

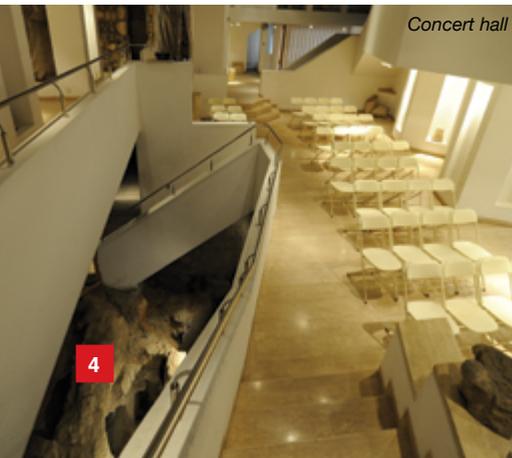
Siebenberg House

Uncovering the mysteries of Jerusalem under King Hezekiah 722 BCE

Parts of the Maccabean lower aqueduct that carried water from Solomon's Pools to the Temple



Concert hall



By Omer Eshel

On the eve of the destruction of the Second Temple

“An urgent missive for His Majesty! An urgent missive for the king,” echoed David Ben Israel's words.

“A throng of Israelites assembles around Jerusalem! The Western Hill, the Second, filled with refugees!”

When he heard the shouts, King Hezekiah came out to greet David and asked: “What is it? What has happened?”

“The Assyrians have burnt down the halls of Samaria, the Kingdom of Israel has fallen, its sons and daughters are being exiled as we speak, by the Assyrian Captain! My Lord, we have to do something! We have to look after our Jewish brethren of the Kingdom of Israel. They are camped on the Western Hill, en route to the Upper Town.”

Hezekiah climbed up the tower in the Stronghold of Zion, the one his forefathers built and strengthened since the days of King David himself. He looked towards Mount Zion and shuddered. Seemed like almost overnight,

the necropolis on the Mount was overrun with thousands of refugees from the Kingdom of Israel, women, children and the elderly, all fleeing in terror from the King of Assyria.

In those days, Mount Zion lay outside the city walls, and served mainly as a burial ground. Now, the refugees used the tombs for storage and shelter.

“Gather my chiefs and councilors bring forth the prophet Isaiah, we have to discuss what to do with this horde!”

That night, in the hall of King Hezekiah it was decided: the Western Hill, also called the Second, would be fortified and added to the walls of Jerusalem. The Western Hill would become the first line of defense, shielding the City of David and the Temple from the west, with all the refugees rallied as the city's defenders.

“For out of Jerusalem shall go forth a remnant, and they that escape out of mount Zion: the zeal of the LORD of hosts shall do this” (Isaiah 37, 32). ▶



Theo and Miriam Siebenberg, Founders

◀ Construction began on Mount Zion the very same night. The ancient wall was repaired and the towers

reinforced. Then they built a new western wall, expanding the city outward:

“Also he strengthened himself, and built up all the wall that was broken, and raised it up to the towers, and another wall without, and repaired Millo in the city of David, and made darts and shields in abundance” (2 Chronicles 32, 5).

Then the King of Assyria came... He besieged Jerusalem and imprisoned King Hezekiah like a bird in a cage. The people of Jerusalem cried out and prayed to the heavens. The city was on the verge of destruction, and all around were the cries of women, of the masses dying of hunger. Above all this, echoed the voice of the prophet Isaiah: “For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God” (Isaiah 62, 1).

Ninth of Av, 70 CE

Fire!!! Fire in the palace halls! The Upper Town has been under siege these past three weeks. No one comes nor goes. Zealots burned down the granaries, and men sold out their friends for a loaf of bread...

“It is just a matter of time,” said David Ben Israel, who came to us from the Galilee after fighting the armies of Herod Agrippa. His war stories are making me cringe with fear. “The siege on Gamla, the downfall of Magdala. Now we are gathered here, defenders of our people after four years of fighting the Romans. We were so full of hope and truly believed we could defeat the Roman Empire, but now all is lost.

“The wall has been breached, and the Upper Town is engulfed in flames. We found a hiding place, David and I, in the walls of

the Hasmonean palace. Its mighty walls are certain to protect us, but if not, we can always flee through the lower aqueduct.

“I sit and write these words, looking at the aqueduct built by King Herod, the one that carried water to the Temple and flowed abundantly not so long ago. Now it lies in ruins. The Romans destroyed it in parts, to cut off our water supply, but they could not prevent us from using the springs. Rumor has it the Romans have invaded Antonia Fortress, and are now destroying our Temple. Smoke, smoke is everywhere, a pungent and suffocating smell of fire. Day has turned into night; we cannot even see the sun. I look down to the City of David and think of Jeremiah, wandering the desolate streets on the eve of destruction of the First Temple, muttering to himself, holding his head in his hands and crying. I cry with him...”

