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ANNUAL REPORT 2014-2015

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The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a project of The Torah and Nature Foundation 9200 W. Sunset Blvd., Suite #700 West Hollywood, CA 90069-3693

The Torah and Nature Foundation is registered in the United States as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, tax ID no. 46-0957232





INTRODUCTION

The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a unique institution that is part zoo, part natural history museum, and part Torah education center. It showcases the mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects of Scripture, as well as related zoological topics from the Talmud. The large species are exhibited as taxidermy specimens, while live

exhibits are maintained for smaller species, and there are also a large number of biological artifacts of religious significance. Visits are conducted via guided tours, which include hands-on experiences! Through the exciting and interactive tour, visitors learn the identities and symbolism of the animals of Scripture, lessons in Jewish values, law and history, and the natural history of Biblical Israel.

The Biblical Museum of Natural History was

launched in October 2014. The nucleus of the collection had already been collected by director Rabbi Natan Slifkin over many years, and so it was possible to assemble the basics of the museum in a very short time. A temporary facility – a large warehouse near the entrance to Beit Shemesh – was leased. This was converted to create the museum, including an auditorium, main exhibit hall, offices, and outdoor area. Due to popular demand, visitors were admitted to see the exhibits just a few weeks after the

facility was acquired. The official opening ceremony, attended by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Beit Shemesh and featuring an address by Minister of Culture Limor Livnat, took place in February 2015. Over the next several months, the museum was improved in all kinds of ways, from renovations of the building to adding a variety of new exhibits and opening an outdoor petting zoo. People from all walks of life have visited the museum – Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and secular, young and old – and have been uniform in their delight with the unique experience.

This report reviews the goals, accomplishments, and future plans of the museum in its pilot year of operation. We are very grateful to all our supporters, and we look forward to going from strength to strength!









GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

To excite people about a living Judaism that engages with the natural world

Ever since the period of emancipation and enlightenment, the Jewish People have been faced with two simultaneous challenges. The first is the need to promote and engender a Judaism of choice, a living and breathing Judaism that is connected to daily life, that is relevant within the modern world, and that adds value and meaning for the individual and the community. The second is the challenge posed by the confrontation of Torah with other systems of knowledge, in particular the discoveries of the natural sciences.

Certain communities in the Jewish world, as a response to these challenges, have chosen to eschew engagement with wider society, and to shun the natural sciences. Other communities have simply surrendered and plunged fully into wider society, at the cost of Jewish tradition becoming irrelevant to modern life. From haredi to secular, most Jews perceive Torah as a dry discipline that is focused upon the synagogue, study hall and written word.

The Biblical Museum of Natural History addresses these problems. It provides a much needed platform to excite Jews young and old about their Judaism, in a setting that goes beyond the classroom and beyond the written word, through engagement





with a living Judaism that, with integrity and authenticity, embraces the natural world. The museum presents Torah and Judaism in an exciting and novel way, featuring hands-on encounters with exotic creatures and displays of wild animals that are more commonly associated with jungle adventures and zoological expeditions than with religious studies.

To increase understanding of Torah and Judaism

The museum enhances appreciation and understanding of Scripture, Talmud and Jewish tradition via the natural world. What did the prophets and sages mean when they drew upon the animal kingdom in presenting messages to us? Which are the kosher and non-kosher creatures described in the Torah? If bats are mammals, why are they in the Torah's list of non-kosher birds? What role did various animals play in Biblical and Jewish history? The museum sheds light on all these questions and many more, in a way that respects the integrity and authenticity of both Judaism and the natural sciences.



To highlight a Judaism that embraces the natural and scientific world

The museum also enhances appreciation and understanding of the natural world itself. By using Torah as a springboard to gain insight into everything from the adhesive abilities of geckos to the aerodynamic aspects of vultures, it demonstrates that Judaism can engage with the natural sciences in a thoroughly beneficial way.

To provide the Haredi public with a platform for engagement with the natural world

Many people in the Haredi sector lack basic knowledge of the natural world, yet yearn for meaningful engagement with it. There are also countless teenagers who cannot apply themselves solely to Talmud and lack an outlet for their broader interests. The museum overcomes cultural and other barriers in order to provide that opportunity. This is done in a manner that both maintains the integrity of the museum while also speaking in the language and respecting the norms of the Haredi community.



