

Development of the Tradition and the Ritual at the Site of Makam

Ibrahim el-Halil on Mt. Hermon

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Abstract

The book of Genesis describes several journeys made by Abraham. Included among the sequence of geographical events is a story that is seemingly not crucial to the story line, namely the military campaign of the four kings of the north against the five kings of the south (Genesis 14, 1-15). This is apparently a reference to a struggle between the kingdoms for control and hegemony, and perhaps also to the northern kings' fear of the independence of the southern kingdom and the establishment of a new kingdom in Canaan, which the family of Abraham and Lot was also likely to join.

The many discussions about the story of the war, its progress, the geographical locations and the incident of the Covenant of the Parts, have included the question of identifying the site of the covenant.

The article presents the geographical-historical background to the site and the development of the traditions, and will raise several questions regarding its identification and its rituals.

Keywords: Holy places; ritual of the saints; Ziara; pilgrimage; Mt. Hermon

The book of Genesis describes several journeys by Abraham the patriarch with his immediate and his extended family, and even war journeys. Some of these journeys were forced on him and some were by choice. Within the sequence of events and geographical steps noted in Genesis 12-17 is woven a story that would seem to be superfluous on the historical continuum. The story, even in its absence, enables understanding the historical and conceptual development at that time. This is the journey of the four kings of the north against the five kings of the south (Genesis 14:1-15). The purpose of the war and of the story in the Bible is not clear, since the progression of events can also be understood without this story. It would seem to be a struggle between the kingdoms for control and hegemony in the area, and perhaps even their fear of the kings of the North regarding the independence of the kings of the South in the establishment of a new kingdom in Canaan, in which the children of both Abraham's and Lot's families were supposed to integrate. To a certain degree these threaten the character of the original control in that area, and are liable to lead to future change, which the kings of the North apparently feared.

This war has two important results. The first lies in the geographical-political dimension and is the eradication of the kings of the North and the establishment of the kingdom in Canaan. The second result lies in the conceptual-religious dimension, which is Abraham's vision and eventual Covenant between the Parts between Abraham and the Creator that promised the Land of Israel to the people of Israel (Genesis 15:9-21).

In discussions over the story of the war, its process, sites, and the story of the Covenant between the Parts, attention is also paid to the question of identification of the site where it occurred. This article is devoted to discussion of that topic. Prior to embarking on a geographical debate, allow us to mention the historical event.

The historical and biblical background to the event

The story of the event appears in the book of Genesis 14:1-17, where the four kings are mentioned:

"In the days of King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim; these kings made war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea). Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled" (King James version).

The war broke out following a rebellion amongst the five kings that starts in the Valley of Siddim, where Lot was taken prisoner. The fugitive came to Abram who was then at Elonei Mamre and he joins the chase as far as Dan and Hoba (Haleb, Aleppo) 'which was to the left [north] of Damascus' to save Lot.

Later, in Genesis 15: 1-18, the Bible recounts the scene revealed to Abram in which he is commanded to take animals of different types and to dismember them, except for the bird.

"After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great ... He said to him, Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon; He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two; and when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended

upon him [...] When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces; On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates."

The main thrust of the event and its historical importance is the promise given to Abraham, the patriarch, and his descendants regarding the continuation of his seed and boundaries of his domain. Hence, one may assume that the importance of the site from the historical perspective would be similar.

Identifying the site – the northern tradition

In pilgrimage literature and literature pertaining to knowledge about the Land of Israel the event is identified on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, at a site known in Arabic as Makam Ibrahim el-Halil (The Place of the Beloved Abraham, the Friend), or as Mash'had a-Tayer (The Indication of the Bird), on a Syrian slope, at the foot of Mt. Habtarim (coordinates 7519/6863; 2160/2989) (figure 1). There were three main reasons for identifying the event with this location.

1. The apparent textual proximity

Those supporting the northern identification claim there is no issue of sooner or later in the Torah. They skip the event that occurred following the chase by Abraham, an event in which he met the King of Sodom and the King of Shalem (Genesis 14:16-24). This approach relies, amongst other things, on exegesis by Rashi (an 11th century medieval French rabbi and author of a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud and the Bible) of Genesis 15:1: After he had experienced a miracle, the one who killed the kings and was concerned and said, 'lest I was paid for all my righteousness, the Lord said, do not fear Abram, I will

protect you [...]’ According to Rashi's approach, the Covenant between the Parts occurred after the battle with the kings of the north.

