

The Six-Lane Desert Enigma

ERETZ Magazine continues to explore the land of Benjamin by taking a drive down the Allon Road with Chezky Bezalel and Shraga Straz. This 87-kilometer highway through the stark topography of the Shomron Desert connects 16 Jewish settlements, countless historic and archaeological sites, and a growing number of tourist accommodations. > by Yadin Roman

“Israel Is Quietly Building A Highway on West Bank; Outside Arab Areas,” *New York Times* correspondent in Israel Terence Smith reported on February 20, 1973. Smith’s article claimed that the road was part of efforts to implement the plan that Yigal Allon had formulated immediately after the Six Day War in 1967, when he was Israel’s labor minister. The Allon plan called for an Israeli presence along two corridors – the Jordan River (the eastern corridor) and the hills overlooking the coastal plain (the western corridor) – while the area between them would be given back to Jordan and a corridor connecting Jordan to the West Bank would run through Jericho.

The *New York Times* reported not only that a highway was being built to the east of the Arab villages along the desert fringe of Samaria, but also that it would be a six-lane highway. The scoop turned out to be a little premature.

“We set out to find this secret multi-lane highway,” Menachem Talmi wrote in the daily newspaper *Ma’ariv* following the American revelations. Talmi searched the West Bank in vain for the road. Finally, in the mountains overlooking the Jordan Valley, he met an Arab horseman from the village of Majdal beni Fadil.

“Have you seen a road here in the mountains?” he asked.

The horseman swore by Allah that there was no road running through this land.

“No road,” the horseman replied, “*ma’afish* [nothing].”

“Six lanes?” Talmi asked.

The horseman repeated that he had not seen any sign of the road.

“It was in the *New York Times*,” Talmi finally said to him.

The horseman smiled.

The *Times* correspondent did not come out to Majdal beni Fadil on a regular basis, Talmi concluded. He did not give up, however, and after a long search, he found the road: it was a two-kilometer dirt track.

Avraham Katz, the 36-year-old geologist whom he met by the dirt track, was the development director of this region for the Jewish National Fund. He told Talmi of the plans to build a road that would connect the Nahal outposts along the mountain desert fringe with the Jordan Valley – one day sometime in the future.

The famous road, which initially was called the Shomron Desert Road, was finally completed in August 1980. Contrary to the *New York Times*’ report seven years earlier, the Allon Road was a narrow two-lane highway that ran along the eastern sides of the Palestinian settlements in the heart of

Facing page:

The Allon Road runs through an area that is little known and sparsely settled. (Yadin Roman)



Above:
The ruins of the grave of Sheikhat al-Nijme. (Shachar Cohen)



Below:
The view of Kokhav Hashahar from the summit of Qubbat an Najama. (Shachar Cohen)



the mountains of Samaria. When it was built, there were only a few army camps and Nahal outposts along the road; today this 87-kilometer highway connects 16 Jewish settlements.

Allon formulated his plan right after the Six Day War in June 1967. He aspired to come to terms with the Arab states surrounding Israel, set secure and recognized borders, and solve the Palestinian refugee problem. His plan called for Israel to retain the corridors for its security and hand the West Bank back to the Kingdom of Jordan. Then a peace agreement would be signed and the final status of borders would be set. Farsighted and visionary as it may have been, the Allon Plan was never officially accepted by the Israeli government. It was, however, acted upon until the first settlements in Hebron and Kedumim in Samaria began to break with its basic concept. When the Likud Party came to power, in

1977, the boundaries of the plan, even though they had been stretched a little by that point, were completely abandoned. By the time Allon died, in 1980, nothing remained of his plan except the road.

The Allon Road runs through a little-known and very sparsely settled area: the desert fringe of Samaria, which geographer Zvi Ilan called the Shomron Desert. This area is the true definition of the Hebrew word *midbar*: a place where sheep are grazed. This is not a land of orchards and agricultural fields, but a place of pastures, a fringe area, on the outskirts of the inhabited land.

