

In the old quarter of Safed, there are enchanting alleyways, cobblestones with grass peeking through, curved metal grilles on the windows, crammed stone houses, and weather-beaten street lamps. The murmur of Torah study rises from the yeshivas and ancient synagogues, mingling with the hubbub of passers-by and the shouts of children playing in the streets. Hasidim and Mitnagdim rub shoulders with those wearing knitted kippahs and thoroughly secular folk.

This is the only city in the world where ‘the elders of Safed’ is not an abstract concept, but flesh-and-blood people sitting heavily on their balconies, gazing down at the street with a wrinkled smile that holds a secret. Waiting – perhaps for the Messiah to come through that narrow alley on Bar Yochai Street, or perhaps simply for another day to pass. A city of hardship, scarred by disasters, occupations and suffering, yet also one of splendour, blossoming and serenity. A city of synagogues and fruit orchards, of a Crusader fortress, Mamluk mosques and a dormant spring, of a cemetery harbouring secrets and of processions of revellers on their way to Meron. This is a city where, if you listen, you can still hear the voice of Rabbi Joseph Karo speaking with angels; a city in whose alleyways the light of the pillars of fire that preceded Rabbi Moses Cordovero’s bier still shines. Here echo the footsteps of the Ari and his disciples as they descend to welcome the Sabbath in the ‘Field of Holy Apples’, and here artists wander in the cool air, as if within a painting, attuned to the breeze and the patter of rain, whilst the sound of klezmer violins rings out through the alleyways. This is a city where the scars of the War of Independence are still visible in its stones and in its soul, even two generations on; a city of the mundane and the sacred that has yet to learn to preserve its past. A city tentatively taking its first steps into the twenty-first century, with a pedestrianised high street and shops, hotels and guesthouses, industry and tourism, schools and a modern hospital.

And yet, anyone who seeks them will have no difficulty finding its magical roots here. Here they will stand, marvelling at the sight of a place frozen in time, nestled amongst blue mountains and the evergreen expanses of the Galilee.

Safed and its surroundings in ancient times

Burial caves discovered on Mount Canaan and around the Citadel Hill, containing a wealth of archaeological finds, indicate that the Safed area was already inhabited during the Middle and United Bronze Ages (2200 BC – 1200 BC). Evidence of ancient settlements has also been found in the vicinity of Safed (Meron, Rosh Pina, Ramat Razim and others). The rich and unique finds uncovered from the Late Bronze Age in Safed attest to its relative importance during this period, when there was a marked decline in the number of settlements in the mountainous Upper Galilee and other regions of the country, and the centre of settlement shifted towards the coast, the lowlands and the valleys. In the 11th and 12th centuries BC, the tribes of Israel established themselves in the Galilee, following the conquest and burning of Hazor, the principal city of the northern regions of the land.

Safed during the Crusader and Mamluk periods

Safed during the Crusader and Mamluk periods was the last city to be established in the Land of Israel until modern times.

In 1099, the Crusaders arrived in the Land of Israel and conquered Jerusalem from the Muslims. Later that same year, the Crusaders set out to take control of the rest of the Land of Israel. The Galilee fell into their hands in the summer of 1099 and was handed over to the Norman prince Tancred, who was granted the title ‘Prince of the Galilee’.

By 1124, the Crusaders had completed their conquest of the coastal cities, with the exception of Ashkelon. At the same time, the Crusaders also conquered the inland regions, and with the coronation of King Baldwin II (1118), they ruled the entire Levantine coast from Antioch in the north to the Sinai Desert in the south.

Safed became a major urban centre when a large fortress was built on its summit (the remains of which are gradually being uncovered today). The Crusaders began fortifying Safed in 1102, and several decades later, in 1168, King Amalric granted Safed to the Knights Templar. They apparently expanded the fortifications there, and it is possible that a civilian settlement also began to develop in the shadow of the fortress. It is reasonable to assume that Jews also lived in the city at that time, although we have no clear sources on this matter.

In 1187, the Crusader army was defeated by the Muslim forces led by Saladin al-Ayyubi at the Battle of Karni Hittin. Safed held out for over a year until, in the winter of 1188, its defenders also surrendered.

