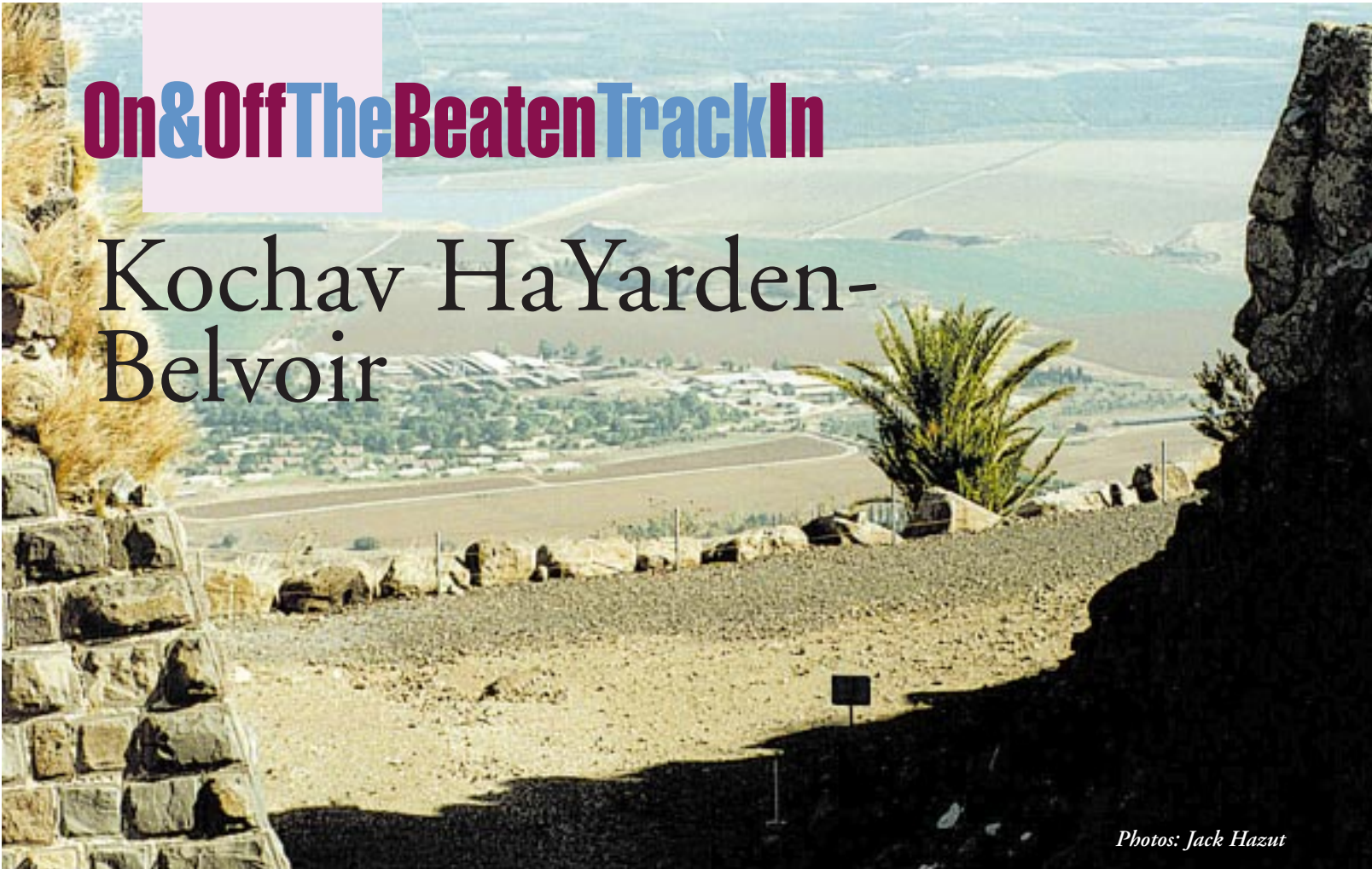


On&OffTheBeatenTrackIn

Kochav HaYarden-Belvoir



Spectacular view of the Jordan Valley, which is 1,500 feet below the Belvoir fortress.

Imagine that every day, hundreds of people travel the main road that connects Bet Shean with the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). I wonder, though, how many take notice of the unusual sign indicating a side road leading to a fortress, perched high on the ridge to the west of the road? Why is this sign unusual? Because the site has two names that seem to have nothing to do with each other. The sign says “Kochav HaYarden” (literally, star of the Jordan in Hebrew) and “Belvoir”

Mr. Abelow is a licensed tour guide and the associate director of Keshet: The Center for Educational Tourism in Israel. Keshet specializes in creating and running inspiring and moving family and group tours that make Israel come alive “Jewishly.” He can be reached at 011-972-2-645-1865 or at peter@keshetisrael.co.il.

(literally, beautiful view in French).

Most guide books will tell you that the fortress at the end of the six-mile road was first built by Crusaders in 1168 to deter the Muslims from invading from the east. The Crusaders first conquered the land of Israel from the Muslims at the end of the eleventh century, but Belvoir wasn't built until seventy years later. French knights who constructed this fortress named it Belvoir, undoubtedly because of the spectacular view of the Jordan Valley below and the hills of Gilead, which today are in Jordan. The fortress was one of the most impressive of the short-lived Crusader kingdom (it lasted less than one hundred years) and turned out to be almost impregnable.

