



Building Bridges

Three bridges, one Arab village, three Jewish settlements, a railway station, and a hydroelectric plant. How did a single bend in the River Jordan generate so much activity?

Where To?

Kibbutz Gesher

Restored site of Kibbutz Gesher and Naharayim power plant visitors' center



Here's a fascinating bit of trivia: the word "bridge" doesn't appear in the Bible.

That's because, with no major rivers, the land of Israel wasn't exactly conducive to meeting the engineering challenge of bridge-building. Even the Jordan is no Danube and can be easily forded in several places during the summer months. Wherever it can't be crossed on foot, it's still narrow enough to tow a ferry from one side to the other – a simple enough solution and one soon adopted by the ancient inhabitants of the Holy Land.

Then the Romans arrived on the scene, introducing aqueducts, sanitation, medicine, irrigation, education, law and order, public baths, and roads – which required bridges.

These structural marvels completed a vast system of roadways spanning the Roman Empire and bringing the primitive Middle East firmly into the second century CE.

A History of Gesher

The Romans discovered that bridges were best constructed at a river's narrowest point – allowing for the shortest possible span – and between high cliffs, providing support. Of course, there had to be a nearby thoroughfare to justify the effort; there was little point in a bridge with no one to cross it.

One such spot was located by Roman architects twelve kilometers south of the Sea of Galilee, where the Jordan River curves voluptuously and is then forced through a high, narrow gorge of black basalt less than ten meters wide. This setting was the ideal place to connect Tiberias with the east bank of the Jordan, on the main caravan route to the Jordanian cities of Irbid, Jerash, and Amman.

The resulting bridge lasted hundreds of years, until it was destroyed by an earthquake, leaving only some pitiful foundations. In the 12th century, these remnants got a new lease on life as the base of a Crusader bridge.



In the 12th and 13th centuries, the Mamluks gave the bridge concept a substantial makeover. Built of black basalt blocks, their bridge measured seventy meters long and six across. Its central arch soared ten meters over the Jordan, leaving room for the winter floods, when the river's level peaked. Two lower arches flanked the main one, allowing floodwaters to pass without washing the entire structure away.

The Mamluks' substantial infrastructural investment was part of their ruling strategy, which required a network of roads linking every part of their empire. The Mamluk postal system was the fastest in history (until Amazon), combining horsemanship with road and bridge maintenance to provide delivery from Cairo to Damascus in just four days.

The Mamluks evidently gave the bridge its Arabic name as well: Jisr

el-Majami, bridge of assembly. Some associate this appellation with the conjunction of the Yarmouk and Jordan rivers three kilometers to the north, but it might also refer to the ample hospitality of a large and well-appointed khan built in the same period just west of the bridge. Weary messengers would have relished a night's rest here – and the possibility of exchanging mail with fellow couriers to reduce the miles each had to cover.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then, but let's jump to 1905, when the Mamluks' Ottoman heirs chose to run the Jezreel Valley railway over the Jordan. Rather than disrupt foot and wagon traffic, they added another bridge a few dozen meters south of the old one, just for the train. Ably assisted by 20th-century technology, the Ottomans soon heaped packed-earth ramps up against the riverbanks and built

Three bridges, three eras. The Mamluk bridge, built over the foundations of a Crusader structure; the British bridge running alongside it; and behind them the Ottoman bridge, part of the Jezreel Valley railway. At right, the remains of the Mamluk khan

Photo: Abraham Graicer

An earthquake destroyed the Roman bridge, leaving only its foundations as the base of a Crusader successor



a younger, slimmer version of the Mamluk bridge over five arches.

After conquering the Ottomans' Mesopotamian territory, including the land of Israel, the British constructed a third bridge in 1925. This one, cast from humble concrete, was part of a highway connecting Beth Shean and Tiberias. It ran alongside the Mamluk bridge and was designed to divert heavier traffic (particularly trucks) from the elderly stone original, saving on wear and repair.

