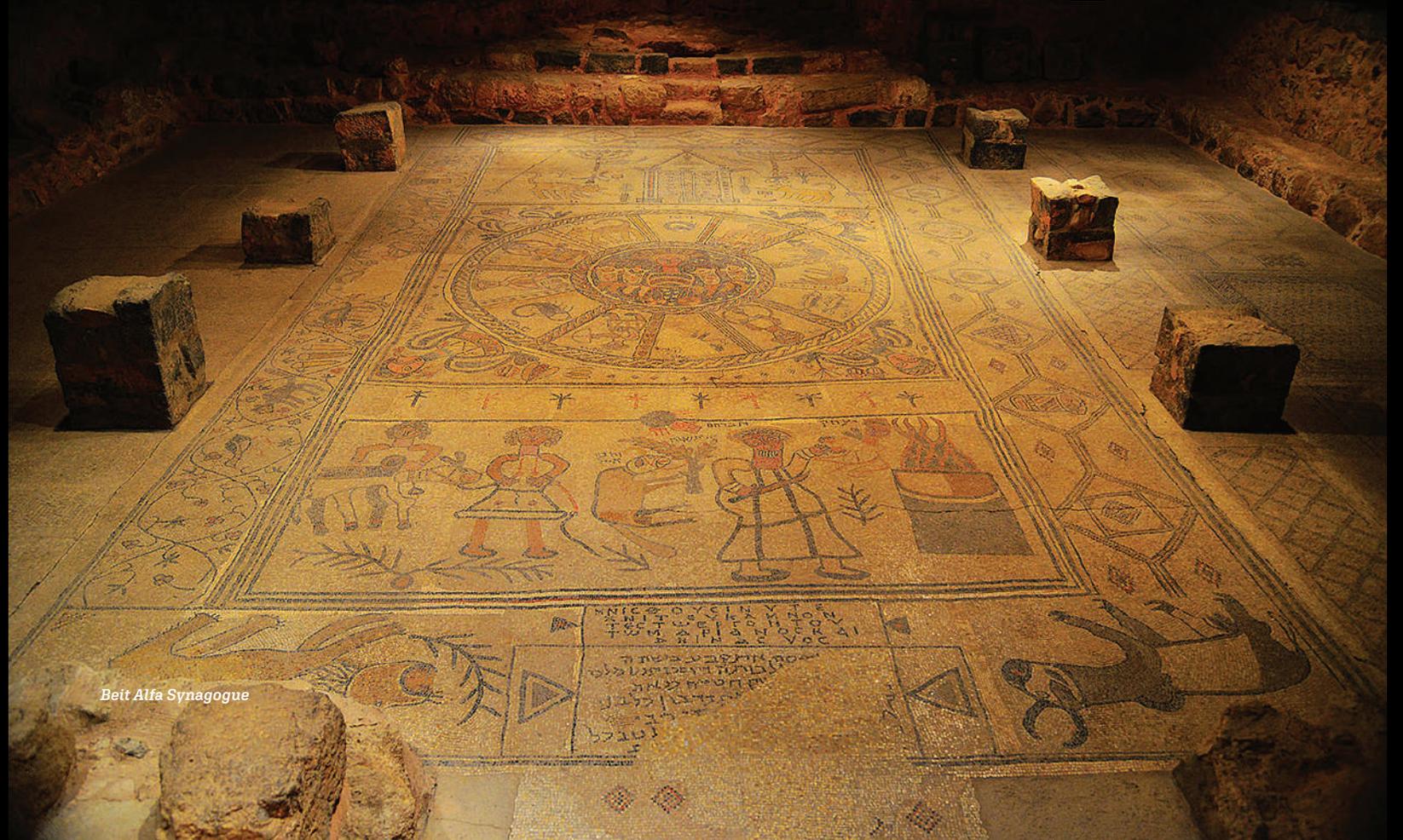


# CLUES FROM THE PAST

The ruins of ancient  
secrets that explain



Beit Alfa Synagogue



Magdala  
Synagogue

# synagogues reveal our traditions.

BY PROFESSOR LAWRENCE  
H. SCHIFFMAN





The ruins of the ancient city of Gamla

**T**

he story of Jewish archaeology in Eretz Yisrael began in 1920-21 when Nahum Slouschz (1872-1966), under the auspices of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society, undertook the excavation of one of the two ancient synagogues at Hamat Teveryah, just south of the city of Tiberias. This was a watershed event, as it was the first archaeological dig conducted under Jewish auspices. Yes, the first Jewish dig was a *shul!* This synagogue stood at the southern end of the city on the shore of the Kineret. It may have been built as early as 250 CE but was expanded in the fourth to fifth centuries and seems to have been in use up until the 11th century. Today, the remains of this synagogue are under a hotel.

# While building an irrigation system for Kibbutz Beit Alfa, workers had stumbled upon a beautiful mosaic floor.

Our story continues in 1928, when Eleazar Sukenik (1889-1953), newly appointed professor of archaeology at the recently opened Hebrew University in Yerushalayim, was still trying to figure out how to organize the program for the school's Institute for Archaeology. He was sitting at his desk one day when someone ran in to tell him that while building an irrigation system for Kibbutz Beit Alfa, workers had stumbled upon a beautiful mosaic floor. Immediately, Sukenik was off and running. This may not have been the first excavation of an ancient synagogue, but it was the first by an Israeli academic institution, and the results had massive consequences not only for Israeli archaeology but for Israeli synagogue research. (Sukenik would later be the first to recognize the authenticity and significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947.)

Up until this point, virtually all archaeological research was led by European or American Christians and concerned only the period of the *Tanach*. These scholars worked in both Eretz Yisrael and the surrounding countries of the Ancient Near East in order to uncover support for the Bible's historical account. Little attention was paid to the value of archaeology

