

PLANT NAMES:

In the guide: The plant numbers correspond to the English, Latin, and Hebrew names listed on the reverse side of the excursion map.

On the ground: 3-digit plant numbers appear on leaf-shaped green signs; plants visible only when in blossom are indicated by a number followed by the Hebrew letter ן.

There are restrooms and litter baskets along the trail.

Bordering Neot Kedumim to the north is an Israel Defense Forces training base; don't be alarmed if you hear gunfire.

STATION 1: ORIENTATION OVERLOOK

Israel is *“a land that has many lands within it...”* (Sifri, Ekev 39)

Neot Kedumim is located in the area known in the Bible as the Shephelah (the Judean foothills or lowlands) lying between the flat coastal plain to the west and the Judean hills rising towards Jerusalem to the southeast. The bare hills to the northwest are what the Neot Kedumim site looked like before development began in the early 1970s. Neot Kedumim is an “artificial” nature reserve. The trees are quite real, but were planted or transplanted by human hands. Thousands of tons of soil were trucked in because centuries of overgrazing, battles, and neglect has eroded the slopes down to bedrock.

As you continue to Station 2, you will pass an excavated winepress that was probably first hewed at the end of the Second Temple period in the 1st century CE and renovated during the 6th-7th centuries.

STATION 2: EMPTY CISTERN

“For the land into which you go... drinks water from the rain of heaven” (Deuteronomy 11:10-11).

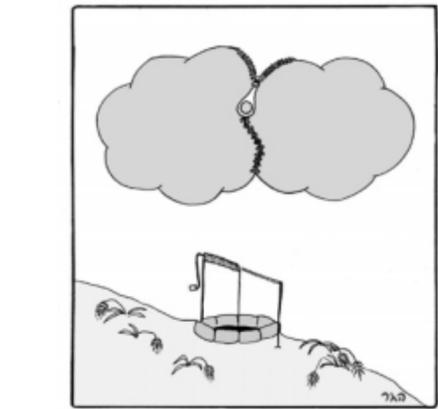
“If you obey [understand] the commandments I give you this day... I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late” (Deuteronomy 11:13).

Israel is a semi-arid land, totally dependent on rainwater that falls, at best, between late October and late March. The fear of drought was ever-present, dramatically voiced in the most dire punishment the Lord could visit upon Israel, to “shut up the heavens so there will be no rain and the land will not yield its produce...” (Deuteronomy 11:17). For the Israelites to settle and farm the hill country of the Promised Land, they had to dig

cisterns such as the one here. Dug out from soft limestone rock, the cistern’s purpose was to collect winter runoff rain water. Whatever water was collected in the cistern had to suffice for the people’s every need for eight dry months of the year.

Most of the cisterns found at Neot Kedumim are empty of water year round. The thick coatings of lime-based plaster cracked over the centuries, causing whatever rainwater collects in the cisterns to seep into the soil, leaving only a layer of mud on the floor. “For My people... have forsaken Me, the Fount of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, which cannot even hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

You are invited to climb down the 17 rungs of the ladder. (You may surprise some doves or owls nesting inside.) When you reach the bottom, you will experience what Joseph and the prophet Jeremiah must have felt when they were lowered into “the pit.” The life-giving cistern, when empty and neglected, could well serve as an effective prison: “When Joseph came up to his brothers, they... took him and cast him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it” (Genesis 37:23, 24). “So they took Jeremiah and put him down in the cistern... they let Jeremiah down by ropes. There was no water in the cistern, only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud” (Jeremiah 38:6).



STATION 3: LOOKOUT and VILLAGE OLIVE PRESS

“...the land you are entering to inherit is a land of hills and valleys...” (Deuteronomy 11:11)

From this vantage point, at an elevation of about 200 meters above sea level, you can understand some of the geographic realities of Israel. The flat coastal plain towards the horizon, where today you see the skyscrapers of Tel Aviv about 20 kilometers away, served as the main commercial thoroughfare connecting the two great kingdoms of the ancient world: Egypt and Assyria/Babylon. Trade flourished on this north-south axis, called by the Romans Via Maris, the Way of the Sea. Neot Kedumim is situated along an easy route taken by pilgrims landing in the ancient port of Jaffa to reach Jerusalem.

“...clear oil of beaten olives for lighting...” (Exodus 27:20)

The excavations carried out at Neot Kedumim exposed part of a village complex that covers approximately 15 acres; you will see another quarter of the village at the next stop on the trail. The installation you see here is a 5th century CE (late Talmudic era) olive oil press. It is part of a larger Byzantine industrial complex comprising two additional olive presses nearby. The wooden beam press and stone weight are reconstructions. In this region of the world, olive oil has been a dietary staple for thousands of years. In addition to food, its most important uses were for lighting oil lamps, for healing, and as an important component in the production of perfume.

