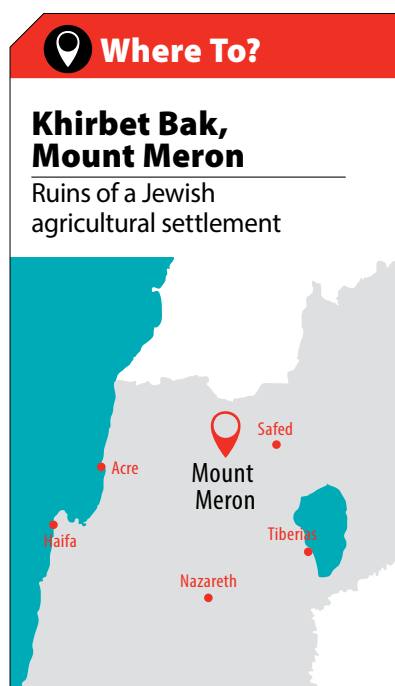




Against Type

Israel Bak wasn't one to give up. The first printer in Ottoman Palestine, he also established an agricultural village on Mount Meron in a series of none-too-successful pioneering endeavors // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Summer 1990. A bunch of sweaty Bnei Akiva campers scramble up the steep slope of Mount Meron. As troops compete for the thrill of being first to the summit, rumors of shortcuts begin to fly. Yokhi, our troop leader, won't hear of it. "We wouldn't dream of skipping Khirbet Bak!" she cries, offended by the very idea that we'd prefer lemon ices to a glimpse of the first Jewish agricultural settlement in the land of Israel.

So we keep on huffing and puffing up the hill, braced by the thought that the first Hebrew sickle awaits us just around the corner. And while everyone else is emptying the freezer and celebrating their reaching the top to the strains of a guitar, we're stuck a few hundred meters away in a small glade scattered with sun-baked stones.

"Right here," proclaims Yokhi, "in the heart of the Druze village of Jármaq, Israel Bak used these very stones to build the houses and stables of his farm." As we look on wearily, she hurriedly invents artifacts to wax on about. "Here's a cave they used then, and this is an ancient grindstone, and

if you peer into that hole, you can still see the glint of clear water at the bottom."

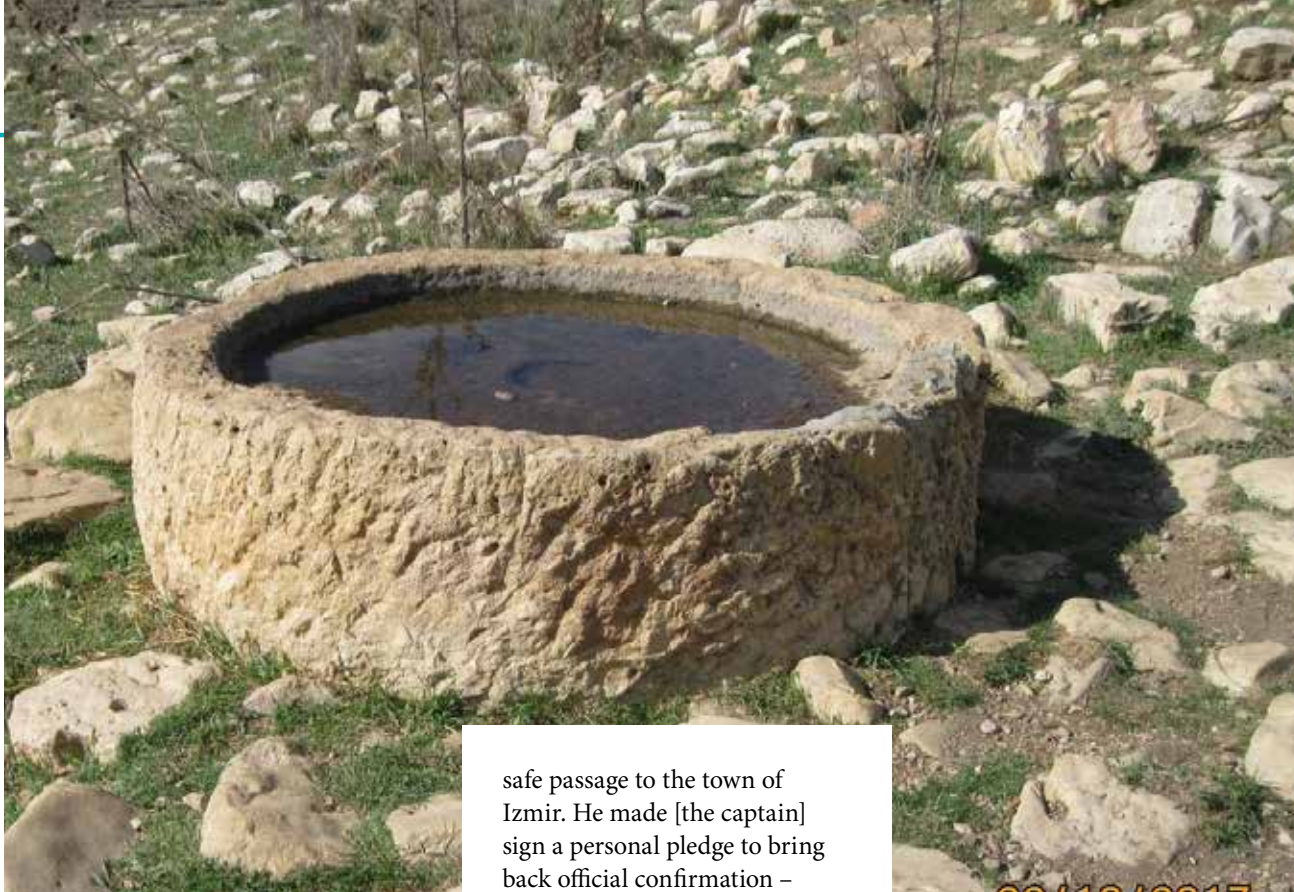
Our visit to Khirbet Bak was nothing special, but mostly because Yokhi knew none of the incredible tales of Bak's pioneering efforts in the Galilee.

