

A Well-Oiled Plot

A forest, a youth village, an artists' colony, a farm, a garden community, a junction – Ben Shemen has seen it all // [Tamar Hayardeni](#)



Where to?

Ben Shemen

Settlement cluster and historic youth village

Access from Route 443 by Ben Shemen Junction



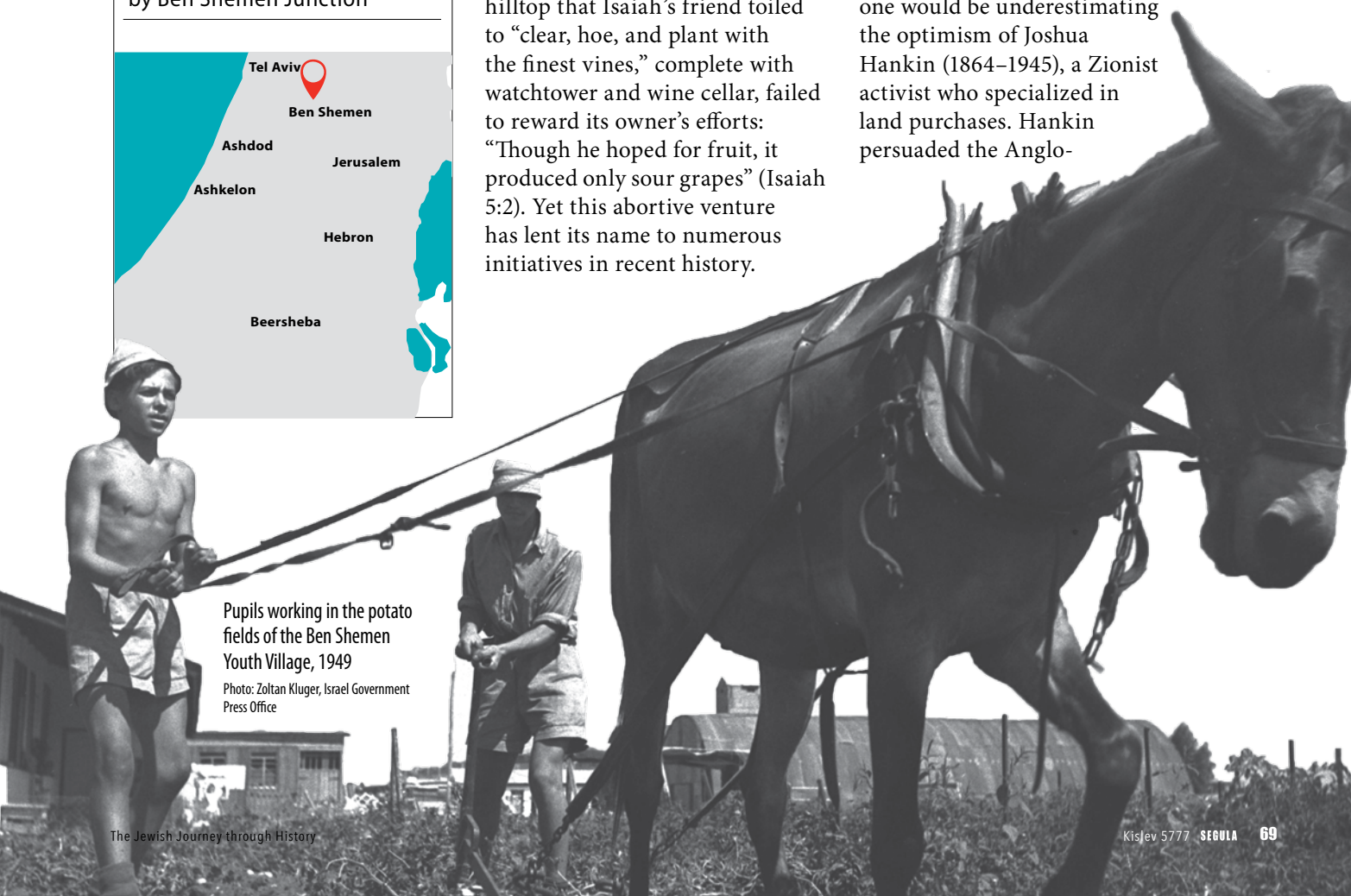
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n one of his most famous allegories, the prophet Isaiah described a friend's

