Common Ground

Muslim and Jewish communities uncover their hometown's heritage

by Eti Bonn-Muller

"This neighborhood is really one of the worst in the country," says archaeologist Yuval Gadot, as we drive in his mud-splattered white jeep through the Old City of Lod in central Israel. On this sweltering late-June afternoon, we pass two women in lace-trimmed white headscarves and long-sleeved black dresses sipping hot tea in the shade of a concrete building, stray tabby cats scrounging for food along a filthy curb, and children on rickety bicycles weaving between discarded water bottles and scattered garbage. We pull into an empty parking lot as a glistening luxury 4x4 slinks around the corner. "Lod has become the center of drug dealings around the heart of Israel," he adds, as his eyes follow the vehicle. "People who come from Lod…their self-image is very, very low."

That is exactly what Gadot is trying to change through a dig with a dual purpose: to glean new information about a 200-year-old Ottoman *khan*, or roadside inn, and to reach out to the people who live in the area by inviting them to excavate it. Increasing awareness of Lod's cultural heritage, Gadot hopes, will instill pride in its residents and inspire them to take action to save its historical sites. "This," he says, "is not mainstream archaeology."

The excavation he codirects here with Taufik De'adle at the site of Khān el-Ḥilū joins a slowly growing number of community digs in the country, a new trend in the past decade. But their work in Lod is a groundbreaking endeavor: the first community-based dig in Israel where Arabs and Israelis, mostly children, are working together. "In the sense of crossing the line, mediating between the two communities," he tells me, "it's the only one." While there was doubt that the project would even get off the ground, it has surprisingly taken hold. And for three years now, Lod's residents have not only been learning about their city's past, but how to live together in the present.

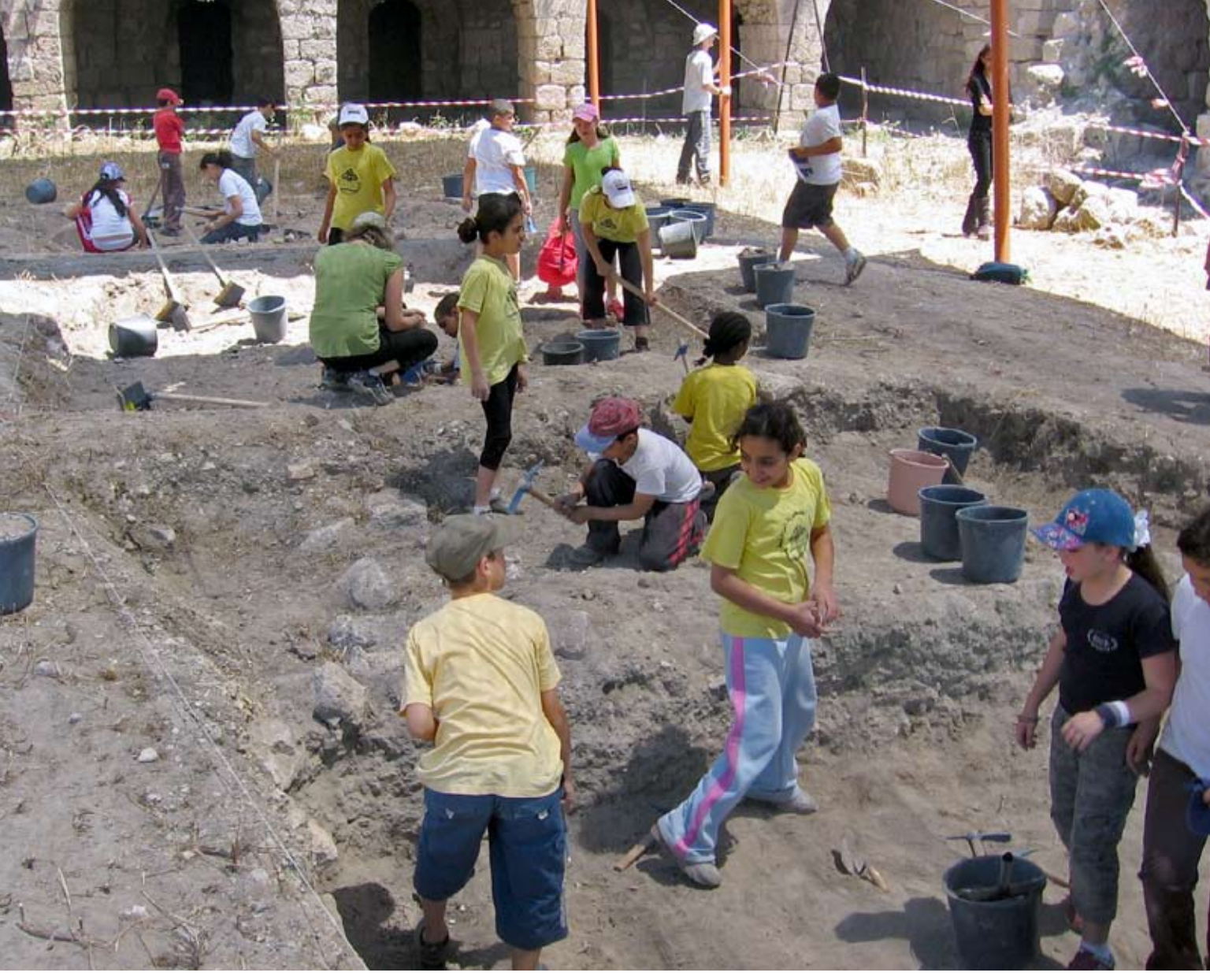
Lod is mentioned in the New Testament, most famously in the book of Acts under its old name, Lydda, where Peter healed a paralytic man. However, despite its Biblical significance and prime location—a five-minute drive from Ben Gurion International Airport—most tourists pass by this desperate ghetto unless they are making a pilgrimage to its 19th-century Greek Orthodox church, where the remains of St. George, the patron saint of England, are entombed. Adjacent to the church is the turquoise-domed al-'Umari mosque, erected in 1268; around the corner is Lod's Jewish community center, its entrance flanked with black graffiti. We get out of the car and walk toward the site, away from the church and mosque, five minutes across a sandy field.