The length of time for which the fortress managed to hold out attests to its military strength and to the fact that it was manned by numerous fighters and well-equipped. The Ayyubids, the successors of Saladin, ruled the Land of Israel as part of their dominion over the regions of present-day Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan.

We know nothing about the Jewish community during this turbulent period; however, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, some twenty years after the Muslim conquest of Safed, travellers and visitors were already mentioning the Jewish community in the city. Sources from that period also recount Jewish settlements in other locations around Safed, such as Yeria, Ein Zeitim, Amuka, Gush Halav and elsewhere. In 1220, faced with the threat of the Fifth Crusade, the Ayyubids reinforced the fortress of Safed for fear that the Crusaders might seize it. Their fears proved unfounded, but the fortress remained in ruins.

In 1240, the entire Galilee was transferred to the Crusaders as part of a political agreement with the Ayyubid ruler of Syria, who was at odds with his counterpart, the ruler of Egypt. Later that same year, the Crusaders began to rebuild the Safed fortress, transforming it into the largest Crusader fortress in the East. There is no information regarding the fate of the city's Jewish inhabitants at that time.

Safed in its Golden Age

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Mamluk Sultanate was in a state of disintegration and struggled to cope with economic and military difficulties, as well as the internal rebellions that were shaking it to its core. The Mamluks, who lagged significantly behind in military technology (they had not widely adopted the use of firearms), found it difficult to withstand the rising power of the Ottoman Empire under Selim I, and thus, between 1516 and 1517, all the provinces of Syria, the Land of Israel and Egypt fell into Ottoman hands.

The transition from the Mamluk to the Ottoman period brought with it a severe upheaval for the Jewish community of Safed (in contrast to that of Jerusalem), which suffered from acts of violence and looting by the retreating Mamluk army and the inhabitants of neighbouring villages. With the support of the Jews of Egypt, the refugees from Safed were able to return to their city and rebuild their lives. The Ottomans introduced a new system of administration and governance that ensured reasonable living conditions and personal security for the inhabitants under a strong and revitalised central authority.

Safed in the Late Ottoman Period and at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

Throughout the seventeenth century, Safed's condition continued to deteriorate until it became a poor and insignificant village, described by one source as a 'pile of ruins' (even though it still served as the seat of the Governor of the Galilee). The early seventeenth century in the Galilee was marked by the ceaseless wars waged by the Druze leader Fakhr al-Din, who sought to take control of the region, against the Ottoman provincial governors and other local warlords. The heavy tax burden, economic hardship, internal strife and migration to other cities eroded the resilience of the Safed community during those bleak years. When news of the hardship reached Jewish

communities outside the Land of Israel (particularly the communities of Venice and Constantinople), they began to organise fundraising campaigns and the distribution of funds to the communities in the Land of Israel. During this difficult period, some eight hundred Jews lived in Safed alongside some four hundred Muslims. In 1655, most of Safed's inhabitants apparently fled from the terror of the Druze conqueror Malham, who destroyed the city and dealt it a severe blow from which it struggled to recover; by the end of the century, the number of Jewish residents was estimated at around one hundred. It was then that Safed's administrative status was downgraded, and it became the capital of a sub-district (having previously been the capital of a district).

Safed during the War of Independence

During the events of 5689 (1929), the Jews of Safed and the 'Haganah' organisation were unable to mount a force to resist the rioters. However, the community, which survived and grew stronger, was able to learn the lessons of these events and those that followed seven years later (5696–5699). Furthermore, the organisational capabilities of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel and of the fighting force at its disposal – in terms of military training, weaponry, troop manoeuvres, command and control – had improved immeasurably. By the outbreak of the War of Independence, the Jewish Yishuv in the Land of Israel was already capable of fielding a significant fighting force against the Arab forces and successfully confronting them in various sectors. At that time, some 1,600 Jews lived in Safed, of whom only about 200 were fit for combat (though not all were armed); to these were added, in the run-up to Operation Yiftach (see below), several hundred Palmach fighters. This was against a population of 12,000 Arabs who fielded a fighting force several times larger, to which were added, in early 1948, hundreds of volunteer fighters from Syria and, subsequently, over 180 volunteers from Jordan and other Arab countries. In the area surrounding Safed, there were three Jewish settlements (Mount Canaan, Ein Zeitim and Biryia) facing an Arab population numbering tens of thousands, whose military strength was reinforced at the end of January by hundreds of fighters from the 'Army of Deliverance' under the command of Adib Shishakli, with further reinforcements to follow.