Olive oil also had important ceremonial uses: lighting the menorah in the Temple and anointing kings and priests. In Hebrew, a person anointed with olive oil is MaSHuaCH, in its English form, “messiah.” The Greek “Christos” has the same meaning – anointed. Today, on the eve of the Sabbath, Jews all over the world light candles, reminiscent of olive oil lamps. Various Christian churches use olive oil in baptismal and healing ceremonies, ritual blessings, in the ordination of priests, and as part of the coronation ceremony of the English monarch.

STATION 4: VILLAGE EXCAVATIONS

“I will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them...” (Amos 9:14)

“One generation goes, and another comes, but the earth abides forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:4).

This excavation offers you a glimpse of several periods of history – from the late Second Temple through the early Moslem period, approximately 1st century BCE - 8th century CE. The alley, houses, and courtyards

with their cisterns made up one of the streets in this Jewish community from the late Second Temple period and later (1st century BCE to 2nd century CE). During the Byzantine period (4th-7th centuries), this village was expanded to serve as a hostel for pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. A system of arches supported the ceilings. Some of the stones in the arch were found scattered on the ground, and were used in its reconstruction. Archaeologists believe that monks lived here in an ecclesiastical farm community, supplying the needs of the pilgrims going to Jerusalem and those of early Christians who lived in the nearby town of Lod.

The white, conical sundial is a reproduction of a typical Roman sundial, like those that were placed in market squares and in the courtyards of homes of the well-to-do. The twelve vertical lines mark the hours between sunrise and sunset. The shadow of the pointer (gnomon) marks the time of day.

STATION 5: SHEEP PEN and CISTERN

“And when Jacob saw Rachel... and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went near and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well and watered the flock...” (Genesis 29:10)

Even though this is a cistern where rainwater is collected and not a well that has an underground water source, the idea is the same as in this verse from Genesis: boy meets girl near the source of water. Try your luck at drawing up water and pouring it into the trough for the sheep and goats. (The water is unsafe for human consumption.)

Remember Moses, who helped water the flocks of Jethro, priest of Midian, and in appreciation was given his daughter, Zipporah, for wife (Exodus 2: 16-21)? Or perhaps you would like to enact the fateful meeting between Abraham’s servant and Rebecca, which also took place at a well (Genesis 24):

In search of a suitable wife for his son Isaac, Abraham dispatches his faithful servant Eliezer to Mesopotamia, Abraham’s native land. Eliezer sets off with a caravan of 10 camels and eventually reaches a well outside the city of Nahor. Awaiting the young women who are coming to draw water, Eliezer asks for a sign that will point him to the right woman for Isaac: when he asks her for a drink of water, she will not only agree immediately, but offer to water all his camels as well. He scarcely finishes murmuring his wish when the beautiful young Rebecca appears, lowers her

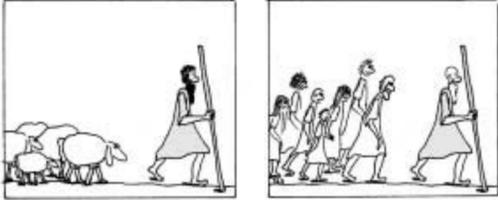


water jar for Eliezer, and declares, “I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking” (Genesis 24:19). Maybe this doesn’t sound like much, but after weeks in the desert, each of Eliezer’s camels needed at least 100 liters (26 gallons) of water, or about 20 buckets of the size you have just drawn. A camel can lose 120 liters (32 gallons) of water – up to 30% of its body weight – and make up the loss in 10 minutes of intensive drinking. Since Eliezer was traveling with 10 thirsty camels, Rebecca’s offer meant hours of hard work – evidence that she was not only beautiful but kind, gracious, and generous (as well as strong!).

Water from the cistern was used not only for drinking and various domestic uses, but also to water flocks and small vegetable gardens, and for whatever household crafts required water, like pottery and tanning. Larger-scale cultivation (grain, grapevines, olives) was totally dependent on the winter rains, as stated in Deuteronomy 11:17: “...there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce...”

About 45 cisterns have been discovered in this area of Neot Kedumim, each with a capacity of approximately 200 cubic meters. From the cisterns’ size and numbers, archaeologists have determined that up to 100 nuclear families (about 500 people) lived on this site. The average use of water was about 15 liters per person per day, not including water for the flocks and vegetable gardens. That’s less than the water for one baby bath!