Along the Allon Road

Since ERETZ Magazine is publishing a series of articles on traveling in the areas of Jewish settlement in Samaria, or to be more precise, in the Mateh Benjamin Regional Council, I decided the

time had come to return to the Allon Road. The last time I had traveled along the road was over three decades ago, when military exercises were conducted on the cliffs overlooking the Jordan Valley, in preparation for the eventuality that vast tank brigades, the combined forces of Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, would attack. During that week of sleepless nights, with breaches, breakthroughs, and counter-attacks, I thought of the Hasmoneans. They had faced the same problem some 2,000 years earlier: Arabs – at that time called Nabateans – attacking from the east. Their solution was to construct a line of fortresses along the cliffs overlooking the Jordan Valley. Alexander Yannai built Sartaba, also known as Alexandrium, to overlook the fords of the Jordan River. Simeon, the last of the sons of Mattathias to survive, constructed Duk above Jericho. Simeon, who also was the founder of the Hasmonean dynas-

ty, actually was murdered in that very same fortress by his treacherous son-in-law, Ptolemy ben Abubus, whom he had nominated governor of Jericho. The fortresses of the desert fringe saw many a battle as the Hasmonean kingdom came to an end. Today these mountaintop strongholds loom over the Jordan Valley.

A stormy geomorphologic history created the stark topography of the Shomron Desert. Unlike its southern counterpart, the Judean Desert, that falls down to the Dead Sea in a series of steps, the last one being the high cliff of the Syrian-African rift valley, the Shomron Desert is located on the steep anticline of the Mountains of Beth El, as it falls down towards the rift valley cliff. But this is no simple steep slope; it has been cut and seared by fault lines that have cleft the mountains into a series of deep ravines and uplifted blocks of mountains between steep cliffs. The most spectacular of these uplifted blocks is Qubbat an Najama, Arabic for “the dome of the star,” which marks the border between the dry Jordan Valley and the edge of the fringe lands of the settled mountains. From the beginning of human time, it was a place of worship, like many of the singular mountains of this area. The ruins of the grave of Sheikhat al-Nijme, Arabic for “the old woman of the star,” still stand on its slope, serving as a reminder of the site’s holy status. The old woman was famous for her ability to cure infertility. The villagers of the mountains and desert wanderers used to gather at the grave every year for a local festival. Once the Jewish settlement of Kokhav Hashahar (Hebrew for “the morning star,” which Qubbat an Najama, “the dome of the star,” is often misunderstood to mean) was built at the foot of the mountain, Arabs could no longer reach the





grave and it slowly crumbled and pilgrimage to it ground to a halt.

Kokhav Hashahar was established in 1975 as an Israeli army camp. It became a Nahal settlement in 1977 and a civilian settlement in 1980. The first settlers came from one of the first Jewish settlements in Samaria: Ofra. Today Kokhav Hashahar is a religious settlement that is home to 350 families as well as an award-winning yeshiva high school for boys from troubled backgrounds.

Shraga Straz was waiting for me at the foot of Qubbat an Najama. He is a longtime tour guide, well versed in the lore of the land, an expert ornithologist, and a resident of Kokhav Hashahar. He persuaded me to drive up the road to the summit. There is a path (marked in green) that leads past the old woman of the star's grave, but the road goes around to the mountain's southern side, which offers a dramatic view of the dry riverbeds plunging down into the Jordan Valley. The road, as Straz called it, was more of a disused track that I remembered from my army exercise days. It still is negotiable, provided one drives very slowly, but is not recommended for cars. We were rewarded by the appearance of a large buzzard sitting on a thistle and a herd of gazelles that seemed totally surprised by this unusual human intervention. The buzzard flapped off from the thistle and soared along the road above us, following us as its Hebrew name, *akav*, which means stalker, implies.

At the top of the mountain, which rises 724 meters above sea level and some 1,000 meters above the floor of the Jordan Valley below it, the view is magnificent. On a clear winter day, Straz said, Mount Hermon is visible from here – and he whipped out his phone with the photos to prove it. To the east are the mountains of Moab, in Jordan. Underneath are the Jordan Valley and the northern tip of the Dead Sea. The Judean Desert, with its gleaming white rocks, can be seen to the south and the towers of the Mount of Olives are clearly visible in the southwest. To the northeast is the conical mound of the grand Hasmonean fortress of Sartaba.

“When the Temple still stood in Jerusalem,” Straz explained, “the Temple priests had to set the beginning of the new month by observing the stage of the moon in the night sky. The day of the new month, the Rosh Hodesh, had to be conveyed to all the Jewish communities in the land and in Babylonia in time for them to greet the new month with the requisite prayers. In order to pass the news, beacons



were lit at the top of the Mount of Olives, these were said to be seen at Sartaba, where another set of beacons were lit, and from there to Kokhav Hayarden, further north and so on. But the Mount of Olives actually cannot be seen from Sartaba, the only place where the two can be seen is at Qubbat an Najama – today Kokhav Hashahar.”

