I ❤ ISRAEL: Back to the Shomron

My wife Coty and I are here in Israel with our family, celebrating the Bar Mitzva of our grandson Yosef. This past Wednesday, the 16th of Tamuz, we left Yerushalayim in the morning and headed north. In less than an hour the landscape changes: the buildings end and the hills of the Shomron (Samaria) begin, olive terraces and villages on the hilltops. It is a biblical landscape. You don't have to imagine it. It's right there, on the other side of the window.

SHILO

Our first stop was Shilo.

"The whole assembly of the people of Israel gathered at Shilo" (Yehoshua 18:1).

In this city, Yehoshua bin Nun gathered all the tribes of Israel to decide by goral (lottery) how the land would be divided: which tribe would settle in the north, the south, the center, the coast, etc.

Shilo is also where the Mishkan was established: the Tabernacle, the precursor of the great Temple of Yerushalayim. It stood there for 369 years. We visited the site of the Mishkan, which can still be identified, a plot of about 50 meters long by 25 meters wide.

It was there, at the Tabernacle of Shilo, that Chana, the mother of Shemuel, the first prophet of Israel, asked HaShem for a son. She later composed her famous prayer of gratitude, Tefilat Chana. It is written there, and we read it aloud with great emotion.

WINE IN SHOMRON

From Shilo we went to the Tura winery, where we had lunch. They gave us three wines to taste: white, rose, and red. First we recited Hagefen, and then, twice, Hatov veHametiv. The wines of the Shomron are famous all over the world. They have won international awards (https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-745547) in blind tastings, where the judges taste the wines without knowing where they come from (otherwise, I doubt we would have won).

There we had lunch with the most famous and active man in the region these days: Yosi Dagan, the head of the Shomron Regional Council and the man responsible, together with the extraordinary minister Betzalel Smotrich, for the incredible, miraculous reconstruction and reestablishment of 22 new communities in the Shomron, what the Goyim call the West Bank.

For dessert, my son, Rabbi David, gave a beautiful Debar Torah. He began by saying: □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□, "We are drinking a prophecy." He was referring to the words of the prophet Yirmiyahu, who, looking at this territory of Israel completely depopulated and destroyed, dared to say:

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In the future, the Jews "will plant vineyards again on the mountains of the Shomron… and they will enjoy their fruit" (Yirmiyahu 31:4). Notice the detail: the pasuk does not say "in Israel" in general but specifically on the mountains of the Shomron, the exact place where the Tura winery stands, along with other famous wineries, like "Shiloh." And the final word, vechilelu, is a halakhic term that applies only to Jews: it refers to redeeming the fruit of the fourth year (neta revai) so it can be consumed with a great celebration. In other words, the prophecy does not announce only planted vineyards but Jews drinking with joy from the fruit of the vine of those mountains. Exactly what we were doing at that very moment!

After the wine, I needed a strong Elite Turkish coffee to stay awake and arrive sober at our main destination: Mount Ebal (□□□□ □□).

HAR EBAL

It was an hour's drive to reach the past: some 3,500 years back. Our destination?

The altar built by Yehoshua bin Nun:

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"Then Yehoshua built an altar to □□, the God of Israel, on Har Ebal" (Yehoshua 8:30).

Moshe had instructed Yehoshua that, upon entering the land of Israel, he should perform a ceremony confirming the covenant between God and Israel: he was to write the Torah on stones coated with plaster, read the terms of the Covenant before the entire people, and there, in that very place, offer sacrifices and offerings of gratitude to God.

In the 1980s, the archaeologist Adam Zertal identified this altar. Thousands of burned bones were discovered there, all from animals the Torah considers pure, that is, fit to be sacrificed. The altar is built exactly as the Torah prescribes: with a ramp instead of the stairs used by pagan peoples and made of whole stones, untouched by metal tools. It is the oldest identifiable archaeological site in the history of Israel in its land!

