

AT

Meqido

AN ANCIENT TRADITION
LIVES ON

*“...And Solomon built cities for his chariots
and cities for his horsemen.”*

[I Kings 9:17-19]





by Tzviah Idan (2015 - All Rights Reserved)

■ photos by Dudu Azulai, Asaf Arez, Shlomi Nissim, Menashe Cohen, Chen Noff, Rick VanLent

***I**t has always been an ideal place for raising horses, and so it remains today.*

The light is soft and warm and the valley lovely and serene, with fertile black soil and well-tended fields of barely and wheat standing beside stately groves of almonds and olives. These trees, burdened with heavy fruit, sway in the steady breeze. The breeze, a welcomed daily visitor, arrives from the great sea that lies beyond the Carmel mountains. Its gentle caress brings relief from the relentless heat.

'Tel' Megiddo, in Arabic 'Tel al-Mutesellim', the site of ancient Megiddo, overlooks this valley, standing off to one side on somewhat higher ground. The valley alongside is known in Hebrew as 'Emeq Yizra'el', which means

'the valley sown by God', [in English this is written as 'Jezreel']. It is perhaps more familiar to many Christians by its old Greek name, Esdraelon.

Regarded today as the jewel of biblical archaeology and protected as a World Heritage Site, 'tel' Megiddo remains the enduring and remarkable witness of this region's turbulent history. Megiddo has always been a site of great strategic importance and it has a long history stretching forward from around 7000 BCE for over six thousand years, until about five hundred years before Jesus.

Canaanites, Egyptians, Israelites, Assyrians, and Persians from the biblical period; Egyptian Mameluks and Mongols from the Middle Ages; and French, Ottoman Turks and

Englishmen from more modern times are among those who made their presence felt there.

Megiddo also offers wonderful panoramic views of many of the Holy Land's best-known historical sites, including the town of Nazareth and Mount Tabor, both just a short drive away.

Horses – that is, war horses, played a pivotal role there from very early on. Those taking an interest in how horses shaped human history will surely name Megiddo as the most significant equestrian site in the entire Near East, if not the world.

