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GARDEN WHERE BIBLICAL PLANTS COME TO LIFE

By MATTHEW NESVISKY; MATTHEW NESVISKY is an editor and writer at The Jerusalem Post.

And Abraham tarried and planted a tamarisk, and Reuben brought Leah mandrake, and the Philistines bound Samson with ropes braided from a plant for which no English name exists.

The cast of characters is familiar enough, but even devoted readers of the Bible are often unable to visualize many of the hundreds of trees, shrubs, herbs and flowers mentioned in Scripture. What comes to mind when we are told that Solomon's beloved is like a rose of Sharon? What is the fragrance of moriah, which may have been one of the plants used on the incense altar of the Temple? What in the world is a terebinth? Or spikenard? Or myrrh?

It is precisely to answer such questions that Israel's Neot Kedumim Biblical Landscape Reserve was established. The living museum is on a 533-acre tract of rolling hills midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, near the village of Modi'im. Neot Kedumim (oasis of antiquity) aspires to bring together in natural settings all of the flora referred to in the Bible and in such postbiblical sources as the Talmud.

The task is formidable. The largely agrarian society that produced the Scriptures peppered its narratives and prophecies with thousands of images, allusions and metaphors drawn from nature. Much of this figurative language has long been the subject of intense debate by textual scholars, some of whom may never have seen an olive branch or a fig tree in their lives. In several instances, as with the case of the rose of Sharon, a score or more of likely candidates have been put forward to embody the biblical reference.

Nevertheless, after nearly 20 years, the Biblical Landscape Reserve now has under cultivation about three-quarters of the several hundred plants and trees named by the patriarchs and prophets.

Groups may tour the site by appointment, and two three-hour guided tours in English are offered each week. Exhibits are identified with unobtrusive English and Hebrew signs cut into slabs of juniper wood. Otherwise the rugged area is free of man-made distractions.

The moving spirit behind Neot Kedumim is Dr. Nogah Hareuveni, and the project in turn is the realization of a dream long held by his botanist parents, Ephraim and Hannah Hareuveni.

"My mother and father came to this country from Russia in 1912," Nogah Hareuveni says, "and they immediately set about collecting and classifying biblical plants. For many years they maintained the Museum of Biblical and Talmudic Botany on the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"In the 1948 war the campus was cut off by the Arab Legion and the museum was destroyed. But that only heightened their desire for something beyond mere display cases of dried botanical specimens. What

they'd really wanted all along was a living garden of biblical plant life."

The pioneering couple did not live to see their dream become reality, but their son did; in the late 1960's the State of Israel granted the land to the Neot Kedumim organization. Today, says Nogah Hareuveni, "we now have not one biblical garden here but many."

The plot that Dr. Hareuveni acquired was no bargain, consisting as it did of rocky hillsides and thistle-choked gullies. "This isn't a standard nature reserve," he observes wryly, "because there was virtually nothing here to protect or save. Everything you see at Neot Kedumim was transplanted here from various corners of the country. We had to truck in tens of thousands of tons of soil, and over the years we cultivated some 70,000 trees, saplings and plants."

Considering that some of Neot Kedumim's specimens originated in such disparate environments as the mountains of Lebanon and the sand dunes of Sinai - and that the reserve's botanists use no artificial fertilizers or pesticides - the flourishing of so many different botanical exhibits in one area is remarkable. Experts frequently advised Dr. Hareuveni that some of the items he planned to cultivate simply would not take. The experts were invariably proved wrong, for reasons that Dr. Hareuveni himself cannot really explain, although he says that the amount of attention lavished on the plantings and the persistence of his staff may have contributed to their success.

The reserve's towering cedars, a source of particular pride, are a good example. "These great trees of course are not native to Israel," Dr. Hareuveni says, "but they're referred to many times in the Bible, usually as a symbol of haughtiness, or again when Solomon had cedar timbers shipped from Lebanon for the construction of the Temple.

"In 1936 I accompanied my parents to Beirut, where they received permission from the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture to purchase some seeds. I was the one who shinnied up a cedar and collected the cones. These my parents took back to Jerusalem and planted on Mount Scopus. Jerusalem is less than 3,000 feet above sea level, and most experts said that was too low for cedars to grow. And Mount Scopus is on the edge of the Judean Desert, quite a different environment from the snowy mountains of northern Lebanon.

"But not only did the cedars grow," Nogah Hareuveni continues, "they somehow even survived the neglect of 19 years while Mount Scopus was a no man's land in divided Jerusalem. Then, a few years ago, the university agreed to sell us 13 'runts of the litter,' which we transplanted here.

"It was a tricky operation, because the trees had to be excavated down to the taproots and replanted within 24 hours. Again, there were doubts of success, because here we're less than 1,000 feet above sea level. But every tree took, and now we even have 75 additional cedar saplings doing very nicely."

