

Michael Even-Esh



Ein Keshatot Mother of All Symbols

A pile of rocks! That's all you could see here for years; just a pile of rocks. Except for a few archaeologists, guides and hikers, this site was way off the beaten path in the Golan Heights.

As of now, we don't know the ancient name of this site, but today it goes by the modern name of *Ein Keshatot* ("Spring of the Arches"). This name derives from the site's Arabic name: *Um el-Kanatir* (literally: "The Mother of Arches"). And indeed, the village spring still lies under impressive arches to this day.

Since the 19th century, explorers and scholars have agreed that an ancient synagogue had been located here, but for most visitors, Um el-Kanatir could just as well have been called "The Mother of all Rubble." (We know today that "*Ra'ash Shvi'it*", a fierce earthquake during the *Shmittah* year of 749 CE, destroyed the village.)

But then... somebody dared to think out of the box!

The premier archaeologist in the Golan, Chaim Ben-David from Moshav Keshet, came to visit the site with ancient technology expert Yehoshua Dray. To paraphrase and condense their conversation, Chaim said: "So what do you think?" And Yehoshua said: "We can do it!"

And so for the first time, somebody took the very rocks of a destroyed synagogue, and built the original *Beit Knesset*, ancient-rock-by-ancient-rock (technically, this process is not called "reconstruction," but rather "anastylosis").

Ben-David, Dray, archaeologist Ilana Gonen and the Golan Regional Council all came together to make the project happen. It began in 2003 with a survey; afterwards, a huge crane was placed over the rubble. From atop the crane, 3-D digital photos were made of the ancient debris, which allowed an analysis and interpretation of the ruins. Every stone had a number and an installed microchip with its "profile." For two seasons, the crane removed more than 1,500 stones from the collapsed structure.

Then it was time to rebuild! Yehoshua "scanned" each stone, and a computer program "told" him where it should be placed and in which position. In 2018, the site was finally opened to the public. It is an absolute masterpiece!

Today, visitors to *Ein Keshatot* can enter the sixth century synagogue, pray the very words that our ancestors prayed, and be surrounded by the very same stones. But the jewel in the crown of this site is on top of the *bima*. A magnificent ark complex ("*heichalit*") stands in all its glory. Although the wooden cabinet that held the Torah scrolls didn't survive, the stone structure that surrounded it did. And it is a sight to behold! Look at the *heichalit's* pillars and you'll see the engraved symbols of a *menorah*, *lulav*, *etrog* and *shofar*.

But what about that strange-looking dustpan-like thing? What's that? It's an incense shovel, akin to that in the Temple in Yerushalayim. This artefact tells us, without a doubt, that the builders and decorators of this synagogue were invoking the image of the *Beit HaMikdash*. As if to say, this is our

Mikdash Me'at, our mini-Temple. We don't just pray towards Yerushalayim, but we invoke the *Beit HaMikdash* itself in our synagogue architecture. If walls could talk...

Compared to others in the area, this *Beit Knesset* is large and fancy. How did the Jewish citizens of this backwater village manage to pay for the construction and decoration of this magnificent monument? The answer might be found near the village spring. Two of the arches stand today over the water that was used for drinking, home use, and other purposes. But on the western side of the spring was an "industrial zone." The pool here was used, apparently, for preparing flax for use in luxury linen clothes. This wasn't just any *shmatteh* enterprise; it was big business!

This is only a small part of the fascinating story of *Ein Keshatot* – its rise and fall, its discovery, its rebirth, and its inspiring archaeological finds. But one question remains: why visit here *davka* on Yom HaAtzmaut?

Golan resident Effie Eitam (Brigadier General, res.), said it best: "This entire site is symbolic of the rebirth of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. For centuries, it was just a pile of stones. Nobody believed it could be rebuilt. Nevertheless, a few energetic visionary pioneers came and put it back together again, stone-by-stone."

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