“And I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock... and I will appoint over them shepherds who will tend them; they shall no longer fear or be dismayed, and none of them shall be missing” (Jeremiah 23:3-4). Herding is a lonely and dangerous business, so it’s not surprising that leading figures in Scriptures apprenticed as shepherds. Those who proved themselves as shepherds could be trusted to lead the nation, like Moses and David. The image of the good shepherd was so central to the biblical experience that it became the prime image of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside the still waters...” (Psalm 23:1-2)



STATION 6: FAMILY WINEPRESS

“... bringing bread out of the earth and wine to gladden men’s hearts, oil to make their faces shine” (Psalms 104:14-15).

“Honor the Lord... then... your vats will burst with new wine” (Proverbs 3:10).

Winepresses, such as the one on the left side of the trail, were always hewed out of bedrock at the edge of the vineyard so that the farmer would not have to transport the easily bruised grapes a great distance. This Modi’in region was famous for both its olive oil and its wine, and the surrounding hills were once covered with vineyards and olive groves.

This winepress, like the one you passed near the start of the trail, is a family-size winepress that was probably first hewed at the end of the Second Temple period in the 1st century CE and renovated during the 6-7th centuries. On your way to the next stop, you will see a larger, mosaic-floored wine press from the Byzantine period (4-5th centuries). (Cross section and isometric drawings and explanations are posted at the site.)

Just as olive oil has its ceremonial uses, so too does wine. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the libation of wine was poured over the altar. In almost every religious ceremony, Jews bless the fruit of the vine. So important was grape-growing in ancient times that grape seeds have been found in most archaeological excavation in Israel, and the grape is the most frequently mentioned plant in the Bible.

The land allotted to the tribe of Judah not far from this area, was particularly famous for its grapes, as reflected in Jacob’s blessing to Judah:

“He tethers his ass to a vine,
His ass’s foal to a choice vine;
He washes his garment in wine,
His robe in blood of grapes” (Genesis 49:11).

The grapevine is also a biblical symbol for the nation of Israel as a whole:

“You plucked up a vine from Egypt;
You expelled nations and planted it.
You cleared a place for it;
it took deep root and filled the land” (Psalm 80:9-10).

STATION 7: MIKVEH (Ritual Bath)

While all the peoples who inhabited this area used similar pressing techniques for olive oil and wine, the ritual bath was distinctively Jewish. The discovery of this *mikveh* was thus the first concrete evidence of Jewish settlement here. Artifacts found in the mikveh date it to the end of the Second Temple period (late 1st century BCE - early 1st century CE).

Immersion in the mikveh has to do with ritual purity which was required, for example, before entering the Temple to offer a sacrifice. The workers involved in producing olive oil or wine, some of which was brought as tithes to the priests in the Temple, also had to be ritually pure.

The mikveh has to contain at least 40 *seah* (about 300 liters or 80 gallons) of “flowing” or “living” water – rain or spring or river water that has flowed directly into the mikveh (Mishna, Menakhot 12,4). According to Jewish law, the flowing water purifies water drawn from a cistern and makes the mikveh fit for ritual immersion. The roots of the Christian practice of baptism lie in the practice of ritual immersion in the mikveh.

STATION 8: EARLY BYZANTINE CHAPEL and CAPER BUSH

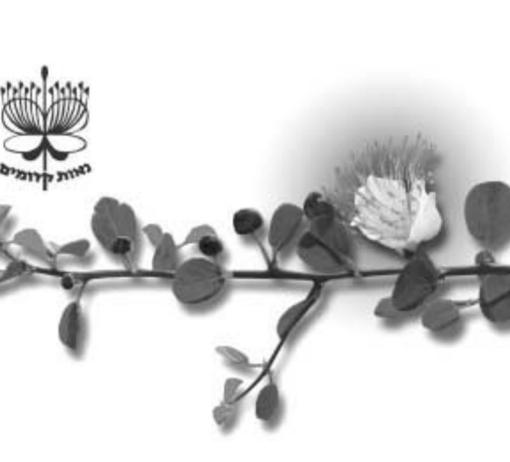
This chapel, characteristic of the earliest Christian communities in the land of Israel, is from the early 4th century CE and faces east towards Jerusalem. The mosaic cross is set in the floor of what was the center of the apse, surrounded by the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha Α and omega Ω. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13). This chapel may have served as a prayer-room in a house, perhaps part of a monastic village. The house was built on the remains of a winepress from an earlier period (below and north of the mosaic floor).

