



# Meitzar

## Keeping on the Strait and Narrow

**H**ave you ever noticed that the Jewish people have a national bout of claustrophobia? Our very existence, and our very Land, seem dangerously narrow to us. And for good reason...

It's even in our language! In Hebrew, troubles are referred to as *tzarot* – or “narrows.” A person who causes trouble is a “*tzar*,” like Haman for example. Even the Czar was a “*tzar*”!

The first time we meet this word is in Egypt, *Mitzrayim* – “the straits.” And King David wrote in Tehillim: “I called out to You from the narrow place, G-d; answer me from the wide-open spaces, G-d.”

Without having to go to Gibraltar, there are sites in Israel where you can feel the straits. In 1967, we controlled the Straits of Tiran (and – for those who remember – Arik Lavi's song that went with it). Near Modi'in, there's the ascent of Ma'alot Bet Horon, which in some places was so narrow, two camels couldn't even pass each other (see Sanhedrin 32b; we still have some paved roads like that in Israel). If you really want to feel the squeeze, visit the caves and tunnels from the Bar Kochba Revolt.

But in my opinion, the best place to “feel the narrows” is in the southern Golan Heights, at a site known simply as “The Meitzar.” It's a short segment of road with deep valleys on each side, and it offers gorgeous views in almost all directions. A nearby Jewish village and riverbed share the name.

Many researchers believe that the Meitzar is the site of the battle

between Israel's King Achav, and King Ben-Hadad of Aram (Melachim Aleph, 20). Later, around the time of the Chashmonaim, there was a small fort here. In the 1950s, Syria built bunkers here, and in the early 1960s, Eli Cohen visited a Syrian army base nearby. In the Six-Day War, Syrian soldiers ran away as the IDF came by helicopter to take the site. In 1968, Sergeant Avi Mizrachi was killed during an IDF ambush of infiltrators from Syria on the eastern side of the Meitzar; his memorial stone still stands. In the 1970s, after the Yom Kippur War, the IDF built an emergency fort that still commands the entire Meitzar. In short, this has been a strategic site for literally thousands of years!

Recently, the Golan Regional Council built two lookouts here that allow visitors to take in the great views. There are explanatory signs about the city of Susita (seen directly to the west, along with the Kinneret and Tiberias in the background), and “*Breitat HaT-echumin*” (which mentions villages in *Eretz Yisrael* – including this immediate area – that observed the agricultural *mitzvot* of the Land of Israel in Talmudic times).

Since we're celebrating Tu BiShvat, how can we not mention the trees on the Meitzar? Some “made aliyah” and were planted here, while others are local and natural. The biggest are eucalyptus trees, which – although relatives of the *hadas* (myrtle) – originate mostly in Australia (and if you're already asking, then no, Eli Cohen did not suggest to the Syrians they plant eucalyptus trees near their bunkers.

He was an inspiring role model in his own right, without needing imaginary stories to enhance his legacy!

The smaller ones are mostly almond trees. Yes, the classic tree of Tu BiShvat – the only native tree in the country that's blooming at this time of year! The almond (in Hebrew: *shaked*) is indeed the early bloomer, full of intense energy that propels it to “the top of its class.” Just like a *Talmid Chacham*, one who takes learning seriously and intensely (in Hebrew: *shakdan*). As we read in the Talmud: “When Ben-Azzai died, there were no more *shakdanim*” (Sota 49b). The word is still used in modern Hebrew for a studious learner.

When G-d wanted to show Yirmiyahu that Yerushalayim would be destroyed quickly and intensely, the prophet saw a vision of a staff from an almond tree (Yirmiyahu 1). Needless to say, Aharon's staff, which bloomed first (Bamidbar 17), was also from an almond tree!

It seems that the Meitzar has seen a lot. Let us hope and pray that with the Golan in peaceful hands, these straits will know more trees than battles. On your next trip to the Golan, stop here and enjoy the views and the trees. For G-d has answered us in the wide-open spaces...

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