

## Eilat Mazar: Uncovering King David's Palace

Etgar Lefkovits



CHINA CASTELNUOVO/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Eilat Mazar is not at her dig just south of Jerusalem's Temple Mount, where she has been exhuming the massive stone walls of what she believes to be the 10th-century remains of King David's palace. Instead the 49-year-old widowed mother of four is at her office at the Shalem Center, a conservative social policy think tank in Jerusalem's German Colony. Her short blonde hair bobs up and down as talks about the palace, possibly the most stunning archaeological discovery in Israel in decades. "It's a huge structure built on the most important place that controls everything around it," she says with excitement. "It must have been an important structure. We need to reveal more of it."

Her office is filled with the kinds of items you might expect: 3000-year-old pots from her excavations of the

ancient Phoenician settlements of Achziv on the northern coast of Israel and treasures from the Mazar family's archaeological "dynasty." Books by her late grandfather, the highly respected archaeologist Benjamin Mazar, are displayed prominently, as is a five-volume work that her father published highlighting the connections between archaeological finds and biblical verses.

Alongside her laptop on a paper-strewn desk sits the most telling object: a heavily marked Bible. Like her grandfather and father before her, Mazar is a believer in the Bible's historical reliability. "One of the many things I learned from my grandfather was how to relate to the biblical text," she says. "Pore over it again and again, for it contains within it descriptions of genuine historical reality." She adds, "I work with the Bible

in one hand and the tools of excavation in the other. That's what biblical archaeologists do. The Bible is the most important historical source and therefore deserves special attention."

This approach led Mazar to the site she now believes is the northern edge of King David's palace in an area known as the City of David. When she set out on her quest in search of the palace in 1997, she turned to her Bible. She found what she was looking for in chapter five, verse 17 of the Second

Book of Samuel. "When the Philistines came to fight, the Bible says David went down from his palace to the fortress," Mazar says. "I wondered down from where? It's very reasonable to assume that when the Bible describes David going down he came from a higher place. The only higher place is from the north."

It was a crucial observation. Mazar reasoned the only direction where the topography is higher would be just north of the City of David, outside the walls of the Old City. She began excavating in February of 2005. The finds came quickly. Surprisingly intact, just two yards beneath ground level, were Byzantine-era artifacts, including a fully-preserved room with mosaic floors dating to the 4th to 6th centuries C.E. When Mazar peeled back the room, she uncovered water cisterns,

and a *mikvah* from the Second Temple period. But it was what was under these that would prove to be the most startling. The Second Temple remains were directly on top of thick foundation walls that protruded in all directions—and even beyond—the length and width of her 30-by-10 meter excavation site.

"We saw that this was clearly something monumental, and was obviously not any private construction," Mazar says.

The pottery found under the building—that is, from before the building's construction—dated back to the 12th to 11th centuries B.C.E.—just before David conquered Jerusalem. But inside one of the rooms, Mazar's team found pottery from the 10th to 9th century B.C.E., indicating that the building was in use during the period of David's reign in Jerusalem. In addition, Mazar found a seal impression, called a *bullae*, of a late 7th-century royal official named Jehucal, son of Shelemiah, son of Shevi, who is mentioned twice in the Book of Jeremiah (37:3 and 38:1). "The *bullae* find—it's an amazing find," she says, adding that it proves "that the site was an important center in the ancient Israelite monarchy for four centuries."

Mazar's excavation, funded by the Shalem Center and its chairman, American financier Roger Hertog, has powerful political implications. When news of the find broke, Zionists, both Jewish and Christian, were ecstatic. If confirmed, the palace would counteract recent claims by the Palestinians, who dismiss King David's reign as useful political fiction.

"For years, there have been those who contended that there was no evidence of public construction in 10th century B.C.E. Jerusalem," Mazar, an ardent Zionist, says. "Based on this, they claim that David and Solomon were not important rulers as described in the Bible. Now there is evidence of such construction, and those who minimize the importance of David and Solomon have to deal with the facts. Because in an out-of-the-way and remote settlement you would not have a structure like this. To build such a major structure, you needed strong central rule in Jerusalem at that time. It's nothing like what is described by the minimalists."

