

## News from the Levant #19a: The City of David™

Neil Hertz

Johns Hopkins University

Estados Unidos

**Resumo:** Este ensaio apresenta os resultados do trabalho de um sítio arqueológico, um bem-sucedido se um tanto piegas turístico “destino”, e um sonho de empreendedor em construção. O objetivo, claro, não é para fazer um sítio arqueológico mais bonito e historicamente mais rico, mas pressionar os palestinos a deixar a área. Esta reconstrução permite visitar esse sítio arqueológico na cidade. A razão é que israelenses e palestinos não podem se dar bem: eles são judeus e árabes, cujos objetivos e intenções no local são bastante diferentes. Tais conflitos permitem detenções indiscriminadas e tiroteios, maltrato de crianças, portas quebradas no meio da noite, o deslocamento das famílias, assentados sentindo-se em casa em antigas casas palestinas – a história agora-familiar da Ocupação.

**Palavras-Chave:** Trabalho de um Sítio Arqueológico; Conflitos em Jerusalém; Judeus, Árabes e Palestinos.

**Abstract:** This essay presents the results of the working of an archaeological site, a very successful if somewhat hokey tourist “destination”, and a developer’s dream in the making. The aim, of course, is not to make a handsomer and more historically rich archaeological site, but to pressure the Palestinians to leave the area. The reason is that Israelis and Palestinians cannot get along: they are Jews and Arabs, whose goals and intentions in the place are quite different. Such conflicts enable indiscriminate arrests and shootings, manhandling of young children, doors broken down in the middle of the night, displacement of families, settlers making themselves at home in formerly Palestinian houses- the now-familiar story of the Occupation.

**Key-Words:** Working of an Archaeological site; Conflicts in Jerusalem; Jews, Arabs and Palestinians.

68

---

*News from the  
Levant #19a:  
The City of  
David™*

Neil Hertz

On the way to the minimart to pick up some coffee, I pass my landlord's storefront and his father waves me in. He's sitting there with a friend, their hookahs are bubbling away. Old Man Tarife puts his right hand on his heart: "You are welcome," he says, and, with his left hand offers me a round of pita and motions towards the remains of their lunch, there on the table in a shallow aluminum baking dish--a juicy lamb pizza prepared by Nazieh, the young building manager. His son Khaled comes out of the back office to see if I need anything, then takes off. Our connection is purely business, but no less amicable for that. I've twice lost my house keys, but on the positive side I pay my rent, a hefty \$1000 per month, a hundred dollars more than Bard's housing allowance. I'm



not complaining; I like the place, and I enjoy, as I wrote in an earlier posting, this Chicago-style family operation. The Tarifes have no interest in politics. The night of the Fatah/Hamas accord, a couple of weeks ago, was also the night Barcelona beat Real Madrid. I was awakened around midnight by honking horns and celebratory gunfire. When I asked Khaled's brother, the next morning, which of these events was being celebrated, he laughed: of course it was the football victory--no one cares what Hamas and Fatah are up to. This is not wholly representative of West Bank opinion, but I doubt if it's merely a minority position. On the #18 bus the other day, waiting to be let through the Qalandia checkpoint, I got talking with a Palestinian-American named Mike--another Chicagoan now running a tow-truck business in Las Vegas. He saw no reason why Israelis and Palestinians shouldn't get along: they're Jews and Arabs, he said, they're not that different; they both like money, they like doing business. It reminded me of a meeting years ago, in a rundown labyrinthine neighborhood of Shanghai (now probably redeveloped as high-rises) with a local resident who invited me and my daughter back to his place for lunch, and quickly whipped up a garlic and noodle dish. Sitting around the low table, he said to Ellen, "Your father looks like a priest." "He's Jewish," she said. His eyes lit up, "Ah," he said admiringly, "the Jews, they are the Chinese of the West"--i.e., diasporic, good businessmen, worldly, more

interested in making money than in proving points, etc., etc. In other words, like Mike and the Tarifes.

But, alas, an interest in making money doesn't necessarily preclude a powerful interest in proving points. Elad, the non-profit that runs "The City of David"™, is dependent on major support from Dr. Irving Moskowitz, who made his money in casinos and who (unlike Mike--



as far as I could tell from our brief conversation on the #18 bus, stalled at the Qalandia checkpoint) is committed to reclaiming all of Jerusalem for Jews. Conversely, proving points needn't preclude an interest in making money, and there will be serious money to be made if Silwan's jumble of Palestinian homes ("this disaster," in Helen's phrase) were to be demolished, and (Jewish) developers got to install the sort of upscale residential community that proximity to a pleasantly landscaped national treasure would seem to demand. The City of David™ is at once a working archaeological site, a very



successful if somewhat hokey

tourist "destination".... and a developer's dream in the making.