To showcase the deep connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel

The museum also fosters a deeper connection to the Jewish People's Biblical connection to the Land of Israel. At a time when much of the world sees the Jews as European colonists in Palestine, the museum demonstrates how our teachings and traditions relate to a time when we lived in a Land of Israel that was inhabited by lions, bears, hippopotami and crocodiles.





VISITORS

Despite only having just started, the Biblical Museum of Natural History has already received over nine thousand visitors, representing a very diverse range of people. These include:

Post-high school yeshivot and seminaries

– Including Kerem B'Yavneh, Amit, Yesodei HaTorah, Migdal HaTorah, Tiferet Center, Yeshivat Reishit Yerushalayim, Shapell's/ Darchei Noam, Machon Maayan, Toronto Seminary, Nefesh HaTalmid, Darkeynu.

Visiting teen groups from outside Israel

 Including the NCSY Anne Samson
Jerusalem Journeys, Partnership 2000
Johannesburg - Beit Shemesh, Birthright-Taglit, The Jerusalem Science Quiz.



Israel tour groups

Including the OU Israel Center, Herzliya retirement home, OU seniors group,
Beit Kenesset Feigenson, Beit Kenesset Ahavat Tziyon.

Local school groups

Including Ohr Moshe, Talmud Torah
Magen Avot, Bet Sefer Harel, Ahavat Yisrael,
Orot Banim, Bet Sefer Etrog, Cheder
Breslov, Talmud Torah Farkas.

Christian tour groups.

Including The Home for Bible
Translators and Scholars (multiple groups
from several countries).





Business and Corporate groups

- Including Finn Partners, Excalibur Systems and Cisco Systems.

Family groups

The museum is a popular destination for families looking for an excursion that is educational as well as being fun. It is especially popular with Anglos from the US and UK visiting their families in the area. There are often bar- or bat-mitzvah trips, in which a special certificate is presented to the young guest of honor. One bat-mitzvah tour, after enjoying their visit, sponsored a visit from an orphanage in Bnei Brak!



Bar / Bat Mitzvah Groups

Many families have decided to do something unique for their bar/bat mitzvah celebration, and they bring the friends and/or family of the celebrant to the museum for a tour, and for a celebratory meal. The museum also offers a special package for such events, in which the celebrant comes a few days beforehand for an orientation session in which he/she is trained to present part of the tour! The celebrant is also presented with a special personalized certificate. In one case, the museum even hosted a *hanachat tefillin*!



Children's Workshop

A weekly children's workshop (*chug*) takes place for children aged 9-13, who sign up for the entire year. Led by Shlomo Horowitz, the students gain knowledge of many aspects of animal taxonomy, physiology and behavior. Participants also learn about the role of animals in the Torah, and many halachic aspects relating to animals. The students also engage extensively in handling the animals and learning how to take care of them. Our unique collection of live exotic animals, skulls and bones, and taxidermy mounts all play a role, and there are often special guest animals that are brought in! The workshop is so popular that almost every participant signed up for a second year!



The campers with part of the museum's skull collection

Lecture Series

This coming year, a series of evening lectures is being held. Titled "Night at the Biblical Museum of Natural History," each lecture will present an in-depth exploration of a particular topic in Biblical Natural History. The lecturers will be presented by museum director Rabbi Natan Slifkin and guest lecturer Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky, well known for his expertise in unusual zoological halachic topics.



Exciting times at the children's workshop

While a summer camp was not part of the original plan for the pilot year, there was demand for one, so we put one together! The campers got to know the museum exhibits intimately, as well as participating in craft activities, excursions, and sports – all on a zoological theme!

Summer Camp



At Night in Beit Shemesh, the Animals of the Torah Come to Life!