After Saladin defeated the Crusaders at the Horns of Hittim (near today's Kibbutz Lavi), the invaders turned their sights on Belvoir. Aerial photos

of the site clearly reveal that a fortress within a fortress existed. It seems that even after the outer fortress fell in 1187, the defending knights retreated to the inner fortress and withstood a siege of almost two years before finally surrendering on January 5, 1189.

Our first clue about the origin of the Hebrew name is from a comment in the *Mishnayot Kehati* in *masechet Rosh Hashanah*, 2:4. The *mishnah* describes the bonfires that were lit on a series of mountain tops to announce each Rosh Chodesh (new month).

Whence did they carry the [chain of] beacons? From the mount of olives [in Jerusalem] to Sarteva, and from Sarteva to Gripina, and from Gripina to Chavran and from Chavran to Beth Biltin.

The *Kehati* states that Gripina is “Har Kochba, on the slopes of the Eastern Lower Galilee”—an accurate

description of the location of Belvoir!

I like to enter the fortress from the eastern gate, first taking in the breathtaking view of the Jordan Valley, over 1,500 feet below. Cross the dry moat that surrounded the fortress on three sides (there was no need for a moat on the eastern side because of the steep hill that slants towards the valley below). The gate is a classic example of Crusader construction, replete with “loopholes” or shooting alcoves that afforded the defenders on the inside ample room for their crossbows but presented only a narrow slit as a target to attackers on the outside. The courtyard between the outer and inner fortress contains a magnificent example of the system of water cisterns that enabled the Crusaders to withstand the long siege.

Exploring the remains of the fortress yields further evidence that Jewish life existed on this hill centuries before the Crusaders. The inner fortress contains the evidence we seek. Use the map that you receive at the entrance to the site to locate the southeastern tower. There, embedded in the walls, is a basalt stone with a chiseled decoration that archaeologists claim was once part of the synagogue of Kochav, a Jewish community at this site during the

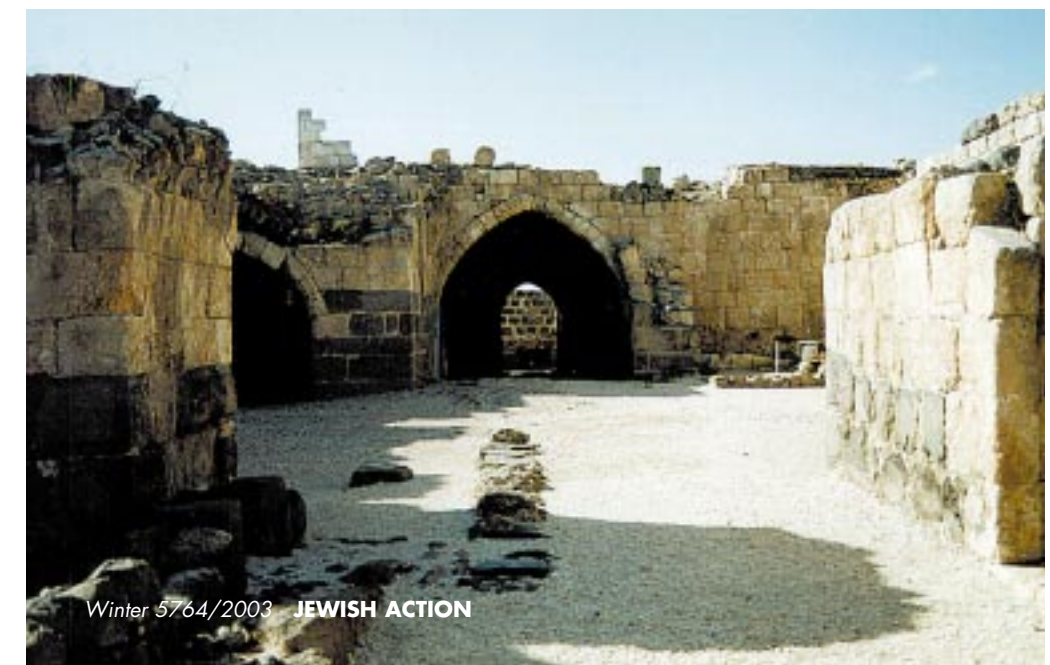
Roman and Byzantine periods, which correspond to our Mishnaic and Talmudic periods. Undoubtedly, many of the other stones used by the Crusaders were also part of earlier Jewish structures, which were destroyed and abandoned many years before the fortress was built.

The other piece of evidence confirming Jewish life at the site is more difficult to locate and far too intricate to describe here. So keep your eyes open, and if you are with a guide, make sure to ask him to point it out to you.

One of the most amazing aspects about touring Israel today is the real-

ization that wherever you are, you are treading on thousands of years of Jewish history. At Kochav HaYarden, the history takes us back to the period of the Sanhedrin with its ancient form of speedy communication (a chain of bonfires to announce Rosh Chodesh), and the periods of the Mishnah and Talmud. **IA**

Photos, clockwise from top: Bridge over the moat where a Crusader drawbridge once gave access to approaching and departing knights; within the inner fortress—just before the arch on the bottom left—is a decorated stone from an ancient synagogue; the eastern gate of the Crusader fortress.



Winter 5764/2003 JEWISH ACTION