all over the property. I met the dean, Naamah Kelman-Ezrachi, and she was incredibly gracious and friendly, showing me around. She totally GOT the whole Yerushalmi thing. I also met the Talmud professor, Ruhamah Weiss, who is also a performance artist. Talk about *living* Talmud...just amazing.

So...we have a new mission to add to our existing one: bringing Yerushalmi to Jerusalem.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think they aren’t studying Yerushalmi in Jerusalem? What can we do to change that?
2. Why, truly why, do people insist on having their students learn from the Vilna Shas? This is the version of the Talmud printed in the 1800’s/early 1900’s that is crammed with all sorts of information but no vowels and precious little punctuation. Rabbi Steinsaltz has completed a new

set with vowels and punctuation in a large enough typeface that someone could read. Why don't people use it? I'm serious on this question. I simply don't understand why a teacher would insist on making Bavli harder than it has to be. It's hard enough as it is. I began my serious learning of Talmud with an Orthodox rabbi and we used the Steinsaltz. What is to be gained from making Bavli as difficult as possible? Do the teachers just like to see the students sweat and drown while help is just one volume away? Does anyone who's a teacher in some other discipline have an analogy that would help me out here?

3. The purpose of this journey was to help me write a historical novel about Beruriah. I already have a pretty long draft done and I was shocked at how many of the things I'd written were actually rather spot-on in terms of what the archeology and geography show. Which leads to the question: can you live in more than one time zone? I think I live in 175 C.E. and commute to 2013. Do you live somewhere else? If so, when and where? Why?

As always, looking forward to your insights!