

Arbel National Park and Nature Reserve



and Nature Reserve

A sheer cliff rising majestically above the Sea of Galilee with a magnificent view of the Golan Heights and Mount Hermon; an ancient community that left remnants of its fine synagogue; trails to a cave-fortress nestled in the rock – these are the Arbel: a nature reserve and national park, a jewel of nature and landscape and an ancient heritage site unparalleled in Israel.



The Arbel Valley, seen from the Horns of Hittin

Geography

Arbel National Park and Arbel Nature Reserve are located in the eastern Lower Galilee, on the Arbel Plateau – a basalt and limestone highland sloping moderately upward from the southwest to the northeast. The western, lower part of the plateau is the fertile Arbel Valley, home to three farming communities: Moshav Arbel, Kfar Zetim and Kfar Hittin.

Along the Arbel Stream, most of which passes through the national park, a number of springs emerge. The largest of these is En Arbel (Ein Hamam) near the Bedouin village of Hamam. The Arbel Stream begins near the town of Eilabun (located above the Bet Netofa Valley) and ends near the community of Migdal (in the Ginnosar Valley). The remnants of a number of ancient flour mills and aqueducts dot the stream. Near one small spring near En Nitay are remnants of pomegranate, fig and citrus orchards and of vineyards.

The Arbel Plateau ends at a limestone and dolomite cliff that towers over the Ginnosar Valley and the Sea of Galilee. The highest point of the cliff, Mount Arbel (181 meters above sea level), rises some 390 meters above the Sea of Galilee. The cliff was created as a result of the Syrian-African Rift and the geological faults that produced the valleys.

North of the Arbel Stream rises another impressive cliff – Mount Nitay (98 meters above sea level). It is also within the Arbel reserve, but is off-limits to visitors in order to protect its flora and fauna.

The Arbel reserve encompasses 1,842 dunams (about 460 acres) around the Arbel Cliff, and the national park has an area of 8,509 dunams (about 2,127 acres).



9.10 map: Eco-Geo Info, Center: GIS unit, Israel Nature & Parks Authority

Information *3639

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Flora and Fauna

Many species of mammals find shelter in the national park, taking advantage of its water sources and rocky hideaways. The most common are wolves, hyenas and martens. Families of hyrax inhabit the cliffs and various species of bats hide during the day in the caves. They include the European free-tailed bat (*Tadarida teniotis*), Egyptian slit-faced bat (*Nycteris thebaica*) and the mouse-tailed bat.

Lesser kestrels (*Falco naumanni*) can be found during nesting season in the more remote cliffs, along with long-legged buzzards (*Buteo rufinus*). The many rock doves in the area gave the lower part of the Arbel Stream its Arabic name, Wadi Hamam (Dove Stream). This is the place to find the blue rock-thrush (*Monticola solitarius*), a bird hardly bigger than a sparrow. The males of this species are gray-blue. In the winter, the wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*), a rare bird with a rather long beak, can be seen 'crawling' along the cliffs as it hunts the insects on which it lives. Its gray feathers make it difficult to spot against the rock wall, except when it spreads its scarlet-daubed wings.

The rock crevices of the Arbel are the only habitat on earth for a small snail, *Cristataria genezerethana*. The shell of this mollusk, between 13 and 20 millimeters long, is ribbed, and is closed with a flap except when the snail partially protrudes from it.

In the nineteenth century, the zoologist Henry Baker Tristram identified dozens of nests of Griffon vultures (*Gyps fulvus*) and cinereous vulture (*Aegyptius monachus*) here, and even reported seeing a large Syrian bear lumbering out of the brush.

The reserve has relatively few trees. The lone carob tree at the top of Mount Arbel, visible for miles around, is a remnant of a species that once flourished here. The slopes are covered with lotus *juzube* trees (*Ziziphus lotus*), with their spiked, crooked branches. Willows also grow along the Arbel stream. The beautiful blue blossoms of the wild hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) appear here in January, and a month later, the crown anemone (*Anemone coronaria*) daubs the slopes red. Pink Egyptian honesty (*Ricotia lunaria*) appears in spring; then comes the turn of the magnificent sun's-eye tulip (*Tulipa agenensis*), hairy pink flax (*Linum pubescens*) and the blue lupine (*Lupinus pilosus*).