Colonial Hot Spot

Meanwhile, Baron Maurice de Hirsch's Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) took an interest in the area. Attracted by the khan and the bridges, the company purchased fertile fields nearby.

In 1920 the first enthusiastic pioneers – Jewish Legion veterans of WWI and workers from the socialist Labor Battalion – marked their arrival by dancing a spontaneous hora on the JCA property next to the bridges. They settled into the abandoned khan, which protected them from the elements and lent their efforts a romantic air. Having moved their few possessions inside and fenced off their new farmland, the youngsters sat down to choose a name for their new settlement. The front-runner was Gesher



Nehalim – Bridge of Streams, though in fact there were multiple bridges but only one stream.

That summer, the pioneers of Gesher Nehalim worked the land in the brutal Jordan Valley heat. But after three years of arguing whether they should become a kibbutz or moshav, they were so dehydrated that they up and left.

New immigrants from Latvia, members of the Ahdut Labor Zionist movement, replaced them. Arriving from Jerusalem after an agricultural crash course in nearby Menahamiah, they blithely took over the khan and set to work in the fields, humming as they went. They called their settlement Gesher Farm to differentiate it from the previous failure.

Things looked promising at first, especially after the British built the secondary bridge and an animal quarantine center. With so

Built at a strategic bend in the Jordan and restored as part of a network of roads crisscrossing the Mamluk sultanate. The Mamluk bridge

Photo: Douglas Carruthers, *Wonders of the Past* (1924)

Labor Battalion pioneers and Jewish Brigade veterans danced a spontaneous hora by the bridge



The Naharayim power plant harnessed the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers to produce electricity from 1932 to 1948

Photo: Boris Carmi, Meitar Collection, Pritzker Collection, National Library of Israel

By the By

→ When the bridges were blown up in the War of Independence, the Mamluk one remained intact, having survived earthquakes and more without a scratch. The Ottoman bridge was severely damaged, and its concrete British counterpart almost completely destroyed. The train was put out of commission and the road was blocked, preventing enemy vehicles from crossing into Israeli territory. The bridges have been partially restored as a tourist attraction, with railway carriages installed on the Ottoman structure for effect.

→ Nineteenth-century Frenchman Victor Guérin's Middle East travelogue includes a stop at Jisr el-Majami and the Mamluk khan. Judging by his odd description of the place, he must have been dazed by the heat:

The hot, dry wind blew all day [...]; by evening, the storm had died down and a magnificent sunset covered the slopes of the hills that looked back at us from the east, across the river, in a purple cloak [...]. Such a vision, in such a place, was truly an invitation to lapse into contemplation and meditation. So I too let my spirit wander long in that atmosphere of religious melancholy breathing all around me. (Victor Guérin, *Description Géographique, Historique et Archéologique de la Palestine* [Paris, 1880], p. 134)

much going on, the future seemed rosy. And indeed, Arab laborers began flocking to the area, dubbing their new village Jisr el-Majami. Mudbrick houses, stores, and a mill completed the initial picture, with more villages sprouting as the population increased.

In 1932, electrical engineer and Zionist activist Pinhas Rutenberg set up the Naharayim hydroelectric station at the confluence of the Yarmouk and the Jordan. He provided housing for his workers and their families east of the Jordan, naming the settlement Tel Or (Beacon of Light).

In 1934, seizing the momentum, the British authorities built an oil pipeline just south of the bridges. Owned by the Iraq Petroleum Company, the Kirkuk-Haifa pipeline transported thousands of liters a day to refineries in Haifa for shipping to Europe, until the system was

discontinued in 1948.

With neighbors like these, Gesher Farm naturally expanded, building sheds around the khan, a mudbrick children's dormitory, and a basalt-block dining room. For eleven years, the farmers worked with one hand and fanned their sweaty progeny with the other. But by 1934, they'd had enough of the heat and relocated a few kilometers north, to a slightly higher altitude offering a bit more fresh air. With some hyperbole, their new kibbutz was named Ashdot Yaakov, Jacob's Rapids, after James Armand de Rothschild.