for understanding the *Bayis Sheini* and Talmudic periods in Jewish history. Now, with the work of Slouschz and Sukenik and those who followed, the excavation of post-*Tanach* sites has taken its proper place. So far, in Israel alone, some 78 ancient synagogues have been excavated and another 54 are known, bringing the total of those discovered to 132. This is in addition to the ancient Diaspora synagogues that have come to light, and we can certainly expect more to be discovered and excavated.

The sixth-century Beit Alfa synagogue, located near Beit Shean, displayed virtually all of the features that would be observed in numerous late Roman and Byzantine period synagogues. In antiquity, this synagogue was a colonnaded two-story building and included a courtyard, entrance hall and prayer hall—the actual *shul*. The first floor of the prayer hall consisted of a central chamber, and on the south side was the apse that served as the resting place for the *aron kodesh* and the *bimah*. The building was aligned southwest, in the direction of Yerushalayim. Two inscriptions graced the synagogue. An Aramaic inscription indicated that it was built in the time of the Byzantine Em-

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# While Zodiac scenes were also found in Greco-Roman art, for Jews, the clear meaning was that G-d created and rules over the orderly progression of time.

peror Justinian I (518 to 527 CE) and paid for by communal donations. A Greek inscription thanked the artisans who had built it. Three scenes were beautifully preserved on the mosaic floor: (1) *Akeidas Yitzhak*; (2) a zodiac with the sun, seasons and constellations labeled in Hebrew; and (3) on the southern side facing Yerushalayim, in front of the *aron*, a representation of an *aron* with two menorahs on each side and a variety of other Jewish ritual symbols.

It is hard to imagine the excitement Sukenik felt as these excavations progressed. However, since then, the field of ancient synagogues known for their beauty has been immensely enriched. Zodiac signs, for example, have been found in synagogues in Naaran, Susiya, Hamat Teveryah, Huseifa and Tzippori (Sepphoris), the latter one of the cities that was the seat of the *nasi* and the *Sanhedrin*, who governed the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael under the Roman and Byzantine rulers. While Zodiac scenes were also found in Greco-Roman art, for Jews, the clear meaning was that G-d created and rules over the orderly progression of time, as we say in *Maariv* every night, “Who with wisdom causes the times to change and orders the stars in their orbits.”

