

The Arbel Cliffs

By Peter Abelow

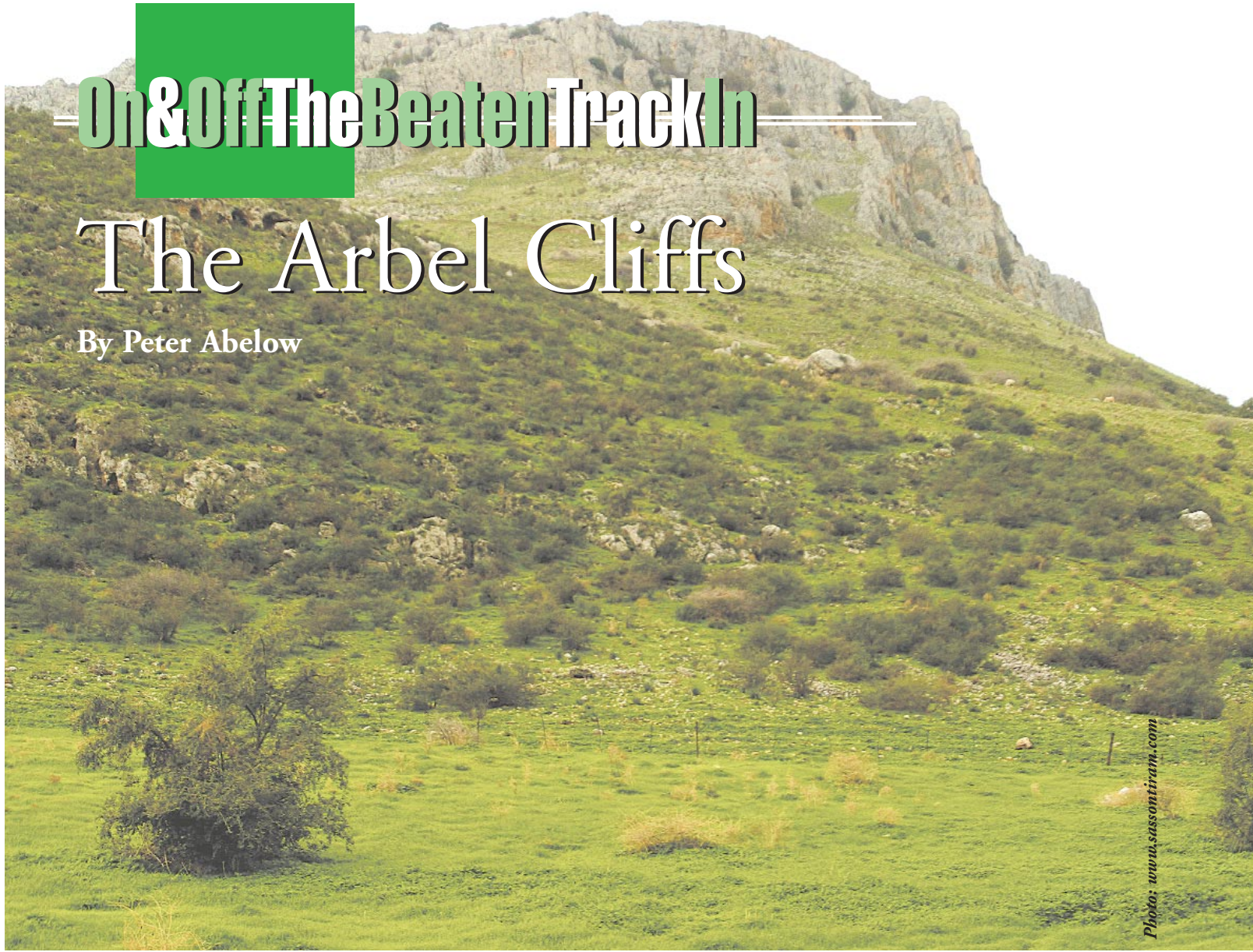


Photo: www.sassonitram.com

One of the most spectacular views in Israel can be found at the end of a short path just beyond the modern Moshav Arbel in the lower Galilee region. In one breathtaking panorama from the edge of the plateau of Arbel one can see the Golan Heights to the

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east, the Jordan River Valley to the north and the beautiful Sea of Galilee (Yam Kinneret) almost 700 feet below. On a clear day, one can even see Mount Hermon in the distance, still snowcapped in April and May.

The spring is a beautiful time for a visit to this spot: The hills and fields are awash with color after the winter rains, and it is not yet too hot to hike in this region of the country.

Like so many other places in Israel, however, the view gives no hint of the rich Jewish history lying beneath the surface. The most commonly known reference to this spot is in *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*), chapter 1, *mish-*

nah 7, where Nitai HaArbeli is quoted as saying, "Distance yourself from a bad neighbor, do not associate with a wicked person, and do not despair of retribution." The remains of a Mishnaic-period synagogue have been discovered on the plateau, not far from the Arbel Cliffs. This was most likely the shul of Nitai HaArbeli. And the mountain directly across the valley is named Mount Nitai!

But the history of the Arbel Cliffs predates the Mishnah (first and second centuries CE) by hundreds of years. In the Biblical period, the prophet Hosea states, "Therefore tumult shall arise among your people, and all your

fortresses shall be plundered as Shalman plundered Beth Arbel on the day of battle..." (10:14). It appears that the Assyrians mercilessly slaughtered many Jews by forcing them off the Arbel Cliffs. This spot was evidently destined to be one of destruction, as the historian Josephus recounts that in the time of the Maccabees, Bacchides, the Seleucid general, captured this site and executed numerous defenders, many of whom were using the caves on the face of the cliffs as their base of operations.

The caves were once again used as a refuge during the time of the Jewish revolt against King Herod in 39 BCE. Josephus describes, quite graphically, how the king lowered his men down the precipice in baskets, and they pulled out the hapless Jews with grappling hooks, forcing them off the cliffs to their deaths below. One hundred years later, Arbel was one of the Jewish towns besieged by

the Romans during the Great Revolt.

The Arbel Cliffs are accessed by a road on the right (north) side of the Tiberias-Golani Junction Highway, just a few kilometers west of Tiberias. Continue past Kefar Hittin and make a right turn towards Arbel. Follow the signs to the Arbel Cliffs, then park your vehicle in the designated area, and walk for about five minutes along a clearly marked path to the top of the cliffs. The view from this spot alone is worth the trip.

The more adventurous should turn left and continue on the marked trail for about another one hundred yards. This will bring you to a series of steps carved into the mountain and the beginning of the trail down the face of the cliff. The National Parks Service, which is responsible for maintaining all of the trails in Israel, has provided steel cables and handholds to facilitate the descent. Follow the trail markings,

and watch your step carefully; try not to look down. When you reach the flat area at the base of the cliff, the trail descends gradually, and the caves come clearly into view.

Don't worry—most Israeli school-children have descended the Arbel at least once before they finish eighth grade, so it is not as intimidating as it sounds. Ask your children who have come to Israel on summer trips or on one-year learning programs: Chances are, they have hiked the Arbel. If you can muster the courage, you are in for one of the most unusual and exciting experiences in Israel. A hat and good walking shoes are necessary, and take an ample supply of water. In addition, make sure that there is someone in your party who can drive to the bottom of the trail to pick you up from there. When you meet, point back to the cliffs and say with pride, "I just hiked the Arbel!" JA

Caves on the face of the Arbel where Jewish rebels attempted to hide during the Maccabean and Herodian periods.



Photo courtesy of Peter Abelow