



Photo courtesy of Shay Bar

# WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ADAM ZERTAL

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. SHAY BAR

SUZANNE LATTIMER  
WITH SHAY BAR  
AND ABIGAIL LEAVITT

*Abigail:* To start, please introduce yourself and talk a little bit about your background and your connection with Adam Zertal.

*Shay:* My name is Shay Bar. I am a 53-year-old archaeologist, now at the University of Haifa. I finished my PhD in 2008. It was dealing with the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I sites in the Jordan Valley and eastern Samaria. Before that I had a career in the Israeli army for 14 years, followed by a management position in a high-tech company.

Archaeology has been my hobby since I was a child, and I am now pursuing my hobby. I began studying during my army service and received a BA in logistics at Bar-Ilan University and an MBA in business management at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. When I came to the University of Haifa after I left the army, I wanted to do a BA in archaeology, but they let me start as an archaeologist because I already had a master's degree.

I met Adam Zertal on my first day at the University of Haifa, when I was still in the business world. I had a half day off, and when I came to study, one of the lessons was biblical archaeology with him. Two weeks later, he asked me to join his Manasseh Hill Country Survey. After that, we walked in the fields together for something like 50 days every year (almost every Friday) for about 12 years. He became my supervisor for my PhD. When I began working with him, I first did all the logistics of the survey, but later I was responsible for the publication of the survey findings, and in his last years of surveying, we were actually working together on everything. When he passed away seven years ago, it was a complete surprise.

The Manasseh Hill Country Survey started in 1978, with the purpose of surveying most of Samaria and the Jordan Valley by foot. It started in the Dothan Valley and eventually expanded to northern Samaria, and then to the allotment of Manasseh west of the Jordan River. We are now in 2023. It's been more than 45 years, and that's actually the longest ongoing archaeological project in Israel and the longest survey worldwide.

*Abigail:* I first met Shay in 2019 while I was with the ABR team wet-sifting material from Adam Zertal's Mount Ebal excavations. Shay came to visit our project and see what we were finding. I was already familiar with his work, having used the *Manasseh Hill Country Survey* multivolume publication\* extensively in the research for my master's thesis.

After I moved to Israel in 2021 to pursue my PhD at Ariel University, I discovered that Shay was still conducting the survey, and I asked if I could join his team. I was delighted when he agreed. One of the great things about doing my PhD in Israel is that I get to work with and learn from some of the top archaeologists in the country, including Shay. I have been impressed by his knowledge, his work ethic, and his high-quality archaeological publications.

The team is currently surveying Mount Kabir, which lies in the biblical heartland and is part of the region on which I am focusing my studies. That means that we have the potential of finding unknown sites that may directly impact my PhD dissertation as well as archaeological research in general. It is an amazing thing to be part of this incredible archaeological project that has been ongoing for so long. I was grateful for the opportunity to interview Shay to hear him share a bit about the project and how important it is for archaeological research in the land of the Bible.



*Abigail:* What was it like surveying those areas with Adam?

*Shay:* When Adam was there, there was no reason to postpone a survey day. It could be minus ten degrees or storming with floods, and he would say, “Okay, if we can’t survey, at least we can see the floods.” Whenever you did not write to him to tell him that you were coming, he would call on Wednesday, two days before the survey, to ask, “Are you coming?” You needed to email him, send a carrier pigeon, or leave a notice! If you said something like “I’m sorry, my niece is getting married,” he would say, “What? That’s no reason to miss a survey! I mean, if *you* are getting married, okay, maybe change the wedding date.” And so, the survey was like a religious activity. I would say it was a ceremony. It was definitely a cultural, friendly activity like a family gathering. The survey team was indeed a family; it is still a family, and this is how he looked at it. This is what caused him to do the survey for so long. It is important to emphasize that in a survey, you don’t come across many nice finds. It’s very rare to find something really nice. You find small sherds; you find a wall here or there. It’s not like an excavation, where many things pop up.

Usually, people don’t do surveys, and especially not long-lasting ones, because of their lower cost-effectiveness. In the academic world, it’s not beneficial. It’s better to go excavate a site and get interesting results. With excavating, you’ll probably get more reliable answers concerning the specific

questions you had before starting. Meanwhile, surveys are long endurance projects, and you don’t see many of them today. Adam was unique in this aspect.

*Abigail:* Was there a reason you worked so long with Adam?