Once the beacons were lit on the Mount of Olives, Straz suggested, the resident priests of Kokhav Hashahar lit beacons on its summit, enabling the news to pass on to Sartaba and onward all the way to Babylonia. Perhaps the beacon-lighting priest lived on the slopes of the mountain below the famous grave. A number of ancient ruins, caves, animal enclosures, and cisterns are strewn around this area, though most of them have not yet been excavated or researched.

One interesting ruin is a little south of the summit, where it is easily seen by those who insist upon driving on the road to the top. Called Al Katzar, the palace, it is the remains of a large Byzantine monastery, which was built on the remains of a Hasmonean tower. The monastery was located here in a bid for solitude, the tower to defend the eastern approaches of the Hasmonean kingdom.

Three kilometers north of Kokhav Hashahar, along the Allon Road, is Khirbet Samiye, one of the most interesting ancient sites in Israel. The bountiful spring of Ein Samiye emanates 700 meters west of the road, at the head of Wadi Uja (Nahal Yitav). Today the waters of the spring (4.7 million cubic meters a year) are pumped up the mountain to

Above:
A viewpoint is near the summit of Qubbat an Najama.
(Shachar Cohen)

Facing page (top):
Noam Cohen plays unique instruments at the Inbalim Wayside Inn.
(Shachar Cohen)

Facing page (bottom):
Tour guide Shraga Straz explains what can be seen from the summit of Qubbat an Najama.
(Yadin Roman)

THE ALLON ROAD

Ramallah. The pumping house, built during the time of the British Mandate and upgraded more recently with a generous grant from the European Union, stands in the shade of the huge eucalyptus trees at the top of the small cultivated valley under the spring. A few meters from the gate, a tap fills a trough with clear spring water for local use. The remains of a Turkish mill stand across the little valley and a few piers of the bridge that once conveyed water from the spring to the mill still are standing (some maps have mistakenly labeled it a Roman mill). The mill operated until 1917, when Wadi Uja became the front line between the advancing British forces and the retreating Turks.

Above the mill, on the slopes of an easily protected hill, are the remains of a fortified ancient settlement that includes remains of an Iron Age (Israelite) settlement. Most of the site has not been excavated, except for a massive fortress with a huge round tower belonging to the kingdom of Judah. To the west of the fortress, a moat that separated the hill from the ridge to the north of it still can be seen. Some identify this site as Ai from the Book of Joshua (7:2-8:29).

To the east of the ancient tell, known as Khirbet Marjame, along the road leading to the spring, are the remains of walls, a few buildings, and terraces. This is the ruins of the large settlement known as Khirbet Samiye that was built here in Byzantine times. The most notable ancient remains in this little valley, however, are on its northern slope. Right next to the road, is an ancient cemetery with hun-

dreds of pier graves from the Middle Bronze Age. The area should be approached carefully since each grave has a vertical pier leading down to a burial chamber at the bottom and the risks of falling into one of the piers are real. The cemetery was in use for a long time: excavations conducted in 1970 of 44 of the graves dated 16 of them to the Roman Period, one to the Israelite period, and all the others to the Middle Bronze Age (Canaanite period). The deceased were buried with weapons, pottery utensils, pottery lamps, and jewelry. In one grave, a silver goblet was found with engravings of figures from the Mesopotamian creation myth. Originally, the waters of Ein Samiya would flow down the Uja Riverbed, irrigating the small valley to the east of the road. At the point where the Uja enters the Jordan Valley there are additional bountiful springs that were used in the Israelite period, as well as in the times of the Hasmoneans and Herod, to irrigate the date groves and balsam orchard in the valley, which was one of the most lucrative agricultural areas in the ancient world.

Wadi Wahita, another impressive Shomron Desert canyon, separates Kokhav Hashahar from the settlement of Rimmonim, which was built on a small plateau overlooking Jericho and the canyon of the Wahita. Like its southern neighbor, Rimmonim was founded as a Nahal army base in 1977. In 1980, 19 Jewish families from Jerusalem settled there. Today the settlement, home to 170 families, includes the only public swimming pool in the neighborhood, which attracts visitors from the nearby communities. The name of the settlement stems from the horrifying Bible story about a man from Ephraim and his concubine, who stayed in the Benjaminite town of Gibeah for a night. The men of Gibeah spent the night raping the concubine and in the morning, the man from Ephraim discovered her lifeless body on the doorstep of the house in which he had slept. He cut her body into 12 pieces and sent a piece to each of the 12 tribes, who decide to punish the Benjaminites. A bloody battle ensued and, "the total number of Benjaminites who fell that day came to 25,000 fighting men, all of them brave. But 600 men turned and fled to the *midbar*, to the Rock of Rimmon; they remained at the Rock of Rimmon four months" (Judges 20:46-47). Gibeah, which is mentioned in many biblical narratives, is probably the village of Jaba, which is a few kilometers west of the settlement. The Rock of Rimmon could be the source for the name of the

