

ROCHELLE'S REVIEWS

By Rochelle Miller



SIFTING THROUGH THE SANDS OF TIME WITH THE "JEWISH INDIANA JONES"

Often mentioned in the Torah, the biblical city of Gath was one of the five Philistine city-states established in northwestern Philistia. Referred to as "Gath of the Philistines," it is said to be the home of Goliath and near the location where a blinded Shimon knocked down the temple pillars. A treasure trove of fascinating biblical and other artifacts that beckon to be unearthed, Gath's existence is confirmed by ancient Egyptian inscriptions.

Today, the city's ruins can be found inside Tel Zafit, an Israeli national park, where it has become a major archaeological site. Since 1996, Aren Maeir, professor of archaeology at Bar Ilan University, has been the director of the Tell es-Safi/Gath excavation. Among the remarkable findings dug up by Professor Maeir and his team are a Philistine Temple, the remains of a Crusader-era castle, and myriad ritual items dating back to the Iron Age.

Professor Maeir's archaeological expertise has earned him the nickname of "Israel's Indiana Jones." Prior to Gath, he directed excavations and surveys in Israel, including Jerusalem, Hazor, Yoqneam, Tel Qasile, and Beth-Shean. He has authored more than 100 scholarly articles on archaeology as well as several books. Moreover, his blog gets hundreds of hits each day from people who are curious about the secrets unraveled by archaeology, particularly in Israel, a region rich in archaeological sites. A world-renowned scholar, he has unearthed a remarkable collection of ancient pottery and other artifacts dating back 3,000 years, many of which are on exhibit in his department of Land of Israel Studies at Bar Ilan.

The many people who come to volunteer on his excavations include novices, more experienced students, and individuals in various related fields. Calling it a "multi-disciplinary effort," Professor Maeir shares, "We have had volunteers from Canada, the U.S., England, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Korea. It's a multinational, interreligious experience."

Part of the attraction is the possibility of unearthing a significant artifact. "Sometimes the greenest volunteer excavates the greatest find," says Professor Maeir. "It's a matter of who struck the trowel in the dirt."

But even those who don't strike pay dirt enjoy themselves despite the long hours of heat and physical labor. "Since we started, not a single person ever said he or she didn't have a good time."

"There's no reason to do archaeology if you're not having a good time," the



amiable archaeologist explains. "It's hard out there in the sun; getting out in the summer and running an excavation dig with 100 people is harder than anything I ever did in the army. So you have a lot of fun. The constant feeling of turning over a shovel and knowing there could be something new and unexpected always tickles me, and the finds are exhilarating."

“We use what we find to enhance our understanding of the past.”

Professor Maeir said the volunteers aren't there to prove or disprove the Torah.

"We use what we find to enhance our understanding of the past," he said. "The fact that we found a gate doesn't prove David came to this gate, but it adds color and context to the story and teaches us how people lived at that time. It appears that the ancient Israelites and Philistines were in contact. Although they sometimes fought each other, they also traded with each other and, in some cases, intermarried."

Born in Rochester, New York, Aren Maeir moved to Israel in 1969 at the age of 11, and has lived there ever since. Already at a tender age, he exhibited a robust zest for the great outdoors and discovering the unexpected. Relocating to Jerusalem afforded his parents many opportunities to take young Aren to archaeology and excavation sites, igniting the intelligent and inquisitive youngster's passion to uncover the secrets of the sand.



Following his service in the Israel Defense Forces—where he reached the rank of captain—he pursued his undergraduate and graduate studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and did a post-doctorate at the Ribner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at MIT. Professor Maeir has been teaching at Bar Ilan University since 1992. He and his lovely wife, Adina, are the parents of three sons.

Over the past two decades, Professor Maeir has witnessed how advances in technology have impacted his profession, greatly facilitating the alacrity and accuracy of obtaining results on-site. "Today we have field labs on our excavation site that allow us to get testing

he receives wedding invitations from members of his team, past and present, is indicative of the affinity and respect with which he is regarded.

Professor Maeir extends a warm invitation to our readers to participate on an excavation. "It's a wonderful opportunity for anyone—particularly young adults—to learn about and experience firsthand the history, culture, and beauty of our land in sites we learn about that are mentioned in the Torah." Additionally, Professor Maeir is offering an extraordinary online course in archaeology through Bar Ilan.

To learn more about how you can help support Aren Maeir's historic excavation in Israel, please contact American Friends of Bar Ilan University at 212-906-3900 or visit AFBIU.org. Please visit Professor Maeir's website at gath.wordpress.com for updates about his archaeological projects. ■

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results almost immediately," he shares. "The initial data that we can collect on things such as stones and pottery, or the micro data such as DNA and Carbon-14, is nothing short of miraculous. It allows us to get a rich and immediate reconstruction of daily life from [long] ago, which we upload into the cloud to form an instant digital archive." Moreover, he says it is almost as though the profession he studied some 30 years ago "is practically a different vocation from what we are doing now."

Much like the fictional archaeology professor Indiana Jones, Professor Maeir views his profession as a labor of love—it is a passion he shares with every one of his students and with each member of his team. Whereas most excavations continue for six to eight weeks, each of his excavations is a four-week experience. Additionally, he will make every effort to form a team that is friendly and non-competitive. He feels the shorter time period promotes camaraderie and avoids conflict. That