Safed in the second half of the 20th century

The first half of the 20th century was a difficult period for the city: the First World War, epidemics, pogroms and, finally, the War of Independence left Safed battered and scarred. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, Safed struggled to return to its former glory, and its reconstruction was a slow and tentative process. This fact would become increasingly apparent in the years to come, in the face of the development of the centre of the country and the cities of the Coastal Plain, and the growth of other northern centres that would begin to erode Safed's centrality, such as Kiryat Shmona, Tiberias, Hatzor HaGlilit, Rosh Pina and others.

On the eve of the establishment of the State, some 1,600 Jews lived in Safed; following the flight of Safed's Arab inhabitants during the War of Independence, they became the nucleus of the city's current Jewish community.

Safed's significance, both in historical consciousness and within the settlement pattern of the north at that time, attracted diverse waves of immigration, notably the arrival of Holocaust survivors from Europe as early as 1949, and the immigration of the Tunisian Jewish community. The presence of empty houses (absentee property) also contributed to the growth of the city's population. Over the years, the city grew at a relatively slow pace, and by 1983 its population stood at 15,900. In the early 1990s, the town benefited from the large wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union, and by 2002 its population had reached 28,000.

Over the years, new neighbourhoods have sprung up in the areas surrounding the Old Town and the Artists' Quarter: to the south of the core of the Old Town, the neighbourhoods of 'Darom', 'Shikma', 'Hadar' and 'Baneh Beitecha' were established; to the west and south-west, the Breslov Hasidic neighbourhood, built in the 1970s on the ruins of Safed's ancient Jewish quarter; the

neighbourhoods of 'Ma'or Haim', 'Ganei Hadar' and 'Ofer' (home mainly to immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union, and also including an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood); and, at their foot, a new industrial estate. Adjacent to the old Kiryat Sarah, on Mount Canaan to the east and north-east of Safed, the neighbourhoods of 'Marom Canaan' (Ivikor), 'Ben-Gurion' (formerly the 'Canaan Neighbourhood'), 'Kiryat Chabad', the 'Ramat Razim' neighbourhood—which is divided into 'Ramat Menachem Begin' (in the south) and the 'Yitzhak Rabin Neighbourhood' (in the north)—and the 'Neve Oranim' villa neighbourhood. Safed is home to a regional care home ("Sukkat Shalom"); "Ziv" Hospital, located in Safed, serves the entire northern region; and the Safed Academic College, a branch of Bar-Ilan University, operates in the city. As the district centre of the Northern District, it is home to numerous government offices, alongside nearby military headquarters.

The spectacular views from Safed, the enchanting alleys of the Old City and its historical sites attracted artists and creators as early as the 1950s, and the city's reputation spread far and wide as a city of artists to which many made pilgrimages. This fact, combined with the city's historical significance, attracted many visitors in the 1960s and 1970s, who came to enjoy the cool, crisp mountain air, the tranquillity, the cultural and historical experience, and the Galilean countryside. Thus, Safed's image as a city of art and tourism was established (it should be noted that the city had already taken its first steps towards tourism during the Mandate period).

Over the years, Safed's standing in this regard has been undermined by a lack of municipal and state investment in tourism infrastructure, the shift of the centre of gravity of artistic activity to the centre of the country, the departure or passing of many important artists from the founding generation, the ongoing physical deterioration of the Old City, the emergence of competing and thriving tourist destinations across the country, and the growth of international tourism, particularly from the 1980s onwards.

From «Safed and All Its Paths», published by Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi.

(Translated with DeepL.com)