2. The sanctity of the space

Amir shows that Mt. Hermon was already sacred to the Canaanites and is even mentioned in the Ugarit poetic literature (Amir 1978). Safrai further observes that amongst the mountains of the Land of Israel, to which sacred traditions were attached during the period of the Mishna and the Talmud, Mt. Hermon is one of them in addition to Mt. Sinai and Mt. Carmel. These traditions are manifested in the Talmudic and the external literature (Safrai 1987: 308). Research on the holy sites finds that those to which early traditions were affixed, whether Canaanite or Jewish, will enjoy a stronger tradition later that does not necessitate it being written, or based on any real event. It is enough for tradition to pass verbally from one generation to another in order to develop sanctity. Both Meshel (1971) and Marks (1980) observe this phenomenon with regard to the graves of Bedouin sheikhs in southern Sinai (Meshel, 1971: 94; Marks, 1980) and Sasson shows this phenomenon regarding the pit into which Joseph was thrown in the Galilee, and the development of sacred sites in the area between Zora'a and Eshta'ol (Sasson 2001).

3. The impact of the Islamic tradition

The Jewish sources that attribute the Mash'had a-Tayer site to the slopes of Mt. Hermon rely on the interpretation of the name of the site as it has been assimilated in Muslim folklore. And indeed, this is the only site that is identified with this event (as compared to other sacred sites, such as the Jewish founders of the nation, who enjoyed several graves in Muslim folklore in diverse parts of the country).

This unique identification apparently strengthens the identification of the site with the event, and therefore has also been accepted in Jewish tradition over the generations.

Description of the site

Several items and installations remained at the Covenant site around a sacred structure that is typical of grave markers and sacred sites from the Mameluke period and thereafter. As befits such sites, the marker was constructed on a domed roof high above the surroundings. This is a long structure (13.5 × 5 m.) with a NNW axis and includes three rooms with convex ceilings covered by cupolas (figures 2-5). Opposite the opening to the structure is a large rock on top of which is a small dome typical of sites of worship. Around the site is a small cemetery with a few graves. Two large water reservoirs are to the north of the site (figure 6), similar to those found at other ancient sites on the Hermon (Darr 1978: 75), which drained the runoff water from the area. Close to the site, the most ancient oak trees in the Land of Israel survived, testifying to the sacred traditions there (figure 7). This site was constructed close to early routes, one of which from leaves from the Baniyas going north, through the site of the Covenant and continues to Mt. Agass, whose remains were located by Darr (1978: 75).

Dating the site: According to Darr, who surveyed the site, archaeological findings were discovered starting from the Roman-Byzantine period, and from the Mameluke and Ottoman periods (figure 8) (Darr 1994: 299, 302). The plan of the three-domed structure is familiar from burial sites around the country from the Mameluke period, such as Nebi Shat Babashit and others (figures 9 and 10).

Evidence of the history of the site and the ritual

Evidence from the late middle ages

The slopes of Mt. Hermon were a walking route from Zfat to Damascus; thus one could apparently expect relatively many sources on and around the site (see, for example, Reicher 1971: 25). However, in view of the sources we present below it seems that their number is limited.

In general, one may aver some correlation between the style of the structure, dated to the late Middle Ages during the Mameluke period, and the sources in its regard. The site is mentioned for the first time in 1537, in the 'Letter of the patriarchal pedigree': 'Dan is Baniyas ... and also the name of the place where Abraham passed in the Covenant between the Parts. It is on the top of a mountain, and non-Jews call it "Mash'had a-Tayer"' (Vilnay 1978, 4499).

Later, Gershom ben Asher of Shkarmila describes the site in the *Book of Pedigree of the Righteous* in 1561 (Ilan 1997: 23).

The author of the 'Letter of the Pedigree of the Righteous' of 1626/1640 expands the description of site: 'The status of the site of the Covenant between the Parts finds it to be a substantial and well-appointed, three-domed building at the top of the hill. It is the place where Abraham made a covenant, and the translators call it Mash'had a-Tayer, after the saying, "And the bird of prey descended on the carcasses"' (Vilnai 1978: 4499). Gershon ben Eliezer, who visited the land in 1635, but apparently did not come to this area, described the site in a manner similar to the previous description: 'The status of the Covenant between the Parts – is a pleasant house with three niches, and it is the place where God made a covenant with Abraham, and the

translators call it Mash'had a-Tayer which is the same as "the bird of prey descended on the carcasses"'.