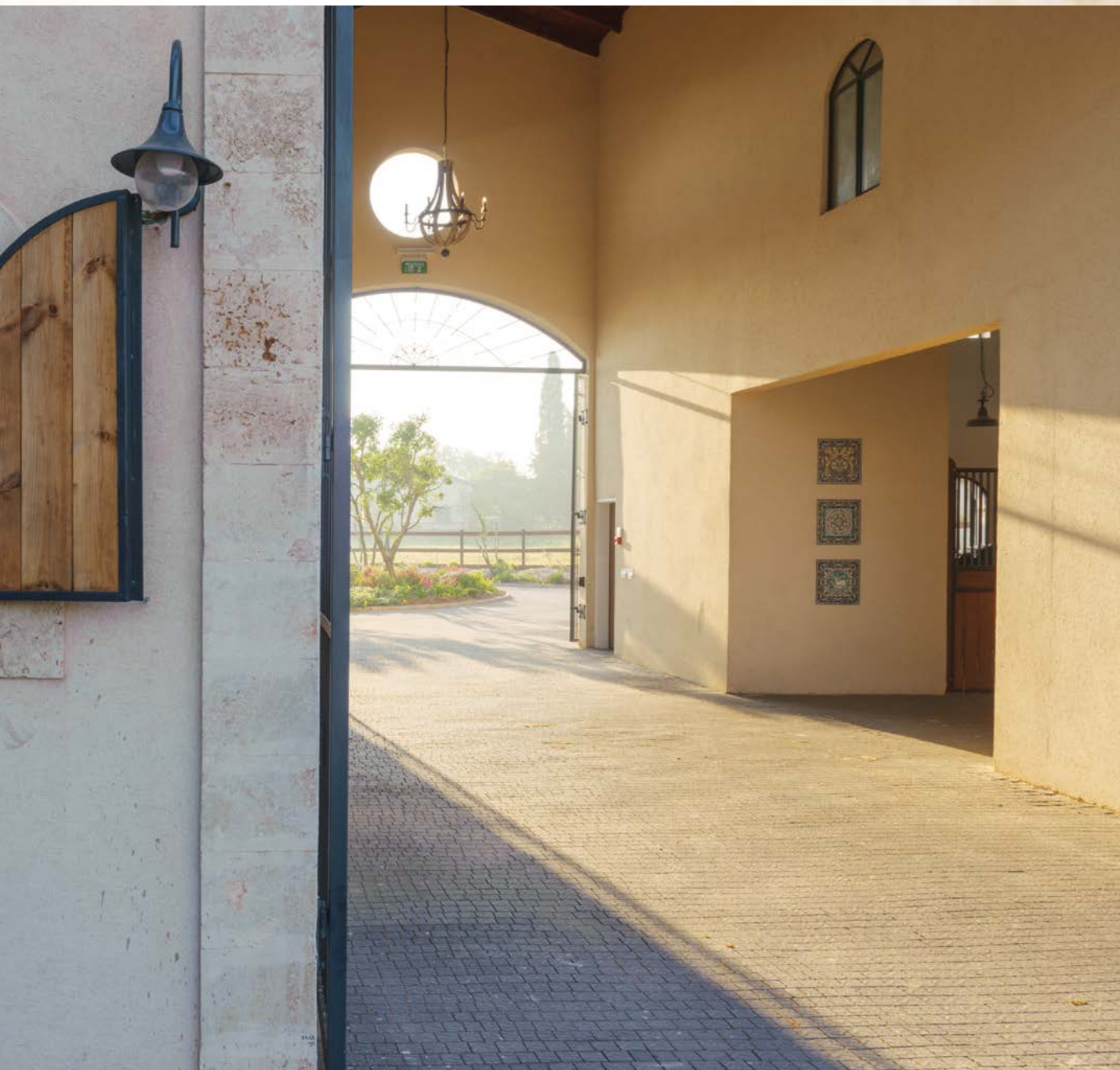
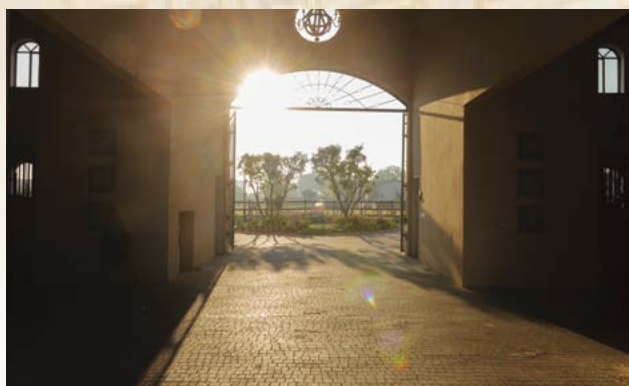
Why so much history at Megiddo? It is primarily because of geography. We are all familiar with the saying "All roads lead to Rome." It is just as true to say that in the ancient Near East, long before there even was a Rome, all roads passed through Megiddo.

Standing at the most important intersection of what is actually the world's oldest intercontinental highway linking Asia with Africa, (or in other words, Mesopotamia with Egypt), Megiddo served its entire lifetime as a garrison or fortress city. Archaeologists continue to dig at this site on an almost yearly basis and have so far uncovered over 20 cities, each one built on top of the other. Every level or 'stratum' represents a different era, a distinct people and a particular culture.

The name Megiddo appears several times in both the New and Old Testaments. In the New Testament it appears as 'Armageddon', a Greek corruption of the Hebrew 'Har' [Mount] Megiddon, and according to the Christian tradition, at some future time it is here that the final battle between Good and Evil will take place at the 'End of Days'.

It is most significant that Megiddo is the sole historical site in Israel that is mentioned in the histories and records of every great power of the ancient Near East.





*“Capturing Megiddo is as good
as capturing one thousand cities.”*

Thutmose III, ca. 1479 BCE



Early Historic Records of Megiddo

We first meet horses at Megiddo in early Egyptian records which date from the 15th Century BCE, when Thutmose III, Egypt's first warrior king, set out to establish Egypt as a regional power. To do so he first had to conquer the Canaanites and their allies at Megiddo and the battle which took place there is known as the Battle of Megiddo.

