

Tanach Tours at the British Museum

Conducted by
Rabbi Arye Forta

Tour Guide

The Tanach covers the earliest and most formative period of Jewish history. Yet it is not only about the past, it is subtly intertwined with the most fundamental aspects of our lives having shaped the way we understand ourselves, our sense of kinship with other Jews and our place within the wider humanity. It is, in effect, the introductory chapter of each Jew's autobiography; each one of our lives being a subplot in its never ending narrative. Your Tanach Tour will be a face to face encounter with key aspects of this timeless story.

What we will see

The Tour will focus mainly on our ancestors' encounter with:

- (a) Egypt examining the career of Joseph, our ancestors' slavery and exodus;
- (b) Assyria, illustrating a terrifying passage from מלכים ב (II Kings);
- (c) Persia, where we will look at items relevant to מגילת אסתר (the Book of Esther)

With two exceptions, all the artefacts we will see are between 3,500 – 2,500 years old.

When and where

Click on upcoming tours for dates and times of tours. Each tour will last approximately two and a half hours. It is essential that we start promptly as we are expected in the archive one hour after the start of each tour, where we will have a private session with one of the curators. We will meet behind the Information Desk (see below). If you are delayed, please call me on 07956 512 773.

Booking your Tour

To book contact Rabbi Forta on 0208 458 6221 or 07956 512 773 or email to tours@forta.com

Getting to the British Museum

See page 4, below

During your Tour

Feel free to ask questions as you go along. Photography is permitted in the galleries; in the archive it is at the discretion of the curator. We can ask once we are there.

Please take note of the following:

- **Never bend down frontwards to view the base of any statue. Some of those we will see are idols that were once worshipped. Halachically, merely bowing in front of them is an act of עבודה זרה (idolatry). So always bend sideways.**

- Visitors are not allowed to touch nor lean against any object on display.
- There is normally no seating in the archive. If you will find it difficult to stand for about half an hour let me know. I can get a small number of chairs put in for you but I do have to book them in advance.
- Lightweight portable stools are provided for use in the Museum. You can collect them near the Information Desk, but you do need to be there early to make sure of getting one. They must be returned at the end of the Tour.
- Some people find it useful to bring a pen and pad to jot down things they find of particular interest. We cover a lot of ground and making brief notes is a good way to remember things.

Preparing for your Tour

You are advised to read up on the following Tanach passages. You will get far more out of your tour if you are familiar with the parts of Tanach the tour will be illustrating.

Genesis 1: 9 - 12 בראשית א ט"ב

Genesis 41: 39-48 בראשית מ"א: ל"ט-מ"ח

Exodus 1: 8-14 שמות א: ח-י"ד

Exodus 14: 2 with 4th Rashi פרק י"ד: ב רש"י ד"ה לפני בעל צפון

I Kings 12: 26-29 מלכים א י"ב: כ"ו-כ"ט

II Kings 9: 4-13 מלכים ב ט: ד-י"ג

All of II Kings chapter 18 till chapter 19: 7 כל מלכים ב פרק י"ח עד פרק י"ט:ז

Chapter 19: 32-37 פרק י"ט: ל"ב-ל"ז

Michoh 1: 13 מיכה א: י"ג

Esther 1: 7-8 אסתר א: ז-ח

Chapter 2: 21-23 פרק ב: כ"א-כ"ג

Ezra 1: 1-4 עזרא א: א-ד

The following information is to help you locate the items you will see on your Tour within their historical and geographical contexts.



As the map shows, Eretz Yisroel lies sandwiched between the major powers of the day, Egypt to the south west, Babylon and Assyria to the east and north east and Persia still further east. This was to be a decisive factor in her early history.

Earlier on, Egypt had been the dominant power in the region, having once controlled an empire extending as far north east as what is today Lebanon. By the time the Israelites were settled in their land, Egypt, Assyria and Babylon were all going through extended periods of weakness, leaving the Jews of Eretz Yisroel threatened only by their immediate neighbours, Edom, Moab, Amon and the Philistines.

By the mid tenth century BCE, the major powers had begun to recover and were again competing for dominance. Incursions from Egypt and Assyria became more frequent and the Jews were caught up in their power struggles, paying tribute first to one then another. In 721 BCE the Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. Thousands of Israelites were deported to Mesopotamia and were lost to Jewish history. A little over a century later, Assyria itself fell to the armies of Babylon who, within a quarter of a century, destroyed Jerusalem and the first Temple. Some fifty years later Babylon, in turn, fell to the Persians, under whose benign rule the Jews returned to rebuild the Temple.

You are strongly advised to print this and the next page and take them with you on your Tour.