Very rare plants find their homes in the rock crevices, such as the splendid centaury (*Centaurea speciosa*), a spiky plant with large pink flowers, and pendulous pink (*Dianthus pendulus*), the ground-hugging *Rosularia inea* with its circle of deep green leaves, white bedstraw (*Galium canum*), as well as ferns, including the southern maidenhair fern (*Adiantum capillus-ceneris*), *Cheilanthes acrostica* and *Cosentinia vellea*.

History

According to a tradition from the Hasmonean period, Arbel was the home of the sage Nitay after whom Mount Nitay was named. Nitay is best known for his adage: "Keep thee far from an evil neighbor and consort not with the wicked and lose not belief in retribution" (Mishnah, Aboth 1, 7). The name Arbel is also mentioned in

Rules of Behavior

- Use marked trails only.
- The trail to the scenic lookout is comfortable and accessible to all walkers. The other trails are for experienced hikers only and require use of hand-holds and cables installed at the site. The 'red' trail is recommended for descent to the fortress. The 'black' trail is recommended for ascent from the fortress.
- A recent trail map is recommended (Lower Galilee, the Valleys and the Gilboa).
- Do not go near the edge of the cliff. Beware of falling and rolling stones.
- On rainy days the trail is wet and slippery. Do not descend the cliff!
- Do not remain in or traverse the national park and nature reserve after dark.
- Rappelling and cliff-climbing is prohibited. Do not climb walls and ancient structures.
- Carry 3 liters of water per day per person. Do not depend on natural water sources for drinking.
- Wear walking shoes and a hat.
- Do not harm flora, fauna or inanimate objects.
- Keep the area clean. Do not bury or burn trash. Please take your trash out with you and dispose of it in a trash bin.



Mount Nitay and the Arbel, looking southwest

Text: Yaacov Shkolnik **Editor:** Dr. Tsvika Tsuk

Translation: Miriam Feinberg Vamosh

Photos: Ze'ev Margalit, Yuval Artman, Itamar Grinberg and Tsvika Tsuk

Consultants: Eti Koriat-Aharon, Abraham Izdarechet and Assaf Dori

Map: Shalom Kveller and Yuval Artman

Production: Adi Greenbaum

the Hasmonean period as one of the conquests of the Seleucid ruler Bacchides on his way to Jerusalem, as his army "...pitched their tents before Masaloth, which is in Arbela, and after they had won it, they slew much people (1 Macc. 9, 2).

The historian of the Roman period, Josephus Flavius, is the only source for a description of the battle between the Galilean Zealots, who barricaded themselves at Arbel, and Herod the Great, in 37 BCE. Josephus relates that Marc Antony had sent Herod to suppress a rebellion by Jews from "the village of Arbella" who were "...lurking in caves...opening up onto mountain precipices [that] were inaccessible from any quarter, except by some tortuous and extremely narrow paths leading up to them; the cliff in front of them dropped sheer down..." (Josephus, War 1: 305, 310). Herod overcame the rebels only after he had the best of his warriors lowered to the caves in cages suspended by ropes, from which the zealots became convenient targets for their fiery brands and arrows. The Zealots fought to the death; Josephus describes one old man who, rather than surrender, closed his ears to the screams of his wife and his seven sons, killed them and threw them into the gorge, jumping after them to his own death.

In the early first century CE, Jesus of Nazareth preached and performed miracles in the Valley of Ginnosar at the foot of the Arbel, moving between Migdal and Capernaum with his disciples and followers. Some Christian traditions locate the site of those miracles in the Valley of Arbel.

In 67 CE, Josephus, who was also the commander of the Great Revolt in the Galilee, fortified the cave-village of Arbel in preparation for the revolt. Findings indicate that the rebels did not make do only with the caves on Mount Arbel. They also barricaded themselves on the slope of Mount Nitay, where a wall was discovered that was apparently their first line of defense against the Romans. The many ardent battles for freedom that took place at Arbel may be the origin of the tradition that the battle of the End of Days will take place there after the coming of the Messiah.

It appears that this early tradition is alluded to at the time of Rabbi Judah Hanasi (second century CE):

"Rabbi Hiyah Rabbah and Rabbi Shimon Ben Halafta were walking in the Arbel Valley at the break of morning before the light of day. They watched the dawn as the light began to shine. Rabbi Hiyah, the great one in wisdom, said to Rabbi Halafta, 'Rabbi, so too unfolds the Redemption of Israel – in the beginning, little by little. And the more it progresses, it increases and grows' (Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot, 1:1).