The millstone incorporated into the floor in front of the threshold reminds the worshipper of the words from Matthew (18:6): “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believes in me, it would be better for you to have a great millstone tied around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.” Note the two small rooms excavated in the courtyard. They were probably used by monks who lived here, as well as by pilgrims passing through on their way to Jerusalem.

The thorny caper bush (105) is a survivor that seems to thrive on difficulty. The caper grows with minimal soil and water, in the midst of the Sinai Desert, and between the stones of the Western Wall. Burned down, chopped to the ground, or covered with hot asphalt, the caper is impossible to get rid of. The caper is fresh and green in the dry summer months when everything else is brown, and dry in winter when most plants are green. No wonder that when the Sages gave examples of survivors in history and

nature, they chose “Israel among the nations... the goat among the cattle, and... the caper among the trees” (Babylonian Talmud, Beitzta 25b).

For its perseverance and productivity the caper was chosen as the emblem of Neot Kedumim. It was designed by Zvi Narkiss, a renowned Israeli calligrapher.



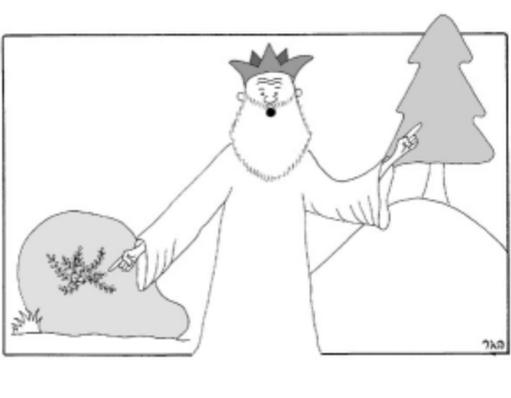
STATION 9: CEDAR and HYSSOP

King Solomon “spoke of the trees, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the rock” (1 Kings 5:13).

In its native Lebanon, the cedar (101) can tower to a height of 30 meters (90 feet). Cedars never grew in Israel and were imported from Lebanon as a glamorous building material. King Solomon purchased expensive Lebanese cedar logs to build the interior of the Temple in Jerusalem: “Solomon... paneled the walls of the House [of the Lord] with planks of cedar... The cedar [wood] of the interior of the House had carvings... it was all cedar, no stone was exposed” (1 Kings 6:14-18). Solomon’s elaborate armory, the “House of the Forest of Lebanon,” was also built of cedar wood: “He built the House of the Forest of Lebanon... of cedar columns, and with hewn cedar beams above the columns” (1 Kings 7:2).

You will have to look a little harder for the low-growing hyssop bush (102), which, in direct contrast to the cedar, blends modestly into its surroundings. Requiring little soil and water, the hyssop can indeed grow “in the rock.” Pick a leaf, rub it, and enjoy the fragrance. This is wild oregano, a familiar Mediterranean spice, and the main ingredient in a popular Middle-Eastern seasoning called *za’atar* in Arabic. Accessible to all, not only kings with wealth and influence, the hyssop also has medicinal properties, and its dry branches make excellent kindling.

Polar opposites in appearance, demands, function, and accessibility, cedar and hyssop became a classic biblical contrast, as in the above verse where they illustrate the range of King Solomon’s wisdom. It’s not hard to see how the cedar became associated with kingship, power, and pride, and hyssop with modesty and humility.



On the eve of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites are commanded to mark their doorposts with bunches of hyssop dipped in the blood of the Passover lamb sacrifice (Exodus 12:21-23). While the blood marks the Israelites’ doorways so that the last of the 10 plagues, the plague of the death of the firstborn, will pass over them, the hyssop reminds them to remain humble and avoid rejoicing at the Egyptians’ terrible punishment.

The Bible sees leprosy as the punishment for pride. Those who set themselves above the community and its laws are stricken with the disease that indeed cuts them off from the community. To rejoin the

community, the cured leper underwent a ceremony that included cedar wood and hyssop (Leviticus 14:2-4). The sages explain: the leper was proud like the cedar, and God humbled him like the hyssop that is crushed by all (Midrash Hagadol, Metzora 14).

King David committed a sin by taking the beautiful Bathsheba and sending her husband off to be killed in battle (II Samuel 11). According to Talmudic tradition, David recognized that he had sinned by placing himself above the moral law (“He [the king] will not act haughtily towards his fellows... [Deuteronomy 17:20]). He was stricken with leprosy for six months, the fitting punishment for such pride (Sanhedrin 107a), and asked the Lord: “Cleanse me with hyssop that I may be pure” (Psalm 51:9).