NIGHT THE BIBLICAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

A Series of Lectures on Torah and the Animal Kingdom

Featuring: Rabbi Natan Slifkin Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky

For more details and registration, write to office@TevaTanachi.org





PRAISE FROM VISITORS

"In the search for quality activities for yeshiva students in the realm of informal education, the Biblical Museum of Natural History stands alone. We brought our entire student body to the museum with high hopes for an educational and entertaining afternoon, and the experience met and exceeded our very high expectations. The exhibits are beautifully managed, and Rabbi Slifkin's presentation combines fascinating Torah content with humor and plenty of doses of the unexpected. No student left the museum disappointed, and their appreciation for and understanding of the science of Torah was greatly enhanced. I highly recommend the Biblical Museum of Natural History to anyone who wants to deepen his understanding of the zoological marvels mentioned in the Torah and Chazal; you will not be disappointed." – Rabbi Scott Kahn, Rosh Yeshivah, Yesodei HaTorah



"We have rarely learned more in as compelling and enjoyable fashion as we did during a tour of the Biblical Museum of Natural History. It teaches profound truths in a fashion that captures our attention and whets our intellectual appetite for more." - Dr. David Luchins, Touro College

"The seminary students of Machon Maayan greatly enjoyed their visit to the Museum of Natural History. The girls were captivated as they embarked on a zoological journey through time. They left with

a clearer picture of what the animal kingdom of Israel once looked like and how it has changed today. At the conclusion of the presentation, the students wanted to continue to look through the exhibits – getting the girls to leave was no easy task!" – Mrs. Meryl-Lee Abraham, Machon Maayan

"Our entire family (ages 1-39!) was enchanted with the museum's wonderful animals and artifacts and Rabbi Slifkin kept everyone fascinated and engaged. An ideal family trip experience!" – Riva Pomerantz

"The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a fascinating educational experience for children and adults of all ages... The museum was a real treat and an eye-



opening experience for me." - Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman, Congregation Ahavas Yisrael, Passaic, NJ

"I highly recommend a visit to the Biblical Museum of Natural History. My family and I learned an incredible amount in a fun, hands on setting. We gained insight into Torah, halacha, and the animal kingdom and walked away with a renewed appreciation and awe of Hashem's creatures." - Rabbi Efrem Goldberg, Boca Raton Synagogue



"The Biblical Museum of Natural History connected us both to Nature and to Tanach (and Chazal) in ways our modern lives often don't allow. The tour also reminds us of the rich wildlife that used to roam Israel—even as we celebrate the country's renewal and resettlement, a museum like this reminds us of a lost world, in which daily life could involve encounters with lions, bears, jackals,

leopards, and more. It's Torah, it's Nature, it's an enjoyable, informative, and illuminating experience for family members of all ages!" – Rabbi Gidon Rothstein

"The Home for Bible Translators and Scholars, Jerusalem, most wholeheartedly endorses the work of Rabbi Natan Slifkin and his dedicated staff at The Biblical Museum of Natural



History in Beit Shemesh. Together with the Rothberg International School for Overseas Students of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, HBT has in the last 20 years brought Bible translators of 76 languages to Israel to learn the "language of the Bible in the land of the Bible." Rabbi Slifkin's kind of work is exactly we insist on trying to get Bible translators to the land to see for themselves the hills and valleys, the rivers and lakes and plains and not least the plants and animals of



the Bible. Because many countries do not have the same animals as the Land of Israel, it is necessary for the translators to see the actual animals mentioned in the text. It is necessary to learn the characteristics of those animals to understand why they are mentioned in the text. Here is where the informative and illuminating and humorous commentary of Rabbi Slifkin and staff is so important beyond just seeing the animals. Indeed, the commentary even becomes inspiring when suddenly the meaning of a text becomes clear. We at HBT feel indebted to the extreme dedication of Rabbi Slifkin in creating and developing and leading this helpful work. We appreciate the many years of effort to arrive at this level of ability to understand and to share, now also in the first volume of an encyclopedia of Biblical Animals." – Halvor Ronning, The Home for Bible Translators



"The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a gem. The tour is both exciting and fascinating—everybody had a great time. Not only should people include a visit to the Biblical Museum of Natural History on their touring itinerary, but schools should make this site a regular visit on their annual schedule of educational sites." - Rafi Goldmeier, "Life in Israel"