Salvage excavations throughout the city have revealed that Lod has been occupied since about 8000 B.C., and almost continually through the Biblical, Second Temple, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods. Beginning at least in the 18th century A.D., the khan served as the economic heart of the city, one of the main stations along the postal road that connected Cairo with Damascus. It was likely built during the Ottoman period (1516–1917), but possibly even earlier.

The city, however, has had a bitter modern history. Until 1948, the year that Israel became a state, its population was 80 percent Muslim and 20 percent Christian. After 1948, Lod became a Jewish city. Since then, houses have been reoccupied or torn down and rebuilt; in this neighborhood, only 10 pre-1948 structures still stand, including the khan. During the mid-1950s, Arabs began returning, but they created new neighborhoods around the Old City, where recently, Ethiopian Jews have also started living. Over time, the newer, nicer parts of Lod grew toward the south, while the Old City was populated by Jewish immigrants coming mainly from Arabic-speaking countries, as well as some Holocaust survivors. Today, the city of 74,000 is about 70 percent Jewish, 30 percent Muslim. "The common thing that unites everybody is that it's a very poor city," says Gadot. "But the tension between them is about to explode at any minute." While both Arabs and Israelis have been responsible for violent acts, the most recent incident occurred in January 2009, when local Arabs targeting right-wing Jews firebombed the garden of a home in the Old City's Ramat Elyashiv neighborhood.

As we cross the sandy field, Gadot explains it was here that merchants who stayed overnight at the khan sold their goods, such as sheep and goats, pickled lupine grains, and olive-oil products at an outdoor market, right up until 1948. From a distance, the khan looks like a droopy pile of beige rocks about half the size of a football field, with a roof sprouting dry weeds. In the past decade, most of its second floor has collapsed.

Gadot unlocks a door to the site, and we enter another



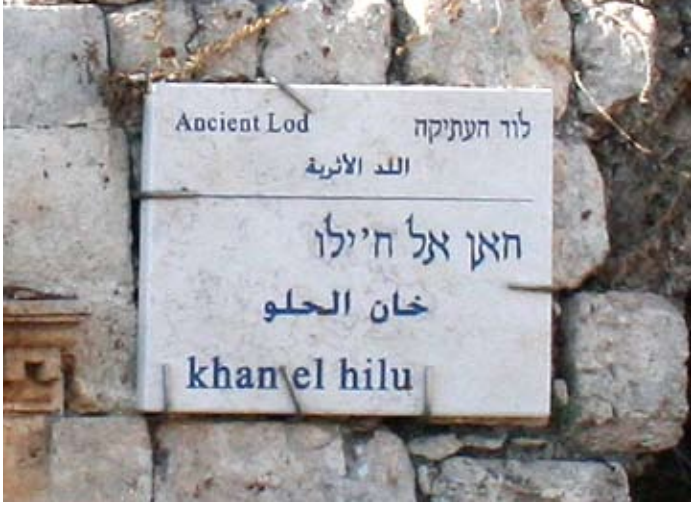
Together, Arab and Israeli children excavate the courtyard of an Ottoman *khan*, or roadside inn, as part of a school program in the Old City of Lod, Israel. Many enjoy the experience so much they return to the site after school hours, when adult community members also dig with volunteer archaeologists.

world. Sunlight envelops the stones and fills four exposed excavation trenches in the open courtyard. The half-dozen arches on covered passageways that still surround three sides of the courtyard convey the khan's former beauty. I imagine merchants traveling from inner areas of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia Minor stopping here in the evening for a cool drink, a snack, and a smoke. Camels whine as their owners lead them to cool water, rearranging the wares on the beasts' backs that had jostled and clanked across undulating sand dunes. A plane barreling down on its final descent to Ben Gurion and a loose dog's guttural yap snap me back to the present day.