Pilot Trip

Israel Bak was born in 1797 to a Hasidic family in Berdichev, in today's Ukraine. At age nineteen, he opened the town's first Hebrew printing house catering to Hasidim. Over the next few years, Israel the Printer (as he was known) printed prayer books in various editions, married a woman named Baila, and produced a family of five girls and a boy named Nisan.

Nicholas I's infamous policy of drafting Jewish men and boys into the Russian army for up to thirty years as "cantonists" came into effect in 1827, just in time to threaten Bak's only son. So in 1831, the printer and his partner, Leibchi the Iron Caster, loaded themselves and their printing press onto a ship and made a pilot trip to the land of Israel.

The pair settled in Safed and opened another Hebrew press,



which, as the first of its kind in the region, was a smashing success. So much so that Bak opened a bindery alongside it and sent for his family.

Aboard a Turkish ship somewhere between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, seventeen-year-old Nisan overheard a hushed conversation between the captain and his first mate. His tongue probably loosened by liquor, the captain let his colleague in on his plan to sell his Jewish passengers into slavery. The teen made a fuss, bringing all hands on deck to berate the captain.

A spicier version of the story has young Bak stealing ashore during a stopover in the Dardanelles to appeal to the local Turkish governor, who then took matters into his own hands:

The governor [...] cursed [the captain] by his drunken great-grandfather, then sent two guards to ensure the emigrants'

safe passage to the town of Izmir. He made [the captain] sign a personal pledge to bring back official confirmation – from the customs department at the Acre port – that the passengers and all their baggage had arrived safely. (Gershon Gera, *All Beginnings* [Maariv, 1984], p. 13 [Hebrew])

Caught in the Crossfire

The Bak family made it to hilly Safed, only to be overtaken by another unfortunate twist.

In 1831, Egyptian governor Mehmet Ali Pasha and his son Ibrahim rebelled against their Ottoman overlords in Istanbul. Conquering Syria and the land of Israel in the First Egyptian-Ottoman War, the governor solidified his hold on the Levant by installing Ibrahim in Acre. The new pasha applied the modernizing reforms his father had introduced in Egypt, eliminating discrimination against Jews and Christians and drafting young Muslims instead of relying on mercenaries.

