

ON AND OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IN TEL AZEKA

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Every once in a while, the Tanakh describes the geography and topography of a place in such detail that being at that spot, one can literally visualize the valleys, hills and streams as they were 3,000 years ago. One such spot is Emek HaElah, the Valley of Elah, and Tel Azeka, one of the hills to the west of the valley.

Although Tel Azeka remains largely unexcavated, it perfectly fits the description of a tel, that is, a manmade mound where civilization has been built on top of civilization. Visiting the site gives the knowledgeable traveler a sense of the many periods of history hidden beneath.

We first read of Azeka in chapter ten of the Book of Joshua. Azeka is one of the first cities to be conquered by Joshua, in the area that is designated to the tribe of Judah. Ironically, Azeka is one of the last cities in Judea to be destroyed in the final days of the First Temple. As it states in Jeremiah: *Then Jeremiah the prophet spoke these words . . . when the army of the king of Babylonia fought against Jerusalem and all of the remaining cities of Judea – Lachish and Azeka – for they remained of the fortified cities of Judea (34:6,7).*

One of the more dramatic discoveries in nearby Lachish is a pottery shard from this tumultuous period on which someone had written, "Tonight the fires of Azeka have been extinguished." The shard provides archaeological evidence that the two places mentioned in the above verse were linked. Tel Azeka's connection to the period of the destruction of the Temple makes it a particularly poignant spot to visit during the season of the three weeks and Tishah B'Av.

More than four hundred years earlier, the residents of Azeka literally had box seats to view the dramatic encounter between David and Goliath, as it took place in the valley below.

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The first book of Samuel describes how the army of King Saul encamped on the hills on one side of the valley, and the Philistine forces were on the opposite hills, between Sochoh and Azeka, with *the valley between them* (I Sam. 17:3). The Jewish army was paralyzed with fear when challenged by the champion of the enemy army.

No one wanted to undertake the seemingly impossible and suicidal task of battling Goliath; no one, except young David, who had been sent by his father from nearby Bethlehem to bring provisions to his older brothers in Saul's army. But the armour that the king put on David was too big, and the sword was so heavy that David descended to the stream, which today still bisects the valley.

And he [David] took his staff in his hand and picked out five smooth stones from the brook . . . and his slingshot was in his hand; then he approached the Philistine (I Sam. 17:40). With one well-aimed hurl from his slingshot, David felled the taunting adversary, thus putting an end to this threat.

The entrance to Tel Azeka is through British Park, which is located along Route 38, just a few miles south of Beit Shemesh. The signs lead you along a dirt road to a small area with picnic tables. From there, visitors can continue by foot, ascending to the plateau of the tel either via a short trail right up the side of the "mountain," or via the road. At the top, the National Park Service has placed a series of stone markers with various verses from the Book of Samuel that tell the story of David and Goliath.

As you look out over the valley below, taking in its beauty, be uplifted by the knowledge that beneath the spot where you are standing are the ruins of a number of cities, whose histories span the period of the Prophets, from the early days of the Jewish settlement in Judea under the leadership of Joshua, to the final days of the First Temple.