As you continue on the trail, you will see a stand of tall bushes with long, needle-like branches. This is the white broom (103), whose tiny white flowers exude a wonderful fragrance when they bloom in February-March. The white broom grows in the sandy hills of the coastal plain and in the Negev desert. It is one of the most effective plants for holding back sand dune. It is called *rotem* רומם in Hebrew, from the same root as the word *ratam*, meaning to harness, rein in, which is exactly what the roots of the rotem do to sand. This is one of the very few instances in taxonomy in which the Latin name, *Retama raetam*, was taken from the Hebrew.

Until recent times, Bedouins in the Negev and Sinai used the white broom to make coal, a practice common in biblical times, as illustrated by the following passage from the book of Job: When the wealthy and fortunate Job loses everything, he bitterly complains: “Now those younger than I deride me, men whose fathers I would have disdained to put among my sheep dogs... they who pick the salt plant leaves and the root of the white broom is their bread” (Job 30:1,4). The reference here is not to eating the root of the white broom, which is totally inedible in any form, but rather to earning one’s bread – meaning to earn one’s living. Making coal from the white broom root was smoky, sooty work, the humblest of occupations. For the aristocratic Job, being mocked by nomads who “earned their bread” in this way was bitter indeed.

The salt plants (104) across the path from the white broom illustrate the same verse from Job 30:4. The salt plant provides food for both people and camels in the Negev and other desert regions. The leaves can be eaten raw but often are so salty that they can be used instead of salt in cooked dishes. Since in Israel the Dead Sea provides quantities of cheap salt, salt plant leaves were not used to produce salt, but were used for food by the poorest of the poor – and even they mocked Job.

STATION 10: THE PARABLE OF JOTHAM

The tree spreading its shade over the stone seating area is the jujube (108) – leafless in especially cold winters, bearing small, mealy, crabapple-like fruit in late summer, and bristling with thorns (both long, straight ones and shorter, hooked ones) all year round. The thorns explain the tree’s Latin name, *Ziziphus spina-christi*, one of several candidates for Jesus’ crown of thorns.

The jujube, by the Hebrew name of *ataad* טאד, features in a dramatic parable in Judges 9. (Though *ataad* is generally mistranslated as “thornbush” or “bramble,” the jujube, as a shade-giving fruit tree, has attributes that perfectly fit the parable.) The tale begins with Gideon, one of the early judges of Israel who rids the Israelites of the marauding Midianites. Asked to establish a monarchic dynasty by the grateful people, he refuses: “I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord alone shall rule over you” (Judges 8:23). Gideon goes back to his farm and his large family (many wives and 70 sons), and peace reigns for 40 years.

But Avimelech, Gideon’s son by his concubine in Shechem (Nablu), does not inherit his father’s noble qualities. He gives himself a name meaning “my father is king,” (*avi melech*) indicating that he has cast his eye on the hereditary monarchy his father refused, and after Gideon dies he has no scruples about violently seizing power. After effectively silencing the opposition by killing his 70 half-brothers “on one stone,” he finds enough followers among his mother’s relatives in Shechem and some hired riffraff to proclaim him king.

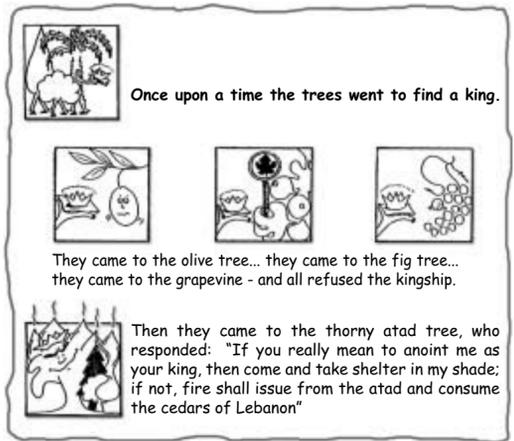
Enter Jotham, Avimelech’s youngest half-brother, who managed to hide and escape with his life. Quickly taking stock of the situation at Avimelech’s anointing in Shechem, Jotham climbs Mount Gerizim, overlooking the city. Rather than risk a head-on confrontation with the Avimelech faction, he tells the crowd a parable about trees:

Once the [fruit] trees went looking for a king. They asked the olive, fig, and grapevine in turn, who (in the spirit of Gideon) each refused to leave their rich and useful fruit to take up politics. Only the *ataad* agreed, saying: “If you really mean to anoint me as your king, then come and take shelter in my shade; if not, fire shall issue from the atad and consume the cedars of Lebanon” (Judges 9:15). If you have acted honorably in crowning Avimelech, adds Jotham – then enjoy each other. But if not, fire will issue from Avimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem, and fire will issue from the citizens of Shechem and consume Avimelech. With that, Jotham makes a discreet exit and leaves the people to draw their own conclusions.