There are several alternative tours of The City of David™; I chose one organized by a group of young Israeli archaeologists called Emek Shaveh, having first downloaded their recent booklet, *Archaeology in the shadow of the conflict*, from their website ([www.alt-arch.org](http://www.alt-arch.org)). The author of that booklet, Yonathan (Yoni) Mizrachi, turned up as our guide last Friday afternoon. There were five of us--a young Jewish couple (he from Philadelphia, she from Venezuela), a



longtime American human-rights activist now living in Jerusalem and wearing a wonderful wide-brimmed summer hat (q.v.), and a German photojournalist toting the most enviably luscious Leica SLR I've seen outside the B&H catalog. After some preliminary remarks about what we could and couldn't visit--The City of David™ (being a National Park) is open to the public free of charge, but (because it's privately operated by Elad) you have to buy a ticket for the tunnel walks, and Yoni and his groups are *non grata* at the ticket windows--we went down some steps and stood where Helen had stood our group the other day, looking at the thick walls of what some think was David™'s palace. "What do you see here?" asked Yoni. "What I see are a lot of stones, which might or might not date from 1000 BC [i.e., David™'s time]." Archaeological dating is tricky, he went on, stones get displaced, used and reused, and experts agree that there's an odd lack of any evidence that can be securely dated as tenth-century. Clearly there was a sizeable structure here, but



what it was cannot, at present, be confidently named as anyone's palace. He discussed the circularity of reasoning--starting with a Biblical text, then digging to prove the text "historical"--that



has been the standard procedure of Holy Land archaeology (and has been carefully analyzed in Nadia Abu El-Haj's *Facts on the Ground* [U of Chicago Pr, 2001]). Like Abu El-Haj, Yoni's group is critical of the singlemindedness with which Jerusalem's stones are made to ventriloquize one and only one national/religious narrative: their own emphasis is populist--not a story of kings and elites, but of all who lived here--multiethnic and multi-theological. Yoni pointed out something that is not mentioned in the Elad literature, the thousands (he emphasized "thousands") of small female



figurines found at every Jerusalem dig, fertility goddesses, he believed, that seem to have been worshipped contemporaneously with the Israelites' YHWH.



Emek Shaveh's populism is present-day as well as historical: why shouldn't the (Arab) residents of Silwan, they ask, whose lives are being disrupted by the excavations, be brought into the picture--first, by not suffering displacement as The City of David™ extends the area of its digs further and further into the village, and second (and ideally) by having their history on the land considered part of the evidence to be unearthed? There are no signs, however, that this ideal is anywhere close to realization. Quite the contrary. At present there are about 400 settlers in Silwan, inserted here and there in an area that houses 40,000 Palestinians. Elad's current plan is to have another 85 dwellings condemned and demolished so that they can recreate "King Solomon™'s Garden" in a Silwan neighborhood called El Bustan (in Arabic, "The Garden") east of the current park. Activists have attempted to block this on the grounds that Elad, a private organization, should never have been allowed to operate the park in the first place, that it was simply illegal. But last week it was reported that a bill had been introduced in the Knesset that would legalize such outsourcing. The aim, of course, is not to make a handsomer and more historically rich archaeological site, but to ramp up the pressure on Palestinians to leave the area. The Silwanis know this and, as a result, every Friday after noon prayers the youth of El Bustan, the *shabab*, take on the IDF and the Israeli police in an exchange of rocks, tear gas and rubber bullets. It was a Friday afternoon, and we were about to take this in, in more ways than one. As we headed along to the next marked site along the excavation trail, we heard shouts from downhill, then gunfire, then smelled the tear gas drifting up the valley. Looking down we could see a file of cops heading along

El Bustan's main street, then more shouts, running figures, and smoke coming up from burning tires.



73

*News from the  
Levant #19a:  
The City of  
David™*

So

Neil Hertz

much for archaeology. Yoni led us around to a few more sites of digs, including the empty tombs shown in the photo above (that's Yoni with the backpack), but the rest of the afternoon we spent walking through the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood of Silwan, threading our way among the mixture of Arab housing and the occasional fenced-in settler compound, sometimes standing aside on the trail so that policemen could trot by us, heading down to the action in the valley.

