

The Sabbath Boundary at Timrat

An inscription discovered by chance gives new life to the discussion on Jewish life in the Galilee in the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. > Text and photography by Mordechai Aviam

Natan Ben-Yehuda lives in Shimshit in the Lower Galilee. He usually spends Sunday afternoons with his grandchildren, who live in nearby Timrat. Their house is only a few paces from the beautiful and little-known Mediterranean forest at Tel Shimron National Park. The tell itself, which is west of Timrat, is a favorite excursion destination for local hikers. Unfortunately, it also is popular with ATV and jeep drivers, who have demonstrated a knack for making deafening noise, stirring up dust, and covering the tell's slopes with ugly tire track marks.

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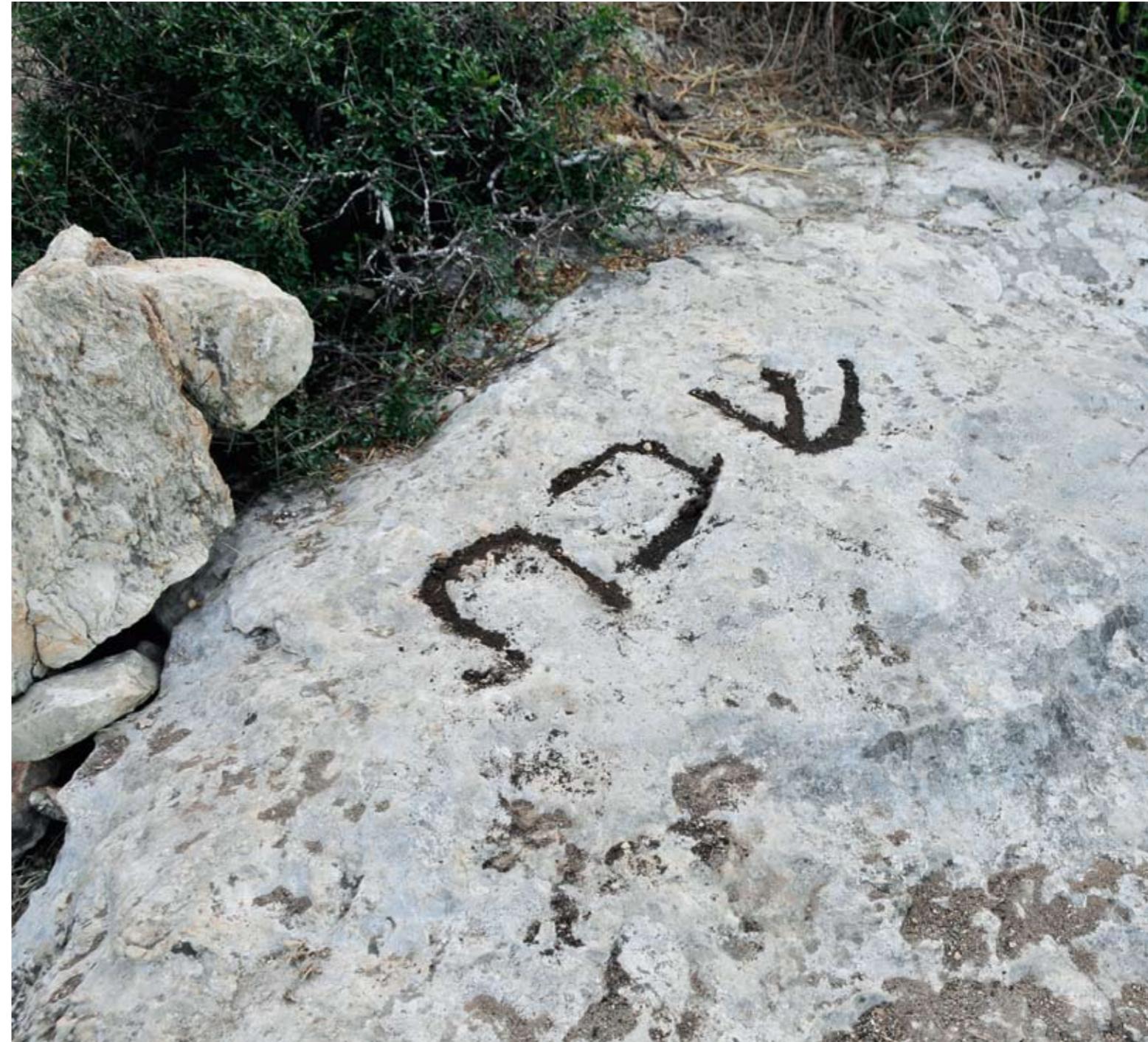
One June day, around 4:30 p.m., the sun illuminated the stone near Timrat at just the right angle and the engraving upon it suddenly was visible.