An interesting description of the landscape and the environs is offered by Moshe Haim Kapsuto, of Florence, Italy, who visited the Land of Israel in 1734.

"The location of the Covenant between the Parts is at the top of a hill, covered with snow even in summer, and the building is pleasing and has three niches and is the place where God made a covenant with Abraham ... and some say that it is also covered at the end of the summer, and in fact there is snow there throughout the year. The place has three small parts and is the place where God appeared to Abraham, the patriarch, and made a covenant with him for eternity" (Kapsuto 1984, 86-90).

Rabbi Joseph Sofer of Zfat, in a letter he wrote in 1762, emphasises the uniqueness of the site topography: 'On the top of the mountain there is also a Covenant between the Parts, made by God with Abraham, of blessed memory. And this is a place of very high elevation, and I was there and I saw from afar the many countries of Havila ana Suf" (Yaari 1976: 297). Similar things were also brought by the emissary Moshe Yerushalmi, in 1769: 'The status of the Covenant between the Parts finds a high mountain with a large house on it, and it has three towers. And in this place, God made a covenant with the patriarch Abraham, of blessed memory' (Yaari 1976: 436).

Evidence from the end of the Ottoman period

Attention should be paid to the fact that we have a relatively large amount of evidence from the end of the Middle Ages, between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. However, the evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is more limited. The sources from this period are usually second hand, and rely on the descriptions

from earlier centuries; for example, Haim ben Rabbi Dov Horovits, who quotes the author of the book *The Order of the Generations* (Seder HaDorot).

In 1845, Joseph Schwarz wrote: "About an hour north of Banias, in the mountains, there is a building with domes, and it is said that this is the place of the Covenant between the Parts, and that place is called in Mash'had a-Tayer as it says in Genesis 15:11 "And the bird of prey descended (and that is the bird)" (Schwarz 1900, 239).

Menachem Mendel Reicher wrote: 'At the top of the anti-Lebanon mountain ... is a beautiful building, and the roof has three domes and they say that God made the Covenant between the Parts with Abraham, of blessed memory, there and the Ishmaelites call it Mash'had a-Tayer, after the saying, "And the bird of prey descended" (Reicher 1971, 25).

It is worth noting that Schwarz and Reicher, who identified and testify to Jewish activity at other sacred sites, did not hint at any Jewish activity at this site. Moreover, it should be noted that Luntz ignored Schwarz's book and did not react to his comment on this site, as he frequently did regarding other sites.

These Jewish sources confirm the decline in Jewish tradition and activity at the site during the 19th century. It is interesting that Darr (1994:298) reported an inscription from 1839, evidence of renovating the site during this period, which at least indicates Muslim and Druze activity there.

The author Aharon Meyerovitch proposed linking the dialogue between the wife and the uncle in the Song of Songs on the background of the sites mentioned there as a clue to the place where the Covenant between the Parts occurred: '[...] turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether' (Song of Songs 2:17).

"Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top

of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon" (Song of Songs, 4:8; note by Meyerovitch, in Braslavi 1960: 493). However, it would seem that the interesting link between the sites lacks any practical and historical affinity.

Evidence from the twentieth century

In general, it should be emphasised that this site lacks numbered journeys by significant researchers and explorers from the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, including those who visited the area, such as Victor Gren and Tristram. The information from the twentieth century, and mainly from its start, regarding the site is also vague, as we found for those of the 19th century.

Yitzhak Goldhor, who was a surveyor in the service of Baron Rothschild in the Galilee settlements and was very familiar with the area, referred to Schwarz's observations regarding the site in 1913. He misconstrued Schwarz's comments, as he meant the remains of the temple on the cliff above the ancient town of Banias: 'A fine grain land not hearing things: the Arabs of Banias told me that the ancient temple at the top of the mountain was A-Tayer mosque, a house for idolatry and prostration to birds', so this generation of Arabs was told by their predecessors. Only from the writings of the Sages do we know that the chicken was a rooster (Goldhor 1913: 278, note 1). However, Schwarz did identify the place of worship of roosters, known as 'Tarnegola' at Banias but without a connection to the Covenant between the Parts (Schwartz 1900: 31, 64).

Goldhor's disregard of the Mash'had a-Tayer site indicates that he did not attribute any significance in the Jewish context, and perhaps was not familiar with it. This is somewhat puzzling precisely because Goldhor was one of the researchers familiar with the Golan, Hauran, and Bashan.