inauspicious vineyard in a corner of the country named Ben Shemen (wherever that was). This stubborn hilltop that Isaiah's friend toiled to "clear, hoe, and plant with the finest vines," complete with watchtower and wine cellar, failed to reward its owner's efforts: "Though he hoped for fruit, it produced only sour grapes" (Isaiah 5:2). Yet this abortive venture has lent its name to numerous initiatives in recent history.

Growing Concern

As the miserable vineyard in the fable represents Israel, with God cast as the disappointed landowner, one would hardly expect the name Ben Shemen to figure in popular use. But then one would be underestimating the optimism of Joshua Hankin (1864–1945), a Zionist activist who specialized in land purchases. Hankin persuaded the Anglo-



Pupils working in the potato fields of the Ben Shemen Youth Village, 1949

Photo: Zoltan Kluger, Israel Government Press Office

Boris Schatz's musing resulted in a historic initiative – the first agricultural artists' colony in Israel

Palestine Bank to help him buy two thousand dunams (acres) near Tel Hadid, not far from the Arab town of Lydda, in 1904. Hankin envisioned a vineyard, but agronomist Israel Belkind of Gadera declared the soil better suited to olives. That, presumably, is why this farm was named Ben Shemen, "Son of Oil." All that remained was to find someone to actually grow the olives.

A few months later, a group of pale orphans arrived from Kishinev, where they'd narrowly survived the Russian pogroms

that had deprived them of their parents. None of these youngsters knew anything about farming, but Belkind welcomed them with open arms to his new initiative – an agricultural school in Ben Shemen named Kiryat Sefer. Built on a hilltop, Kiryat Sefer's classrooms, barns, stables and dormitories were clustered around a square courtyard. Olive trees were planted all over, while one hundred dunams were set aside for the Hadid factory – the first in the Middle East to manufacture olive oil using automated presses.

Nahum Wilbush, the enterprising engineer responsible for building the factory, had studied a sophisticated heat-assisted method of extracting oil from the olive husks left behind after pressing. Said oil was less refined but supposedly better than

wasting what remained of the olives. Jewish and Arab oil makers alike were amazed that someone would purchase their olive refuse, but when the machinery arrived from Europe in 1906, Hadid did just that.

In 1907, the Jewish National Fund acquired Ben Shemen and additional plots in the area, and hopes rose. Despite Belkind's assurances, however, olives were about the only thing that wouldn't grow in Ben Shemen. The trees were replaced with other crops, but the Kishinev orphans gave up. Kiryat Sefer's funding ran out, and the institution closed in 1908. Hadid ran into trouble around the same time, with two hundred sixty tons of olive refuse yielding only twenty-six tons of low-quality oil. Undaunted, Wilbush tried using the leftover olive skins to manufacture soap, opening the Atid ("Future") Oil and Soap Factory in Haifa.

Hadid limped along in Ben Shemen until the factory burned down in 1915. Wilbush transferred the surviving equipment to Atid, which eventually increased its output and changed its name to Shemen. The plant is celebrating its hundredth anniversary this year.