Both armies fought using horses and light chariots. We know this for certain because the exact details of the battle are incised on the walls of the Egyptian Temple at Karnak, making it the earliest recorded

battle in all of human history. We also know that horses were being bred in an organized manner close by Megiddo because the records also show that Thutmose's forces carried back booty which included not only six stallions and 924 chariots, but also 2,041 mares, 191 fillies and ? [unreadable] colts.

Other archaeological finds referencing horses and Megiddo have been found at or close to the ancient site. A letter written by an Egyptian general about twenty years after the Battle of Megiddo instructs the king of nearby Taanach: “Send me your





charioteers and horses, presents for me, and send all your prisoners. Send them tomorrow to Megiddo."

A second letter, this one addressed to the king of Egypt, is part of a famous hoard of letters unearthed at Tel el Amarna in Egypt, and dates to about fifty years later. It was signed by 'Beridiyya', who apparently was then in charge of the garrison at

Megiddo. Beridiyya's letter opens by first expressing his loyalty to the Egyptian king: "I have obeyed the orders of the king, my lord and my Sun, and I am indeed guarding Megiddo, the city of the king, my lord, day and night ...By day I guard it from the fields with chariots, and by night on the walls of the king..." He then goes on to plead to the king for reinforcements.

The Hebrews in Canaan



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The Egyptian Merneptah Stele which dates from ca. 1209 BCE provides independent extra-Biblical proof that the Hebrews, or Israelites, were present in the land of Canaan from the 13th Century BCE onward, greatly supporting what we read in the Old Testament. Back in those days the Hebrews had no horses and little knowledge of horsemanship. In fact, Hebrew law expressly forbade their keeping horses. This being the case, in their early attempts to conquer Canaan the Hebrews were repeatedly defeated by those who had horses and 'chariots of iron'.

One of the famous incised Canaanite ivories discovered at Megiddo dates from this same general period and shows images of chariot horses with very

refined heads, arched necks, and gaily carried tails in the act of running down their enemies, so one can see what the Hebrews were up against.

The Old Testament books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel describe how the Israelite forces developed specific fighting tactics which took every possible advantage of the natural deficiencies of chariots and horses. These strategies helped them to finally gain control of much of Canaan, including Megiddo.

Under the leadership of Kings Saul and David the Hebrews established the Kingdom of Israel, and to protect this kingdom King David became the first of his people to openly break the religious taboos about keeping horses.





“And they brought horses to Solomon out of Egypt and out of all lands.”

[I Kings 10:28, 2 Chronicles 9:28]



*According to long-standing Hebrew tradition, David's son Solomon kept horses as well and was, in fact, a breeder, connoisseur, and collector of fine horses; a true horse fanatic who once wooed his sweetheart with the words, “**I have compared thee, O my love, to a mare of the chariots of Pharaoh.**” [Song of Songs 1:9]*

The Arabs also have their own extremely rich tradition and histories concerning both Solomon and David, who, in the Islamic tradition are referred to as prophets.

*According to Arab historian Hisham Ibn Al-Kalbi (ca. 819 AD), as quoted in Judith Forbis' The Classic Arabian Horse, Solomon simply followed in his father's footsteps regarding horses because David was also known to have been a horse lover and over time collected one thousand of the very finest. “**When David died,**” Ibn Al-Kalbi explains, “**he was succeeded by his son Solomon who declared: ‘Of all the wealth I inherited from David, nothing is dearer to my heart than these horses.’**”*

Many oral Bedouin traditions also trace their finest desert horses back to horses bred by Solomon. One tradition recalls that Solomon gifted a stallion to the bedouin of the Beni Azd tribe of Yemen, who

was ‘lucky’ and always brought success to he who rode him at the hunt. The horse later gained a good reputation as a sire. When bred to the best and most famous mare of the Beni Amr tribe, he got the colt Al Awaj (or Al Awaji) who later became the most celebrated stallion of the Arab breed.

