

On & Off The Beaten Track In

# Be'ersheva: Spanning the Millennia *By Peter Abelow*



**H**opefully, if the prayers of *Am Yisrael* are answered, we're in for a very rainy winter—one that will replenish the depleted Kinneret. So, when it's raining in the North, why not turn your compass south to the Negev and its capital, Be'ersheva. With an average annual rainfall of 200 millimeters (mm)

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(compared to over 500 mm in Jerusalem and over 1000 mm in the Golan Heights), this bustling desert city, with a population of 200,000, is an ideal destination for your winter *tiyul* (trip). A modern city, Be'ersheva is a true reflection of David Ben-Gurion's vision for the country; he believed that Israel's success was dependent upon its ability to develop the Negev.

But for me, the highlight is the nearby Tel Be'ersheva National Park, where visitors can see the Be'ersheva of nearly 4,000 years ago. The Tanach

truly comes alive at what is believed to be the place where Avraham and Avimelech negotiated a treaty with seven lambs, near a well, in a historic event which gave Be'ersheva its name. “And he said, ‘These seven ewe lambs shall you take from my hand, that they may be a witness to me, that I have dug this well. Therefore he called that place Be'ersheva; because there they swore both of them’” (Bereshit 21:30-31). A deep well is located near the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE gate to the restored ancient site. Could this be the well of Avraham?



Photo: Jack Hazut

*Next to the entrance gate of ancient Be'ersheva, there stands a well. Could this be the well where Avraham and Avimelech negotiated their treaty?*

Stand within the ancient gate and close your eyes. Try to imagine what transpired at this spot—guards protected entry to the city and the elders sat here to dispense justice. In the gate in Chevron, just to the north, Avraham negotiated for the purchase of Me'arat Hamachpalah: "...and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, saying, 'No, my lord, hear me; the field I give to you, and the cave that is in it, I give it to you; in the presence of the sons of my people I give it to you; bury your dead'" (Bereshit 23:10-11).

This Be'ersheva site contains remains that span millennia: from before the period of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs through the era of the First Temple, until Hellenistic, Herodian and Roman times. It is a classic *tel* in which each civilization was built upon the ruins of its predecessor.

One of the more dramatic discoveries on display is a horned altar, the type that was used during the era of the First Temple. The altar, which is made of stone blocks, seems to have been deliberately disassembled rather than violently destroyed. Might this be vivid evidence of the reformation of King Josiah who, upon the discovery of a Torah scroll in the *Beit Hamikdash*, led a cam-

paign to rid the country of all the altars to false gods? There the Tanach specifically mentions Be'ersheva (see II Kings, 22. 23). The site also includes a restored palace, dwellings, storehouses and a sophisticated water system, all providing a fascinating glimpse into life during the Israelite (First Temple) period. The Tanach makes a number of references (in the Book of Judges, Samuel and Kings) to the country extending from "Dan to Be'ersheva" precisely during this era.

I would like to suggest two other

families and has a total population of about 600. Many of the customs of this unique community are displayed at the Museum of Cochin Jewish Heritage in Nevatim. A video, available in Hebrew or English, tells the story of Cochin Jewry and their arrival in Israel. Additionally, a beautiful synagogue, located just a few yards from the museum, is a replica of the original synagogue in Cochin.

Just west of Be'ersheva, in Hazerim, there is the Museum of the Israeli Air Force. An airplane enthusiast's delight,

the museum features dozens of aircrafts that have served the State of Israel, from 1948 to the present. The original Piper Cub, flown by former President Ezer Weizman in the War of Independence is on display. So are many fighter jets, including French Mirages and American Phantoms, which have been retired to this spot. The Russian MiG that was flown to Israel by an Iraqi defector in the 1960s is also on display.

But for children, the highlights are the planes that visitors are permitted to climb into as well as the film about the Air Force that is screened in the actual Boeing 707 that accompanied the famous rescue operation in Entebbe (1976). Knowledgeable young women in the Israeli Air Force are available to guide visitors in English or Hebrew around this most unusual outdoor museum. **JA**



Photo: Jack Hazut

A "horned altar," in ancient Be'ersheva, presumably from the First Temple era.

unusual things to do in the Be'ersheva area. One of the more fascinating segments of contemporary Jewish society is the small community of Jews who trace their origins to Cochin, India. Most of the Jewish community of Cochin immigrated to Israel in the 1940s. In 1954, a group of 15 families settled in Moshav Nevatim, which is located a few miles east of Be'ersheva. Today, the *moshav* is home to 120