Below and facing page:
The view of the Samiya valley. (Yadin Roman)





Jordanian army buildings stand to its south. The road that crosses the Allon Road here leads down from Rammun to Jericho and has the strange name of Tarig abu George, that is, Abu George's Way. Today this winding road is the main connection between Ramallah, Jericho, and the Allenby Bridge over the Jordan River to the Kingdom of Jordan. One side of the road is a steep chasm and the other side is carved into the soft chalk, which actually marks the beginning of the Judean Desert. Abu George was probably Major Edwin George Bryant, who served in the British Mandate's police force in the Galilee as superintendent of the Acre Prison. During the War of Independence, he served as chief engineering officer of the Arab Jordanian Legion and it was probably under his instructions that the road was first constructed (the original route is a little south of the current road). After 1967, a series of Israeli bunkers were dug along the road; long abandoned, they still pockmark the ascent.

South of the Rimmonim Junction, the Allon Road

runs down the cliff of the ravine. Some carved steps in the rock, a few caves, and cisterns are the only signs remaining today of what was the largest colony of ascetics in the Judean Desert in the fifth century CE. It originally was a *laura*, a community of hermits. Each member lived alone in a separate cave meeting with the other hermits only for a communal meal once a week in the large cave-church that still can be seen in the cliff. It later became a *coenobium*, where the monks lived as a community. The site was abandoned following the Arab conquest in the seventh century CE.

Continuing southward, the settlement of Ma'ale Mikhmas is on the right. It is named after the Arab village of Mukhmas, located a little further west and up the mountain. Mukhmas is located on the northern bank of Wadi Kelt, opposite the village of Jaba, which sits on the southern bank. These names are reminiscent of the biblical sites of Gibeah and Michmas, the place where the Philistines gathered to fight the Israelite tribes led by Saul and where

Above (top):
The ruin of Khirbet al Kilya sits on the edge of Rimmonim. (Yadin Roman)



Above (bottom, from left):
A cross in the ruins of the monastery at Khirbet al Kilya; gazelles on Qubbat an Najama; ruins of the monastery at Khirbet al Kilya; and one of the pier graves at Khirbet Samiya. (Yadin Roman)

nearby village of Rammun and is the inspiration for the name of Rimmonim, the modern settlement on a rock overlooking Jericho.

Rimmonim enjoys an unmatched view of the towers of Jerusalem to its southwest and of the Jordan Valley, the northern tip of the Dead Sea, and the Mountains of Moab to its east. On its northern fringe, at the edge of the small plateau that Rimmonim is located on, the ruin of Khirbet al Kilya overlooks the Wadi Wahita Riverbed. The earliest remains at the site are from a Roman frontier military post. In the Byzantine period, the military

post was converted into a large Christian monastery. A church was added to the central tower and an annex with extra rooms and a large paved courtyard were built in the center of the site. The site was in use until the Ottoman period in the sixteenth century. At the eastern edge of Rimmonim is a lookout point known as Mitzpor Eli that offers a dramatic view to the east.

Two kilometers further south on the Allon Road is the Rimmonim Junction. A large fortified Israeli army pillbox on the northern side of the junction stands guard over the road; a few pre-1967

plunges into the canyon of Wadi Makkuk. As it ascends from the riverbed, a junction is reached; today the Allon Road leads off to the left from it. The road that continues straight ahead is a later addition that is part of the elaborate network of roads built in the last two decades to allow drivers to circumvent the Arab villages around Ramallah and connect directly to Route 60 to reach Jerusalem. Once past the junction, on the Allon Road, a path marked in red leads south into Wadi Makkuk. After running along a small ridge for a few hundred meters, the path makes a sharp serpentine turn and

Saul's son Jonathan demonstrated outstanding bravery (Samuel I, Chapters 13-14). Gibeah, Gibeah of Benjamin, Michmas, and many of the other villages around here are mentioned time and again in the biblical record and the name selected for the modern settlement of Ma'ale Mikhmas echoes those biblical connotations.