"People are still living here," says Gadot, pointing to a black patch on the ground—a makeshift fireplace—in one of the passageways. A squatter has chiseled a hole at the apex of the stone arch above it to let the smoke escape, which has threatened the stability of the entire structure. "These rooms are being used all the time by drug addicts," he adds. "During the dig, every morning we come and collect needles." The thought makes my toes curl under my sandaled feet as I nervously scan the ground.

Six years ago, Gadot was directing another community dig at the site of Givat Sher in nearby Modi'in, when a few Jewish residents from Lod heard of his work and approached him about starting a similar excavation. An expert in the Bronze and Iron ages, Gadot's day job is already packed with numerous responsibilities, including codirecting excavations at Ramat Rahel in Jerusalem, a palatial center built by the kings of Judah. In his spare time, he volunteers to undertake community digs. "I want to do archaeology that is socially minded, that matters, that affects things," he says. "At the same time, to do good archaeology."

In 2002, Gadot received permission from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) to excavate the khan. He also secured



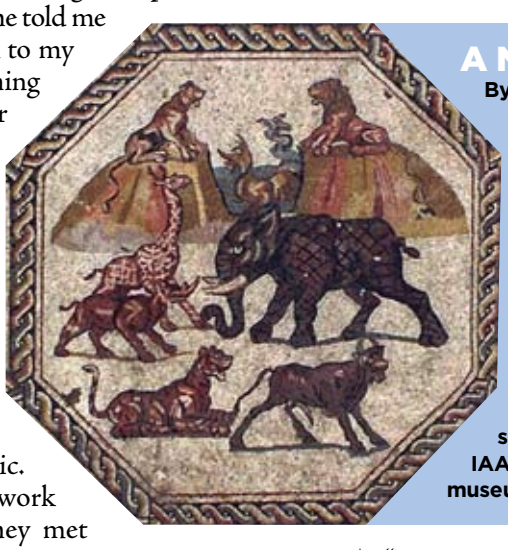
The Israeli Institute of Archaeology posted signs near the entrance to each of the Old City's pre-1948 buildings in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The use of all three languages to identify a historical structure is rare in the country, but at Lod, both Arabs and Israelis now connect with the city's past.

solid backing to create a comprehensive program: Hebrew Union College conducting the excavation, the Israeli Institute of Archaeology promoting the reconstruction of Lod's historical structures, and the Karev Foundation running a year-round educational component for kids in local schools. He chose the khan because it is a landmark that is meaningful to the community today, he says, and he thought it might be interesting to learn more about the city's understudied Ottoman period. "In Israel, traditional archaeologists deal first and foremost with Biblical material," he says.

Gadot asked Deʿadle, an archaeology graduate student at Hebrew University concentrating on the Islamic Middle Ages, to codirect the dig. Deʿadle grew up in Lod's Arab community. "It's a harsh city," he told me later. "I wanted to come back to my people and give them something I now have—a clue about their history, their city's history."

It took them four years to get the dig up and running. Gadot and Deʿadle started by approaching Lod's community leaders, social organizations, and volunteer advocacy groups. Gadot spoke to Jewish groups in Hebrew, Deʿadle to Muslim groups in Arabic. They then got the groups to work with them, and together they met with residents.

"At first, we were afraid we were going to be vomited out of here," Gadot tells me, as we leave the site for a place to sit and talk. The Arab residents feared that the archaeologists would find remains of a "Jewish" past and use the evidence to force them to leave. Both communities were afraid that an exceptional discovery would be made, then taken away from Lod for display elsewhere, as with the famous mosaics excavated in 1996 on the new side of town (see below). Gadot and Deʿadle reassured them they had good intentions: to excavate the khan; help stabilize, clean, and preserve it and the neighborhood's other remaining pre-1948 structures; and educate the public about Lod's historical sites.