Local feelings boiled over in 1834 with the Peasants' Revolt against Mehmet Ali, and as usual,

Not much left. Grindstone at Khirbet Bak

Photo: Soheel Makhoul

Impressed by his personality – including his tenacity – Montefiore presented Bak with a magnificent printing press

Photo: Communications Museum, Sammy Ofer School of Communications, IDC Herzliya





Bak's Hebrew press in Safed was such a smashing success that he opened a bindery alongside it and sent for his family in Berdichev



Jews misfortunate enough to be caught in the crossfire were attacked too. Jerusalem, Hebron, and Nablus all suffered, but the Jews of Safed were hit hardest. For thirty-three days, robbers, rapists, and murderers ran amok.

Israel Bak's printing house was vandalized, and the cast-iron Hebrew letters brought so painstakingly from Berdichev were smelted down to make bullets. Trying to defend his property, Bak was cornered by a mob but miraculously escaped. Luckily, the "only" lasting damage he sustained was a severe limp, but his wife Baila's heart was affected, and she died shortly after the riots.

A furious Ibrahim Pasha crushed

the revolt mercilessly, and whoever wasn't hanged in the town square had to generously compensate the Jews he'd assaulted.

Living off the Land

What does any of this have to do with the first Jewish agricultural settlement on Mount Meron? The Bak family had absolutely no plans to grow cucumbers in Jarmaq, but here's the positive twist in the tale, as Israel the Printer himself reported in flawless biblical Hebrew in a memoir published in *Havatzelet*, a Jerusalem journal:

God granted me favor in the eyes of this official, and he

Bak acquired the land either in return for a favor or as compensation after local riots. Ruins in Khirbet Bak
Photo: Soheel Makhoul

Bak eventually moved his printing operation to Jerusalem. Printer's preface to one of his books, 1843

refused me nothing. (*Havatzelet*, 1 Shevat 5632/January 11 1872, p. 106)

What made the pasha partial to Bak? Some say the printer was also an expert in treating malaria and cured Ibrahim Pasha when no one else could. Bak became a close friend, so the Druze of Jármaq offered him half their fields if he could persuade the pasha to stop their Arab neighbors in Peki'in from fleecing them for protection money and stealing their harvests. Bak succeeded, and the Druze kept their word, which is how the first Jewish farming enterprise in modern times began on the stony slopes of Meron.

Alternatively, according to historian Eliezer Raphael Malachi, the pasha offered Arab fields to many Jews injured in the riots, but everyone except Bak declined for fear of reprisals.

Bak's memoirs mention neither malaria nor any promise from the men of Jármaq, only Ibrahim Pasha's generous land grant:

In 5594 (1834) the entire town of Safed was looted and vandalized, and we were left with nothing. I turned my steps to the lord pasha, to the city of Acre, where he dwelt. I fell at his feet and begged for mercy [...], and the lord took pity on me and gave me the small village of Jármaq as my property [...]. Previously this village had boasted gardens and orchards, but now it was nothing but forest and rocks and whatever seeded itself there pushing up between the stones. (ibid., pp. 106–7)

Though Bak now owned Jármaq, he was in no hurry to put

his hand to the plow. In fact, he didn't even visit the place; instead, he sent his son to oversee a few hired hands growing vegetables there.

Bak remarried and rebuilt his printing house in Safed. Here, once again, the tale takes a turn for the worse.

On 24 Tevet 5597 (January 1, 1837), a severe earthquake shook the Holy Land. With Safed at the epicenter, Bak's print shop crumbled like a house of cards. Apart from one son-in-law buried in the rubble, the printer's family was thankfully unharmed. By now, however, he was wondering if God wasn't trying to tell him something. So the Bak clan moved to Meron, as his memoir later recounts:

On 24 Tevet 5597, the great earthquake occurred, overturning Safed and Tiberias. That was when I had to move to this village, which gave me some breathing space. I built houses there in which to dwell, dug gardens, and sowed fields, and that very year I ate heartily of the produce of the land. By the second year, I had cattle and sheep, ewes and goats, horses and mules, and with God's help I still observed the Sabbath meticulously. I also upheld all agricultural laws to the nth degree. My home was open to all, and God blessed all my activities, at home and in the field. Though the place is too stony for sowing, my hands were diligent, and God was my help. (ibid., p. 107)



