

An Underground Adventure

By Yaffa Ganz

for Olomeinu Magazine

Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

Yoav couldn't wait to get off the plane. He could see his cousins waving to him from the visitor's platform further out on the landing field. When he came down the stairs of the plane with his parents, they stopped a minute to thank Hashem for the privilege of being in Eretz Yisrael again. It was summertime, and the Elsteins were in Israel for their yearly visit to their family.

Yoav never got tired of coming to Israel. He loved to be with his twin cousins Batya and Menashe, and their older brother, Nati. Nati always saw to it that there was something exciting to do and somewhere interesting to go. One year they visited the graves of famous Tannaim (rabbis of the Mishna) and Amoraim (rabbis of the Gemora) all over the Galil, the northern part of Israel. Once they took a week-long tiyul (trip) through the Sinai desert. Last year they were at Yericho and Yam Hamelach (the Dead Sea). Yoav didn't know what he enjoyed more – actually BEING in all these places, or going home and TELLING his friends about it!

When the hellos were all over, Yoav's first question was, "Where do we go this summer?"

"This time we're going to stay in Yerushalayim (Jerusalem)," said Menashe. "We planned a great three weeks. By the time we're finished, you'll know every square inch of the city by heart!"

Early next morning they were packing up food and getting ready. "Don't forget the flashlights. That's the most important thing today," said Nati. "We're going to daven at the Kotel. Then we'll eat breakfast nearby and start out."

Yoav davened with a lot of kavanah (feeling) that morning. It had been a whole year since he was at the Kotel, but even if he could come here every single day it would STILL be exciting to be in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh (the Holy City) . . . right outside the Har Habayis (Temple Mount) where the Bais Hamikdosh once stood ... in front of the Kotel Hamaaravi! He wished he lived with his cousins because they were able to come here all the time!

After Shacharis and breakfast, Nati explained what they were going to do. "Did you notice all the excavations around the Kotel? Once, this was the center of Jerusalem. Thousands of people passed through here every day on their way to the Bais Hamikdosh. These broken stone walls and openings are the remains of stores, buildings, homes, and mikvaos (ritual baths) that were here. But today we're going to the excavations underneath ancient Yerushalayim, not far from the Kotel. If our

imagination is good, we'll be able to picture what it was like when Jews walked from the Holy City to the Bais Hamikdosh.

"What's in there?" asked Yoav.

"You'll see," said Nati. "It's a whole underground city! The sections we'll be going through are clean and lit, but we'll have to be careful anyway."

They went through a small door in the side of the mountain not far from the Kotel. It took a minute for Yoav's eyes to get used to the dim light. The air was funny, too. It had a musty and damp smell, like a basement. The children stayed close to each other.

"Once," Nati explained, "these were busy streets underneath Yerushalayim. There were storehouses here for wares belonging to the Bais Hamikdosh. There were banks where people exchanged money that they had brought for karbonos (offerings), stables where animals were kept until they were used in the Temple, and stores where people bought their daily needs. And there was a large network of underground pools to store water."

"Why did they need so much water?" asked Batya.

"The Kohanim (priests) and Levi'im (Levites) needed a lot of water to wash and prepare the korbanos in the Bais Hamikdosh. They used water to purify themselves, too. Yerushalayim doesn't have many natural pools or springs, so they channelled water into the city from higher places as far away as Chevron. But what would they do with the water after it got here? To take care of the storage problem, they carved pools out of the hard mountain rock under the city, so Yerushalayim had many reservoirs underneath it where water was kept clean and fresh."

"Careful now. The ground is getting a little uneven here. Batya, give me your hand. You two boys hang onto each other, too."

Yoav peered into some of the side paths which were roped off and closed to the public. All he could see was an inky blackness. It seemed as though the underground streets and turns and hollowed-out rooms with domed tops would never end. Yoav let go of Menashe's hand to brush a spider web away from his face. "This is like the end of the world," he said.

Nati laughed. "Once, it was a busy square in a large city. We're almost at the end now. Just two more turns."