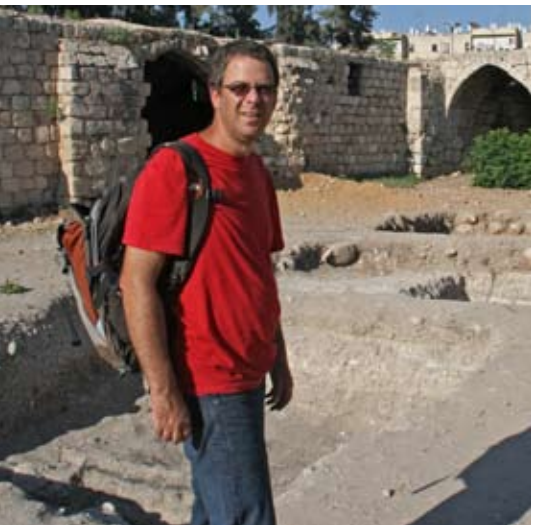


A New Activist Spirit

Byzantine mosaics depicting exotic animals, birds, fish, and merchant ships, uncovered in 1996 during the construction of a road on the new side of Lod, have been touted by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) as the "largest and most magnificent" ever unearthed in the country. Over the summer, the IAA announced that the fourth-century A.D. mosaics, which were reburied after their discovery, would soon be re-excavated and conserved, then sent to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art on a three-year loan. Shortly thereafter, hundreds of Lod's residents, fearing the mosaics may never actually return, signed a petition demanding they stay put. The IAA is now working together with residents to plan a museum that will be built in Lod to house the mosaics.

"We wanted to foster mutual respect for both nations' pasts," he says, "to do inclusive archaeology."

To that end, they invited everybody from Lod to dig, regardless of religion, sex, or age, beginning with their first season in May 2007. While adult community members participate, most of the excavators are around 11 years old: children from eight elementary schools throughout Lod who, as part of the program, are introduced to archaeology and the history of the khan in their classrooms, then brought to the site each May to dig.



Yuval Gadot (far left) stands in front of exposed excavation trenches in the khan's courtyard. In one of its passageways, Taufik Deʿadle (left) explains excavation techniques to Arab schoolchildren prior to their first dig.

"I was very happy to hear about the project and to know we would take an active role in it," Amīn al-Jamal, headmaster of Al-Rāshīdiya, an Arab elementary school, later said. "The project offers our children the opportunity to connect with their hometown." Iris Barda, headmaster of Zvulun Hamer, a Jewish elementary school, echoes al-Jamal's enthusiasm. "My kids are given a great gift through this program," she said. "They get to know their city's positive aspects."

Gadot and I find an Arab café, where he pulls out his laptop with the presentation he usually shares with Lod's residents. Meanwhile, the proprietor serves up a complimentary mound of ruby-red watermelon on a single plate with two forks. After just three seasons, says Gadot, flipping through the images, the team has unearthed pottery that helps date the earliest construction of the khan to the 17th or 18th century. Excavations have also revealed that the courtyard's floor was made of tamped earth and stones; fragments of ultramarine-colored plaster show it may have been richly decorated. Other artifacts—jugs, clay pipes, animal bones, and a gold coin that dates to the rule of the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II (1808–1893)—speak to those who passed through.

"The best part was finding new things," an 11-year-old Arab girl named Marwa recently told me by e-mail. "I also liked digging with my classmates." Given the city's tensions, one might think that the Jewish children wouldn't be interested in learning about the history of an Arab structure, but through the dig, they have come to think of it as part of their city's shared heritage. "I enjoyed the dig," e-mailed an 11-year-old Jewish girl named Natali. "Before, I didn't know anything about the city. Now I know of places that are ancient."

Jewish girls from Ganei Aviv elementary school clean and sort potsherds they've just excavated at the khan.

Deʿadle, especially, relates to the children. When we met, he recalled being in a class with hyperactive kids, just like some of those digging at the khan. "I feel like I'm going back in time," he said. "These were *my* friends." He sees archaeology as "therapy" for them. "They cause trouble in class all the time. On site, they work with tools and sift sand. They like it more than their classrooms. Are they filled with drugs and committing crimes because they're lazy? No! They're really smart. It's just that now they know they have choices."

The program is planned to continue for three more years, but it has already brought new hope. The Arab and Jewish children were originally scheduled to work on different days. "When we began, we said we wouldn't force them to work together," says Gadot. But last May, almost half of the schools opted for mixed days. "Some parents were afraid following the joint meetings we had in advance," commented Rinat Dekal of the Karev Foundation. "But when they saw how happy their kids were, they changed their minds." Gadot was equally moved: "The fact that they work together is like, whoa!"

At the end of his presentation, Gadot pauses on an image of children painting cheerful pictures on pink and blue construction paper. One day during the 2009 season, he tells me, munching on a wedge of watermelon, an Arab teacher came to the site with her art class. "They had no connection to us. The teacher used the khan as a classroom," says Gadot. "This has always been the backyard of Lod. But when they came, I felt like we were turning it into the front yard." ■

An Arab teacher not involved with the archaeology program brought her own floor mats and used the khan as a classroom for her art students.

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