The discovery has drawn Mazar into the center of a heated archaeological debate. Gabriel Barkai, professor at Bar-Ilan University, was emphatic, calling Mazar's findings unprecedented. "She has for the first time after more than 150 years of archaeology in Jerusalem discovered a massive public building dating back to the 10th century B.C.E.," Barkai said. But other archaeologists are dubious. "I am not at all certain that this is what has been found," said University of Haifa archaeologist Professor Ronny Reich. He noted that in order to determine that the site was indeed David's palace, the pottery and the walls had to be found "in the same context" and "living together." "Whether this is the case here is still an open question," he said.

Even more critical is Israel Finkelstein, professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University and the leading proponent of, "low chronology," which claims that many of the grand buildings dated to the 10th century B.C.E. and attributed to King Solomon are actually a century younger. Finkelstein characterizes the hoopla over Mazar's discovery as "Messianic eruptions in biblical archaeology."

In fact, Finkelstein challenges Mazar's entire approach of linking the Bible with archaeological research. "That David took two steps down and four steps up and saw Bathsheba bathing on the rooftop does not prove that you have found King David's palace," Finkelstein told *The Jerusalem Post*. "Biblical archaeology is the only disci-

One of the many things I learned from my grandfather was how to relate to the biblical text. Pore over it again and again, for it contains within it descriptions of genuine historical reality. I work with the Bible in one hand the the tools of excavation in the other. The Bible is the most important historical source and therefore deserves special attention.

pline I know in which time stopped four centuries ago and no progress has been made since then."

Palestinian archaeologists have also weighed in. Hani Nure el-Din, an archaeologist at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem told *The New York Times* that he and his colleagues consider the kind of biblical archaeology practiced by Mazar and others to be an effort by Israelis "to fit historical evidence into a biblical context. "They try to link whatever they find to the biblical narration. They have a button, and they want to make a suit out of it."

One of Mazar's earliest memories is of her grandfather driving off in a jeep with the Israeli archaeologist Yigal Shiloh. In those days, archaeology was closely intertwined with the larger project of building the Jewish state and there was a never-ending hum of excitement about archaeological discoveries. "It was into such a

world that I grew up," Mazar recalls. Her whole family participated in one way or another, including her mother, who, even after divorcing Mazar's father, remained close with Benjamin Mazar. At the age of 11, Eilat took part in her first dig, helping out at her grandfather's excavation south of the Temple Mount just a few dozen yards

Shoham died suddenly of a heart attack in 1997 at the age of 44, two years after Mazar lost her grandfather.

This winter, in the midst of the excitement stirred by her finds, Mazar took time out to plan her son's bar mitzvah. "Family life is very important to me," she explains. "My family life gives me the strength to do what I do. Work is part of my life—I love my work. I see it as a complete life."

The ambitious Mazar is no stranger to controversy. In 2000, she was one of the most vocal critics of the Waqf, the Muslim religious trust that administers the Temple Mount, for carting thousands of tons of earth off the Mount without archaeological supervision in an effort to expand an underground mosque.

Indeed, she was just as critical of the Israel Antiquities Authority, which by law is responsible for any archaeological activity on the Mount: The Authority didn't pursue the matter, largely because the second *intifada* broke out and it had little stomach for enflaming Muslim sensitivities.

Despite the controversy whirling around her, Mazar remains focused on her goal: establishing the authenticity of her find. Back at her office at the Shalem Center, she and her team are processing the finds, dating, recording and properly storing the shards and other artifacts. Once finished, she'll head back to the dig to uncover more of the palace.

Mazar doesn't seem at all surprised that she has found King David's palace. In her view, it's always been there, awaiting an archaeologist who could decipher the clues in the Bible. She's pleased that she's the Fortunate one. "It's nice to touch your history," she says. ☺

from where she is excavating now.

Despite these early experiences, Mazar didn't decide to become an archaeologist until after her army service, when she enrolled in courses at Hebrew University. She calls her years in university an "immense delight," a time when she and her fellow students would run to any place in the country where an excavation, no matter how modest, was underway. Later, she served as a field supervisor for the City of David excavations, directed by Shiloh, the longtime friend and associate of her grandfather. The excavations were conducted on the ridge just south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem—again very near to where Mazar is excavating.

Balancing a career in archaeology with family has not been easy. She married right out of the army, had a child, and then divorced. Later she found new love with Israeli archaeologist Yair Shoham and the couple had three children. Tragically,