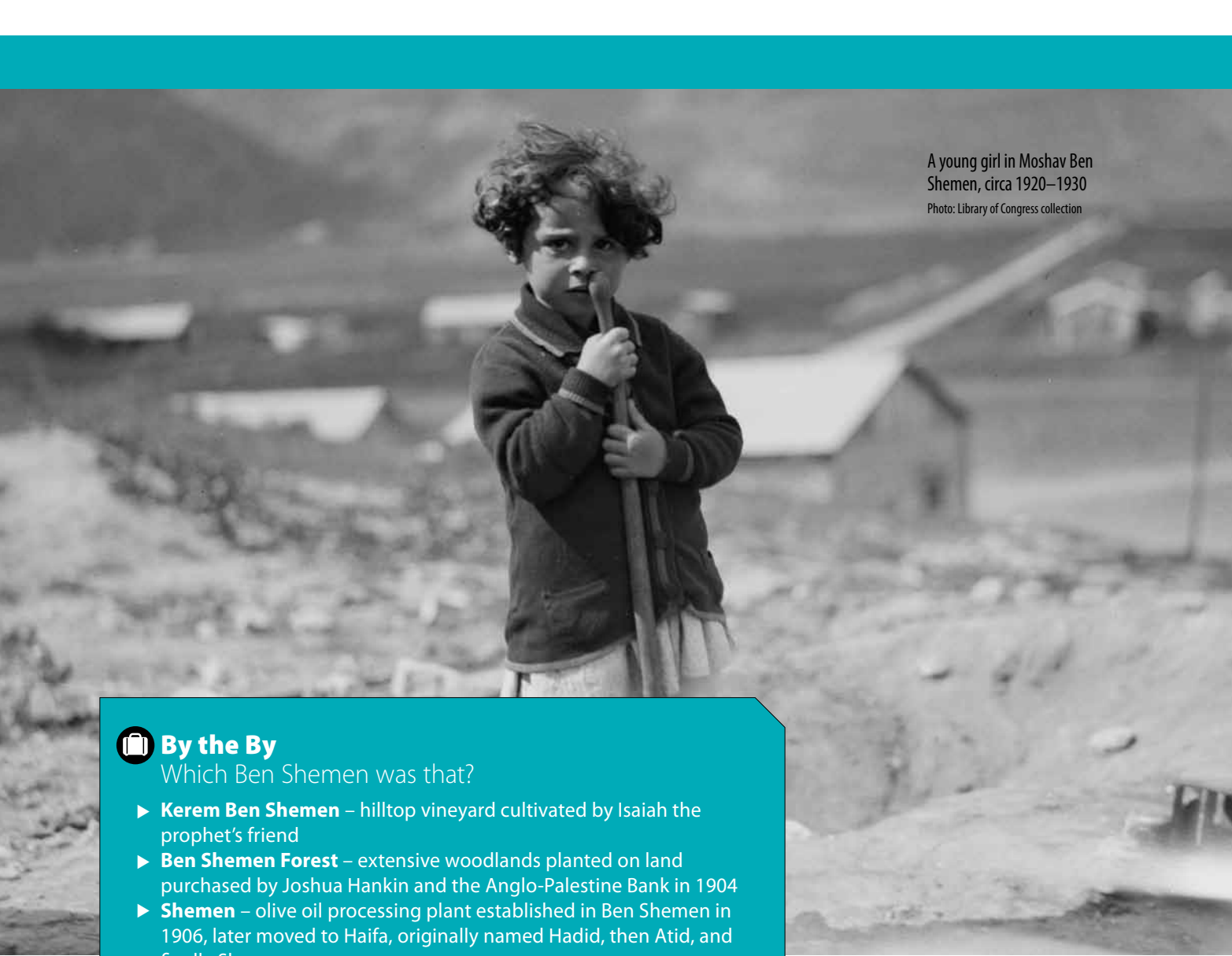
Yemenite Artisans on the Farm

After Kiryat Sefer closed, the Jewish National Fund persuaded famous agronomist Isaac Vilcansky (Volcani) to open an agricultural research station there.



House in the agricultural artists' colony built in 1911, today part of Moshav Ben Shemen

Photo: Dr. Avishai Teicher, PikiWikIsrael



A young girl in Moshav Ben Shemen, circa 1920–1930
Photo: Library of Congress collection



By the By

Which Ben Shemen was that?