Other stately temperate-zone trees unaccountably thriving at Neot Kedumim are the walnut (mentioned in the Song of Songs as the *egoz*) and the maple (believed to be the *tidhar* listed in Isaiah). Right near these familiar trees are such semitropical exotics as the date palm (seven varieties), the pomegranate and the *Pterocarpus santalinus*, or red sandalwood.

Yet while the big fellows like the cedars most readily catch the eye of the visitor, some of the reserve's most fascinating specimens are to be found among undistinguished-looking shrubs and plants. For that reason the guided tours are useful.

One of the guides for English-speaking visitors is Helen Frenkley, a native of Silver Spring, Md., and assistant director of Neot Kedumim. Her itinerary requires trekking up hills and down wadis from one exhibit area to the next - the reserve features sectors with such names as the Forest of Milk and Honey, the Pool of Solomon and the Garden of Wisdom Literature. But even in between these rather grandly designated main attractions she rarely fails to point out something of interest. Stopping beside what could easily be overlooked as a dusty little shrub, Miss Frenkley says:

"This is the yitran or, in Latin, *Thymelea hirsuta*. I don't think it has an English name, but the Negev Arabs call it mitnan, meaning a tent rope, which is *yeter* in Hebrew. And indeed, incredibly strong rope can be braided from the fibers of this bush. In Chapter 16 of Judges we get the story of how Samson's strength was tested by binding him with strands of *yetarim*." She relates the story in detail and concludes: "Today Israel Defense Force troops are taught how to make rope from yitran in desert-survival courses."

Nearby, Miss Frenkley stoops to examine a broad-leafed weed growing close to the ground. Pushing aside the leaves, she reveals half a dozen yellow, egg-shaped fruits nestled in the earth.

"Mandrake," she announces. "In biblical times these 'eggs' were believed capable of helping a barren woman to conceive. That's precisely why Reuben presented them to Leah."

A shrub called the *moriah*, which bears a striking resemblance to the menorah, particularly inspires Miss Frenkley. "In Exodus, Chapters 25 and 37," she says, "we get a very exact description of how the artisan Bezalel fashioned the first menorah, or seven-branched candelabrum, for the Tabernacle in Sinai.

"We're told it was patterned with three knobbed branches on each side of the main stem, and with so many almond-shaped calyxes and flowers on each branch. Dr. Hareuveni's parents searched for the botanical prototype and identified it as this *moriah*, or *Salvia palaestina*. It's a member of the sage family, and its very fragrant oil was likely used in the Temple. In the Bible we're told that the burning of sweet incense always accompanied the lighting of the menorah."

And so the tour continues, from the saffron crocus that Solomon's fleet may have imported from Asia to become known as the rose of Sharon to the blackberry bush that is identified as the incendiary shrub that astonished Moses in Sinai.

According to Neot Kedumim's staff, a great deal of work remains to be done in identifying and cultivating biblical flora and researching such related matters as Talmudic disputation on issues like hybrids. But the staff is unabashedly pleased with what has been accomplished so far.

"What was an utter wasteland is now blooming with everything imaginable," says Miss Frenkley. "Dozens of varieties of birds have made our ponds regular stopping-off points on their migratory routes. And jackals and gazelles and other animals have reappeared after an absence of many generations. I think the land approves of what we're doing." In search of ancient plants The Neot Kedumim Biblical Landscape Reserve is off the main Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway, about two miles north of the exit to the village of Ben Shemen. The drive from either Jerusalem or Tel Aviv is about 30 miles and takes less than an hour.

The No. 471 bus, which runs twice a day between the central bus stations of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, will stop at the reserve if a passenger asks the driver to do so. The round-trip fare is the equivalent of about \$1.50.

Tours groups that have made arrangements in advance may visit Neot Kedumim Sunday through Thursday from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. and on Friday from 9 A.M. to noon; the reserve is closed Saturday and on Jewish holidays. It is open to the general public for three-hour guided tours in English, given Monday at 2 P.M. and Friday at 9:30 A.M. Admission is \$3, \$1.50 for students from fourth grade through college and free for children under fourth grade.

Vegetarian lunches and dinners are available for \$3 to \$5 at the reserve's study center, but reservations are required. For tour groups wishing to stay overnight, Neot Kedumim operates a 40-bed dormitory that is similar to a youth hostel. The cost is \$10 a person for a double, \$7 a person for four to a room; breakfast is \$2.50.

Between February and April the area is carpeted with wildflowers, but the reserve's staff notes that there is much to see year-round. Visitors are advised to wear hats and good walking shoes. For reservations and further information, call 233840 or 245881 (area code 08). The mailing address is Neot Kedumim, Post Office Box 299, Kiryat Ono, Israel.M. N.

drawings; map of Israel highlighting Noet Kedumim Biblical Landscape Reserve; photo of Helen Frenkley (Richard T. Nowitz