The poet Elazer Hakalir, who lived in Tiberias in the seventh century CE, gave lyric expression to this sentiment: "In the first month/Nissan, on its fourteenth day/He shall his goodness in the Arbel Valley display/ Where Menachem son of Amiel shall hold sway/his vengeance and beauty in full array" (Menachem son of Amiel is a messianic figure).

After the destruction of the Second Temple, a family of priests of the order of Yeshua settled at Arbel. In those days Arbel became known for its production of particularly strong flax, as opposed to Bet She'an, where delicate flax was produced. During the Talmudic period, Arbel was a well-off town with a grand synagogue.

Remnants of the medieval and later settlement have been identified at Irbid Ruins, on the northern outskirts of Moshav Arbel. Some say that ancient Arbel was located at Vradim Ruins (Hamam Ruins) on the eastern slopes of Mount Nitay, near the stream, and that it moved to the site



Mount Nitay, view from a cave in the Arbel Cliff



The Arbel Cliff, the Ginnosar Valley and the northwestern Sea of Galilee

where Irbid Ruins now stand during the Middle Ages. Medieval Jewish and Muslim travelers located at Arbel and its surroundings the tombs of various revered figures, albeit without historical foundation.

Sites in the Reserve and the National Park

The Ancient Synagogue

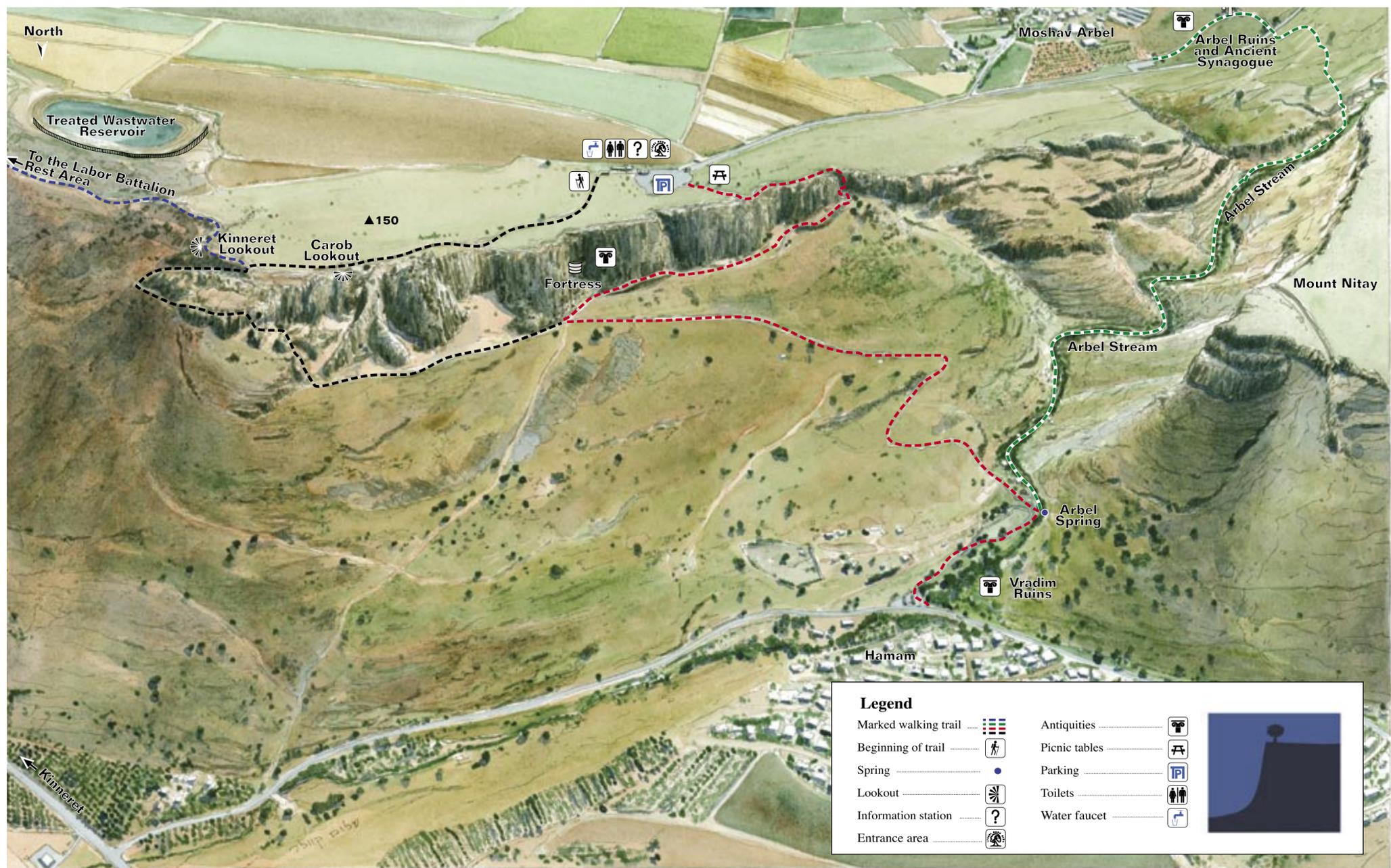
Remains of the magnificent ancient synagogue were first discovered in 1852 by the explorer and scholar Edward Robinson. It has been excavated a number of times, most recently from 1987 to 1989 by the late Dr. Zvi Ilan, in cooperation with Abraham Izdarechet.