By the By

- ▶ The Bak family still debates whether the initials making up its name originate in an ancestor who was a professional Torah reader (*ba'al korei*) or one who died a martyr and whose son therefore called himself "son of holy martyrs" (*ben kedoshim*). Either way, no one disagrees that the name is Bak, not Bek.
- ▶ The Baks became mainstays of Hasidic Jerusalem. Israel Bak's son helped establish the Kirya Ne'emana neighborhood near the Old City's Damascus Gate, whose homes are still called the Nisan Bak Houses. He was also responsible for building the Tiferet Yisrael Synagogue in the Old City, which legendarily tipped its hat to Kaiser Franz Joseph on his visit to Jerusalem. (See "The Kaiser's Cap," *Segula* 39.)
- ▶ In Jerusalem, Israel Bak opened yet another printing house, this time with an ultra-modern British printing press supplied by Moses Montefiore. Bak promptly labeled it "Gift of Moses and Judith," stamping an acknowledgment to that effect in every book he printed. The historic press is on display today in the Communications Museum of the Interdisciplinary College Herzliya.
- ▶ Bak had two daughters with his second wife, Raizel. The younger, Mindel, married Israel Dov Frumkin, founder of the *Havatzelet* Hebrew periodical. And who do you think printed *Havatzelet* from its very first issue in 1863 until his death in 1874?



Bak's farm was soon booming – so much so that Moses and Judith Montefiore came to see it when they visited Ottoman Palestine in 1839

In just two years, Bak's farm was booming – so much so that when Moses and Judith Montefiore visited Ottoman Palestine in 1839, they came to see for themselves:

Thursday, May 23. Zafed [sic]. About nine o'clock the horses, ready saddled, were at the door, and we set off for Djernek [sic] [...]. The son of Rabbi Israel Back [sic] was now seen riding over the hill to meet us. He informed us that his father was expecting our arrival with delight and trusted that we should attend the ceremony of naming his son, to whom we had been invited to stand godfather and godmother.

On reaching the abode of the worthy Rabbi Israel, a numerous family, consisting of three generations, came out to meet us, and saluted us with the graceful and friendly salaam of the East; the females, who were very pretty, and the children, kissing my hands before I dismounted. [...] The fete being over, we prepared to take leave of Djernek, amid the blessings and kind wishes of the ladies, and other branches of the family. (Judith Montefiore, *Notes from a Private Journal on a Visit to Egypt and Palestine by Way of Italy and the Mediterranean* [1885], pp. 237–39)

Deeply impressed by the Bak family farm, Moses Montefiore

fantasized in his diary about leasing two hundred villages near Safed from the sultan in Istanbul and setting up Jewish colonies just like that of Jármaq. But once again, a plot twist complicated matters.

Dethroned

The sultan had had enough of the rebellious Egyptian pasha and, with the help of the colonial powers, booted Ibrahim out of Syria (which included the Galilee in those days) and Mehmet Ali off the throne of Egypt. Greater Palestine returned to Ottoman rule as a result of the Second Egyptian-Ottoman War. Realizing their land would soon be reallocated, the Baks packed their bags and regretfully left Jármaq behind for Jerusalem. In Israel the Printer's words:

Were it not for the many and regrettable circumstances that overtook us in [55]99 [1839] in the wake of the terrible war between our lord the sultan and the pasha of Egypt, which forced me to leave that pleasant village and come to Jerusalem, I would now be truly happy. (*Havatzet*, p. 107)

The only remains of that short-lived Jewish settlement in Jármaq are the few sparse hovels and traces of orchards known as Khirbet Bak. It might not be worth missing an ice pop for, but if you've already made it to the top of Mount Meron, why not backtrack a few hundred meters and pay your respects to the printer who preceded the pioneers of Petah Tikva by forty years? ▣



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

Handy Info



Where to Eat

Seudata

Meron Junction
Kosher, meat
(04) 950-7722

Gallo Bistro

Meron Junction
Kosher, meat
053-710-2452

Geula Hummus

Meron
Kosher, parev
(04) 677-2752



Don't Miss

Baram National Park

Talmudic synagogue
Entry fee
(04) 698-9301

Pa'ar Cave

Sinkhole funneling rainwater
Entry free

Rimon Winery

Visitors' center, tastings, and workshops
Ramat Dalton Industrial Park
Entry fee
(04) 682-2325