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A Snapshot of Jewish Life After the Temple's Destruction

Ancient Sussya

South of what most people consider the land of Judah, long past the city of Hebron, the landscape begins to change. Instead of grapevines and green terraced hills, the surroundings are more desert-like; dusty expanses with flocks of sheep and goats roaming in the distance.

Welcome to the Southern Hebron Hills, the desert edge of Judah. In Biblical times this area was on the cusp of civilization. King David in his shepherding days protected the flocks of the wealthy Naval, whose home and business dealings were in Maon and Carmel. The landscape does not look so different today, even when you enter one of the beautiful Jewish communities down here. Nestled in the desert is a place that is a snapshot of Jewish life after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Next door to the modern community of Sussya is the ancient town of Sussya. Sussya is a town whose origins go back to late Second Temple times and it was settled until at least the Moslem period (8th century CE or so). The layer exposed to visitors today goes back to the 4th–6th centuries CE. What makes Sussya so fascinating is that the town was largely preserved intact and it was clearly a Jewish town. You can walk the streets and see how wide they were, check out the alleyways and remember the laws of carrying and *eruv* on Shabbat and descend to the caves used by the residents for storage, living and security. Anyone who has learned Talmudic

laws about property, courtyards, streets, shops and more will find this place fascinating, as it brings the text to life.

Jewish elements of the town abound. There is a niche in one of the doorposts, presumably for a *mezuzah*. A *menorah* is incised on a stone in one of the houses. *Mikvaot* (ritual baths) are everywhere. And at the highest point of the town is a beautiful synagogue, with a number of important mosaics as well as a secret tunnel that leads inside, which allowed the residents to hide in the synagogue if they were besieged by invaders.

In the excavations of Sussya conducted after the Six-Day War, the archaeologists noticed some interesting and unique finds. Most prominent is the ubiquity of *mikvaot*. Over 35 *mikvaot* were found here. This, in a time when the Temple has been destroyed for at least three centuries! Who was so concerned about purity that they needed a *mikveh* for every few households?

The burial cave at the entrance to the town was also curious. By this point in time, Jews had abandoned burial in ossuaries, small bone boxes, and had moved to burial in sarcophagi, like our coffins. But the Jews of Sussya were still using ossuaries. Why were they so behind the times?

The synagogue had its own interesting quirks. The theme of a *menorah* is certainly a common one in ancient synagogues, so the fact there are prominent *menorahs* here and in other Southern



Hebron Hills synagogues was not unusual. But the orientation of the synagogue is odd – east to west, even though the ark is in the north; the same orientation as the Temple. The inscriptions here are all in Hebrew or Aramaic, unlike synagogues in the north where the language is more likely to be

Greek. In addition, the inscriptions include dates: not the date of the current Roman emperor, but how many years since creation and what year in the *shem-itah* cycle it was! And finally, mentioned in the inscriptions are the names of *kohanim* (Mar Issi HaKohen), something not found in other ancient synagogues.

Do these pieces add up to a whole? Some scholars think they do. Dr. Doron Sar-Avi of the Sussya field school, and others, suggest that the Southern Hebron Hills became a refuge for *kohanim* after the Bar Kochba revolt. As the Jewish population abandoned Judea and moved north, one group stubbornly stayed behind – the *kohanim*. They knew that even though the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were defeated twice in one century, someday they would return to Jerusalem. And when that happened, the *kohanim* wanted to be close by. So they stayed in the neighborhood, holding on to old traditions regarding burial, putting up a synagogue that reminded them of the Temple and continuing to eat their food in purity. All the while saying, *שְׁמֵי הַמִּקְדָּשׁ יִבְנוּ בְּיָמֵינוּ*, let the Temple be rebuilt speedily. *Amen!*



Shulie Mishkin is an Israel tour guide who specialized in “back to the sources” tours.



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