These old traditions are so well-entrenched today that most horse lovers consider Solomon the most fanatic horse lover of all antiquity, one who appreciated their beauty as much as he did their utility.

*The Old Testament records the Hebrew tradition, which makes many references to the horses of King Solomon. The book of Kings and the book of Chronicles each describe how the Israelite king transformed his people into a true equestrian people by introducing them to the war horse and chariot, and ensuring that they also learned how to use them: “**But of the children of Israel did Solomon make no bondsman: but they were men of war, and his servants, and his princes, and his captains, and rulers of his chariots, and his horsemen.**” [I Kings 9:22]*

Solomon received tribute horses from both allies

and his subjects throughout his forty year reign: "And they brought every man his present, vessels of silver and vessels of gold and garments, and armor, and spices, horses, and mules, so it was year by year." [I Kings 10:25]

Through the strong ties he developed with Egypt and other allies, Solomon gradually came to completely monopolize the regional trade in horses and chariots: "And the horses that Solomon had were exported from Egypt; and from Qeve the merchants of the king would collect them, at a set price. And they fetched up, and brought forth out of Egypt a chariot for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty: and so they brought horses for all the kings of the Hittim, and for the kings of Aram, by this means." [Chronicles II 1:16-18]

The claim is also made that Solomon owned tens of thousands of horses. These were stabled at his capital in Jerusalem and at other strategic locations throughout the kingdom where Solomon established cities and facilities for his chariot corps and horsemen and and a sophisticated infrastructure to maintain them: "And Solomon had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen. And those officers provided stores for King Solomon, and for all that came to King Solomon's table, every man in his month: they lacked nothing. They brought barley also and straw for the horses and swift steeds to the place where the officers were, every man according to his charge." [I Kings 5:6-8]

The most important of all of these chariot cities was the chariot city at Megiddo.





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The Stables at Megiddo

This glorious tradition appear to be reflected in actual 'brick and mortar' by the remarkable finds that form part of 'Stratum IV' at 'tel' Megiddo, which dates back to a time during which it was ruled by the Israelites (the 8th thru the 10th centuries BCE). There is little doubt that the buildings uncovered at this level are stables, and these were composed of standard units which were obviously built by skilled masons according to a uniform plan. Enough stables were identified by archaeologists in what are today designated as the 'northern stables' and the 'southern stables' to house well over three hundred horses, but today only a small section of the 'northern stables' remains exposed as originally excavated.

The accompanying photos show how the stables looked when originally excavated in the late 1920s and also following their partial reconstruction. The famous 1931 model of 'Solomon's Stables', built according to original drawings made at Megiddo when the stables were first discovered, is shown as well.

Each stable unit was organized as follows: On either side of a central passage were standing stalls paved with rough stones (to prevent horses from slipping and to absorb urine). Between each stall and the central passage, was a row of stone pillars alternating with mangers, also made of stone. The pillars served to support flat mud roofs, of which fallen remains were found in several places, and also separated the horses from one another. The pillars were most likely also used as tying posts, as they were fitted with holes in each corner. There was also a large open yard, thought to be a place to exercise the horses, located adjacent to the stables.

Some of the mangers show signs of teeth marks (cribbing) and scientific analysis has revealed high

concentrations of horse urine in the underlying soil. The stables are almost exact replicas of stables uncovered at Gezer and Hazor, both of which are named as chariot cities built by Solomon in the Old Testament.

There is a minority opinion circulating which claims that what we define as 'stables' were actually nothing more than storehouses. But, if this is so, no physical trace of either storage jars or whatever might have been stored in these building has ever been found.

The stables at Megiddo are generally referred to as King Solomon's stables, but are nowadays generally dated to about one hundred years later, to the 8th Century BCE, the period during which King Ahab ruled over the northern Israelite kingdom. Perhaps Solomon's stables still lie untouched, buried underneath, but it makes little difference because Ahab clearly followed Solomon's example and fielded a large standing army based on horsemen and chariot corps. Assyrian archaeological artifacts provide the proof.