Classical guidebooks of the 20th century, Hebrew and western literature such as the Baedeker 1912 guide, the 1938 guidebook by Pinchas Cohen and David Benvenisti and others, also ignore the site. Moreover, a suggested tour route in the area of Banias and Shiva, or towards Damascus, lacks mention of the Maqam Ibrahim site. An exception is Vilnay's (1954:404) guide, which describes the Muslim tradition regarding this site but does not mention Jewish tradition or any activity there.

There is scattered evidence from the 20th century about the site. Braslavi mentions his visit in 1926:

"When, in 1926, we climbed up the River Siyon to the village of Shive we passed Makam Halil Ibrahim [...] The makam was decorated with flags and rags, that the sick rip off their shirts in order to transfer their illness. We also found primitive drawings there. Almost certainly, this makam is almost certainly Mash'had a-Tayer of the Middle Ages, which is the site of the "Covenant between the Parts" of the Jews of the area during that period (Braslavi 1957: 494)".

Ziv (1983: 14) also reports the custom of tying pieces of material to the trees. Ilan (1969: 113) and Vilnay (1970:170) note that the Jewish custom of going to visit the site in our generation was renewed in 1969, after the Six-Day War. Apparently this event is connected to Vilani's trip and his 'rediscovery' of the site. In any case, the guidebook issued by the Committee to Save Ancient Tombs devotes a long chapter to this site (Kadmonenu 1987: 288-90). Problematic and dubious evidence of the traditions and special merits of this site are presented by Morag (1997: 42) in his essay on the 'Mysticism of the Holy Land':

"The place of the patriarch Abraham enjoys special sanctity, in particular regarding the relationships within the family. Pilgrims visit this site throughout the year, pray next to the building and wash in the reservoir waters (that have healing properties). In

recent years, the belief is rampant that the place is connected to aliens or to UFOs, and mystics come there and hold certain ceremonies there."

It is interesting to note that the guidebooks to the sacred places printed recently lack mention of this site.

Attempts to empower the tradition and develop a ceremonial and ritual framework in the last generation

Since the Six Day War in 1967, and the renewed return to the legacy of our forefathers in Judea and Samaria, Gaza, and the Golan, a special relationship and adaptation to the historical sites including sacred tombs and sites began to develop. These were integrated in tour routes, as an inseparable part of imparting the 'Heritage of the Forefathers' to tourists, and the site of the Covenant between the Parts was not overlooked. It would seem that the pathos used by Micha Levana, one of the senior guides and founders of the Nature Preservation Society, regarding the site, also characterises others: 'This is a place whose impressive beauty is no less than its tremendous importance: Here God promised the Land of Israel to Abraham our forefather – to him and to his seed for eternity' (HersHKovitz 1982; Livne 1982).

Some fifteen years ago Jewish ritual was renewed at this site. Annually, prior to the Sabbath on which the Torah portion pertaining to this section of Genesis is read, thousands of pilgrims, adults, youth, students in schools and seminaries for Jewish and Land of Israel studies, and field schools in northern Israel, come to celebrate at the site. The ceremony, backed by religious Zionist leaders in northern Israel, includes reading from the portion of the week from Genesis 12-17, prayers, and dancing. The entire event, which enjoys military assistance, lasts for several hours until midday, with thousands of celebrants attending. It would seem that this celebration now embodies social and political elements that empower the character of the festivities

and their development.

One might perhaps have expected Muslim and Druze traditions regarding this site to have developed in recent years, but in view of the activities *in situ* we cannot identify such a trend.

Aspects of the development of the tradition and the site

1. The psychological aspect

In Jewish kabbalist culture of the late Middle Ages and even during the Golden Age of Zfat, special attention was paid to burial sites and tombs, rather than to the sites of visions, such as that of the burning bush in the Sinai desert, of Jacob's dream in Beit El, and the site of the Covenant between the Parts. In Jewish culture, from the 16th century onwards, a tomb or a cave was perceived as a distinct geographical expression of an historic event. The geographical marking serves as an anchor for ritual, while sites of visions and dreams, mainly, which from the outset were perceived as a symbol of Jewish folklore, vanished totally from the cult of sacred graves.

2. The geographic aspect

In the historical perspective it transpires that even sacred traditions are affected by their accessibility. A significant example of the development of a holy site relative to the development of a system of roads is the migration of the tradition regarding Joseph's pit from Samaria to the Galilee in view of changes in the status of the main roads in the Land of Israel in the Middle Ages (Sasson and Hayut 2004). It seems that difficulties of accessibility to the Hermon and its distance from the main road to Damascus during the Ottoman period led to a decline in the level

of activity at the site, to the point of the tradition disappearing in Jewish culture.

