n 2005, a scientific experiment in germinating ancient date seeds that had been found during the archaeological excavations of Masada in the mid-1960s added a new and surprising example: a 1,900-year-old seed (as confirmed by carbon dating), which had belonged to the extinct Judean Desert palm tree, germinated and developed into a living plant. In 2011, the grown plant was transferred from its protected pot to the soil of Kibbutz Ketura in the southern Arava desert. The Judean Desert Palm tree thus returned to the modern Israeli landscape.

A team of Israeli scientists, led by Dr. Sarah Sallon from the Hadassah Medical Organization in Jerusalem and Dr. Elaine Solowey from the Arava Institute of the Environment, performed this experiment out of their diverse scientific interests. Their report in *Science* about the experiment indicates that it “can provide valuable insights to the history of domestication and historic crops and has important implications for seed banking and conservation.”

It is unclear whether the biological requirements of fertilization of palm trees make regeneration possible beyond this single specimen. From the perspective of the study of Israeli collective memory, however, the regenerated ancient seed physically embodies the concept of *revival* and provides a rare biological link to the ancient past that other sites of memory offer in a more limited symbolic form.
Indeed, the palm tree long carried symbolic meanings associated with antiquity and the biblical landscape. The Hebrew Bible refers to the palm tree and its fruit, and other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts allude to its nourishing, medicinal, and symbolic values. Jewish tradition counts the palm tree among the “four species” of plants and the “seven species” of fruits and grains associated with the Land of Israel. European romantic art features the palm tree as an important icon of the Holy Land and the Middle Eastern landscape, and Jewish and Zionist artists pursued this trend in the earlier part of the 20th century. Thus, in 1908, for example, E.M. Lilien, who would become a leading artist of Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, drew the biblical Rachel and Jacob in front of a tall palm tree as an illustration for a German edition of the Bible. The solid stem of the palm tree exudes groundedness and strength, while its fronds project the promise of vitality and growth as befitting the symbolism associated with the portrayal of biblical ancestors.

In reality, however, those who wished to cultivate palm trees in the 20th century had to import them from other countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa. In the 1920s and 1930s, the streets of the “new Hebrew city,” Tel Aviv, were lined with sycamores, not palms. In time, however, the cultivation of palm trees developed into an established agricultural branch of some kibbutzim along the Jordan River Valley. In recent years, various Israeli localities have planted palm trees in public parks and along key streets, demonstrating not only their decorative value but also their cultural meaning as part of the Middle Eastern landscape and as a bridge to the past.
The regenerated palm tree nonetheless differs from other forms of revival of the palm trees in Israel. Whereas modern orchards and contemporary botanical gardens designed to represent the biblical landscape cultivate modern plants that offer a generic affinity and resemblance to their biblical ancestors, this particular plant presents the direct growth from an ancient seed that was revived after nineteen centuries. Like other ancient objects and structures that archaeological excavations unearth, it offers a direct link to a remote past, but unlike such inanimate objects or ruins from the ancient past, the seed embodies a living, biological connection to antiquity. The connection of the seed to Masada adds another commemorative layer given its symbolic meanings in contemporary Israel. As I discussed in Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition (1995), the development of Masada as a national myth was based on the selective interpretation of Josephus’ narrative about ancient Jews’ collective suicide at the top of Masada in 73 AD/CE and the Zionist paradigm of death and rebirth. The germinated palm seed from Masada encapsulates both of these themes, providing a tangible example of renewal. “The return of the palm tree,” which earlier referred metaphorically to the reintroduction of palm trees into the Israeli landscape, was transformed into a literal title in 2012, when the Biblical Lands Museum in Jerusalem mounted a small exhibit about the experiment.

Jewish tradition has long recognized naming as an important mnemonic practice that recreates a symbolic continuity between the present and the past. The palm tree inspired several Hebrew first and last names, including the biblical name Tamar and new names such as Tomer and Dekel. Yet when the Israeli scientists nicknamed the old–new plant Metoushelah after the biblical ancestor who had lived the lengthy life of 969 years (Genesis 5:27), the name reinforced its symbolic connection to the Bible. The personification of the plant reversed the more common Israeli practice of naming people after plants; but it also drew on Israelis’ humorous use of “Metoushelah” to mark a person as extremely old or behind the times. The personification of the revived plant is even more pronounced in the title of a blogpost announcing that “Metoushelah is seeking a Shidduch [marital partner].” The blog alerts readers to the uncertainty that surrounds Metoushelah’s future, given the need for both male and female plants for procreation. The revival of the Judean Desert palm tree therefore might not extend beyond this single specimen. The germination of the ancient seed made the plant traverse 1,900 centuries thanks to the desert climate and contemporary Israeli scientists, whose interests in ancient plants, their genetics, and their medicinal benefits has helped push the boundaries of both science and reality.