



THIS PLACE IN JEWISH HISTORY

Spotlight on “Birya Forest”

By Rabbi Gideon Shloush

As we consider the 250 hectares of the Birya Forest that have been destroyed due to the war in the North, it's meaningful to reflect on the Jewish history that ties us to this location.

Birya is situated in the Upper Galilee, on the slopes descending east from Tzefat to Rosh Pina and Hatzor. Many of the greatest Mishnaic and Talmudic sages are buried in this region.

Deep within the Birya Forest is a place called **Amuka**, the burial site of the renowned *tanna* (“teacher” in Aramaic) **Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel**.

Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel lived **2000 years ago**. He was one of 80 rabbinic scholars who studied under Hillel the Elder and is considered the greatest of his students. He authored an Aramaic translation of the Books of the Prophets called “Targum Yonatan”, which essentially serves as a commentary.

The Talmud in tractate Megillah (3a) shares, “When he wrote his translation, the land of Israel over an area of 400 parssa by 400 parssa trembled, and a heavenly voice came forth and said, ‘Who has revealed My secrets to mankind?’ Rabbi Yonatan immediately arose and proclaimed, ‘It is I who have revealed Your secrets. You know that I did not do it for my honor, nor for the honor of my father's house, but for Your Honor, to avoid all quarrels among the people.’”

The Talmud in tractate Sukkah (28a) relates: “It was said that whenever Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel sat down to delve into the Torah, any bird straying over his head was burnt by [the intensity of] his words.”

The tomb of Rabbi Yonatan ben Uzziel is considered an auspicious place to pray for a soulmate. Legend has it that since he never married or had children, he is considered to have a special power to intervene on behalf of those in a similar situation. Close to half a million people flock to his tomb each year, making it one of the most visited in Israel.



His *hillula* (festivities marking the date of his passing) on the 26th of Sivan is held at his tomb each year. Sadly, the traditional hillula celebrations were severely curtailed this year, in light of the ongoing missile attacks and ensuing forest fires in the north, including in the Biriya Forest area surrounding the tomb.