3. The historical aspect

Studies on the process of the development of traditions and sacred tombs in the Land of Israel find a general decline in Jewish activity and in the awareness of them towards the end of the Ottoman period. Although this is more prominent in Judea, a similar but more moderate process can be observed in the Galilee and peripheral areas. From this point of view, the area of Mt. Hermon and the Covenant between the Parts can be seen as peripheral as far as Jewish historical awareness is concerned; that affects the type of ritual at the site and its development.

4. The cultural-Israeli aspect

The last generation has been characterised by extremism regarding symbols in Israeli and Jewish culture: on the one hand shattering myths and symbols by certain groups and on the other hand empowering symbols by other groups. In the process of empowering a site or a symbol there is a stage of 'enlightenment and stimulating interest' anew in 'dormant' symbols in order to memorialise a person, event, or the awareness of an area and its story. This process occurs in a broad cross-section of individuals and organizations, both secular and religious. One of the examples of this process in secular and civilian society is, for example, the attitude to memorial sites and sculptures in memory of Israel's fallen soldiers that become 'holy places', at least as regards the family's attitude to them, as Shamir (1997: 48-49) has already shown. In civil religion, the attention is on the real, the immediate, the known, and the rational, and therefore the memorialization and the

memory is in the personal domain, and only a few, such as the tomb of Rachel, the poetess, and the tomb of Isaac Rabin became sacred sites of civil religion. In contrast, there is interest in religious society, for diverse considerations, both religious and political in also maintaining relatively peripheral sites, wherein the very attribution of traditions to them empowers the attention of the public to them.

5. The political aspect

At all stages of the Zionist enterprise, associated historical and sacred sites were a basis for settlement and pioneering activity.

The later settlement was perceived as a link in the historical continuity, both in terms of land settlement and in terms of the toponomy, i.e., keeping the names of the historical places/towns. The Hermon and the Golan were rich, on the one hand, in historical evidence of Jewish activity that enjoys archaeological backing mainly vis-à-vis the Talmudic period. However, as regards the toponomic identification of the early sites, the research encounters tremendous difficulty, if only from several isolated sites (Ben David 1987). The situation is more difficult regarding sacred sites. While in the Galilee there are many such sites (even if their identification is doubtful), the area of the Golan and the Hermon lacks sacred sites and tombs. Therefore, the site of the Covenant between the Parts, which is ancient and to which Jewish traditions are attributed, will serve as an anchor in local interpretation and in supporting the locale-patriotism of the regional populations, as we have also seen in other areas and vis-à-vis sites of other types. Therefore, such a site is seen as part of the struggle for the totality of the area, and its remaining under Israeli sovereignty, like other tombs in Judea and Samaria such as that of Joseph and of Rachel. But the Covenant between the Parts site suffers from several limitations that are questionable in advancing the subject. First, it

should be noted that this site was never part of the broad Israeli consciousness as a sacred or important historical site. Although it was included in tour routes and enjoyed relatively extensive documentation, it was not included in Zionist and Israeli heritage routes, as were other sites, due to security and objective limitations. Another reason is associated, to a certain degree, with the character of settlers in the area, who, even when they emphasised the historical relationship to the area, it was in regard to distinct archaeological remains (mainly synagogues) rather than to burial sites.

The problem of identifying the site and the character of the historical sources

A thorough examination of the sources, ignoring the long-standing literary tradition regarding the Covenant, raises doubts pertaining to the reliability of the sources and identification of the site.

- a. Most of the tradition and evidence concerning the site, as shown above, is from the end of the Middle Ages and no earlier than the 16th century. Other sacred sites, doubtful as they might be, usually enjoy evidence dating to the 16th century, if not earlier, and even to the Byzantine period. This matter questions the foundations of the tradition regarding the northern site. Binyamin MiTudela, for example, made no mention of the site (Yaari 1976: 44). This may testify to the late development of the tradition in its regard.
- b. At many sacred sites the process of sanctification and the development of the traditions start in the Middle Ages amongst Muslims, and is converted or copied during the Middle Ages to Jewish tradition. In this case, we do not know of firm Muslim practice regarding the site, and hence this is the development of a Jewish