The parable explained: Jotham’s audience, people of the land, were familiar with the atad tree, not only its appealing shade and fruit, but also its aggressive thorniness, the secondary importance of its fruit compared to the olive, fig, and grape – and most of all the fate of any tree that “takes shelter in its shade.” For the atad’s widespread root system, extending as far as the shade of its branches, is notorious for leaching all nourishment from the soil. As the people of Shechem well knew, any tree planted in the shade of the atad had little future – and the implication was clear.

As for the fire: It was likely for fire to “issue from the atad,” whose branches catch fire quickly and make excellent kindling. But it was highly unlikely for such fire to “consume the cedars of Lebanon,” which grow in the northern mountains, far from the lowland-dwelling atad. The fire emanating from the atad would be like war, sweep through the entire country, and leaving destruction in its wake.

The prophecy fulfilled: Three years after Avimelech is crowned, a “spirit of discord” comes between the king and the people of Shechem. In the course of the bloody fighting that follows, Avimelech meets his end when a woman drops a millstone on his head. “And so the curse of Jotham... was fulfilled upon them” (Judges 9:57).

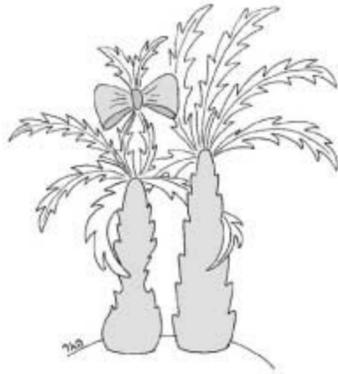


STATION 11: POOL OF SOLOMON

The author of Ecclesiastes, traditionally believed to be King Solomon, wrote: “I laid out gardens and groves where I planted fruit trees of every kind. I made pools of water to irrigate a forest of growing trees” (Ecclesiastes 2:5-6).

This Pool of Solomon is part of a chain of six pools built to catch and store winter runoff rain water, and – like those made by King Solomon – used for irrigation in the early days of Neot Kedumim. Today it is a beautiful spot for rest and meditation, and the site of *huppot* (wedding canopies) for the many wedding ceremonies conducted at Neot Kedumim.

When the date palms (155) were transplanted from a nursery in northern Sinai in 1976, they were too young to be identified as male or female. Fortunately, since the female date palm needs male pollen to produce fruit, both sexes are present. The dates ripen in the fall, around the time of Sukkot.



At the center of every date palm are several *lulavim* (plural of *lulav*), which are the embryonic, unopened fronds growing at the tree’s heart (*lev*). The *lulav*’s sword-like shape may be a source of the tree’s association with victory. Date palms symbolizing triumph appear on coins minted by the Maccabees (to celebrate their victory over the Greeks) and by the Romans (on their “Judaea Capta” coins commemorating their conquest of Jerusalem).

As you proceed around the pond, note the fragrant myrtle (145) bushes and the cattails (156). It was among such cattails along the banks of the Nile that the infant Moses was hidden in his floating papyrus basket (Exodus 2:3).

If the water is still, you can see the cedars and date palms reflected together, illustrating the words of Psalm 92: “The righteous person flourishes like a date palm, and grows tall as a cedar of Lebanon” (92: 13). The two trees were “planted in the house of the Lord, and flourish in the courts of our God” (92:14) – a possible reference to the magnificent gardens King Solomon planted around the Temple in Jerusalem, where cedars from the north and date palms from the south symbolized the extent of his kingdom.

The trees opposite the date palms around the Pool of Solomon are willow-poplars (114). These willows grow in warm climates where there is abundant water, as along the shores of the Jordan River. This is the same species of willow under which the Jews, exiled “by the waters of Babylon, sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres” (Psalm 137:1-2). The continuation of this psalm is traditionally recited by bridegrooms as they break the glass under the wedding canopy as a symbol of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I cease to think of you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my greatest joy” (Psalm 137:5-6).