The synagogue was built from large limestone blocks without mortar. It stood out against the homes of the ancient village, which were built out of black basalt rocks, the rock most common in the region. The construction style and the findings within the synagogue, which was built in the center of the ancient village, have led scholars to conclude that it was built in the fourth century CE in at least two phases. The synagogue is believed to have continued in use until the eighth century CE.

The synagogue's ancient phase consisted of a hall with three rows of columns in a U-shaped formation. The columns supported a second-story gallery. The corner columns were carved in the shape of a heart and the rest stood on square pedestals. The ground-floor columns bore Corinthian capitals, and those of the gallery – Ionic capitals. Many benches lined the walls. The floor of the hall was about 1.5 meters lower than the threshold, perhaps an allusion to Psalm 130:1: "Out of the depths have I called Thee, O Lord." A niche with a small door, hewn in the eastern part of the northern wall, may have been the synagogue's charity box.



Caves in the Arbel Cliff



The synagogue's façade faced east, which conformed to Jewish law but was a rarity in Galilean synagogues. The façade apparently had one doorway hewn out of a single rock, of which one very impressive pillar remains. Other parts of the doorway, adorned with vegetal patterns, are still scattered around. A large courtyard east of the building was paved with basalt slabs.

The early building seems to have been destroyed at some point, replaced by a new synagogue apparently in the sixth century CE, built of mud-bricks, some of which are still visible. The later synagogue is very different from its predecessor, although the builders use many items from the older structure (integrated into the foundations of walls). The main changes were the addition of round niches in the southern wall, facing Jerusalem for the Torah shrine and a platform for Torah-reading. The stone flooring was also renewed. A doorway added in the northern wall alludes to the construction of another façade that transformed the building's axis from lengthwise to broad, giving it the north-south orientation more common to Galilean synagogues. The courtyard was extended northward and abutted two lengthwise halls with vaulted roofs.

The synagogue was apparently destroyed in a fire in 749 CE, perhaps resulting from the earthquake that destroyed many sites along the Syrian-African rift in that year. Jewish sources call the quake "the earthquake of the seventh year" because it occurred in a Sabbatical year.

The Fortress and the Caves

Rock-hewn steps descend from the top of the Arbel Cliff to the trail leading to the Cave Fortress (Qala'at Ibn Ma'an). The huge walls that were built in front of the caves, consisting of courses of black basalt and limestone, are remnants of a fortress apparently built here in the seventeenth century by Ali Beq, the son of the Druze emir Fahr ad-Din, a scion of the Ma'an family. The fortress, built as a military stronghold, had a controlling view of the Arbel Valley and the roads leading through it, near the sacred Druze center of Jethro's Tomb on the western edge of the valley.

A description of the fortress appears in the writings of the seventeenth-century traveler Evliya Çelebi: "At the distance of a cannon's shot west of the city of Tiberias is an exposed cliff rising to great height in which is a fortress the Arabs call Qala'at Qa'aqa [fortress of crows]...Druze, the people of Ma'an's son, hid [there] after they raided Migdal. Kúcuħk Ahmed Pasha [the ruler of Damascus] sent an army against them that hewed a shaft from the top of the high mountain and dropped fire into these caves. Those inside died in panic and fear and the caves were securely conquered."

The construction of the fortress in the cliff, which included a magnificent staircase and a protected gateway, involved basic changes in one of the ancient cave complexes, which were hewn on four levels. Coins and Jewish ritual immersion baths from the Hellenistic period were among the finds in the caves inside the fortress.