“How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies” (Lamentations 1).

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“So you have excavated all this by yourselves?” I ask Miriam Siebenberg.

“Yes,” she says, with a smile. “My husband Theo and I bought the house in 1970, you know, after Jerusalem was unified in June 1967.

“We came to Israel after the Holocaust. Theo always said that every Jew yearns to return to the land of his fathers and renew our days as of old. When we bought the house, Theo ▶



Stone columns from 2nd Temple Period



Lady of the house’s key ring (2nd Temple Period) and arrowhead dated 2600 years ago

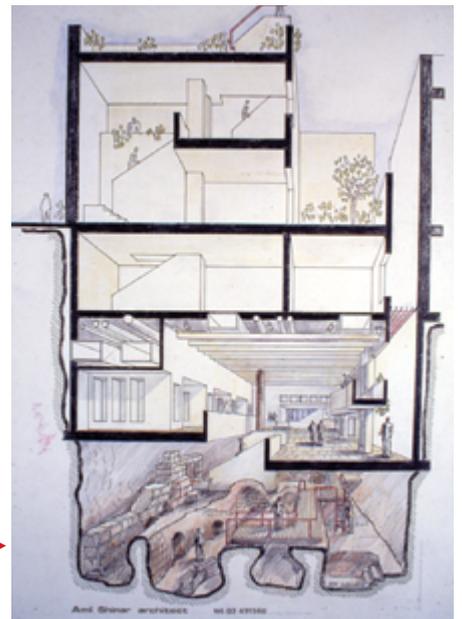


Diagram of the Siebenberg House excavation—architects, Yakov Year and Ami Shinar



We went up one level, where she suddenly stopped by a giant pillar made out of layers of dirt. One of those layers was all black and sooty. "See?" said Miriam, "This is the layer of ash from the day Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE."

I stood there, awestruck and speechless, and Miriam turned to go back up to her house. She asked me to join her, saying, "The best is yet to come."

We went up the stairs, through the house she shares with Theo. We crossed a library filled with thousands of books and went up to the roof.

Some coffee and a plate of cookies await, and I sit down to look at the Mount of Olives, Temple Mount, the Jewish Quarter and entrance to the City of David.

The cool afternoon air in Jerusalem mixes with the smell of cooking that fills my lungs, and I sip some coffee and look around me in amazement.

"Now you see?" said Miriam. "This house represents the entire history of the Jewish people, from Biblical times, through the destruction of the Second Temple, the diaspora and Holocaust, the return to Zion and the founding of the State of Israel."

I smile and think back to my ancestors, who stood right here, where I now sit, who saw before them the mighty armies of Assyria, of Babylon, of Rome and wondered what would become of the Jewish people. Right here, on this very spot, I hear the echoing voice of the prophet Isaiah:

"For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married" (Isaiah 62). ●

◀ hypothesized there was a whole world lying hidden at our feet, buried by the sands of time and history."

We go down to the basement in Miriam's house, at 5 Beit-Ha'shoeva Street, in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. A door opens, and we enter a huge room overlooking excavations from different periods - Solomon's Temple, Second Temple, Byzantine and even Crusaders.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a structure carved out of rock, and move to look at it up close.

"What is this?" I ask.

"Granaries from the Solomon's Temple period," says Miriam.

"From the First Temple period?" We are on the Western Hill, and up until the days of King Hezekiah, this was nothing but tombs carved in rock. Yet lo and behold, this structure that was indeed a tomb in the days of King Hezekiah became part of the town's fortifications during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem. I quickly turn to the book of Chronicles, and it takes my breath away. Here are King Hezekiah's preparations for the siege, no longer just a matter of speculation or theory, but actual archeological proof!

I am overwhelmed with excitement, and continue my tour in this underground world, a gateway to ancient worlds and key moments in the history of the Jewish people. Before me are Mikvehs (ritual baths) from the days of Jesus, and next to them the remains of a well-chiseled canal.

"What is this canal?" I asked Miriam, and she explained, "Here stood the Hasmonean palace, and this canal is none other than part of the lower aqueduct that carried water to the Temple."

As a student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I learned a lot about the city and its ancient water systems. One of the main problems of Jerusalem was that of purifying and cleaning the Temple, since the only water source was the Gihon Spring, far from Temple Mount. So the Hasmoneans built an elaborate water system that carried water from afar and solved the city's water problem. And here I am, standing over the remains of the Hasmonean palace, almost touching an aqueduct built by our forefathers.

"This place was left in ruins, along with the Temple," I told Miriam, who smiled and asked me to follow her.

For more information: www.siebenberghouse.com
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