

MAKING ORDINARY PLACES HOLY PLACES

The history of the holy cities, and making some holy cities ourselves.

Sacred Cities

Jerusalem holds a special place in our hearts, and for years now, there's been talk about dividing the city, G-d forbid. Just the thought of giving up any part of Jerusalem is enough to make any Jew feel unsettled.

So what is it about Jerusalem that makes it so central, that every Jew feels so strongly about it?

We're all familiar with the idea of the "Holy Land." Israel isn't just any country; people all over the world—even non-Jews—recognize it as the Holy Land. But what many don't know is that within Israel, there are four cities known specifically as the "holy cities": Hebron, Jerusalem, Tzfas, and Tiberias.

Hebron

Let's start with Hebron, the oldest city in Jewish history, dating back 4,000 years. This ancient city was home to Abraham, who, according to tradition, received a divine command here to perform circumcision and was visited by angels who told him he and Sarah would miraculously have a child. Later, when Sarah passed away, Abraham bought the Cave of Machpelah in

Hebron to bury her, making it a central Jewish site.

The Cave of Machpelah later became the burial place for all the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, as well as Adam and Eve. Hebron has held a special place for Jews ever since, symbolizing a deep connection to their roots.

This week's Torah portion also tells of Jacob, who leaves Hebron to reunite with his long-lost son Joseph in Egypt.

The name "Hebron" is related to the word meaning "to connect." Tradition holds that it's a place where Jewish ancestors help bridge the connection between their descendants and a higher spiritual purpose. Even in modern times, Jewish leaders sought to reestablish a presence there, reinforcing this historical bond.

Today, only a small number of Jews live in Hebron, surrounded by a much larger Arab population, maintaining this ancient heritage with determination. Nearby, there's a newer Jewish town called Kiryat Arba with a larger population. However, the historic Hebron remains the heart of this tradition, where a small community continues to preserve its legacy.

Jerusalem

The second city known as a "holy city" is Jerusalem. King David was originally crowned as the king of Israel in Hebron, but after seven years, he established Jerusalem as the nation's capital, making it the royal city about 3,000 years ago. David built his palace there, officially transforming Jerusalem into the heart of

Jewish life.

David also purchased the land that would later become the site of the Temple, known today as the Temple Mount. His son, King Solomon, would go on to build the First Temple on this very spot, solidifying Jerusalem's role as the spiritual center of the Jewish people.

Today, visitors to Jerusalem can explore the City of David, an area filled with archeological evidence of King David's original city. Jerusalem's sanctity and significance are well-known, and words hardly do justice to its importance in Jewish history and identity.

The name "Jerusalem" combines two words: *yir'ah shalem*, meaning "complete awe" (Taanit 16a). According to Midrash, the city was once called "Shalem," ruled by Malki Tzedek, who was also known as Shem, the son of Noah. Later, Avraham named the area around Mount Moriah *yir'eh*, meaning "awe" or "will be seen." The Midrash explains, "Avraham called it 'Yir'eh,' as it says, 'Avraham named that place, "the L-rd will see"' (Bereishis 22:14), and Shem called it 'Shalem,' as it says, 'Malki Tzedek was king of Shalem' (Bereishis 14:18). G-d said, 'I shall call it Yerushalayim [Jerusalem].'"

Combining "Yir'eh" and "Shalem" gives us the name Jerusalem—a city symbolizing "complete reverence," a place uniquely suited for awe and spiritual awareness (*Hisvaaduyos* 5742, Vol. 2, p. 655).

Tzfat

The city of Tzfat was established around 2,500 years ago, about a century after the destruction of the First Temple (which is why it isn't mentioned in the Bible). After the Spanish Inquisition, many Sephardic Jews fled to the Holy Land, and a large number settled in Tzfat. However, the city became truly famous centuries later, thanks to the kabbalists who made it their home, the most notable of whom was Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the Arizal. He gathered a group of mystics around him, and Tzfat became Israel's center for Kabbalah.

One of Tzfat's most famous sites is the Arizal's mikveh—a natural spring where he immersed himself. There's a legend that anyone who immerses in this spring won't pass from this world without first achieving repentance.

The name "Tzfat" is connected to the Hebrew word for "north," as it's located in northern Israel. But the Rebbe added a deeper interpretation, connecting *tzafon* (north) to *tzafun*, which means "hidden." Tzfat is known for revealing the hidden parts of Torah—Kabbalah, often called "the wisdom of the hidden."