rite, with questionable oral traditions. Together with this, one cannot ignore Muslim traditions that see Mt. Hermon and certain sites there as sacred. Moreover, Braslavi (1957: 190) proposes a Muslim tradition that sees Mash'had a-Tayer actually as Abraham's burial place. Near the Hermon and Damascus there are several sites bearing the name of Abraham or his relatives, or such that are linked to his history, examples of which are the River Ibrahim in southern Lebanon, Kalat Nimrod (named after Nimrod, known as Abraham's enemy), and 'Sarah's tree' in Mazra'at Beit Jann. These traditions (parallels to which are found in southern Israel) indicate a special relationship to the personality of the patriarch Abraham. Such traditions and others may have percolated down to the Jews and altered their character to that known to us today regarding the Covenant between the Parts site. In this regard, the Jewish tradition pertaining to this site and the activity there is very similar to the ritual of sacred sites in the Galilee in the Middle Ages, already discussed by Reiner (1988:261) – ritual that sanctifies the site rather than the character itself.

- c. As noted above, we have presented many Jewish sources that describe the site of the Covenant between the Parts. However, in-depth scrutiny of these sources and the history of their authors proves that some of them never visited the site and described it second-hand. Hence only a few people actually saw or heard any tradition or activity at the site. It is worth noting that this phenomenon of transferring and copying from one source to another is well known in the Jewish geography of the Land of Israel from the late Middle Ages until the 19th century. Nevertheless, extensive use was made, mainly in the Diaspora, of this literature both in the framework of rabbinic emissaries and in the framework of Jewish and Land of Israel studies (as already discussed elsewhere) (Sasson 1998: 226-7).

It should further be noted in favour of the authors of the sources that the area of the Hermon was far from the routine pilgrimage routes to sacred tombs known as 'Ziara' - the Little Pilgrimage' that was to Zfat and its environs. Only those who performed the 'Big Pilgrimage', who were few in number, went as far as Damascus, and were supposed to pass through this area. Thus, for the sake of exactitude this limitation should be mentioned as it influenced the number of sources and their character. Nevertheless, there are several exceptions, since a Jerusalemite, for example, included the Banias and the Covenant between the Parts in the framework of the 'Small Ziara' ('Hakafa Haktana') (Yaari 1976: 436).

- d. Many holy sites, with all the intensity of mysticism in their isolation and distance, are located alongside main roads or along known and familiar routes. Darr (1978:75) admittedly describes the remains of an early route in the area, but it seems that this site and its environs were not on any main route that led from the Galilee (Banias) to Damascus. Considerable isolation and separation of the sacred site from the human surroundings inhibits its development.

Summary

The Covenant between the Parts, the first covenant between God and the People of Israel, the Covenant that promised the Land for the first time, was a subject of study and discussion in the religious and belief dimensions amongst the Jewish people. The geographical aspects of the covenant and its occurrence did not concern the public, and certainly not the Jewish public, until the 16th century. During this period, traditions began to develop regarding the identification of the site of Makam Ibrahim al-Halil or Mash'had a-Tayer on the slopes of Mt. Hermon as the site where the Covenant was made. Non-Jewish traditions that were passed by word of mouth persuaded diverse Jewish travellers of the validity of the custom. However, study of

the order of events presented in the Bible, as well as the content of the 1st century CE Book of Jubilees led us to seek the site of the Covenant in the area between Shalem and Sodom. According to the text and Abraham's life events Alonei Mamre (Ramat el Halil) is the most suitable location. The history of the site and traditions woven around it over the generations, mainly regarding the biblical and the Second Temple period, lead us to see it as the site of the Covenant between the Parts (Magen 1991). This identification, of a site that is not on the periphery of a settlement, and is in fact 'close to its readers' is compatible with the rules of locating visionary sites, discoveries, and other miracles that are usually found in known and familiar places.

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Figure legends

1. The site of the Covenant between the Parts and the large water reservoir (Photo: Avi Sasson, winter, 1990).
2. The plan and cross-section of the building (Source: Darr 1994: 299).
3. The front of the site (Photo: Avi Sasson, winter 1999).
4. General view of the structure from within (Photo: Avi Sasson, winter 1999).
5. General plan of the site – the building and water reservoir (Source: Darr 1994: 296).
6. The small water reservoir (Photo: Avi Sasson, summer 1997).

7. The oak forest at the Covenant between the Parts site (Photo: Avi Sasson, summer 1997).
8. Ceramics from the Mameluke period from the Covenant between the Parts site (Source: Darr 1994).
9. The Mahreb, prayer niche at the site (Photo: Avi Sasson, summer 1997).
10. Arabic inscription by the pilgrims (Photo: Avi Sasson, summer 1997).