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Simple pleasures in the land of milk and honey

Grapes and vineyards, the seven species of the Bible, forests, flocks - and even pizza. In Neot Kedumim and Mevo Modi'im, people live the taste of Israel.

By Ronit Vered

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From the so-called Jeremiah lookout you see a slope covered in a wild tangle of bushes of prickly burnet and spiny broom, mastic trees and various other flora characteristic of the Mediterranean forest. A short walk away, from the heights of the watchtower in what is called Isaiah's vineyard, the landscape changes, and grape vines, fig, pomegranate and olive trees cover terraces that bisect the rolling hills.

The area of Neot Kedumim, the Biblical Landscape Reserve - a "living museum" of the flora indigenous to the Land of Israel, and also of daily life during the biblical era - is divided into gardens focusing on various topics, which illustrate on a small scale the different habitats of local flora: Here is a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of uncultivated forest and wild vegetation, ideal for raising sheep and bees, and over there the land of the seven species of the Bible, where forests were removed to make way for crops cultivated by human hands; here is the territory of wandering shepherds, and there the promised land of wine-drinking farmers who are permanent residents of the area.

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Avraham Chai.

Photo by: Dan Peretz.

Sometimes neglect returns to the fields cultivated by man, during periods of destruction and desertion, and then the (indigenous Mediterranean) forest once again reclaims the areas confiscated from it.

Thus the entire history of the Land of Israel, according to the worldview of the people in Neot

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Faking it?

Kedumim, fluctuates between milk and honey on the one hand, and the seven species on the other. The expression "a land flowing with milk and honey" appears 20 times in the Bible, usually as a name for the Land of Israel, and according to the most common interpretation it symbolizes abundance, prosperity and success.



For years the Hareuveni family - nature researchers Hannah and Ephraim Hareuveni and their son Noga, who established Neot Kedumim based on their vision - presented a different and more complex interpretation of that expression, with a double meaning.

Discussion of this subject was the focus of a conference at the site a month ago, which was devoted to the late Noga Hareuveni, who died four years ago. Bible scholars and nature researchers, gastronomes and poets, wondered whether the promise in this expression has been fulfilled, and talked about the intention of the author of the Bible (does it refer to milk and honey from fruit, or to milk from animals and honey from bees?), about the identity of the people who coined the expression based on what they saw around them and on their worldview (shepherds as opposed to farmers), and about honey, milk and wine as cultural symbols.

Occasionally the discussion spilled over into fascinating areas, sometimes they were soporific, but all around you could hear secular, spoken biblical Hebrew, pleasant to the ear and thought provoking. Such Hebrew is used by the guides of Neot Kedumim - naturalists and book-lovers who seek to understand the daily life of the inhabitants of the land 5,000 years ago via the Jewish sources. In the past year there have been interesting cultural encounters at this site on Friday mornings, which offer contemporary interpretations of beautiful ancient texts, and combine guided tours of the reserve with events including music, yoga, literature and the culinary arts.

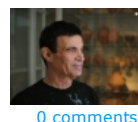
Neot Kedumim Biblical Landscape Reserve, for information: www.neot-kedumim.org.il, 08-9770777

Dragon trees

A small herd of goats is forging its way through the tangle of prickly burnet bushes and Mediterranean forest, in Mevo Modi'im. Avraham Avraham Chai, holding a heavy wooden shepherd's crook in his hand, wearing fashionable glasses and sporting a patriarchal-style beard, skips around behind them from rock to rock. At a distance of 300 meters, in the yard of the family farm, his wife Yehudit (Judy) is teaching a small group of skullcap-wearing boys and their parents how to milk a goat, prepare cheese, press olive oil, use a spinning wheel to make wool, and other ancient handicrafts that are related to the cycle of life in nature.

Avraham was born in Cochin, India and immigrated with his family to Jerusalem where he met his wife, the daughter of a family of Jewish spice merchants from London. Together the two settled 23 years ago in Moshav Mevo Modi'im, in the wake of the charismatic late rabbi Shlomo Carlebach; their well-tended yard reflects the interests and personalities of its owners. Avraham - who studied agriculture and botany, and did a two-year internship at the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust on the Channel Island of Jersey on preservation of rare species of animals - is cultivating an exotic array of subtropical plants, fruit trees and also birds in danger of extinction.

Specifically, the yard contains 30 types of olive trees, each of them with its own fascinating story, and the family prepares wonderful olive oil and pickled olives from them; kigelia pinnata, the "sausage tree," from whose fruit they prepare black beer in Africa; curry and mango trees from India; so-called dragon trees from the Canary Islands; beautiful Bali Mynah birds with blue "eye shadow," of which fewer than 100 remain in the entire world; and rare species of parrots from distant forests. And we haven't yet mentioned the species of bald blue-feathered guinea fowl, the flock of wild chickens and the herd of goats from which the family produces good, simple cheeses.



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For families with children Judy and her daughters offer a chance to make handicrafts that have been forgotten in modern times, and to get to learn about the community and its residents; adults and larger groups can arrange fascinating tours or discussions about botany, archaeology and history of the region where the community is located, which are given by Avraham.

Tour of the Chai Farm, Mevo Modi'im, 08-9264680, 054-4283646

Pasta and melodies

Yaakov Rahmana and his son are digging with hoes in the ground around the rows of vines. The picturesque vineyard, whose wilted leaves are now colored in shades of red and yellow, is located on the border of the Ben Shemen forest and stretches out beneath the windows of Luciano's Pizza, a strictly kosher Italian trattoria housed in a modest "Jewish Agency"-style house. And how did Luciano come to the Holy Land and to the community of disciples of the dancing Rabbi Carlebach?

Here's the story: Shoshana (Suzie) was born in the "Borscht Belt" - the Jewish area in the Catskill Mountains in New York State - to an Ashkenazi-Jewish family of German origin. In the 1960s she was wandering around the streets of San Francisco with the flower children, met the rabbi and joined his circle of disciples. While touring Italy she met Luciano, a handsome Neapolitan, who was converted by the rabbi, married her and immigrated to Israel with her in the mid-1970s. In Mevo Modi'im, which a generation ago was one of the few communities in the area, the two opened a small Italian eatery.

After 25 years of marriage, eight children and one pizzeria, the two divorced, and it was Shoshana, a feisty woman who wears a headscarf, who has continued to stand in the open kitchen and to prepare everyday, from 4 P.M. to 11 P.M., cheese calzone, home-made pasta and fresh pizza.

The kitchen is a big mess, the tables are a little sticky, but who cares about petty matters when a wood-burning stove and Goldstar beer warm the body, and the melodies of Rabbi Carlebach, the regular soundtrack, warm the soul? Every evening local residents gather here, many of them musicians and artists, as well as diners from neighboring towns and an ultra-Orthodox community that enjoys good food.

"The joy here is tremendous," says Shoshana, who has a heavy American accent, a nasal laugh (imagine a vocal range between Fran Drescher and Marge Simpson's sisters), and a natural talent for storytelling. The baked goods are wonderful, the olive oil is good and fresh, all the dishes are ready the moment they're ordered, and the charm of the place and its owner also work in its favor, even though they sprinkle kosher mozzarella and Parmesan of mediocre quality over the baked goods.

Pizza Luciano's, Mevo Modi'im, 08-9262526, 054-6374514.

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