At one point we were standing on a ridge above a house that had been taken over by settlers and could see below us a bunch of kids, settler kids, as curious as we were about what was going on in the valley. The little girls are trying to look through the gate guarding their enclosure, one brother seems to be trying to boost himself up to look over the wooden fence, while his younger sibling is practicing his

riflery, aiming his green-and-yellow plastic water gun, presumably in anticipation of his obligatory military service, fifteen or so years from now.

We wound up at the Wadi Hilweh community center, where we sat in a sort of makeshift arbor and listened to a presentation by Ahmed, a man in his thirties, one of the founders of the center. And this turned out to be an odd experience of a totally unexpected sort. Ahmed seemed to have one leg slightly shorter than the other and limped, but otherwise was a lithe and athletic figure. What he had to relate, illustrated with large color photos, were grim stories of just how nasty the Israeli pressure on Silwan had been--for decades. Indiscriminate arrests and shootings, manhandling of young children, doors broken down in the middle of the night, displacement of families, settlers making themselves at home in formerly Palestinian houses--the now-familiar story of the Occupation, whether one hears it in East Jerusalem or on the West Bank. Ahmed's English was pretty good, but--and this was telling--he was suffering from a really bad case of laryngitis, so his story of oppression came out in a high pathetic soprano whine, in some relation to the content of his narrative but totally unrelated to the face and figure of the young man standing in front of us. It was unintentionally comical and became more so when, after some time, the door to the street behind Ahmed opened and a seemingly unending file of grade-school children--thirty or forty of them--came through, one by one, as he was speaking, pausing to take us all in, then heading for another conference room beyond where we were seated. It was more than distracting and finally Ahmed turned round and--finding his baritone voice--said, loud and deep and clear, "*Shabab*, shut up!!" That moment of angry irritation seemed to have done the trick: the rest of his presentation was not high-pitched. Instead, it was dramatically high-tension. Ahmed was telling us of the harassment of children by the IDF while limping over to one side of the room, where he had concealed his crutch, one of the aluminum kind that attaches to one's forearm, the sort you see on people with permanent disabilities.



Using the crutch but not mentioning it, he came back to the center of the small room to conclude his talk: he was telling us how he had seen his six-year-old being slapped around by a soldier, had gone to his defense, shouting at the soldier, and had been shot him in the leg, in front of his son. Hence the crutch. That was, in effect, the end of the tour. We thanked him, thanked Yoni, who apologized for the necessarily abridged tour of the digs, and left.

Backed by the courts and the Knesset, Elad will probably succeed in taking over Silwan, Barring divine intervention, that is—but through what mediation? Obama? The UN? Another intifada? The possibilities seem either unlikely or unthinkable.



*News from the Levant #19: Visiting “The City of David”™*

Because we are about to devote some classes to the politics of archaeology in Jerusalem, I spent several afternoons this week at what is officially known as the Jerusalem Walls National Park, but most often referred to as “The City of David”™, an archaeological site, a theme park, and, if truth be told, a public-private joint venture in displacing Palestinians from a neighborhood in East Jerusalem. The neighborhood is known today as Silwan--Biblical Shiloah or Siloam, where Jesus is said to have restored a man’s sight. Unlike other Israeli *National Parks*, the management of The City of David™ has been outsourced to a non-profit called Elad, whose stated aim is to repopulate (with Jews) the area just south of the Old City where, it is believed, King David™ and King Solomon™ had their royal quarters.



Archaeologists have been working in this neighborhood for over a hundred and fifty years, since long before this Arab village on the slopes of a valley outside the walls had been incorporated into Greater Jerusalem, and they have made some remarkable finds, though perhaps the most remarkable was accidentally discovered around 1880 by a local Sephardi teenager wading through an underground waterway carved out of the bedrock--it has been determined--around 700 b.c. What he found was an inscription, in early Hebrew, marking the spot where the two groups of miners, one starting to dig from one end, one from the other, had met. It reads: “Behold the tunnel! This is the story of its cutting. While the miners swung their picks, one toward the other, and when there remained only 3 cubits to cut, the voices of one calling his fellow was heard--for there was a resonance in the rock coming from both north and south. So the day they broke through the miners struck, one against the other, pick against pick, and the water flowed from the spring [i.e.,

Gihon] toward the pool [i.e., Siloam], 1200 cubits. The height of the rock above the head of the miners was 100 cubits.” You don’t have to be a Zionist, or to care much about the accomplishments of King Hezekiah, in whose times this tunnel was dug, to find this thrilling: “a resonance in the rock,” indeed! Who knew that ancient miners had such a lyrical relation to their own labor! It reminded me of a time when, biking in Western France, I had stopped off at a village bakery. It was not a shop, just a small working space with ovens in back and, in front, the great metal bowl in which the dough was worked, mounted on a steam-driven vertical axle. While I was there, a coal delivery arrived, two guys carrying burlap sacks on their shoulders. They dumped them in a bin by the ovens, then stood around waiting to be paid. One of them reached down and idly gave the axle a twist, setting the bowl spinning slowly. “Insofar as I am a coal man,” he announced, to no one in particular, “*En tant que charbonnier*, I make this bowl turn.” A nice bit of French self-reflexivity. Even more moving to hear a much more heroic version of the same sort of pride echoing down 2700 years.

