

Eve Harow



Bar'am and Purim

Just three kilometers from Lebanon on Israel's northern border lie the remains of the ancient Jewish village of Kfar Bar'am. Founded in all likelihood during the Second Temple period, the town remained Jewish for centuries until some time between the early Muslim conquest in the seventh century and the Ayyubids in the late 12th/early 13th century when it was abandoned and occupied by Muslims. Maronite Christians lived there till 1948, and in 1949 the secular Hashomer HaTzair established Kibbutz Bar'am on the land where they now cultivate orchards of plums, nectarines, apples and pears.

After the destruction of *Bayit Sheini* (70 CE) and the demolishing of Judean towns as punishment for the Bar Kochba Revolt (132-135/6 CE), the Galilee and Golan became the center of Jewish life in Israel under the Roman and Byzantine Empires. Many synagogues in the area were built from the third century and are mentioned in Mishnaic and Talmudic literature. There are a few in the southern Chevron Hills (Eshtamoa, Sussya, Maon, Carmel) and some in the Jordan Valley Rift (Ein Gedi, Jericho) but the vast majority are in the eastern Galilee and Golan. These are some of the earliest synagogues we know and there has been much debate about the time of their building. Of the two synagogues in Kfar Bar'am, one has been preserved and restored and is the subject of scholarly investigation. The synagogue itself has been dated to the third century based on a relief and other evidence, however the archaeological survey of the area around it has remains only from the fifth century. Much has been discussed about this discrepancy between the building and the grounds

and this is also the case in other Galilean Talmudic towns where the synagogues are older than the signs of settlement around them.

How can this be explained? The latest theory is the buildings are put together from stones in secondary use, meaning they were carved earlier for other buildings elsewhere and reused in these new sites. It's clear, for example, that the lintel of the Bar'am synagogue is not the original. What possible reason would there be for this taking apart and rebuilding?



Remember that quarrying, carving and moving stones in the ancient world was an expensive, time-consuming and difficult endeavor, so there was much secondary and even tertiary use of stones. It's likely the Romans didn't allow the Jews to have monumental buildings for worship and they could only do it at a later time. Perhaps they weren't allowed to carve anything new and could just recycle what had already been built. It's also more than possible that the very early original synagogues mentioned by the Sages were very simple affairs, more like a *beit midrash*, and these impressive buildings were constructed later, perhaps commensurate with the

fifth century building of churches and Samaritan synagogues around the Land.


One of the interesting traditions connected to Bar'am is of it being the burial place of Mordechai and Esther, in a tomb in the National Park near the synagogue. On Purim in 1949, Jews from Tzfat read the Megillah there, reviving a Middle Ages tradition to celebrate Shushan Purim at the site. We have evidence from as early as 1215 of travellers and explorers writing that Queen Esther had instructed 'her son Cyrus' to bury her there and it soon became a site of pilgrimage. It's unclear though what the source of the tradition is and the more accepted version is that they are buried in Hamadan, Iran, possibly ancient Shushan. But still...

In another Tzfat-Bar'am connection, there's a tradition that the facade of the Tiferet Yisrael synagogue in the Old City of Jerusalem was inspired by the arches of the ancient synagogue of... Bar'am. As the story goes, after the devastating earthquake of 1837, survivors from Tzfat came to live in Jerusalem and in a desire to remember their beloved Galilee, designed the synagogue to look like the one in Bar'am.

Traditions, conjecture, history, holidays. We may never know the 'truth,' but we've come home and can once again celebrate, in the Land of Israel, the Purim miracle that happened in the *galut*.

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