

Synagogue Full of Surprises

Which Jerusalem synagogue is located in the “Valley of Giants,” what’s beneath the synagogue’s glass floor, and why is a drawer built into the ark?

Where To?

Emek Refaim Synagogue
4 Yael Street, Baka



Sometimes in Jerusalem, it’s better not to ask. Not everyone there with the last name Ashkenazi originated in or around Germany, for instance, and not every Tzarfati (literally, French) hails from France. And how many flowers even are there on the Old City’s Flower Gate?

Perhaps that’s why residents of one of Jerusalem’s more picturesque southern neighborhoods, officially called Geulim but better known as Baka, don’t question why the local Emek Refaim Synagogue isn’t on Emek Refaim Street, in the German Colony. No one comments on the glass pane in the synagogue floor either, and even the sock drawer

incorporated into the place’s otherwise tasteful wooden ark hasn’t raised an eyebrow in thirty years. Neither has the singular decoration carved into the ark doors.

As a native Jerusalemite, I tend to leave well enough alone, but for our readers outside the Holy City, let’s set the record straight.

Who Moved the Valley?

Emek Refaim literally means Valley of Ghosts (or Giants), a name wholly inappropriate for the charming area running through the hills and dales of south Jerusalem. “Baka,” on the other hand, comes from an Arabic word for “field” rather than the Hebrew term for “valley” (*bik’a*). In fact, Baka is situated not in a valley but

Thanks to Moti Kehat of Emek Refaim Synagogue for his help with this column



On the ridge, not in the valley. Façade of Emek Refaim Synagogue, a.k.a. Kehillat Yael

All photos: Tamar Hayardeni

on the city's highest ridge, along the watershed bisecting Israel's interior (see "By the By," p. 64). How, then, did a synagogue in Baka acquire the name Emek Refaim?

A certain young lady, daughter of one of the congregation's founding members, has spent years researching the issue. In the end, she blames a Hebrew map dating from 1948 and including sundry misspellings – plus the words Emek Refaim boldly inscribed at a completely inaccurate angle along the length of Baka. Immigrants

pouring into Jerusalem after the declaration of the state evidently perpetuated the error by assigning the same name to the synagogue they opened in 1949 in an abandoned Arab house.

The congregation's founders, mostly Holocaust survivors, devoted enormous efforts to converting this domicile into a synagogue. One major obstacle was the elderly couple who'd moved into one room of the building just before it was repurposed. Another was the architecture. The iron front door, for example, led straight into

The mismarked map was naively adopted by post-1948 immigrants settling in the area



the men's section, complicating the location of the women's gallery. Immediately behind the synagogue was a Hasidic house of prayer, or *shtiebel*, precluding expansion backward. The only space remaining was one of the two rooms immediately in front of the men's area, with the niche containing the holy ark right behind them.

The eventual solution was farcical: the women's seating was crammed into one of these chambers. The other remained home to the aforementioned aging residents, who went about their daily routine even as shofar blasts, cantorial trills, and communal singing periodically pierced the air. The couple adapted remarkably well, even allowing the women's section to overflow into their quarters on the High Holidays.

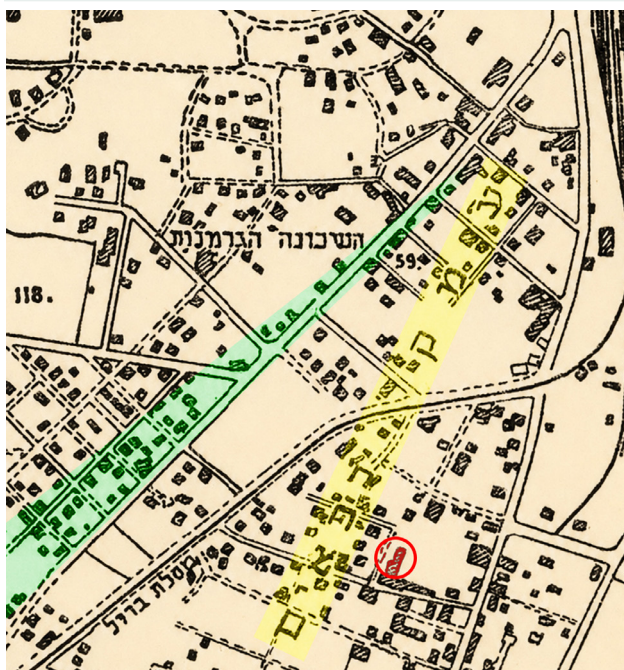
Underneath the Flagstones

Emek Refaim Synagogue's first Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were especially memorable. In the autumn of 1949, anticipating record crowds, the organizing committee broke down walls, disposed of unnecessary scrap, and commandeered chairs from all over the underprivileged immigrant neighborhood. Synagogue elders still recall how they clambered up the hill to

Checklist

For your next visit to Emek Refaim Synagogue:

- Lost hinges: Watch for the original hinges in the main doorway, which are still wondering where the historic iron door to which they were once attached has gone.
- Mystery verse: A familiar verse from Psalms looks down on guests passing through the door, but might an Arabic inscription lurk behind it?
- The window that became a door: The modern entrance was knocked through by enlarging a double-arched window overlooking the original women's gallery (relocated in a renovation during the 1980s). The twin arches, one on each side, are still visible.
- Vanishing walls: The synagogue's soaring, vaulted ceiling delineates the original interior of four parallel rooms connected by a narrow corridor. The walls were torn down and replaced with four massive supporting pillars surrounding the reader's platform.
- Floor tile puzzle: Find Mahmoud Abu-Rais' original tiles and ponder where the vintage flooring ends and the modern one begins.



