

In Memoriam: Doctor Ze'ev Meshel (1932–2024)

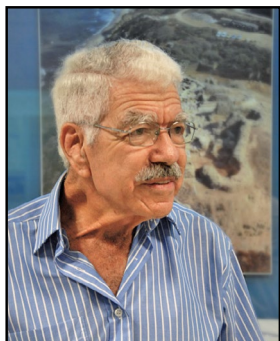


Photo by Omer Ze'evi-Berger

Dr Ze'ev Meshel, a leading scholar of the desert landscapes of the Southern Levant, passed away in December 2024 at the age of 92.

Dr Meshel was widely admired for his warmth, generosity and unfailing courtesy, qualities that left a lasting impression on all who engaged with him. He was known for his sweeping lectures and vivid immersive field excursions, which conveyed both his deep scholarly knowledge and his profound and abiding love for the land. His teaching combined intellectual rigour with a storyteller's gift, and he was deeply respected by students and colleagues alike for his ability to bring the past

to life with clarity, nuance and enthusiasm.

Dr Meshel pursued his undergraduate studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and in 1974 he completed his Ph.D. dissertation at Tel Aviv University on the history of the Negev during the Iron Age. He joined the Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures at Tel Aviv University in 1988, where he served with distinction until his retirement in 2001. His scholarly interests focused on the interface between settled society and marginal landscapes—in particular of the Negev, the Sinai Peninsula, the Arabah and the Judean Desert—and he examined their archaeological remains through a combination of survey, excavation and environmental insight.

Dr Meshel possessed an exceptional familiarity with the geography and archaeology of Israel, and particularly with its desert regions. His command of the land's topography, historical depth and material culture was unparalleled, and he was widely recognised not only as a scholar but as a remarkable teacher and guide. His field tours were renowned for their intellectual richness and their capacity to bring the past to life in ways that were both scholarly and deeply human. He also made notable contributions to public engagement with archaeology, publishing several books intended for both academic and general audiences.

His work on the Sinai Peninsula is a cornerstone of research in the field. In a series of publications, both monographs and articles, he documented the archaeological history of this expansive desert region, as well as broader questions concerning the relationship between human societies and the environment. Between 1974 and 1980, Dr Meshel directed extensive excavations at the oasis of Yotvata in the southern Arabah, where his

team uncovered settlement remains from both the Early Iron Age and the Early Islamic period. While preliminary reports were issued by Dr Meshel himself, the final publication of the project was recently completed by Lily Singer-Avitz and Etan Ayalon within the framework of the Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University (*Yotvata: The Ze'ev Meshel Excavations [1974–1980]: The Iron I 'Fortress' and the Early Islamic Settlement*, 2022).

Dr Meshel's most celebrated project remains his excavation at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, located in the northeastern Sinai. Conducted in 1975–1976, the excavation revealed an isolated waystation dating to the 8th century BCE, which likely functioned within the sphere of the Kingdom of Israel's transdesert networks. The site's two principal structures yielded a remarkable assemblage of Hebrew inscriptions, some invoking 'YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah' and 'YHWH of Teman and his Asherah', along with a corpus of figural drawings preserved on plastered walls and pithoi.

These findings generated considerable scholarly interest and bore far-reaching implications regarding early Israelite religion, the cultic representation of the divine and the dynamics of literacy and exchange in the Iron Age Southern Levant. He was quick to disseminate the results, both through early publications and through a landmark exhibition at the Israel Museum. The final excavation report, published in 2012 under the title *Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Horvat Teman): An Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah–Sinai Border*, is a testament to his methodological rigour and interpretative nuance.

Dr Ze'ev Meshel, known for his modesty, generosity and keen sense of curiosity, inspired generations of students, colleagues and fellow travellers. His relationship with the desert was not solely academic: it reflected a deep respect for the people, landscapes and histories that shaped it.

Ido Koch