Another water-loving plant, the reed (157) קנה *kaneh*, related to the English “cane”), was particularly useful in ancient times. Its tall, flexible, hollow stalk was ideal for making mats and fences and was sharpened into knives and pens (often used by Torah scribes). According to tradition, the flutes used in the Temple were made from hollow reeds.

The reed’s straight, evenly-ridged stalk also served as an early measuring device. Reeds functioned in ancient Egypt as “Nilometers,” important in measuring the depth of the river and projecting the extent of its inundation. The Bible also speaks of “measuring reeds”: “The measuring reed in the man’s hand was six cubits long, plus one handbreadth for each cubit: so he measured the breadth of the building” (Ezekiel 40:5). Measure your height in both ancient and modern units on the “measuring reed” placed here for that purpose.

As you continue on from the measuring reed, you enter Neot Kedumim’s Dale of the Song of Songs, the Bible’s celebrated love poem. Rich in references to Israel’s nature, the Song of Songs is also fertile ground for allegory, notably the traditional interpretation that the lovers symbolize God and Israel.

The Sharon was a famous grazing area in biblical times, the region where the shepherdess in the Song of Songs pastured her flocks, as she describes herself in terms of two Sharon wildflowers: “I am the ‘rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys’” (Song of Songs 2:1). The identification of these two flowers has been debated through the centuries. Commonly translated as “rose of Sharon,” חבצלת השרון *havatzelet hasharon* is more likely the Sharon tulip (159), a bright reddish-orange flower that grows in the sandy Sharon soil and blooms in March and April. (The Hebrew חבצלת *havatzelet* relates to the root בצל *batzal*, meaning onion or bulb, from which the tulip grows.) A prime candidate for שושנת העצקים *shoshanat ha’amakim*, commonly translated as “lily of the valleys,” is the narcissus (119).

To the right of trail lies a cultivated field of thorns (120), a plant farmers uproot as a troublesome weed. These חוח *hoakh* (plural חוחים *hokhim*) thorns sprout in March after the winter rains, with yellow flowers appearing in June. The hoakh turns brown and then grayish white at the end of the summer.



“Like the *shoshana* among the *hokhim* (thorns), so is my beloved among the young women” (Song of Songs 2:2). Thus the shepherd in the Song describes his beloved. In their natural habitat, the narcissus and the *hoakh* thorn often share a common growing area. In December-January, when the narcissus blossoms, its gentle white beauty stands out among the tall white thorns – just as in the eyes of her lover, the shepherdess in the Song of Songs stood out among other women.

“Like a thorn in the hand of a drunkard, so is a proverb in the mouth of a fool” (Proverbs 26:9). Like the shepherd in the Song of Songs, the book of Proverbs employs the common habitat of narcissus and thorns to make a point. Reaching for the beautiful narcissus, the drunkard might end up with a sharp thorn plant in his hand, with painful results. Similarly, reaching for a proverb, the fool may painfully pick the wrong one.

STATION 12:
THE APPLE AMONG THE TREES OF THE FOREST
“Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young men” (Song of Songs 2:3).

Praised as a “narcissus among the thorns,” the shepherdess returns the compliment by calling her lover “an apple tree among the trees of the forest.” What exactly is this apple tree? Probably not the cultivated apple, which cannot grow “among the trees of the forest.” More likely it is the hawthorn (125), which grows in Israel’s natural forests and bears small, crabapple-like fruit in late summer. “Your breath is like the fragrance of apples” (Song of Songs 7:10). It was the fragrance of the hawthorn flowers, unmistakable in early spring, with which the shepherd praised his beloved.

As you turn right along the path just before Station 13, you will see one of the most beautiful trees of the forest, the Mediterranean redbud (126), which in early spring is covered with stunning deep pink flowers. It is also called the “Judas tree.” This name may come from a misunderstanding of the French *arbre de Judée* (tree of Judea), rather than from any likelihood that this was the tree on which Judas Iscariot hanged himself. Though common in the forests of the Judean Hills, the Mediterranean redbud is not particularly tall and not a very suitable gallows.

STATION 13: THE SHARON FOREST
You have walked through the area of Neot Kedumim planted to represent the natural forest of the Sharon Plain, particularly the Tabor oaks (117), which researchers believe predominated in the Sharon’s natural forests in biblical times. Along with the white broom (103), native of the sandy Sharon coast, are bulbs and annuals indigenous to the hilly regions of the Sharon.