"The Biblical Museum of Natural History is outstanding! I visited it with my children,

and was very moved by how appealing the tour and exhibits were for people of all ages and varied backgrounds. I was delighted when the students from our yeshiva also had the opportunity to visit the museum on a yeshiva-organized excursion. They were raving about it when they returned!" – Rabbi Gidon Shoshan, Yeshiva Darche Noam/Shapell's, Jerusalem



MEDIA REPORTS

Feature articles praising the museum have appeared on the front page of *The Jerusalem Post*, in the *Jerusalem Report*, *Jewish Action* magazine, *The Jewish Press*, the *Los Angeles Jewish Journal*, the *North Jersey Jewish Standard*, and many other publications. A seven-page article on the museum also appeared in the Israel teacher's magazine, *Etrog*.





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CONSERVATION

A major educational theme of the Biblical Museum of Natural History (and the *Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom*) is the changes between the natural world of Biblical times and that of today. Visitors learn about the animal life that has disappeared from the Land of Israel, and about efforts to conserve the remaining species, as well as to reintroduce some of the species that disappeared. Visitors also learn of the problem of invasive species that have been introduced to Israel through negligence, encountering examples such as the mynah bird and red-eared slider turtle.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority licenses the collection at the museum (licensing is required for both the live and taxidermy specimens). The Nature and Parks Authority is also sending its own staff to the museum to experience the museum's educational program and thereby enrich their own work.



The hand-raised hedgehog that is unsuitable for release into the wild



Preserving the fragile ecosystem of the Land of Israel is not only an educational goal of the museum but also a practical one. The Nature and Parks Authority has designated the museum as a suitable institution to receive animals that are confiscated. In some cases, the confiscations are due to these animals being illegally imported and a threat to the ecosystem, such as with the albino African clawed frogs that the Nature and Parks Authority delivered to the museum. In other cases, this is due to these animals being illegally taken from the wild and unsuited to being re-released, such as with a hedgehog that was captured and handraised, leaving it incapable of fending for itself in the wild.



ANIMAL CARE

The ever-growing collection of live animals at the Biblical Museum of Natural History currently represents some thirty species. Looking after this diverse collection is a challenging task!

Our veterinarian, Dr. Maya Kimhi, regularly visits to survey the collection and reports to the local veterinary authority. Dr Kimhi fulfills a wide range of tasks, from clipping overgrown beaks and nails to administering injections of antibiotics to our huge iguana and monitor lizards – always a hair-raising task that requires numerous people on hand! Our valuable and much-loved eclectus parrot, Hertzl, suffered a respiratory infection which caused him to lose feathers, but a prolonged course of antibiotics returned him to full health. He has now expanded his vocabulary, and recites the Hebrew blessing that visitors pronounce upon him, *Baruch shekacha lo b'olamo* (Blessed is the One who has such things in His world)!

The most memorable veterinary episode took place at the incredibly inconvenient time of the day before Passover. One of our hyraxes, who was heavily pregnant, went into labor, but was experiencing severe birth complications. It was rushed to veterinary

hospital in order to undergo a Caesarean section. The fetuses that were removed did not have a pulse, but the veterinarian restored them to life with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation!

The animals have responded to their high level of care by thriving and breeding. The most spectacular growth can be seen in our magnificent monitor lizard, "Bubaleh," who has more than quadrupled in size in less than a year. While the arrival of the hyraxes was our greatest birthing event, our spiny mice and rats also regularly produce large litters, while our doves are already second generation.