The tell, which began as a city in the Bronze Age, is mentioned in the Bible (Joshua 19:15) and its name preserves the sound of the site's name in Roman and Byzantine times, Sim'oniya. Only a few archaeological digs have been conducted at the site, but they revealed remains from the Bronze and Iron ages, including part of a gatehouse. During the time of the Second Temple, the site was home to a Jewish community that the Yevamot Tractate of the

Jerusalem Talmud associates with Rabbi Judah Hanasi. The late professor Benjamin Mazar identified a structure with pillars at Tel Shimron that may have been the community's synagogue.

East of Timrat, in the midst of a pine forest that the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund planted, are the remains of the Arab community of Ma'alul, which existed until the War of Independence. The Arabic name preserved the sound of the name of the ancient Jewish village of Mahalul, which is mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud (Megillah Tractate, Folio 71). Today a significant portion of the ancient village lies within a military base. Pottery has been discovered there from the time of the Second Temple, the Mishna, and the Talmud; stone remains hint that a synagogue might have existed there while remnants of oil presses shed light on the village's economic base. Nearby is the spring of En Timrat, which served as one of the village's sources of water. The aqueduct that carried water to a flour mill during Ottoman times is still visible along the path leading up to the youth movements' camp.

On one of his excursions, Ben-Yehuda noticed odd engravings on a stone by the edge of the path. An archaeology and history buff, he examined the stone more closely, but did not discern anything special. Then, one June day, around 4:30 p.m., the sun illuminated the stone at just the right angle and the engraving suddenly was visible. Ben-Yehuda



Above: The Sabbath inscription at Timrat. (Ofer Hoffman)

Below (top):
One of the inscriptions found at Gezer.

Below (bottom):
One of the inscriptions found at Usha.

identified three Hebrew letters that had been carved into the stone – shin, kaf, and chet – spelling the word “shakach” (forget). He could not help but wonder what had been forgotten and who had put so much effort into engraving the reminder into the forest stone.

He invited his neighbor, Ofer Hoffman, to come and take a look as well. Hoffman too found it interesting and summoned his brother Yoram, a tour guide who also writes about knowledge of the land, archaeology, and excursions on his blog, “Bible Walks.”

Yoram suggested that the second letter was not a kaf, but a bet and the final letter was not a chet but a taf, which would mean that the letters spelled “Sabbath.” He suggested that the stone was one of the markers along the Sabbath boundary of a Jewish village, indicating the farthest points that residents could walk to without violating the Sabbath. He posted the idea on his blog and after consulting with his other brother, Roni, who also is an archaeology enthusiast, he decided to turn to me since I have been researching ancient villages in the Galilee for many years.

I arrived at Timrat in the afternoon and met Ben-Yehuda 30 meters from the highway, somewhere dozens of residents stroll regularly without noticing the inscription since it is almost impossible to see if the light does not fall on it at the right angle. Sprinkling a little earth on the letters engraved in the stone made them more prominent. I have no doubt that they spell “Sabbath.” The shin is absolutely clear. It has three arms, like those on other ancient inscriptions, such as the caskets found nearby at Zippori and Bet She’arim. The other two letters also are similar to ancient inscriptions from the Galilee and other places. Based on these comparisons, the inscription can be dated to the Late Roman Period or the Byzantine Period (the third to the sixth century CE). Another indication that this is not a recent inscription is that the patina on the letters is identical to that on the surrounding stones.