You may have noticed some strange texts along the way! This section of the trail is part of the wedding trail that connects the Pool of the Sycomores with the Pool of Solomon in the Dale of the Song of Songs. In case the groom forgot the ring, he’s reminded here that the Babylonian Talmud permits betrothals to be formalized with the giving of an acorn, a pomegranate, or a walnut, provided the value of each is at least a *pruta*, the smallest currency of the time – about a penny. (Tractate Kiddushin 47a)

STATION 14: THRESHING FLOOR

You are in a threshing floor, the place where the grain was separated from the stalks of wheat. This was the scene of the meeting between Ruth and Boaz, the progenitors of King David. The threshing floor was the focus of the biblical farmer’s life for six months of the year. The floor was cleaned in March before the start of the barley harvest, which began on Passover. Farmers worked “by the sweat of their brow” (Genesis 3:19) until the end of the wheat harvest in mid-summer. After the harvest, the rocky soil was plowed several times to prepare the field for the next season’s crop, planted right after the first winter rains in late October.

“When the Lord returns the exiles to Zion... They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping bearing the seed-bag, shall come back with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves” (Psalm 126:1, 5-6). Bringing forth bread from the earth is an arduous task. Hard work isn’t enough – “the rains from heaven” determine the ultimate success of the crop. Since wheat and barley were the chief sustenance in biblical times, and survival hinged on the grain crop, the gamble of sowing seed was central to people’s lives.

The Bible ties several extraordinary commandments governing social responsibility for the less fortunate to the grain harvest: “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field (*pe’a* פאה), or gather the gleanings (*leket* לֶקֶט) of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger” (Leviticus 23:22). “When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook (*shikhekha* שכח) a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow...” (Deuteronomy 24:19).

The certainty that there will be bread to eat is a source of great joy, a symbol of the hope for a peaceful future when people “shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; they shall never again know war” (Isaiah 2:4).

Wheat played an important role in the Temple ritual – the 12 loaves of the Presence in the Temple (one for each tribe of Israel), as well as the sacrifices. In Jewish tradition, blessing the bread blesses the entire meal, and the full grace after meals is recited only when bread is eaten.

Try to locate the following implements around the threshing floor and match them to the verses below. Because the Bible speaks to an agricultural people, these tools became metaphors for spiritual ideas. “Will the plowman continually plow for the sowing, breaking up and furrowing his land?” (Isaiah 28:24)

“Ply the sickle, for the harvest is ripe” (Joel 4:13).
“I will make of you a new threshing board with many sharp knives...” (Isaiah 41:15)
“Not so the wicked: they are like chaff that the wind drives away” (Psalms 1:4). (A winnowing fork is used to separate the kernels from the chaff.)
“What has straw to do with [sifted] grain?” (Jeremiah 23:28)

The trees planted around this pool are sycomores (113) (also called “Egyptian fig,” no relation to the sycamore of the northern hemisphere). Since it is native to the lowlands (1 Kings 10:27), the sycomore was one of the first trees returned to its original habitat when Neot Kedumim began its ecological “rehabilitation.”

Although its offshoots don’t live long after cutting, the sycomore tree itself is expert at regenerating. A variation of its Hebrew name, שיקמה *shikma*, means “rehabilitation.” Chopped down to the ground, the sycomore grows new branches. If wind or water expose its roots, the sycomore sends deeper roots into the ground. If sand covers the entire tree, the branches send roots downward into the sand and shoots upward, and a new young tree starts growing above the ground.

The sycomore’s regenerative powers appear in a homily based on Isaiah’s prophecy of hope: “They shall build houses and live to inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build for others to inhabit, nor plant for others to eat, for as the days of a tree are the days of My people...” (Isaiah 65:21-22) The sages added: “As the days of a tree are the days of My people, like this sycomore that survives in the earth for 600 years” (Bereshit Rabba 12, 6). As the sycomore can survive in the earth even when buried and grow anew when conditions are right, so the people of Israel will regenerate after centuries of exile.

What does the name Neot Kedumim mean?
Neot נאות means pasture or places of beauty (as in Psalm 23, “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”) Kedumim קדומים, ancient, contains the Hebrew roots that also indicates forward movement in time, and express our hope of future growth from past roots.



SELF-GUIDED TOUR

TRAIL A (WHITE) Distance: 2 km

Accessible to strollers and wheelchairs
The rebuilding of this trail for the needs of the handicapped was made possible with the support of the Kahanoff Foundation and the Ministry of Tourism through its development arm, the Israel Government Tourist Coporation.



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Some of the material in this guide is treated in detail in the books **Nature in Our Biblical Heritage** and **Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage** by Nogah Hareuveni, founder of Neot Kedumim. These and other books are on sale in the Visitor’s Center gift shop at a special discount price.



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