

Beth Shearim lies on the southern slopes of the low mountains of southwestern Lower Galilee. It is near the western end of the Plain of Jezreel. The town dates to the Roman and Byzantine periods (first century B.C.E. to the seventh century C.E.) and occupies about ten acres. It is famous as the burial city of Rabbi Judah the Prince, redactor of the Mishnah in about 200 C.E. (the Mishnah is the compilation of Jewish law based on the Torah). Josephus mentions the town as Besara, the center of the estates of Queen Berenice, daughter of Herod Agrippa I, sister of Herod Agrippa II and granddaughter of Herod the Great. During the second century C.E., Beth Shearim was the seat of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish community's ruling council. The rabbis of the town are mentioned many times in the Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish lore and law, which includes the Mishnah as one of its two principal components.

Beth Shearim was also famous for its huge cemetery, in which pious Jews from many cities of the Roman empire and eastward of it wished to be buried. A synagogue and olive press have been excavated at Beth Shearim. This general view shows the elaborate, triple facades of catacombs 14 and 20 (at left and right). The catacombs of Beth Shearim are among the richest examples of Jewish art in Israel. High above the entrances are benches cut into the bedrock for funerary monuments erected above the catacombs.

Beth Shearim was excavated in 1936 by the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society under the direction of Benjamin Mazar. In 1953 excavations were resumed by the Israel Exploration Society and the Hebrew University under the direction of Nachman Avigad. Benjamin Mazar directed the excavations in 1956 and 1959.