In Memorium

For five years Gesher Farm stood empty, until a group of Labor Youth graduates seeking a challenge joined forces with young German immigrants brought in by the Youth Aliya organization. Taking possession of the ancient khan



Kibbutz Gesher and the nearby police station were attacked by both the Arab Legion and the Iraqi expeditionary forces. The station with Golan Brigade soldiers, 1948

Photo: Binyamin Isaac, Pikiwiki



Opposite: Gesher pioneers lived in the ruins of the Mamluk Khan near the bridges and built their dining room from its stone blocks. Mess hall in Old Gesher

Photo: Dr. Avishai Teicher, Pikiwiki

and plowed fields, they chose the simplest name possible: Kibbutz Gesher. Their children paddled in the Jordan and learned to live with the sweltering heat, thanks to the large, shady trees planted by previous pioneers, which had grown to full height over the years.

Everything seemed perfect, until Arab nationalist tensions shattered the tranquility and the neighboring villages turned hostile.

The British threw up a concrete checkpoint with a Tegar fort separating Gesher from Jisr el-Majami, hoping to protect the kibbutz, the bridges, the railway station, and the pipeline. Some semblance of security was restored,

and another band of stalwarts joined the kibbutz, mostly refugees from Germany and Poland who, having survived the Nazis, were not to be deterred by 40° Celsius in the shade.

By 1946, Kibbutz Gesher boasted 180 residents and finally seemed on the path to permanence. Then the War of Independence broke out in earnest, and the kibbutz members realized they were the only barrier between the State of Israel and invading forces pouring over the three bridges from Jordan.

The 1948 battles for Kibbutz Gesher are a saga worthy of a full-length feature film, including the kibbutzniks' capture of the

All bridges over the Jordan were blown up to block infiltration by the Iraqi expeditionary forces



British police station, the Arab Legion's shelling (which almost leveled all the houses), and the kibbutz children's hasty evacuation to Ashdot Yaakov in the dead of night, escorted by the Golani Brigade. The movie's climax would definitely be the blowing up of all three bridges to keep the Iraqi expeditionary forces out. This successful operation earned one of its participants a medal of bravery.

Reinforcements turned Kibbutz Gesher into a frontline outpost that held its ground throughout the War of Independence, keeping the State of Israel right on the River Jordan and never surrendering. In the wake of its almost total destruction, however, kibbutz members decided to rebuild a short distance away, on a slightly higher and breezier hill. The kibbutz is still there.

In 1992, some of the original houses were restored to create a visitors' center and memorial,

known as Old Gesher. The British police station and the train platform remain just off-site, awaiting transformation by some heritage fund with deep pockets.

Only the black basalt dining room survived the war, and today it's part of the visitors' center. The refurbished children's home isn't far away. The bunker where the kibbutzniks huddled throughout the conflict has been reconstructed too, complete with household items as well as military equipment.

The Israel Electric Corporation recently gifted Gesher with a wing dedicated to Pinhas Rutenberg – affectionately known as the Old Man from Naharayim – and his hydroelectric station, destroyed by the Jordanians in 1948. Under Israel's peace treaty with Jordan, the plant's remains were ceded to that country after a twenty-five-year lease ended in 2019, but they're visible from Old Gesher. Don't visit in the heat of the day, however, especially in the summer. □

Handy Info

■ Where to Eat

Aggadat Lehem

Old Gesher
Kosher, dairy
050-220-0803

Pizzarini

Ashdot Yaakov
Kosher, dairy
(04) 611-0555

Helena

100 Shaul Ha-melekh St., Beth Shean
Kosher, meat
(04) 887-7577

■ Don't Miss

Beth Shean National Park and Roman ruins

Entrance from Shaul Ha-melekh St.
Entry fee, (04) 648-1122

Gan Ha-shelosha (Sahne) National Park

Tower and Stockade Heritage Center, archaeological museum, swimming and wading pools
Entry fee, (04) 658-6352

Gan Garoo

Australian zoo
Kibbutz Nir David
Entry fee, (04) 648-8531



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