

Walking the Pilgrims' Road: Shavuot, Jerusalem, and the Journey of Unity

In the heart of ancient Jerusalem, a remarkable pathway has once again opened to the public, the Pilgrims' Road of the City of David. Stretching upward from the Pool of Siloam toward the Temple Mount, this excavated street invites visitors not only to walk through history, but to step into one of the most profound rhythms of Jewish life in antiquity. As Shavuot approaches, the festival of first fruits and one of the three biblical pilgrimage festivals, this rediscovered route offers a powerful lens through which to understand the spiritual and communal heartbeat of ancient Israel.

Shavuot was not merely an agricultural celebration; it was a national gathering. As described in the Mishnah (Bikkurim 3:3), the commandment to bring first fruits to the Temple applied broadly to men and women alike participating in this shared act of devotion. Jerusalem became the focal point of a people united in purpose. In this sense, the modern experience of walking the Pilgrims' Road echoes that same spirit: individuals from diverse backgrounds ascending together toward a place of meaning, connection, and identity.

The symbolism runs even deeper. Jerusalem itself has long represented unity. When King David established it as the capital, he chose a city situated on the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, transforming it into a shared space rather than a tribal possession. It became, and remains, a meeting point. Today, as visitors from across the world walk this ancient road, the city continues to fulfill that role, bringing people together across time, geography, and belief.

The journey begins at the Pool of Siloam (Shiloah), located at the southern end of the City of David. This pool, currently still undergoing excavation, was not only a vital water source but also a place of preparation. Fed by ancient aqueducts whose flowing water can still be seen today, it sits at the natural convergence of the Kidron Valley, the Central Valley, and the Valley of Ben Hinnom a geographical gateway into the city. For ancient pilgrims, this was the point of arrival, refreshment, and spiritual readiness before the ascent.

From here, the path rises.

The Mishnah and Talmud even consider the role of children in this journey. According to Mishnah (Chagigah 2a), children were to be included in the pilgrimage, unless they were too young to participate. The debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel hinges on a vivid image: is a child obligated when he can ride on his father's shoulders, or when he can hold his father's hand and walk the distance? Significantly, this journey was measured from the Pool of Siloam upward. The pilgrimage was not only a physical ascent, but a formative experience, embedding memory, identity, and belonging from a young age.

As one begins to walk the Pilgrims' Road today, a subtle but striking feature emerges: the steps are uneven. Each wide step is followed by a narrow one, creating a natural rhythm that slows the walker down. This is no accident. The ascent to the Temple was not meant to be rushed. It was a journey of reflection, intention, and spiritual preparation.

It is here that the ancient words of the Psalms come alive. Many of the most beloved passages begin with the phrase *Shir HaMa'alot*—"A Song of Ascents." Standing on this very road, the phrase takes on new meaning. One can almost hear the echoes of pilgrims reciting:

"A song of ascents: I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem... Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound together." (Psalm 122)

The geography and the poetry converge. The ascent is both physical and spiritual, each step drawing the pilgrim closer not only to a destination, but to a sense of unity and purpose.

And yet, this road is not only a story of celebration, it also bears witness to destruction and resilience. Beneath the stones runs a drainage channel described by Josephus, used as a hiding place by Jews during the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Archaeologists have uncovered coins fused into the pavement by intense heat, along with layers of ash—silent testimony to the fire that consumed the city.

Above and around these remains are further layers of history. Remnants from the Roman and Byzantine periods include the apse of a church commemorating the miracle associated with the Pool of Siloam, along with intricate mosaics. Shafts from the early Islamic period intersect with earlier infrastructure, revealing how each generation adapted and reinterpreted the city. Jerusalem, as always, is layered—each era leaving its mark while building upon the last.

The Pilgrims' Road itself was once a bustling artery of life. Archaeological findings suggest areas of commerce, including weights used for trade, open plazas for gathering, and even what may have been a "claimants' corner," referenced in the Talmud, a place where lost items were announced and returned. This was not only a sacred path, but a social and economic hub, a place where people met, exchanged goods, shared stories, and experienced community.

To walk this road today is to step into that continuum.

As Shavuot approaches, a time when ancient pilgrims would have carried their first fruits to Jerusalem in gratitude and celebration, the reopening of this path feels especially meaningful. We can once again trace their footsteps, beginning at the waters of Shiloah, ascending slowly and thoughtfully, and carrying with us our own offerings, perhaps not of figs or barley, but of prayers for hope, and a longing for unity.

In a world often marked by division, the Pilgrims' Road offers a different vision: a shared journey toward something greater than ourselves. Just as it did 2,000 years ago, it draws people from far and wide, inviting them to walk together, to remember, and to reconnect.

And perhaps that is its greatest gift, not only a path through ancient stones, but a living reminder that Jerusalem, at its best, is a place where many become one.