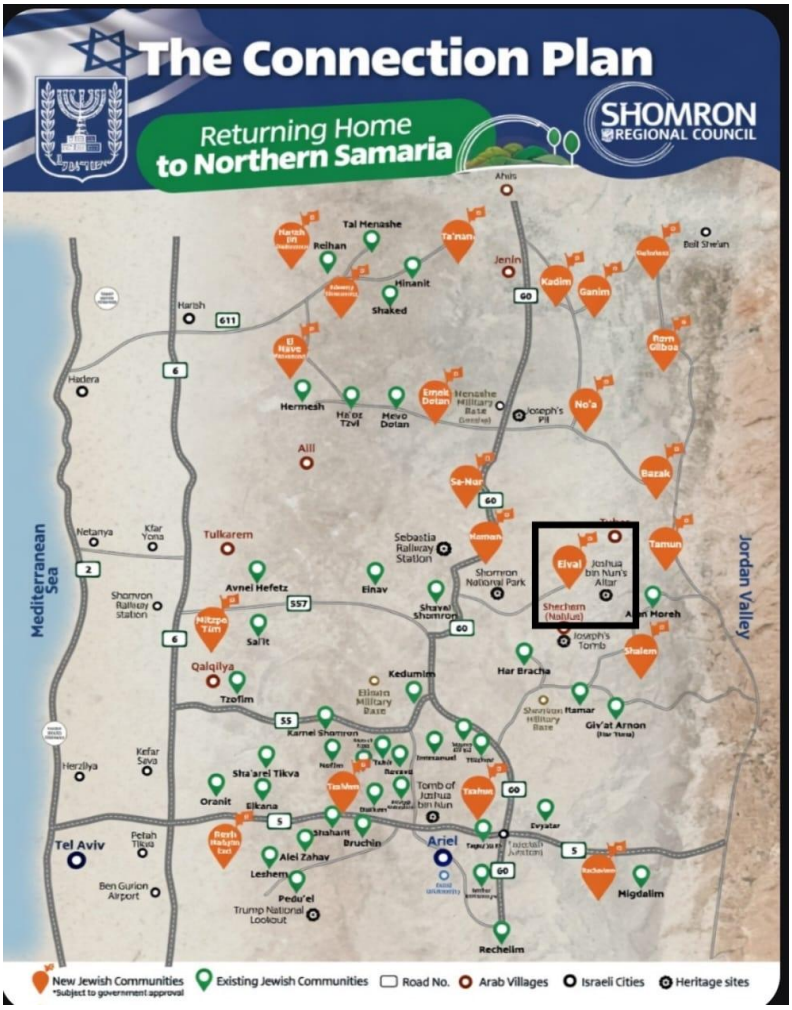
It was deeply moving to stand there and picture, from that spot, our ancestors between the two mountains, the Kohanim and Leviim facing us in the valley, listening to Yehoshua bin Nun reading the Torah.

THE RESET

But we did not only see the past. We also saw the future. Standing at the summit of Har Ebal, with our backs to the altar, the view commands the northern Shomron: Mount Gerizim in front, the valley below, and hills dotted with Arab towns and villages: Shechem, I believe Jenin as well, and others.

But from that same spot we could also see the new Jewish communities: Har Berakha, on Mount Gerizim itself. Elon More, very close, to the east. Itamar.

And now look at the map.



In the black square you can see the site of Yehoshua's Mizbeach (altar), on the northeastern summit of the mountain. And a short distance away, on the same mountain, there is a new dot that did not exist a year ago: a new community bearing the name of this mountain: Ebal (spelled: Eival).

And Eival is not an isolated case. In May 2025 the government of Israel, B"H, approved the creation of 22 new communities in Yehuda and Shomron, something that had not happened in decades. The names are a map of the Tanakh coming back to life, as you can see in the orange marks on this map. It is part of Yosi Dagan's "One Million in the Shomron" plan: to reach one million Jewish residents in the Shomron by 2050.

The community of Eival was founded in March 2026, in the middle of the war with Iran. While missiles were falling on Israel, trucks were climbing the mountain of Yehoshua at night, carrying the first homes. Half a year of preparations, and the Mount of the Covenant has a Jewish population again, after thousands of years.

Without knowing it, we were standing on a time-tunnel, or a time-bridge. Behind us, the ancient stones of the altar that Yehoshua built 3500 years ago. And in front of us, the land to which the people of Israel are returning, in our privileged days.