Getting to the British Museum

* **By underground** (always check for station closures before you travel).

From Tottenham Court Road (Northern Line): Leave the station by Exit 3 (it's marked Dominion Theatre, British Museum). As you emerge onto street level, turn sharp right and immediate left into New Oxford Street. Go along New Oxford Street and turn left into Coptic Street (a 5-6 minute walk). At the end of Coptic Street (it's a very short road) turn right. The Museum entrance is a few yards up on the other side of the road.

From Russell Square (Piccadilly Line): As you exit the station, turn left into Bernard Street, carry on till you come to the main road (Russell Square), cross the road and enter the park. Continue diagonally across the park, past the fountain and out through the opposite exit. Cross the road. To the right of where you are standing is Montague Street turn left into it (do not go into Montague Place by mistake). At the end of Montague Street turn right, the Museum entrance is a few yards up on your right.

* **By car.** Meter parking is available in Montagu Street, but please be aware that the Museum is inside the congestion charge zone. If you have a blue disabled driver's badge, you can book free parking in the Museum forecourt by calling 020 7323 8299, provided you give them 24 hours notice.

As you enter the Museum, go straight ahead into the Great Court. The Information Desk is on your right. We will meet in the area just beyond the Information Desk.

The Tour itinerary

The following is the complete tour itinerary. It will enable you to locate the group if you happen to arrive late or get detached from them (as has happened). Each Gallery is numbered and the colour coding below corresponds to that of the Museum's own map. If you cannot find your way around, there are members of staff on hand who can give directions. This itinerary will also give you a series of reference points when recalling what you saw on your Tour or telling family members about it.

We will meet in the area beyond the Information Desk where I will talk to the group for about two minutes before proceeding to the galleries.

1. Our Tour will begin in **Gallery 4** (Egyptian statuary) where we see
 - (a) two black statues of Pharaoh Amenhotep III (possibly the pharaoh whose dreams Yosef interpreted),
 - (b) a stone pillar
 - (c) a pharaoh wearing the double (red and white) crown of united Egypt,
 - (d) The famous Rosetta Stone,
 - (e) the funerary monuments of Pharaoh Horemheb (probably the 'new king who rose over Egypt'),
 - (f) a huge torso of Ramses II, the pharaoh for whom our ancestors built Pithom and Ramses,
 - (g) a statue of Prince Khaemwaset, probably one of Moshe's childhood friends,
 - (h) a statue of a sheep god protecting a pharaoh,

(i) a lioness headed goddess,

We will leave this Gallery approximately one hour after the start of the Tour. Proceeding back to the Rosetta Stone, we will exit by the door on the left. Turning left into the Great Court, we will walk to **Gallery 24** where we meet the Curator of the Egyptian collection who will take us to the archive (in the basement). Please note that once the group has entered the archive, the door will be locked for security purposes and it will not be possible to gain entry

2. We will spend 30-40 minutes in the archive as the Curator presents objects relevant to the Egyptian slavery and exodus. These objects are not on display to the general public.
3. Leaving the archive we will return through **Gallery 24**, turning left through **Gallery 26** (North America) and **27** (Mexico) up the **East Stairs** (four flights) to **Gallery 52** (Ancient Iran), where, at the top of the stairs, we will see a giant carving of King Achashverosh.
4. Entering **Gallery 52** we will see
 - (a) an ornamental stairway depicting Persians and Medes,
 - (b) the famous Cyrus Cylinder containing the decree of Koresh (Cyrus), founder of the Persian Empire, permitting deported peoples to return to their homelands (and allowing the Jews to return and build the second Beis Hamikdosh),
 - (c) wine cups from the time of Achashverosh, such as would have been used at his feast plus one of the wine fillers,
 - (d) a section of wall from the palace at Shushan, showing what Bigthan and Thresh might have looked like.
5. Leaving **Gallery 52** by same the door, we will cross to **Gallery 65** to see one more item relating to the Egyptian slavery.
6. From there, we proceed through **Galleries 53-59** where we will see the Lachish letters from the time of the destruction of the first Temple followed by some Philistine remains. We then turn right into **Gallery 61** (Tomb chapel of Nebamun) to see a 3,500 year old matzoh, still bearing the finger impressions of the person who patted down the dough.
7. To leave the Museum, go out of the Gallery by the same door, turn right and right again into **Gallery 4** (Egyptian statuary). Proceed past the Rosetta Stone and turn right into the Great Court. Follow the circular wall till you see the exit.

Wishing you an enjoyable and memorable Tanach Tour

**For further information about Rabbi Forta's museum tours, lectures and shiurim
visit www.livingjewishhistory.com**