The Kurkh Stele, commemorating the Battle of Qarqar [ca. 853 BCE], documents that King Shalmaneser III fought against a coalition of armies that included "...2,000 chariots and 10,000 men of Ahab of Israel...", leaving little doubt that King Solomon succeeded in his efforts to transform the Israelites into excellent horsemen. Royal Assyrian records document that following Sargon's conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel (ca. 722 BCE) a unit of Israelite charioteers was invited to join his own chariot corps. They formed an elite unit appropriately named the 'Samerinaya', after the Israelite city of Samaria.



Back to the Future

It is often said that history repeats itself and today at Megiddo, this would seem to be the case. Once again fine and noble horses can be seen peacefully grazing in the valley below the ancient site.

These are the horses of Ariela Arabians, which moved to their new home at the nearby village of HaYogev in January of this year. Like many of Solomon's best horses, the bloodlines at Ariela Arabians also trace back to Egypt.

The lovely new horse facilities beautifully complement the surrounding countryside, and well they should, because tremendous thought and consideration went into the planning of both the stables and the landscaping at the new farm.

"We wanted to remain in harmony with and true to the ambience of this valley. Even the trees and the plants we chose for our gardens can be found in the Carmel mountains above us," explains farm manager Chen Kedar, "and we chose to build with wood, granite, and stone, all of which are already found here naturally. Only our stalls and stable fittings were imported. These were manufactured and assembled by the world famous company Rower & Rub in Germany. We hope that in a few years, as the gardens mature, that the farm will blend in perfectly with its surroundings."

Ariela Arabians was established over thirty years ago and is greatly respected internationally for its highly acclaimed straight Egyptian breeding program. The farm has consistently produced horses of supreme quality and type which have won prestigious titles at most of the major Arabian competitions around the world, including world championships titles.

*There are approximately thirty Arabians on the farm today and the herd's matriarch, twenty-one year old *The Vision HG, continues to reign over a newer generation of horses in which Chen and Eliko take great pleasure. This includes Vision's own son,*

*the seven year old Dubai Gold Cup winner Al Ayal AA, sired by the rare German stallion *Al Ayad. A highly-decorated international show champion and much sought-after sire at home and abroad, Al Ayal is currently on lease to AlJassimya Farm (Qatar/USA) and is standing at their California facility.*

*The farm's most senior stallion, nineteen year old international sire Laheeb (*Imperial Imdal x *AK Latifa), is now back home after spending many years crisscrossing the globe to sire foals at some of the industry's most important farms in Poland, Egypt, and America. Across the aisle from Laheeb is his own two-year old son and heir apparent, the elegant Israel Gold and Silver Medals winner Laheeb Al Nar AA, out of the homebred multi-champion mare Nashwah AA (*Al Ayad x *Insha Sha Latifa).*

*Chen is especially excited about a horse she describes as the farm's 'new rising star'. This is the stunning three-year old Shams Sharav AA, sired by Dr. Nasr Marei's *Simeon Sharav and out of the American-bred *Saniyyah RCA. He is a many time champion in Israel and at Jericho and his first foal, the 2015 Egyptian Event - Israel Silver Medal Futurity Filly Laneya AA, out of Latifah AA, is exceptional.*

The younger maternal half-sister of Shams Sharav and 2014 Israel Gold Medal Futurity Filly Sofiya AA, sired by Al Ayal AA, will soon follow her sire to America where she is slated to be shown over the next two years while on lease to Jeff Sloan and Midwest Training Centre of Minnesota.

Watching such beautiful horses in such a lovely serene setting, one can easily lose track of time. It seems hard to believe that it is less than one year since Ariela relocated to HaYogev. Chen often finds herself reflecting on the rich culture and heritage surrounding the farm's new location.

"It is truly humbling to find ourselves so close to

Megiddo and all it represents, so many ancient peoples, and such a long equestrian tradition. The valley is so weighted with history that it often seems as if every single ordinary stone has its own story to tell. We feel as if we are continually discovering our own past."

It is somehow fitting that Ariela Arabians, Israel's foremost Arabian stud, now calls this ancient valley home. The farm's own story will no doubt continue towards what will be an even more brilliant future. □



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