

SAFED

Tours to Safed and the Jewish Holy Places

Walk the narrow alleyways of the Jewish Mystics in Safed in the 16th century. This is known as the Kabbalah based on the book written by Shimon bar Yohai. Tzfat (Safed)

The town of Tzfat is so called because of its location high in the mountains of Upper Galilee. This location made it a safe place for people to live quietly, untroubled by marauding nations, even though they could watch them from their high perch, as they marched, the Egyptians marching to make war on the Babylonians, the Phoenicians on their way to make war on the Egyptians and so on.

They sat safely while nations below them, like Babylon and Egypt clashed in battle for the riches and the strategic value of other towns in Israel, which lay, like a bridge between East and West and North and South. Because they weren't on the main highways, deep ravines separated their town, perched high above all the action and the all-important trade routes, such as the Via Maris.

Having little material wealth and no strategic importance, excepting as a lookout and a refuge, Tzfat held no attraction for the warring nations. They watched the struggles for material power and strategic control over Israel going on below them in silent meditation.

It's no wonder that Tzfat is so named; it means "vantage point". It's also no wonder that Jews fleeing from Roman persecution in the time of the 2nd Temple and in the days of Hadrian took refuge in the caves in the mountains all around Safed.

In the 12th century Safed became the main refuge city of the Crusaders, who called it Saphet. The Crusader king of Jerusalem Fulk, built the main castle in all Galilee at the highest point of the town, because if needed they could hide all their knights in armor safely from the Muslim enemy who in fact, under leadership of Taher e bybar conquered them here at the end of the 13th century and turned it into a Muslim town.

Jewish refugees fled here after the destruction of Jerusalem, by the Romans in the year 70 and turned the town a center of Torah study. These early teachers of the Torah, were known as the Tanaim, the first teachers of Judaism. They lived around Safed, studying and developing the Mishna, the 2nd most important book of Judaism.

The Mishna, a compilation of Jewish customs, based on the Torah, made it possible to follow Jewish Laws, keeping the Jewish People together as a nation, even without the temple and Jerusalem.

One of these Tannaim of the Mishna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, compiled another important book, the Zohar, while living in a cave, hiding from the Romans, who, at the time of Hadrian, forbade the study of Torah.

The Zohar revealed the secret knowledge of the 10 Sefirot, the mystic levels of holiness, to which a person must strive to rise in holiness.

Since then Safed became so strongly associated with Kabbalah, Jewish Mystic ideas contained in the Zohar, that nearly 1500 years later rabbis who had been expelled from Spain in 1492 came to live in Safed, seeking safety from persecution and to be close to the place where the Zohar was written.

Amongst these rabbis was Rabbi Joseph Caro, the compiler of the shulhan Arukh, the book of Jewish observances and Rabbi Arye Luria, the founder of a new mysticism, known as the tikun, the repair, which introduces a new way to understand the observance of Jewish Laws as a method of repairing the wrongs in the world. Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, the compiler of the beautiful prayer "Come my friend to welcome Sabbath the queen" and many other rabbis lived here in the 16th century.

One can visit the synagogues where these great teachers prayed in the 16th century. Today Safed has become famous as an artist's colony where one can see paintings by an artist called the zeigermacher (the watchmaker) who is famous for his Biblical themes painted in miniature cartoon figures.