"Tzfat" also relates to the Hebrew word *tzofeh*, meaning "to watch" or "to see." Physically, Tzfat offers stunning views of the Lebanon mountains and the Sea of Galilee. But beyond that, it's a place for spiritual vision, where one can gain inspiration and even experience moments of clarity that go beyond ordinary sight (*Sichos L'Noar*, Vol. 4, Shevat 5726).

Kabbalah also teaches that those who live in Tzfat are granted special compassion from Above, experiencing the Thirteen

Attributes of Mercy in their lives (*Hisvaaduyos* 5745, Vol. 1, p. 685).

Tiberias

Tiberias was founded about 2,000 years ago by Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who named it in honor of the Roman Emperor Tiberius. Originally, it was a Roman city, and many Jews, especially priests, avoided it, as they believed it was built over an ancient cemetery, which would have made it ritually impure. This perception continued until Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (Rashbi) came and dismissed these concerns.

Rashbi emerged from hiding in a cave, where he and his son had hidden for 13 years to escape Roman persecution. After the Roman policies eased, they were allowed to come out, but Rashbi's health had suffered, so he went to the famous hot springs in Tiberias for their healing properties. By doing so, he effectively removed any lingering doubts about the city's purity. Tiberias then became a thriving Jewish center, and eventually, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, made it his home.

Today, Tiberias is known for its significant burial sites, including those of the Rambam (Maimonides), Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, Rabbi Akiva, and others.

Though named after a Roman ruler, the Sages found meaning in the name Tiberias, saying it suggests *tovah re'iyatah*, meaning "it has a good view"—a nod to its natural beauty, with gardens, orchards, and the Sea of Galilee. Additionally, it was called *tovah re'iyatah* because it was a seat of great Jewish

scholarship, as the Sanhedrin sat there in the days of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi (Megillah 6a, Maharsha).

Why Are These Cities Holy?

So, why exactly are these four cities called “holy cities”? We know that Jerusalem is a holy city because of the Temple and its special halachic status—even today, bodies are not kept overnight in Jerusalem because of its sanctity. But what makes the other three cities uniquely holy? Interestingly, the term “holy cities” only became widespread in recent centuries.

The simplest explanation is that these cities are home to “holy sites,” where many great and righteous figures are buried, making these places spiritually charged. When someone seeks a spiritual experience or a place to connect more deeply with G-d, they typically go to one of these four cities, not Tel Aviv or Netanya.

As mentioned, each of these cities carries a unique message in its name. *Chevron* comes from the word “connection” and is believed to be a gateway to Gan Eden, connecting us to our ancestors and G-d. *Jerusalem*, or *Yir’ah Shalem*, means “complete awe,” symbolizing reverence and holiness. In *Tzfat*, the mysteries of Torah and spirituality are revealed. *Tiberias*, meaning “good view,” reflects not only its physical beauty but also its connection to wisdom and spiritual insight.

For those of us who live outside Israel, it’s not easy to visit these holy places. But we can still bring a bit of holiness to our own cities. How?

Back in the early days of the Chassidic movement, “maggidim” (traveling preachers) were common. These maggidim would go from town to town, delivering fiery speeches urging people to repent. Often, they took a harsh approach, describing the terrible punishments awaiting sinners and painting vivid pictures of hell that left men weeping and women fainting.

Chassidus took a different path, focusing on G-d’s love for every Jew. Chassidim didn’t appreciate the harsh maggidim who preached with fire and brimstone.

There’s a story of a maggid and Reb Shmuel Munkes, a well-known chassid of the Alter Rebbe, who found themselves staying at the same inn for Shabbos. During Shabbos, the maggid delivered a fierce sermon, harshly rebuking the community. After Shabbos, Reb Shmuel entered the maggid’s room, locked the door, pulled out a large axe, and announced, “I’m going to kill you, so I suggest you start saying *viduy* (confession).”

Terrified, the maggid asked why. Reb Shmuel explained, “Every year, I travel long distances to pray at the graves of tzadikim, but now I’m getting older, and travel isn’t easy. If I make you into a tzadik, I’ll have a grave to pray at right here!”

The maggid, panicking, protested, “But I’m no great tzadik! I’m not like those holy people.” Reb Shmuel replied, “I’m a simple Jew—I don’t need much.” But the maggid continued to insist, listing his flaws and even confessing a few misdeeds. At that point, Reb Shmuel interrupted him: “If you’re such a sinner yourself, who are you to rebuke everyone else so harshly?”

Now, I'm not suggesting that we try Reb Shmuel's method of making our city "holy." I wish everyone a long and healthy life!

But there's something we *can* do: we can make our city more Jewish, more spiritually vibrant. More homes keeping kosher, more kids receiving a Jewish education, more Jews attending shul. With these small steps, our community, too, can become a place of holiness.