

Parshat Ekev
On the Trail of the Sanhedrin
Leah Fine - Class of 2024

Our *parsha* draws attention to the beautiful agricultural produce of *Eretz Yisrael*,

אֶרֶץ חֹטֶה וְשֵׁעֵרָה וְגֶפֶן וְתַאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ-זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדָבָשׁ :

“A land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and date honey.” (Devarim: 8:8).

I always marvel at how true this verse is, as I walk through the public markets, the hills and valleys of our “promised land.”

This summer, I visited a bluff overlooking Haifa Bay. I made my way into a recently excavated village, Horvat Usha, a town famous from the writings of our Sages (today, adjacent to Kiryat Ata). I walked down a broad street—doorways to my left, doorways to my right. This was the industrial center of Usha, a series of oil presses and wine presses, *batei bad* and *gitot*, where the produce of this rich region was processed into olive oil and wine. It was excavated during the pandemic by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Astonishingly, beside each installation, archaeologists have found a [mikvah](#), used by our ancestors to create oil and wine in a state of purity. The workers of Usha were meticulous in making wine and oil suitable even for the *Mikdash*, a century after Jerusalem itself was destroyed!

Usha is a stop on the [Sanhedrin Trail](#), a hiking path created by the Israel Antiquities Authority to connect the most important towns and cities of the lower Galilee. It takes inspiration from a *baraita* in Bavli Rosh ha-Shana 38 a-b:

גלתה סנהדרין...
מלשכת הגזית
לחנות ומחנות לירושלים
ומירושלים ליבנה



ומיבנה לאושא
ומאושא לשפרעם
ומשפרעם לבית־שערים
ומבית־שערים לציפורי
ומציפורי לטבריא

...The Sanhedrin was exiled
from the Chamber of the Hewn Stones [of the Temple]
to the camps of Jerusalem,
from Jerusalem to Yavne,
from Yavne to Usha
from Usha to Shefaram
and from Shefaram to Beit Shearim
from Beit Shearim to Sepphoris
and from Sepphoris to Tiberias

I was struck by the flora that grows wild along the trail, particularly near Usha. I could literally touch—and smell—trees and vines sprouting: **גֶּפֶן וְתַאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ־זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדִבְשׁ:** “vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and date honey. (Devarim 8:8)” At Usha I could feel how our ancestors processed this bounty into food stuffs, and that uniquely Jewish element of the work— *tevilah*, immersion, in a *mikveh*.

Standing in an oil press, a *beit ha-bad*, my mind turned to Mishnah Bikkurim 1:3.

אֵין מְבִיאִין בְּפוּרִים חוּץ מִשְׁבַּעַת הַמִּינִים
וְלֹא מִזֵּיתֵי שֶׁמֶן
שְׂאִינָם מִן הַמְּבַחֵר

Bikkurim are brought only from the seven species
Not from olives that are not choice.

Here we can almost almost hear and see Jews preparing their olive oil, מִן הַמְּבַחֵר, from the very finest olives, and squeezing it into oil. Alas, Usha was inhabited by refugees from Judea, Jews who moved north as a result of the Bar Kochba Revolt of 132-135 CE. Bringing their oil as *bikkurim*, as first fruits, could not have been farther off.

Sages who assembled at Usha around 135 CE were no less than an “all star team,” the students of Rabbi Akiva who survived the Bar Kochba Revolt. We know them well:



Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yose, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, and many others. They walked where I was walking!

I left Usha and hiked something like [2000 cubits](#) to the Shabbat boundary inscription discovered near Usha and saw the next city listed in the *baraita*, Shefaram, in the distance. This is where archaeology brings the text to life!! After the Bar Kochba revolt, we are told, Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava defied a Roman decree that forbade rabbinic ordination. If a rabbi ordained a student, he and the whole town were put to death! *Bavli Ketubot* 50a has it that Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava used this Shabbat boundary to ordain Rabbi Akiva's students:

מה עשה יהודה בן בבא
הלך וישב לו בין שני הרים גדולים
ובין שתי עיירות גדולות
ובין שני תחומי שבת
בין אושא לשפרעם
וסמך שם חמשה זקנים
ואלו הן: ר"מאיר ור' יהודה
ור' שמעון ור' יוסי
ור' אלעזר בן שמוע

What did Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava do?

He went and sat between two large mountains

between two large towns

and between two Shabbat boundaries

i.e., in a desolate place that was not associated with any particular city so as not endanger anyone not directly involved

Between Usha and Shefaram

and there he ordained five elders

And they were: Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehuda

Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Yose,

and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua

The Sages of Usha are famous for enacting “eighteen ordinances,” to stabilize Jewish culture after the catastrophe, and help it thrive for generations. Giving *tzedakah*, for example, is a *mitzvah*. According to the Sages of Usha, however, there is a limit to how much charity people can give. There is no *mitzvah*, however, to make yourself destitute! In b. Ketuvot 50a, we read:



אמר רבי אילעא: באושא התקינו
המבזבז
אל יבזבז יותר מחומש

Rabbi Ila'a said: In Usha the Sages instituted
that one who donates his money to charity
must not donate more than one-fifth

The sages of Usha demanded that fathers provide upkeep for their minor children.
Another enactment asserts that Torah study is preferred over performance of *mitzvot*,
for it leads to a more profound performance later.

All of these were determined at Usha, an agricultural town where wine and oil
production were the local business. In this unassuming, small place— especially when
compared with the larger Beit Shearim, Sepphoris and Tiberias— the oral Torah grew in
profound ways— just as “*vines, figs, and pomegranates, ...olive trees and date palms*”
do along the byways of the Sanhedrin Trail today.

For me, this visceral experience of the world of our Sages lifts their words off the *daf*
into the daily life of *Klal Yisrael*. Even after adversity, Torah flourished at Usha. It was as
sweet as date honey and figs and pomegranates and grapes, offering sustenance and
meaning to our Sages, as it does for us today—

אֶרֶץ חִטָּה וּשְׂעוּרָה וְגֶבֶן וּתְאֵנָה וְרִמּוֹן
אֶרֶץ־זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדָבָשׁ

“A land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates,
a land of olive trees and date honey.”





Leah Fine brings to Maharat a deep and rich commitment to Jewish education for all. She holds an MA in Modern Jewish History from Yeshiva University's Revel Graduate School and has studied at Pardes, Drisha and Baltimore Hebrew University. She was awarded a prestigious Melton Senior Educators Fellowship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and has recently completed a fellowship at the i-Center for Israel Education. Leah has taught in a wide range of settings, including as a special education teacher and as director of an award winning family education program. She is co-author of *Where God Dwells: A Child's History of the Synagogue*. Leah recently returned from the Sanhedrin Trail, for which she is creating a multimedia curriculum, supported by the i-Center.