Yoav wasn't quite sure just how it happened, but as soon as he made the first turn, he found himself all alone!

"Darn! I should have taken Menashe's hand again! They must have turned left and I think I turned right. But there aren't even any lights on this street. Maybe it's one of those that should have been roped off. I cannot see a thing!"

Yoav backtracked a few steps and felt around the stone wall to find the turn to the left. “That’s funny. I’m sure I didn’t walk more than three or four steps in. The turn should be right here.” But all he could feel was the cold, slimy stone. He walked a little faster, feeling his way, until he scraped his head on a sharp piece of stone. His heart started beating harder and funny thoughts came tumbling into his head.

“Just a minute now, Yoav Elstein” he told himself, “don’t be a baby! Even if you are a little lost, there’s no use getting hysterical! Just holler for Nati. I should have done that right away! Why didn’t they call me? Maybe they don’t even realize I’m not with them!”

“Hey – Nati, Menasha, Batya! Hold it! Wait for me! Can you hear me?” No answer. Yoav suddenly realized that there was no echo, and his voice sounded very small. “I must have stumbled into some small room if there’s no echo at all down here. I think I’d better sit down and think this out. The more I walk, the more lost I’ll get. And Nati said it’s dangerous to wander around in the dark. He said there are deep pits one can fall into!”

Yoav sat down on the damp ground. I’m not going to get scared. As soon as they see I’m not with them, they’ll go back to the guard and bring someone to look for me. I can’t have come too far. The smartest thing is to sit tight and keep calm! I wonder how long it will take them to find me!”

Yoav saw the luminous hands on his watch. It was 9:20. At 10:30 he was still sitting in the same spot. He didn’t hear a thing except a steady ‘drip, drip’ of water coming out of the rocky wall and falling into some pool nearby. He dozed off.

He dreamt that it was the year 60 C.E., a few years before the Bais Hamikdosh was destroyed. He was coming to the Har Habayis (Temple Mount) to bring a korban. The streets were full of people. They were talking and laughing and friends were calling greetings to each other. Yoav bent down to tie the strap on his sandal and picked up a small object.

“What’s this? Someone dropped a small clay oil lamp. Maybe I can find the owner.” Just then he heard someone calling him, “Yoav! Yoav! Where are you?”

Yoav woke with a start and realized that it wasn’t just a dream. People WERE calling him! They were looking for him! “Here I am! This way!”