*Shay:* I was the first one to confront him, and he liked it, even if I said things that he didn’t like. He explained, “I have many yes-men that come, and they’re afraid to say what they think.” That’s how I came to work with him. When he said, “I need someone who will prove me wrong,” I replied, “I can’t prove you wrong—I’m a first-year student in archaeology and you are a professor of archaeology!” But eventually I did prove him wrong sometimes, mainly when he became my PhD supervisor, but we also became friends.

*Abigail:* So he was more concerned with finding the truth of the matter than with upholding his own view?

*Shay:* I think so, and I think it’s very important because not many people are that way. Sometimes you have your idea and you’re fixed to it, but he was willing to change his mind. Although, I’m not sure about his “baby,” the Iron Age I period—about how happy he would be with changing his ideas about that. But for the survey, which was the main project of his life, he was very positive and open-minded.



Photo courtesy of Shay Bar

**Above:** Adam Zertal (seated) and Shay Bar (far right) on an Iron Age fort in eastern Samaria. For almost 40 years of his life, Zertal, the founder of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, spent his Fridays walking the hills of Samaria. His crutches, necessary due to a war injury, were his constant companions.



*Abigail:* We're talking mostly about the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, but what are some of the other archaeological projects that you're currently working on?

*Shay:* I'm currently working on too many projects! That's my problem. Most of my work is focusing on Samaria and the Jordan Valley, but I have at least two projects that are in the boundaries of the "Green Line."

The "Green Line" is a demarcation created during the 1949 Arab-Israeli War armistice between Israel, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. This boundary has undergone adjustments and controversy over the past seventy-four years.

The biggest one is Tel Esur. We started excavating there in 2010, again in the footsteps of Adam. He excavated three years there, but he found Middle Bronze Age material, which was not the focus of his research. So, we've continued the excavation after him. It's a community excavation with school children, and it's now in its 13th year. It will probably continue at least one or two years more. What we have excavated until now, and are focusing on, and have published, is from the Late Bronze Age. We have discovered a very important destruction of an Egyptian-connected Canaanite caravan station on the *Via Maris*. We also exposed, in the lower tell, an Iron Age administrative complex that probably dates to the time of King Jeroboam II of the kingdom of Israel. But the focus of this public-outreach community project will probably shift in a year or two from the site of Tel Esur to the site of el-Ahwat, also excavated by Zertal, which is in the same region.

I also excavated Tel Shiqmona in Haifa Bay more than ten years ago. We are near the completion of the final reports now.

I am also surveying in other regions of Israel, because I cannot survey only in one place. I'm surveying with Dr. Yitzchak Yaffe, from the Zinman Institute of Archaeology of the University of Haifa. We are surveying in the Carmel Mountains, in an area called the Maharal Valley, which is a small inner valley not far from the seaport of Tel Dor. This project is very interesting for me because Dr. Yaffe and I come from two completely different survey disciplines. I am the more conservative walk-in-the-field type of surveyor, where you find the sites and you document them. But he's been surveying for most of his professional life in China, and there they do statistical surveys. So, they plot off areas, collect everything in them, and do statistical analyses of the finds. This joint survey is a very interesting project because of the different methodologies.

And in Samaria and the Jordan Valley there are several excavation projects. I started the main one, the Fazeel Valley Regional Proto-historic Project, in 2008. It was part of my PhD at the time. I excavated six sites from the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age I periods. It is an ongoing project, and we have some tremendous new finds. In fact, a big question of the Chalcolithic period is to figure out where metalworkers of that era produced their very high-quality copper objects, like the fantastic, beautifully made crowns, mace heads, and scepters found in the Cave of the Treasure. I have a collaboration with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the Israel Antiquities Authority experts, and we think the production site could be in Fazeel. So it is a very important site. We will keep working there for many years.

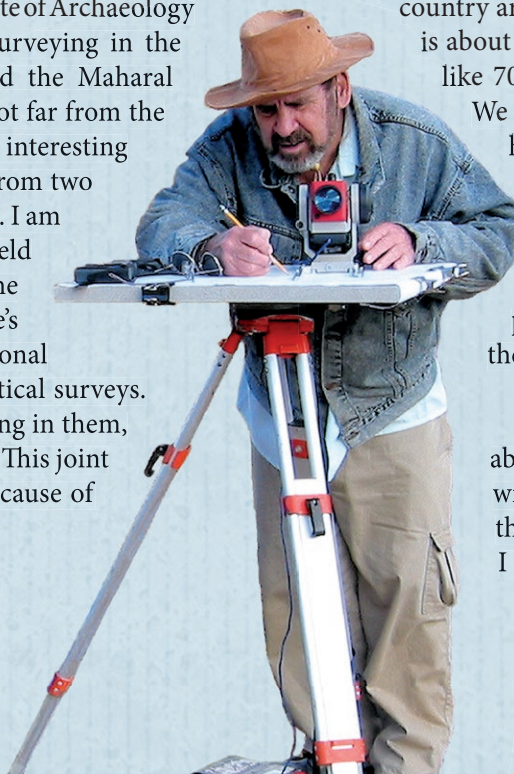
In 1961 an astonishing hoard of carefully hidden copper objects was discovered in a cave, subsequently known as the Cave of the Treasure, in Nahal Mishmar (also known as Wadi Mahras) off the western shore of the Dead Sea. The assemblage contained ceremonial and ritualistic objects dating to 4500–3500 BC, the Chalcolithic period (or Copper Age). It was an especially amazing discovery because of the beautiful and advanced craftsmanship the pieces demonstrated.