- ▶ **Kerem Ben Shemen** – hilltop vineyard cultivated by Isaiah the prophet's friend
- ▶ **Ben Shemen Forest** – extensive woodlands planted on land purchased by Joshua Hankin and the Anglo-Palestine Bank in 1904
- ▶ **Shemen** – olive oil processing plant established in Ben Shemen in 1906, later moved to Haifa, originally named Hadid, then Atid, and finally Shemen
- ▶ **Ben Shemen research station** – experimental agricultural facility set up by agronomist Isaac Vilkansky in 1908
- ▶ **Ben Shemen artists' colony** – founded in 1910 to help Bezalel students supplement their income by farming
- ▶ **Moshav Ben Shemen** – farm community set up in 1923 on the site of the former artists' colony
- ▶ **Ben Shemen Youth Village** – agricultural school established in 1927 near Moshav Ben Shemen
- ▶ **Ben Shemen Dwellings** – housing project built on the site of the original farming settlement after its abandonment in 1948
- ▶ **Ben Shemen Vineyard** – picturesque neighborhood alongside Ben Shemen Dwellings

Vilkansky sent apprentices to Wilhelmina, a nearby Christian Templar colony (today B'nei Atarot), to learn how a real farm functions: how to work a modern plow, survive the stench of organic fertilizer, etc. The station became

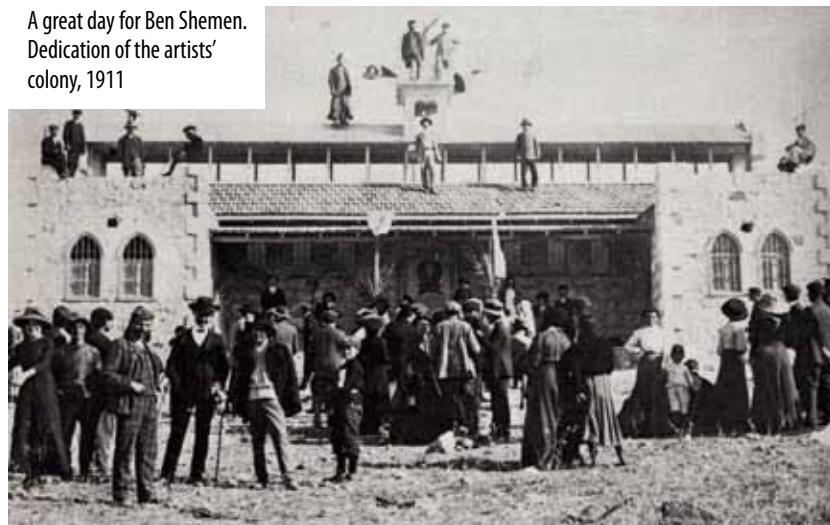
a resounding success. At its peak, it boasted a cowshed, a henhouse, and even an apiary, attracting such distinguished visitors as Boris Schatz, legendary founder of the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts (forerunner of today's Bezalel



Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, wife of Israel's second president, toured the Ben Shemen Youth Village in 1959

Photo: Fritz Cohen, Israel Government Press Office

A great day for Ben Shemen. Dedication of the artists' colony, 1911



Academy of Arts and Design) in Jerusalem. Wandering among the vegetable beds, Schatz thought about his graduates struggling to make a living in Jerusalem. His musings led to the country's first agricultural artists' colony, on a hill east of the Ben Shemen research station.

With Ben Shemen plagued by sabotage and burglary originating in the nearby Arab village of

Hadid, Vilkansky and his workers welcomed the Bezalel artists as Jewish reinforcements. The Jewish National Fund offered a free two-dunam plot to every Bezalel student choosing to live, farm, and produce Judaica in Ben Shemen. For his part, Schatz convinced Bezalel's donors to fund ten one-story stone houses. In the end, five two-family homes, a quaint two-story workshop, and a water tower were built.

Alumni of the Ben Shemen youth village include author Yigal Mozenson, parliamentarian Shulamit Aloni, and Shimon Peres and his wife Sonya

In 1911, ten Yemenite silversmiths moved in with their families, ululating and beating great tin drums. The area gained its first retail venture, a grocery store. But the local water supply soon proved inadequate, and the backbreaking work of clearing the stony ground injured the smiths' delicate fingers.