The Arbel Cliff featured eight cave complexes (they can be seen at the foot of the cliff as you walk the path to the fortress).

Some of the caves are natural, karstic caves, which were hewn on a number of levels to make them suitable for habitation. They are clustered and protected by their cliff-side location. At their center is a



The Cave Fortress (Qala'at Ibn Ma'an)

water system; some have ritual immersion baths. Some were also used in later periods (Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman).

Visitors who view the fortress from the top of the cliff rather than going down to it, can see similar clusters of caves on the slopes of Mount Nitay to the north.

Lookouts and Rest Areas

The Carob Lookout – This observation point at the top of the Arbel Cliff reveals the Sea of Galilee, the Golan, Mount Hermon and the eastern part of the Upper and Lower Galilee. It is dedicated to the memory of Brig. Gen. Yosef Luntz.

The Kinneret Lookout – Located along the 'blue' trail on the eastern slope of the Arbel Cliff, east of the Carob Lookout, this point affords a view of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret) in all its glory, the Golan and the cities of Tiberias and Safed, as well as communities around the lake and on the way to the Upper Galilee.

The Labor Battalion Rest Area – Located at the foot of the Arbel Cliff, near the road around the Sea of Galilee, this rest area is in the remains of a quarry from the 1920s, from which the 'battalion' of road-builders headed by the legendary Joseph Trumpeldor dug the rock for the bed of the Tiberias-Tabgha road.



Doorway of the Arbel synagogue, hewn from a single stone

Touring Routes

The map in this brochure refers to the routes on the Arbel Cliff.

To visit the Arbel Stream along its entire length, use the Lower Galilee trail map.

Please note the recommended way to walk the trails:

The 'red' trail ascent to the entrance area to the fortress and the caves and recommended for ascent. The 'black' trail descends from the Carob Lookout to the fortress and the caves and is recommended for descends only.

To the Carob Lookout

Time: 30 minutes

The route back and forth is accessible to all walkers.

The route begins at the parking lot, reaches the Carob Lookout and returns to the parking lot.

To the Fortress and the Caves

Time: 3 hours

This is a loop trail including a steep descent and ascent. It is suitable for experienced hikers. The recommended route is as follows:

The trail begins at the parking lot and continues to the Carob Lookout (marked in black). From there, it heads west along the edge of the cliff and meets the 'red' trail, which reaches the fortress and the caves. Use the cables and hand-and foot-holds in the cliff. From the fortress, continue east on the 'black' trail back up to the parking lot.

To the Labor Battalion Rest Area

Time: about 2 hours

Note: You should have a vehicle waiting at the Labor Battalion Rest Area.

The trail follows a steep slope.

The route begins at the parking lot, continues to the Carob Lookout on the 'black' trail and continues along that trail for about another 200

meters to its junction with the 'blue' trail. The 'blue' trail reaches the Kinneret Lookout and continues down the slope to the Labor Battalion Rest Area.

To the Arbel Spring

Time: 2-3 hours.

Note: You should have a vehicle waiting on the road near Hamam.

The trail follows a steep slope requiring use of hand-and foot-holds in the cliff.

The trail begins at the parking lot and continues to along the 'black' trail to the Carob Lookout. From there it continues to the caves and down to the Arbel Spring.

To the Synagogue

Time: 30 minutes.

This looptrail is short and easy.

It begins at the small parking lot at the side of the road that skirts Moshav Arbel, reaches the synagogue and the Arbel talmudic-era village, and returns to the parking lot.

From the Synagogue to the Arbel Spring

Time: 1.5-2 hours.

The trail begins at the small parking lot at the side of the road skirting Moshav Arbel. It reaches the synagogue and the Arbel talmudic-era village and continues down a fairly steep path via burial caves to the Arbel Spring (along the 'green' trail).

The Kinneret Lookout was built in memory of Roi Dror by his family and friends in the Tsor scout troop and the Israel Defense Forces Duvdevan unit, with the assistance of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

Roi was a teen who loved nature and open spaces, a boy of inner beauty and happiness, of joy of life and love of humankind, of values, giving and devotion. He was born on March 5, 1983 at the scouts' farm near Kibbutz Ramat Yohanan. He was killed by heat stroke 20 meters from the top of the Arbel Cliff on June 18, 2002, during orienteering training of the Duvdevan unit.

The trail from the Kinneret Lookout to the Labor Battalion Rest Area was also blazed in his memory.