*Abigail:* So, let's go back to the Manasseh Hill Country Survey. Can you give a brief explanation and overview of what it is and what its goals are?

*Shay:* In 1978, Adam Zertal started surveying northern Samaria. His first goal was to survey the Dothan Valley as part of his PhD. Then he expanded the project. The Manasseh hill country was like gold. That's how I feel now when I'm there. I mean, everything is new. Those who initially surveyed that region in the past didn't walk the entire area by foot but just made quick visits to the known sites. We found so much more, and this is one of the important things with the Manasseh hill country area. It's not the number of sites, though that is about four thousand, but the fact that something like 70 percent of them were not known before. We are changing what we know about the history of the region.

*Abigail:* Adam began working on the Manasseh Hill Country Survey in the late 1970s, but how long have you been participating, and how long have you been the head archaeologist on the project?

*Shay:* I've been there since 2005. That makes about 18 years, 11 years with Adam and 7 years without him. So, seven years I've been leading the project. For a year, before he passed away, I codirected the project with him.





*Abigail:* Most people probably don't know how a survey works, so could you explain what a day on the survey looks like?

*Shay:* Well, a typical survey day now is different from and maybe a little more time-effective than the typical survey day in Adam's time. There is less storytelling and less communal eating and coffee drinking. That is unfortunate, because he was a very good storyteller.

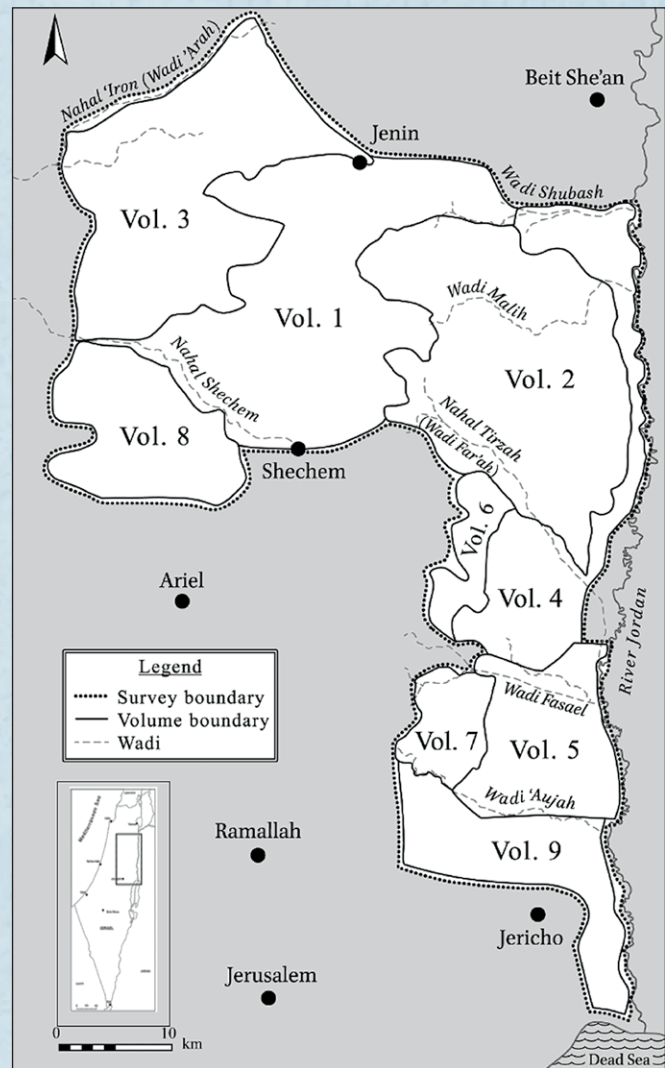
We meet very early in the morning and then drive to the area of the survey. We decide beforehand the exact area we want to survey. The important thing is that we walk everything by foot, except for places where security does not allow us to do it, such as in minefields or on high cliffs. Generally speaking, we are supposed to walk the entire area by foot, and when I say walk "by foot," what I mean is that we form a line where we each stand between 65 and 100 feet apart (20 to 30 meters), the distance depending on the terrain and on the visibility. We then start walking in a line and we look for ancient remains. We look for everything, which could include artifacts anywhere from flint from prehistoric periods to World War I remains. When we find something, we dive into understanding what we found. If it's an ancient site, we ask ourselves, "Did people live there or do some activity there?" We fully document it, and, of course, later we publish it. We try to date these ancient locations according to the finds, which turn out to be mainly flint or pottery. We give a detailed description of the site and take photos. We take measurements and map the place. And eventually, back in the lab, we complete the research and prepare the data for proper publication.