The management of The City of David™ of course, is eager to match up stones with Biblical texts, and that is the burden of their brochures and of the signage along the way. I came away from that first, self-guided, tour having seen a lot of stones and been shown, on the accompanying plaques, the apparently relevant passages from the Old Testament. I had read enough to know that some of the interpretations put forward on the plaques were disputed by reputable Israeli archaeologists, and it was hard not to register how single-mindedly tendentious the interpretations were, but that didn’t keep the tour, the mere sight of the uncovered stones, the descent into the tunnels, from being fascinating.

I decided to come back again, to see what the guided tour was like.



Next day I returned and joined a group that included four Swiss Germans, a couple of elderly American Baptist missionaries who had spent years in Israel working with Palestinian orphans, and another American couple who didn't look either particularly Jewish or particularly Evangelical. Our guide was

“Helen,” a *zaftig*, athletic German-Jewish Israeli in her sixties, wearing her honey-colored greying hair long and loose, with a vivid smile and a gift, I was to discover, for offensive humor. We were first led into a small theater, given 3-D glasses to wear, and shown an animated historical reenactment, full of zooming shots and rousing crescendos, of the early Israelites, led by David™, taking over the very hillside we were standing (or, at the moment, sitting) on, back around 1000 b.c. and turning it into The City of.....David [™]. A foolish film, at once accomplished, in a Disney way, and comically simplistic. It ended with the promise that soon, thanks to The City of David™, children would once again play on this hillside. Of course, children are already playing on this hillside, they just happen to be Palestinian. Out in the bright Jerusalem sunlight, blinking after turning in our stereoscopic shades, we listened to Helen's initial orientation. She pointed out Mount Zion, to the west, where, in the past, some historians had located David™'s

palace, and the Old City, north of us, where the Muslim holy places, the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque, now occupied the site of Solomon™'s Temple. Then she paused, and, with a twinkle in her eye, asked us to take note of the relative positions of the mosque and the Dome: if we could imagine Moslems down on their knees in al-Aqsa, she went on, directing their prayers towards Mecca, to our



southwest, we must see that their raised rear ends would be, of necessity, facing the Dome of the Rock. Helen found this amusing. It wasn't clear whether this was part of The City of David™'s script, or just a charming riff of her own. She led us over the terrace to look to the east, across the Kidron Valley, to the "Tomb of Pharaoh's Daughter," a small rectangular facade barely discernible among the tightly clustered houses on the steep Silwan hillside, a neighborhood Helen referred to as "this disaster." She went on to explain about the tomb, so named by a 19th-century French archaeologist who imagined that this (eighth-century b.c.) tomb contained the remains of the Egyptian wife Solomon™ is supposed to have taken in his old age. Helen quipped that, like many another Jew, he had married out of the faith, a joke apparently lost on the Swiss Germans (who came from a small village near Bern and probably didn't know from *shiksas*). One of the Americans in our group asked about all the litter one could see, sliding down among the Silwan houses. Did people just throw their trash downhill? Helen nodded, that's what they're like. But aren't there garbage trucks, regular collections? he pursued. "They stone the trucks," said Helen. The American shook his head, and we left the observation platform to follow Helen down to the first of the excavation sites.

This dissing of Silwan, I knew, was not idiosyncratic to Helen. You hear it all the time from Israelis, even the *bien-pensant* who disapprove of the politics of The City of David™. But I was surprised to find it in a recent, finely written and wonderfully informative book by the Cambridge classicist Simon Goldhill, *Jerusalem: City of Longing* (Harvard UP, 2008). I quote from his chapter "The Oldest City":

In the Silwan Village on the other side of the valley there is a fascinating necropolis, largely dating from the eighth century B.C., with more than fifty graves in two rows cut into the rock face. Unfortunately, this is not a safe place for Western visitors to go, while the current political situation exists.