Furthermore, as observant Jews, the Yemenites required a mikve, whose building and maintenance drained Bezalel's already strained finances. To help balance the budget, the school asked the residents to pay rent, arousing a hornet's nest of mutual recriminations, all directed at the JNF.

The Bezalel experiment lasted just three years. Whatever tools and other possessions the artisans left behind were sold to Vilkansky, and research station workers and their families took over the stone houses.

Full Circle

Things went downhill from there. A 1913 epidemic destroyed half the cattle, and in 1915 swarms of locusts devoured three thousand fruit trees. Meanwhile, World War

I raged, with troop movements in the area ravaging the fields. Late in 1917, as Turkish and British soldiers fought for control of the Holy Land, shelling blasted the houses and made confetti of the crops. The terrified farm laborers fled, and by war's end Ben Shemen was a shadow of its former self.

Once the dust settled, however, the farmers returned and reopened the research station. Extra farmhands were taken on, business improved, and in 1923 the old artists' colony became a communal settlement named – believe it or not – Moshav Ben Shemen. The workshop was turned into a school, and Ashkenazic Jews replaced the Yemenite families.

Four years later, the moshav converted the research station building into an agricultural youth village for new immigrants, much as Belkind had intended. Its name? Ben Shemen. The village absorbed a fair number of refugee children who arrived from Europe through the Jewish Agency's Youth Aliya program before and during the Holocaust. The village still operates today, and its graduates include author Yigal Mozenzon, parliamentarian Shulamit Aloni, and even Shimon Peres, who met his wife Sonya there.

During the Arab Revolt against the British Mandate (1936–9), both the moshav and the youth village were repeatedly attacked by their Arab neighbors. In 1940, the village director and eleven staff members were arrested by the British when a night raid on Ben Shemen uncovered a Hagana stash of weapons and ammunition.

Matters reached their lowest ebb after the United Nations approved the partition plan on November 29, 1947, when it emerged that Ben Shemen was to be included in the future Arab state. The place was besieged, and the youth village evacuated. Though Ben-Gurion and his council resolved to hold the position for strategic reasons, it was accessible only by convoy. One such, known as the Ben Shemen Convoy, was ambushed two weeks after partition, and thirteen of its members were killed. That incident finally persuaded the British to provide armed escorts for the convoys, but once Mandate personnel left in February, Ben Shemen was cut off. Supply aircraft came under constant fire from the ground, but there was no other way of reaching Ben Shemen's defenders.

In July 1948, Lod and its environs were conquered by the Israel Defense Forces, and Ben Shemen finally became part of the Jewish state. Getting over the trauma of the War of Independence took time, but in 1952 Moshav Ben Shemen was reestablished southwest of its original location, with the remains of the original settlement renamed "Ben Shemen Dwellings." Eventually the latter became a garden community, "Ben Shemen Vineyard," bringing Isaiah and his frustrated friend full circle – almost three millennia later. □



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

► Papino

49 Emek Dotan, Modi'in
08-926-8180
Kosher, dairy

► Meet and Meat

15 Central Boulevard, Modi'in
053-809-6624
Kosher, meat

► Grill 433

Sonol gas station, Shilat Junction,
073-702-0976
Kosher, meat



Other Local Attractions

► Neot Kedumin

Biblical nature reserve
Access from Route 443 between Ben Shemen Forest and Mevo Modi'in
(08) 977-0777
Open Sunday–Thursday, 8:30 am–4 pm,
Friday 8:30 am–1 pm, entrance fee

► Park Anabe

Urban nature park
Access from Hashmonaim Boulevard,
Modi'in
Open 24 hours a day, free entry

► White Tower

Ancient mosque, tomb, and reservoirs
Danny Mas Street, Ramle
(08) 921-6873
Open Sunday–Thursday, 8 am–4 pm,
Friday 8 am–2 pm, entrance fee