One kilometer south of Ma'ale Mikhmas, atop a small hill, is the settlement of Neve Erez. Officially a neighborhood of Ma'ale Mikhmas, it actually is a settlement of its own. The 14 families residing here vary from secular to religious, but share a love of



nature and a commitment to environmental values and permaculture. They strive to maintain a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with their surroundings. Tehila and Noam Cohen, who moved to Neve Erez in 1999, operate the Inbalim Wayside Inn alongside their home. Noam is a musician who has mastered a variety of unique instruments and they host small concerts and gatherings at the inn's pub area, often accompanied by explanations about the instruments. They also serve meals made from locally grown ingredients, including the flour and honey. Next to the pub area are campgrounds dotted with a variety of fruit trees so guests can enjoy ripe fruit for much of the year. On the other side of the hill, Mordechai Lederman grinds wheat in his flour mill. He grows the wheat in the valley below Neve Erez, planting and harvesting it himself.

Continuing south past the minute settlement of Mitzpe Hagit, the road plunges down into the grand riverbed of the Judean Desert, Wadi Kelt. The wadi actually does not belong to the Shomron Desert, it is already inside the Judean Desert, but the Allon Road must cross it in order to connect to the Jerusalem-Jericho highway. Wadi Kelt, which is known as Nahal Perat in Hebrew, deserves an article of its own. The grand canyon flowing with water is a hikers' paradise.

Since I was already here, I stopped at the parking lot at the entrance to Ein Maboia, known in Arabic as Ein al Fawwar. This spring fills a small concrete pool that was built over it. The spring, like the spring of Gihon in Jerusalem, emanates water in bursts. This happens when a spring fills a small

underground cavern: when the water fills the cavern to its top, the spring empties out into the pool or into the riverbed in its natural conditions (it is very similar to the operation of a flush toilet). The Ein Fawwar spring "flushes" every 20 or 30 minutes, causing the water level in the pool to suddenly rise about 1.5 meters.

The spring is near the Allon Road's southern end. There is just one final serpentine ascent to a series of Jewish settlements at the top of the hill, Allon and others, and then a descent to the Jerusalem-Jericho road. Instead of heading straight back to the city, we decided to savor the Shomron Desert experience a little longer and stopped at Yoel Ma'ashanet Basar in the industrial zone at the entrance to Kfar Adummim. After many years as a chef at major hotels and a catering company, award-winning chef Yoel Ben-Shabbat and his wife Hanni opened this restaurant, whose name is Hebrew for Yoel Smokes Meat, last fall. As the name implies, the specialty is meats that Ben-Shabbat smokes and ages on the premises. In addition to this, he also prepares steaks, hamburgers, kebab, and chicken and fish entrees. A tasty selection of cold salads and hot vegetable dishes ensures that vegetarians do not go hungry. This reasonably priced kosher bistro, which can host large and small groups in its main dining room or on its terrace, is open for dinner on weeknights and for other meals by appointment. On Fridays, the restaurant is turned into a shop where patrons can buy a selection of the restaurant's offerings to enjoy at home or at one of the bed and breakfast places nearby over the weekend. ■

Facing page:
The Ein Maboia Spring emanates water in bursts. (Yadin Roman)

Useful Information

Accommodations in Neve Erez: Inbalim Wayside Inn

Camp out under the stars amid the fruit trees and enjoy a concert with unique instruments, a lesson on permaculture, and a meal prepared from local ingredients. Tehila Cohen: Tel.: 050-745-1432
NIS 100 per family or tent per night in the camping area; NIS 60 per person for a meal

Neve Erez Flour Mill

Mordechai Lederman hosts visitors at his flour mill, explaining the process of

producing flour, from planting the seeds to grinding the wheat in his mill. Flour made from locally grown wheat can be bought directly from him at the mill.

Mordechai Lederman: Tel.: 050-498-0058

Dining in Kfar Adummim: Yoel Ma'ashanet Basar

Award-winning chef Yoel Ben-Shabbat and his wife Hanni operate this reasonably priced kosher bistro in Kfar Adummim that specializes in smoked meats as well as a variety of meat entrees.

Tel.: (02) 535-3218; cheftfood@walla.com

Touring with Shraga

Shraga Straz is a licensed tour guide who resides in Kokhav Hashahar and offers tours and lectures that focus on history and nature, among many other topics. His many years of guiding and teaching experience, wealth of knowledge, and enthusiasm for his subject matter make his tours and lectures memorable.

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