(This is, in fact, good advice, but Goldhill goes on):

Actually, it hasn't been an attractive prospect for a trip for a long while. In 1876 Charles Warren, who went on to fight the Boer and to become the commissioner of police in London when Jack the Ripper was at large, wrote: "The

people of Siloam are a lawless set, credited with being the most unscrupulous ruffians in Palestine.” J.L. Porter, the president of Queen’s College, Belfast (a tough enough city), ten years later also called them “lawless, fanatical vagabonds,” and another Victorian traveler called Kelly, who actually tried to enter a tomb, was terrified by the shriek of an old Arab woman which brought hundreds of swarming children and cursing men and women out of the tombs all around. He fled. Even the modern archaeologist who surveyed the site has little love for it: “Words cannot describe the filth we encountered. At the time there was no proper drains or sewers in the village and the sewage flowed in every direction...Piles of refuse and junk were heaped everywhere.” So now it is advisable to see the Tomb of Pharaoh’s Daughter from a distance.

My teaching partner, the architect and city planner Omar Yousef, grew up in Silwan. His parents still live there. His father is a retired school administrator, his mother a retired teacher.

Where was I? Oh, yes: Helen, standing over the excavation of what looks like a very thick wall, with yet another twinkle in her eye. We can’t be *a hundred percent sure* this was the site of David™’s Palace, she coyly pronounced, but it just *might* be--the wall is so thick, it had to be a very grand building. The archaeologists are working on it.

That was when I bailed out. I’d had enough of Helen, so, when she headed towards the steps leading down to the famous tunnels, I slipped into a file of Japanese in identical colored hats coming up the stairs and left The City of David™. As I walked back into the Old City, I found my anger growing and spreading: I was angry with myself for not challenging Helen, but more generally and unfocusedly furious, fed up with the lot of them, Jews and Arabs alike, fed up with Palestinian garbage, with being jolted around the West Bank over bad roads in badly sprung minibuses, with the cocky uniformed Israeli soldiers, barely out of their teens, sporting their dark glasses and AK-47s on the plaza in front of the Wailing Wall. What had once seemed to me the exhilarating diversity (of people, sights and sounds) of the Old City had turned, in this mood, to nothing but jostling crowds, kitsch, and clutter. I looked around for a calmer, less fraught, place to sit down and cool off and



walked toward the north-east corner of the Old City, past the Armenian rug salesmen, to the least dolorous end of the Via Dolorosa, the Pools of Bethesda, where I'd read there was a handsome Romanesque church, St. Anne's.



If I'd had it with the bloody-minded Arabs and Jews, perhaps a more familiar foreignness might be more soothing.

I was remembering student biking trips in France to visit Romanesque churches, guided by Henry Adams's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, and, in particular, to see one that he was



sure "Jews might kiss and Infidels adore." And indeed, once through an archway, what I found was very familiar and very French--a small formal garden with careful plantings surrounding a monumental bust that might appear in any town square honoring, in this case, not a former mayor but a cardinal, and then the church itself, elegantly simple and undecorated, close to some excavations, beds of aromatic herbs, an arbor.

The nave was empty, though I'd seen some French priests in white robes as I was coming in. There was a bench in the shade, across from the facade, and I sat down to consult my guidebook. St. Anne's, honoring Mary's mother, was built around 1140, I learned. Turning back to the page of Jerusalem chronology, I realized that this was not all that long after Godfrey de Bouillon broke through the walls of the city. Here is a contemporary account of that moment in July of 1099:

Now that our men had possession of the walls and the towers, wonderful sights were to be seen. Some of our men--and this was the more merciful course--cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. [...] In the Temple and porch of Solomon men rode in

blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers.

The entire Muslim population of the city was wiped out, and some indeterminate but large fraction of its Jews. This was not quite what I had in mind when I wished myself rid of the bloody-minded Jews and Arabs. But it was a reminder that there are no untainted spots in this city or this land.

Godfrey's sword hangs in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, that bewildering building where, last October, Louise and I heard a weary American tourist ask her husband, "So what would have happened if they hadn't killed Him?"



*News from the  
Levant #19a:  
The City of  
David™*

Neil Hertz

Good question. Not the scene below, from Gustave Doré's folio on the Crusaders, but perhaps an equivalent? My Bulgarian-born Jerusalem friend Elizabeth guessed that "there would just have been one more splinter party in the Knesset."



*[To be continued. I don't want to overload this posting, so I will describe my third trip to the City of David™--the alternative archaeological tour of the site--in my next essay.]*

*News from the  
Levant #19a:  
The City of  
David™*

Neil Hertz