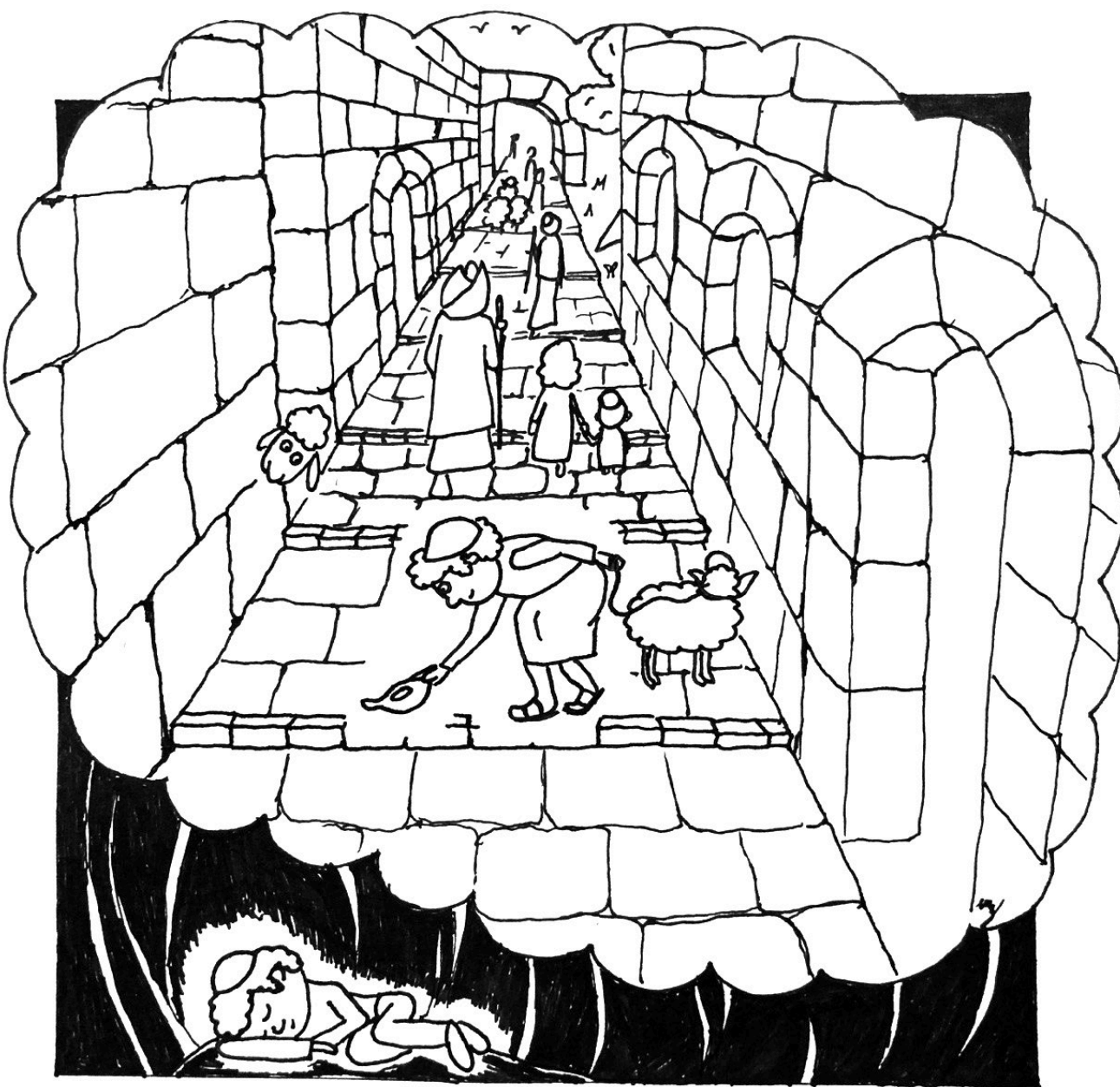
Two men with big floodlights almost blinded him as they turned the corner only a few steps away from where he was sitting. And there were Nati and Menashe and Batya right behind them!

“Boy, did you have us worried! What happened to you? Are you O.K.?” Yoav assured them that he was, as they hurried back out into the daylight. “Were you scared?” asked Menashe. “We were frightened silly because of you!”

“No, I wasn’t scared. I knew you’d find me. I just sat tight. I even had a nap! I dreamt that I was bringing a korban to the Bais Hamikdosh and I found one of those little oil lamps they used to use. The kind we saw in the museum once.”

“What’s that?” asked Batya, pointing to Yoav’s hand. He opened his hand and there it was – a very small, dirty, round clay oil lamp. “How do you like that? I guess I picked it up while I was dreaming! Do you think I can keep it?”

“I don’t know,” said Nati. “We’ll have to ask. All the antiquities are government property.”



The guard sent them to an office where the head archaeologist examined the little clay lamp. “I think you can keep this, Yoav,” he said. “We have hundreds like them. They were the most common, inexpensive means of providing light. We have our flashlight, but in ancient times they used these lamps.”

“Flashlight! I forgot all about my flashlight! I didn’t even think of turning it on when I got lost!”

“If you had turned it on, you would have found your way back immediately!” said Nati.

“But then I wouldn’t have dreamt about bringing a korban and I wouldn’t have found the oil lamp. I’m sorry I scared you, but I’m kind of glad I got lost. I feel as though I just came back from a trip to the Yerushalayim of a few thousand years ago.”