Veterinarian Maya Kimhi bottle-feeding a newborn rock hyrax



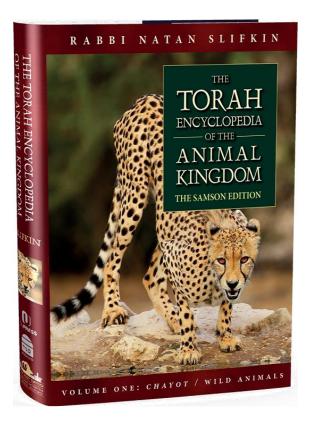
Our Mother's Day card, featuring one of our rats nursing her litter





PUBLICATIONS

This year, the museum published *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom*, copublished with the Orthodox Union and Koren Publishers. Written by the museum director Rabbi Natan Slifkin, the encyclopedia is a stunning full-color volume, explaining every reference to wild animals in Scripture and rabbinic texts, and incorporating insights from modern zoology. It complements the museum experience, enabling museum visitors to gain greater understanding of Biblical (and Talmudic) natural history. A Hebrew translation is currently in preparation.



"In *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom* Rabbi Natan Slifkin has produced a groundbreaking work of outstanding scholarship, vast erudition, and a truly engaging approach to an understudied topic. The work will be eye-opening for many, who had only a vague sense of the intense interest the Hebrew Bible and Judaism's sages had for the Divinely created diversity of the animal kingdom. A wonderful book, magnificently produced, that should be on every Jewish bookshelf." -Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks



VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

The Biblical Museum of Natural History runs an extensive volunteer programs. This is not only to save costs – it is also a way to benefit the community. Many young people, especially in Beit Shemesh, find it hard to "fit into the system." The museum provides a constructive, positive and safe environment in which they can find fulfillment. Over twenty teens and young adults have volunteered at the museum during its first year. Here is a letter that we received from one of our most dedicated volunteers:

"I was very fortunate to be able to become involved with The Biblical Museum of Natural History. I had been sick for a few years. It was bad enough that I was not able to function very well properly in society - I had lost motivation and faith in myself.

"As a child I was so fascinated by animals. I had met Rabbi Natan Slifkin at the age of ten shortly after I had moved to Israel. He gave classes about animals in the Torah, and I made sure to always be there. It was my dream as a child to be a zoologist. And though that dream had faded, my passion for animal life was still there.

"Ten years later, Rabbi Slifkin got in touch with me and told me about his idea for the museum. And that day I worked up a real sweat. Scraping away old layers of paint and stucco. Putting in new layers of



stucco, sanding them down and painting over. It was hard work, but I felt like I had accomplished something. I did this for a few days. And then I was done. It was nice to work hard, but I felt it was time to go back to my old life of directionlessness.

"A few days later though Rabbi Slifkin asked me if I wanted to help out with caring for the animals. And that's what I did. Eventually I was the one caring for all the animals there, and I spent eight months at the museum. I felt like I had a purpose there, that people (and animals of course) depended on me. When people feel they are appreciated, they will work harder. And I sure felt that peopled cared for what I did.



"When people feel strongly about things in a positive way, they want others to experience that same pleasure. And I really saw it during my time at the museum. It was wonderful to see people's faces light up when they interacted with the animals and learned about them. And it felt great knowing that I was helping to introduce people to something I thought was amazing.



"I became more responsible and less detached. And once I started taking steps towards progression, I did the same in other facets of my life. I came out a totally different person after those eight months, and kept on growing. The museum is an amazing place run by some great people. I have Rabbi Slifkin and the rest of the staff to thank for nudging me in the right direction. I now have a steady job, and I'm starting my psychometric study course in December. I plan to go to university as soon as I finish. And in the meantime I am looking into jobs for the future.

"I will always be grateful for the opportunity I was given. It was an experience I won't soon forget. I am very thankful to Rabbi Natan Slifkin for letting me be a part of this miraculous place."



THE OPENING CEREMONY

The official opening ceremony for the Biblical Museum of Natural History took place on February 23rd, 2015. Minister of Culture Limor Livnat praised it highly, describing it as playing an important role in bringing Tanach to life. The mayor of Beit Shemesh, Moshe Abutbul, described the museum as a "great gift to the city," and stayed for an additional hour, fascinated by all the exhibits. Deputy Mayor Shmuel Greenberg, in his speech, praised the museum and expressed his wish that it will eventually expand and also include a larger outdoors component.



Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, speaking with benefactor Mr. Lee Samson



Deputy Mayor Shmuel Greenberg delivers his address



Mayor Abutbul examines our lion, Simba



The museum staff helps Mayor Moshe Abutbul hold a Burmese python





Like all cultural institutions, and especially zoos (which incur high costs in animal care and maintenance), the Biblical Museum of Natural History relies on support from visionary donors who value its goals and want to participate in its mission. The launch of the museum was made possible via the generosity of several people, in particular Mr. and Mrs. Shlomo and Tamar Rechnitz, Mr. Lee Samson, and Dr. Stephen Schloss, all from Los Angeles. Several other people have joined our patron's program, and we look forward to continued support in order to continue our educational activities, and to develop the museum even further.



Benefactor Dr. Stephen Schloss on a visit to the museum with his family



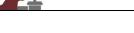
Benefactor Mrs. Karen Winnick meeting a python



Patrons

Mr. Shlomo and Tamar Rechnitz, Los Angeles Mr. Lee Samson, Los Angeles Dr. Stephen Schloss, Los Angeles

The Winnick Family Foundation, Los Angeles Rabbi Dr. Dov and Nancy Friedberg, Toronto Mr. Yehuda Feigen, Los Angeles Mr. Ronny and Toby Hersh, Flatbush Mr. Steven Plotnick, Fairlawn, NJ



PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT

Education Program for Elementary Schools

With tens of thousands of children in local schools, the museum is uniquely situated to provide a tremendous educational opportunity. However, many local schools are poorly funded, and cannot visit the museum unless the admission cost is greatly discounted. Thus, in order to enable the children to benefit from the museum, their visit must be heavily subsidized.

In order to maximize the potential of school visits, these should be more than the normal tour. They should include preparatory lesson plans for the teachers to

implement before the visit, and follow-up lessons and projects. The museum would like to develop a full education program for local schools. In addition, the museum would like to develop a program that can be used for schools abroad that are unable to physically visit the museum. This would incorporate printed materials, audiovisual materials, and a live video presentation from the museum.



Hebrew Edition of Encyclopedia

Following the widespread acclaim for *The Torah Encyclopedia of the Animal Kingdom*, the museum is currently working on a Hebrew edition. The translation is being done by Shakhar Pelled, chairman of the Israel Translators Association. The Hebrew edition is expected to be ready for publication in late 2016.

Video Documentary

The museum tour features a 10-minute video presentation on the lion in Jewish thought. This is very popular, usually earning a round of applause. Plans are underway to expand this into a full 60-minute documentary on the animal kingdom in Jewish thought. This would be sold at the museum gift store and also on the website, as well as distributed through other outlets. It would enable visitors to take the experience home with them, as well as increasing traffic to the museum, and furthering the museum's goals of inspiring and educating people about the relationship between Judaism and the animal kingdom.



Much of the raw footage has already been shot in Africa, with trained animals including hyenas, cheetahs, leopards, elephants and giraffes. Turning this into a polished and professional documentary is, however, an elaborate project.

Permanent Facility

At present, the museum is housed in a rental facility. This has many limitations, especially with regard to capacity; during peak periods, it is simply impossible to accommodate all the people who would like to visit, and the museum is forced to turn many people away.

Planning has begun for a permanent facility. This will be a much larger building than the present facility, and it will also include an extensive outside area, with enclosures for animals that cannot be maintained indoors, aviaries, a petting farm, plants and trees of the Bible, and children's play areas. The museum would be the premier cultural attraction for the entire region.



Help us Continue to Educate, Enrich and Inspire!

The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a private initiative supported by the generosity of visionary donors. Your contributions help us create and advance this extraordinary and unique institution, and operate educational programs which benefit all sectors of society. Please help us continue to develop and grow!



The Biblical Museum of Natural History is a project of **The Torah and Nature Foundation**, which is registered in the US as a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. The tax ID no. is 46-0957232. Donations should be made payable to "The Torah and Nature Foundation" and can be sent to the following address:

> The Torah and Nature Foundation 9200 W. Sunset Blvd., Suite #700 West Hollywood, CA 90069-3603

Donations can also be made online at www.BiblicalNaturalHistory.org/donate



Thank you for joining us in inspiring and educating people about the relationship between Judaism and the natural world!