*Abigail:* So, the survey has been going on for over 40 years. How much territory has been covered?

*Shay:* It's something like eight or nine percent of the area of the state of Israel. That's a lot, and it takes a lot of time. That's why the survey has taken 45 years and is still ongoing. And, of course, the methodology of the survey has changed over time. The advent of the Global Positioning System (GPS) made life much easier because now we are much more accurate. When you work for forty-something years, things change in the world of archaeology.

*Abigail:* How many sites has the survey team documented?

*Shay:* Well, the first problem is deciding what qualifies as a "site." In the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, we typically identify "sites" as places where people lived, as opposed to "features," which are man-made structures that people don't live in, such as agricultural installations, cisterns, and some caves. We discovered about four thousand sites, and we documented something like the same number of features.



**Above:** The Manasseh Hill Country Survey covers a large portion of Israel and divides that portion into nine geographical units. The finds from each unit are published in a separate volume. When the survey is complete, the publication will be a ten-volume series, with volume ten serving as a summary of the other nine volumes.



**Above:** In 2010 Shay Bar (left) was visited by Adam Zertal at the Tel Esur (or Tell el-Asawir) excavation. Discoveries there of multi-period cities and a huge Early Bronze Age metropolis give evidence of what Canaan was like prior to the Conquest.





Photo courtesy of Abigail Leavitt

**Above:** Abigail Leavitt (foreground) with the Manasseh Hill Country Survey in 2021. Over 40 years after its beginning, the survey continues, now under the leadership of Shay Bar. Some of the original team members still participate, while other new members have joined more recently.

*Abigail:* During Adam Zertal's work on the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, he discovered a site on Mount Ebal, which he ended up excavating in the 1980s. Can you explain a little bit about the site and Adam's identification of it?

*Shay:* First, it's important to emphasize that the site was discovered as part of a detailed survey. It's not that Adam went to try to find "Joshua's altar." The discovery was part of a scientific endeavor that was meant to document and publish all sites on Mount Ebal, as he eventually did. And it was only in the third season of excavation, not when he started to excavate, that he understood, according to what he later wrote in his book *A Nation Born*, that this site was possibly the site of the story of Joshua. He wanted to excavate it as a typical Iron Age dwelling site. He didn't know what he was excavating at the beginning. But, of course, he eventually identified it as the cultic site of the blessing and the offerings described in Joshua 8:30–35, and, more importantly, as the place where Israel became a people before the Lord. If that's true, then this is one of the most important sites for the nation of Israel.

*Abigail:* After Adam passed away, that could have been the end of the survey project. But you decided it was important enough to continue. What do you think the survey contributes to the field of archaeology?

*Shay:* This area is now changing—geopolitically changing—and sites are being destroyed on a daily basis. So, we are salvaging these sites and the history of the region. I know of dozens of sites that are now completely destroyed. Sites that were there only 20 years ago, and that were documented in the survey, are now nonexistent. If there was no Manasseh Hill Country Survey, we would have lost all this information. So, this is the main reason. As I mentioned before, today people are not engaged in such large-scale, long-lasting projects. So, saying it very simply, if we won't do it, nobody will do it.

\* See Adam Zertal, Shay Bar, and Nivi Mirkam, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey*, 7 vols., Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 21 (Leiden: Brill, 2004–22).



**Abigail Leavitt** serves as the Assistant Director at ABR's Shiloh excavations. She has participated in ABR's archaeological projects since 2008, previously serving as both a Square Supervisor and the Objects Registrar. She has worked with the Temple Mount Sifting Project and at multiple sites, including Khirbet el-Maqatir and Mount Zion. Abigail earned a Master of Arts in Biblical History and Archaeology from The Bible Seminary. She is currently pursuing her PhD at Ariel University.