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2,000-year-old
Pilgrimage Road

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2,000-year-old Pilgrimage Road to Temple Mount opens to public after years of digging

Millennia after being buried, street once traversed by millions of faithful from southern end of ancient Jerusalem to Western Wall can once again be walked by visitors

By **ROSSELLA TERCATIN**

For Michael Ganeles and his wife, visiting the City of David in Jerusalem was a must when they took their three children to Israel for the first time from West Hempstead, New York, to celebrate their middle daughter's bat mitzvah.

When the family learned that the site known as the "Pilgrims' Path" or "Pilgrimage Road," a roughly 2,000-year-old stepped street that led up to the Temple Mount from the southern part of the city, would open to the public during their stay, they wanted to be part of it.

"We were looking into the City of David, and when we saw they were offering a first tour [of the Pilgrimage Road] we told ourselves that we had to do it," Ganeles told The Times of Israel last month. "My kids kept on asking when we are getting to see the street."

On January 20, the Ganeles family was among a group of roughly 30 people to take an inaugural walk up the road. Starting from an area where the archaeologists believe the ancient Siloam pool stood at the entrance of the ancient city, in what is today the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, the largely subterranean road runs underneath modern infrastructure for several hundred meters to the Jerusalem Archaeological Garden adjacent to the Western Wall.

Occupying a slope just to the south of the Old City, the predominantly Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan sits on what archaeologists understand to be the most ancient part of the 3,000-year-old city, much of which is today part of the City of David archaeological park. Over the years, excavations across different areas of the site have uncovered extraordinary finds spanning the history of Jerusalem, including the First Temple Period (1000-586 BCE), when a significant portion of the biblical narratives took place, and the Second Temple Period, which lasted until 70 CE.

The Pilgrimage Road, under excavation for some 20 years by archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority, is believed to have been built in the first years of the common era by either King Herod or Governor Pontius Pilate as the leading artery through which visitors ascended to the Temple from the south.

“This is one of the most magnificent archaeological discoveries in Jerusalem in the last decades,” Amit Re’em, IAA chief archaeologist for the Jerusalem District, told The Times of Israel via telephone ahead of the tour. “For the first time, you can see this direct link between the Siloam Pool and the Temple Mount, and the street was sealed under the modern city for thousands of years.”

Uncovering the road has not come without controversy. The East Jerusalem site is in an area considered by Israel to be an integral part of the capital but recognized by much of the international community as under Israeli occupation.

The archaeological park is supported by the City of David Foundation, or ELAD, which operates with the controversial mission of strengthening Jewish presence in the city’s Palestinian neighborhoods.

The excavation itself was opposed by many Palestinian residents living in the houses above the underground site, as they charged that it would damage the buildings, an accusation firmly rejected by the archaeologists, the City of David and ELAD.

In 2019, then-US ambassador David Friedman symbolically sledgehammered open an ersatz wall to mark the opening of a portion of the road, drawing criticism for the act that many saw as illustrative of the first Trump administration’s attitude toward the city’s disputed status.

Today, the street is enclosed by a tunnel of concrete and metal to support the houses and streets above. While experts estimate that based on the exposed end of the road adjacent to the Temple Mount, the original street was about eight meters (26 feet) wide, only a portion of it has actually been uncovered.

In some places, the remains of the stores lining the street are still visible. Among other things, the archaeologists uncovered a small mikveh, or Jewish ritual bath, and a podium that might have been used for announcements or ceremonies, such as the reading of a Torah scroll.

Jewish and historical sources describe how, toward the end of the Second Temple Period, millions of pilgrims would flock to Jerusalem for the annual festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, as the city and the Temple reached the apex of their splendor after Herod renovated and expanded them.

Part of the Pilgrimage Road is paved with massive Herodian stones that are still intact, while in other parts, the archaeologists were unable to locate the 2,000-year-old stones.

“It is possible that the reason why they are so well preserved is that actually the road was not in use for such a long time,” explained tour guide Ariana Ohayon. “In the year 70 CE, Jerusalem was destroyed [by the Romans]. The road was covered.”

Originally from New Jersey, Ohayon moved to Israel 11 years ago and has been working as a guide at the City of David for six years.

She described the experience of leading her first group as exciting and “a bit nerve-wracking” as she walked with a Hebrew Bible in her hands, conveying the deep meaning that she felt in going through the site as a Jew, two millennia after the destruction that sent her people into exile.

Joining Tuesday's group were tourists from abroad, mainly from the United States, such as the Ganeles family, as well as local English-speaking Israelis. Additional tours were organized in Hebrew and other languages.

Leah Cohn, a resident of the settlement of Efrat, was pleasantly surprised to learn that the tour, which she joined to celebrate her 52nd birthday, was the first to be open to the public.

"It's my first time at the City of David, even though I have been wanting to come for a long time. It's a miracle," she said.

Even before it was open to the public, the Pilgrimage Road was traversed by foreign dignitaries interested in understanding more about the connection between Jerusalem and the Scriptures.

Notably, in September, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio attended the site's inaugural ceremony.

Visitors who pay an entrance fee for the City of David can now book tours or explore a section of the road by themselves. To see the road in its entirety, visitors must purchase a ticket that also includes entry to the Davidson Center, which manages the Jerusalem Archaeological Garden next to the Western Wall.

According to Ohayon, the tour aroused great interest.

"The first English one filled up, so they opened a second one for today that also filled up," she said.

Also among those who joined was Jonathan Rouz, a Swiss native who has been living in Jerusalem for the past four years.

"It's a very exciting moment to go to this pilgrimage road, which [feels] like the Bible, and to connect to the ancient remains we find," he said.

Rouz described himself as "of a Protestant background."

He said that as a Christian, he felt a strong connection with Jewish history.

"Everything in the New Testament is from the Jews," he said. "We love the Jews, we love the State of Israel, and we are happy to be here."

At the end of the path, which is about 600 meters (roughly 2,000 feet) long, the group emerged next to the southern part of the Western Wall, beyond the plaza, in an area currently being excavated.

Many took time to look at the archaeologists digging and sifting through the dirt, and witnessed with excitement as the workers found some pottery shards to preserve.

"It was just the biggest honor to be among the first people to ReWalk these steps," said Shira Greenspan, a resident of the central Israeli city of Modiin. "I thought it was just like a perfect blend of experiential, funny, and meaningful. It did not feel dry; it felt alive and real. You're suddenly connected across thousands of years. It's just breathtaking."

"To be here with Jews and non-Jews from all over the world makes you feel like you are a little stone in a big story," she added.