Inscriptions on stones in open fields are very rare in Israel. What is common is inscriptions on stones that served as borders between villages or as tombstones. At the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Clermont-Ganneau investigated the first significant group of such inscriptions, which were found in the area of Tel Gezer. The stones surround the tell at a distance of 1.5 kilometers. These stones, nine of which have been studied in depth, generally bore the words “tchum Gezer” (Gezer border) in Hebrew or “of Alkios” in Greek. One of the first hypotheses about them was that they marked the Sabbath boundary of a Jewish community.

The Jewish community that existed at Gezer during the time of the Second Temple began when Simeon the Hasmonean conquered the city. It subsequently was governed by the man who went on to become King John Hyrcanus I. In the last article that Prof. Ronny Reich, of the University of Haifa, published on these inscriptions, he proposed that the inscriptions did not mark the Sabbath boundar-

ies, but differentiated between the new Jewish agricultural area of the city and non-Jewish areas. He suggested this was part of the development of Jewish laws regarding the land. In any case, this was the first case of Hebrew inscriptions on fieldstones that mark a border of some sort.

The second group of stones bearing inscriptions was discovered around the village of Usha, which the Sanhedrin relocated to after the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Researchers mention two inscriptions and perhaps more, but only one survived in situ. They are written in Greek and two of them bear the Greek letters CAB, which could be an abbreviation of the Greek word for Sabbath. The stone is 1.5 kilometers from the center of the ancient village of Usha. The Arab village of Husha, which was located at the site until the War of Independence, preserved the sound of the ancient name. The late geographer, Joseph Braslavi, recounted that Arabs called that stone “the Sabbath tile,” but it is impossible, of course, to know if that is because the story made the rounds in the area over the ages or if residents picked up the phrase from researchers or travelers.

The talmudic anecdote (Sanhedrin Tractate, Folio 14, Side A) about Judah Ben Bava ordaining five scholars also sheds light on this issue. The Talmud relates that the ordination occurred between the Sabbath boundaries of two cities, indicating that Jewish communities were surrounded by Sabbath boundaries. That said, not a shred of evidence hinting that Sabbath boundaries were marked in the field in a concrete way was found prior to the Usha inscriptions. As a result, some researchers questioned whether they really marked the Sabbath boundaries. One Franciscan researcher proposed that they actually were associated with a monastery.

The discovery of an inscription at Timrat that clearly bears the word “Sabbath” (even if the word “boundary” does not appear) raises the issue for renewed discussion. Even though only one Hebrew inscription has been found at this point, it is enough to reinforce the identification of the Usha inscriptions as Sabbath boundary markers. The Jews of the Galilee spoke and wrote in three languages: Hebrew; Aramaic; and Greek. A survey of the inscriptions discovered throughout the Galilee demonstrates that Hebrew and Aramaic were used more widely in the villages in the interior. Greek was more common in the big cities of Tiberias and Zippori as well as on the margins where proximity to non-Jewish cities meant the Jews needed to use

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Greek to communicate with their neighbors.

The Timrat inscription shares one more characteristic with the Usha and Gezer inscriptions: they all consist of large letters that can be seen clearly from a distance. In Timrat and Usha, the letters are about 20 cm. high and the Timrat inscription is 60 cm. long, even though it consists of only three letters. The Usha and Gezer inscriptions are about a meter long. They are much larger than inscriptions on stone tombstones and caskets. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that the letters were painted to make them even more prominent.

The inscription discovered in Timrat is, without a doubt, connected to one of the two communities mentioned above. It is located about 1.5 kilometers from both Tel Shimron and Mahalul – exactly the distance of the Usha inscriptions from the ancient village and similar to the distance between the inscriptions and Tel Gezer.

We hope to discover additional inscriptions in the survey we are preparing to conduct around Timrat. That said, modern communities have been built on a significant part of the area where the stones were likely to have been placed and their construction may have erased all signs of other inscriptions. Much of the remaining land is covered with vegetation that could obscure the inscriptions. Furthermore, it is very difficult to identify such inscriptions; the entire area must be checked meticulously at different times of day under different lighting.

The discovery of another inscription in the Timrat area would greatly strengthen the theory that the inscription marked the Sabbath boundary. However, even on its own, this inscription, which was discovered by chance, is an important contribution to knowledge of Jewish settlement in the Galilee during the days when the Mishna and Talmud were being redacted. ■

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