When archaeologists first discovered the large building stones in the southern Hebron Hills from what appeared to be the Byzantine era, they questioned whether the site was Jewish or Christian. I often ask my tour groups: What clues would you look for in order to find out if this was indeed a Jewish village? Children (particularly well-traveled, tour-savvy ones) invariably come up with the best answers: mezuzot, mikvaot, Hebrew writing, a synagogue, Jewish art themes. Sussia has all of the above and more, thus clearly identifying it as a Jewish city from the Mishnaic–Talmudic eras in Eretz Yisrael.

Although not mentioned in Scriptures, it is very close to the Biblical towns of Carmel and Maon (I Shmuel).

Sussia is one of the best places in Israel today to glimpse and taste what Jewish life was like during these time periods and to understand how many of the principles of Jewish law, enunciated in the Mishnah and Talmud, were put into practice in everyday life. A stroll through restored Sussia’s buildings and alleyways is a walk back in time to the 3rd through 9th centuries. If you can time your visit to coincide with one of the holiday periods (Pesach, Sukkot, Chanukah), there are costumed guides walking around the site and performing scenes that make the place really come alive. Crafts of the time, such as pottery making and weaving, are demonstrated and there are varied activities for children. These are the most popular and crowded times at Sussia, especially for

Photos by Jack Hazut

Peter Abelow is a licensed tour guide and the associate director of Keshet – the Center for Educational Tourism in Israel, specializing in family, group and synagogue tours that make Israel come alive “Jewishly.”
east–west axis, with a large entry courtyard on the east, but the direction of prayer is clearly to the north, facing Jerusalem. The main floor has a large mosaic with themes of the Beit Hamikdash: aron kodesh, menorah, lulav and etrog, incense pan and shofar. This is similar to other synagogue floors from the same time period found in other parts of the country, such as at Tzippori, Beit Alpha, Teveria and Yericho.

But for me, the highlight of the tour is the Hebrew inscription in the mosaic of the courtyard floor, a dedication which would warm the heart of any courtyards which figure so prominently in the laws of Shabbat, especially with regard to defining different domains for purposes of carrying and hilchet eruv. See how the structure of the homes incorporates the Jewish value of modesty, encapsulated by the Biblical verse, “Ma tovu ohalecha, Yaakov...” (See Rashi’s commentary in Bamidbar 24:5 on this.)

A memorable feature of Sussia is the synagogue building, which dominates the crest of the town, at the end of the main street. Synagogues were to be built only at the highest point of the city. During the Talmudic period, the synagogue was not only a place for prayer and study, but was likely the center of Jewish life. Many public, cultural, educational and other activities were probably held there, such as sessions of the local rabbinical court (beit din), communal feasts and public meetings. This synagogue was built on an east–west axis, with a large entry courtyard on the east, but the direction of prayer is clearly to the north, facing Jerusalem. The main floor has a large mosaic with themes of the Beit Hamikdash: aron kodesh, menorah, lulav and etrog, incense pan and shofar.

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In bold letters, it reads: “In honor of the kindness of my master, Rabbi Issi HaCohen, the honored, who generously donated this mosaic and plastered the walls of the synagogue which shook with joy on the day of the wedding feast of his son, Rabbi Yochanan HaCohen, the scribe. Peace unto Israel. Amen.” How some things never change!

Near the synagogue, is a cave which housed an olive press. Look carefully, and you will see many of the elements of the olive press which are described in the Mishnah. The sign hanging near the entrance quotes the midrash which compares the Children of Israel to olive oil. “Just as oil and water do not mix, so does the Jewish people maintain its separate identity!” I often wonder if this comparison was not one of the reasons why olive oil has come to symbolize the festival of Chanukah, which recalls our battle against mixing, i.e. assimilation.

The young and young-at-heart should not leave Sussia without experiencing the secret escape tunnel. The short underground passage begins not far from the synagogue and involves some crawling and squeezing through tight spaces. It is lit, so you don’t need a flashlight. The more timid members of your group can wait in the courtyard of the synagogue; the adventurous explorers will emerge from a hole in the northwest corner. This will be a memorable conclusion of your visit to this rather remarkable site.

I am convinced that if Sussia were located only 15 minutes from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, it would be one of the most popular sites in Israel. But this restored Talmudic village is in the southern Hebron Hills, about one hour south of Jerusalem, past Gush Etzion and Kiryat Arba, and about 20 minutes from Hebron. It can also be reached by a short drive from the Beersheva-Dead Sea road. Despite the distance, it is well worth a visit to Sussia on your next trip to Israel.