Source of the problem. Jerusalem map from 1948, mistaking Baka as Emek Refaim (highlighted here in yellow). Emek Refaim's correct location is marked in green. The synagogue, in Baka, is circled in red.

Courtesy of the Eran Laor Cartographic Collection, National Library of Israel



extricate rusty iron benches from military buses and ambulances left to rot in nearby Allenby Barracks, a disused British army camp next to Hebron Road.

Yet the most exciting part of the synagogue's makeover was the discovery of a secret staircase under the flagstones, leading to a huge basement filled with all kinds of things:

Twelve hundred pairs of new shoes, four kerosene stoves, a box of crepe rubber for soles, a substantial number of tanned hides, seventeen chairs, three armchairs, two sewing machines,

eleven mattresses, twenty-three blankets, three Persian rugs, two new-looking sofas, and twenty-seven pairs of leather boots were found yesterday by police searching a cellar in one of the deserted houses in Jerusalem's Baka district. There's now a synagogue on the floor above. ("Large Storehouse of Merchandise Discovered in Abandoned Jerusalem Cellar," *Hatzofe* daily, 14 Tishrei 5710/ October 7, 1949, p. 8)

A wealthy Arab tanner named Mahmoud Abu-Rais had lived in the house before the War of

Arched vaults and original flooring reveal the synagogue's Arab origins. Interior after renovation

The real surprise lay beneath the floor, where a secret staircase led to a huge basement



By the By

→ Why Baka Isn't a Valley

The name Baka comes from the Arabic for an unfenced but cultivated field. The term appears in the Talmud – for example, regarding the complex sale of a plot within a larger expanse of fields (*Bava Batra* 61b) and whether an alleyway opening onto unfenced fields is public property (*Eruvin* 7a). In the 15th century, Muslim magistrate and historian Mujir al-Din also mentioned Baka as Jerusalem's agricultural periphery:

Surrounding Jerusalem are vineyards and orchards with grapes, figs, and apples. The most scenic spot is southwest of Jerusalem, which they call al-Baka. Saladin bequeathed it to the Sufi hermits of Al-Khanqah as-Salahiyya [in the Old City's Christian Quarter]. (Yossi Ben-Artzi, "The Muslim Exodus Outside the Walls of Jerusalem in the Late Ottoman Period," in *Jerusalem in the Modern Period: A Yaakov Herzog Memorial Volume*, ed. Eli Shaltiel [1981], p. 177 [Hebrew])

→ The National Watershed – A Raindrop's Dilemma

Israel's national watershed runs the length of the country, from the Hermon mountain range in the north all the way down south to Eilat. Every drop of rain falling on this ridge has to "choose" whether to flow west toward the coastal plain or east to the Dead Sea.

The watershed cuts right through Jerusalem, including its Mahane Yehuda market, so a stall selling lemonade could literally be in the west of the country, while a burekas shop just across the alley lies in the east – the perfect metaphor for Israeli diversity.

No one has ever asked why the ark doors' wooden inlay depicts the Kaaba, in Mecca

Independence and ran a shoe factory there too. Before fleeing war-torn Jerusalem with his family, he hid all his furnishings in the basement in anticipation of his return. The congregants of 4 Yael Street were unmoved by the rubber crepe but delighted with the unexpected gift of chairs and sofas just in time for the High Holidays.

The police turned over all the rest of the stuff to the Custodian of Absentee Assets' warehouses, apart from a rather handsome

closet. Crafted in solid wood with a stunning Damascene inlay, this masterpiece was immediately upgraded to a position inconceivable at the time of its making – a holy ark, standing proudly at the front of the synagogue to this day. Three small Torah scrolls rescued from the Holocaust were ceremoniously placed in the ark. The Ministry of Religious Affairs later contributed another, larger Torah, also extracted from the devastation.



The wardrobe that became an ark, complete with rounded extensions, sock drawer, and distinctive inlay

Regards from Damascus

Over the years, the congregation enlarged the ark to accommodate the scrolls within. Rounded, wooden extensions were added to each side, and a gilded decorative flourish embellished the cornice. The only unused part of the wardrobe is Mahmoud's elegant sock drawer, still in place at the bottom of the ark.

Astoundingly, none of the regular worshippers has ever asked why the ark doors' exquisite inlay features a well-known Damascene motif – the Kaaba, in Mecca. Emek Refaim Synagogue must rank among the only Jewish houses of prayer in the world to sport an authentic Muslim symbol.

The cellar was almost forgotten, until the neighbors (Prof. Avinoam

Rozenak and his artist wife, Bitya) renovated their home. A hidden staircase was revealed there too, leading to a basement they didn't know they had – part of the same space discovered underneath the synagogue next door.

After some discussion, Bitya was allowed to turn the entire floor into her studio, complete with a tempered-glass skylight to brighten up the dark cellar. Hence the glass pane in the synagogue floor, which so perplexed us earlier. If you drop by Emek Refaim Synagogue for afternoon prayers, don't forget to wave to Bitya down below.

Check out the synagogue website for more on this landmark's fascinating history, founders, and congregation, which includes Nobel laureate Prof. Robert Aumann among other Jerusalem notables. □



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