Sukenik’s son, general and archaeologist Yigael Yadin (1917-84), discovered the synagogue at Masada, one of the earliest synagogue buildings typified by a bleacher-type seating arrangement on all sides of the room. The important examples are Masada in the Judean Desert, Herodium just south of Yerushalayim, and Gamla in the Golan. While the first two are dated to the Roman period, specifically to the years of the Great Revolt against Rome (66-73 CE), the excavators of Gamla have suggested that it reaches back to the first century BCE. If so, it could be the earliest excavated synagogue. These synagogues did not have an *aron*. Instead, *sifrei Torah* and other scrolls were stored in a closet located outside the prayer area. Such an arrangement is described by Rashi (*Sotah* 39b) with regard to synagogues in Talmudic times. Indeed, in

the excavations of Masada, such a room was found right next to the synagogue, containing fragments of what had been scrolls of *Devarim* and *Yechezkel*.

Looking generally at the location of the ancient synagogues in Eretz Yisrael, one can follow important demographic changes that took place after *Churban Bayis Sheini* in 70 CE. Previous to the revolt, Jews were living primarily in Yehudah (Judea). With the destruction, much of the population began moving northward. They basically skipped the area of Shomron (Samaria) since it was inhabited by the Samaritans—the *Kusim*—and for the most part they moved into the Galil and



Masada Synagogue

Golan Heights. One can see this very same movement in the various texts of *Chazal*. Most of the accounts pertaining to the *Bayis Sheini* period take place in and around Yerushalayim. Later, during the time of the *Tanna'im*, one gets the impression of movement into the Galil, but there is still a substantial group of *Tanna'im* in the south. By the time we reach the *Amora'im* of Eretz Yisrael, everything is happening in the Galil.

These developments were paralleled by

the movement of the *Sanhedrin* and the *Nasi* to the Galil. As we learn from *Rosh Hashanah* 31a-b, the *Sanhedrin* moved after the destruction "...from Yerushalayim to Yavneh, and from Yavneh to Usha, and from Usha [back] to Yavneh, and from Yavneh [back] to Usha, and from Usha to Shfaram, and from Shfaram to Beit Shearim, and from Beit Shearim to Tzipori, and from Tzipori to Teveryah." Clearly, Jewish life had shifted to the north in this period.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to find beautiful synagogues throughout the Galil. One amazing example I had the opportunity to visit recently is that at Magdala. The discovery and excavation of this synagogue and the surrounding village has considerable irony to it. A Catholic group had been given permission to build a retreat center there. Little did anyone imagine that when construction began, the workers would stumble upon the remains of the ancient town known in Aramaic as Magdala, in Hebrew as Migdal, and in Greek as Taricheae. This town, as the excavations show—and which makes sense because of its location on the seashore—was a center for the fishing industry. The Jews there in the early Roman period built at least two synagogues that have been identified and excavated. The one most thoroughly analyzed yielded columns, benches, remains of a mosaic floor and an amazing find that has yet to be successfully explained. This item, known as the Magdala Stone, which I already discussed in a previous article in *Ami Magazine* (Issue 320, May 28, 2017, p. 160), is sort of a low table that some think may have been connected to the reading of the Torah. It has various scenes depicting the *Beis Hamikdash* on the side, and there is no question that its placement in the synagogue indicates the close *kesher* of worshipers to the memory of the *Beis Hamikdash* in Yerushalayim.

A second synagogue building has been found recently, evidenced by the recovery

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Hammat Teveryah

Excavations at Katzrin

## A house was discovered in Dabbura in the Golan with a stone that had once been the lintel of an ancient beis midrash.

of remains of some plastered benches and fragments of frescoes that must have decorated the walls. Most small villages usually had only one synagogue, so one must assume that this town was considerably larger than what has already been uncovered by the ongoing excavations. At this site, one can get a sense of how residential

areas, industrial areas, and the port on the Kineret were closely related to the life of the synagogues during the time of the Mishnah and the Gemara.

Numerous impressive synagogues were built in the Galil and Golan in the fourth through sixth centuries. Let's take a quick tour of Hamat Teveryah. We al-

ready mentioned one *shul*, excavated by Slouschz, which is now covered. The second synagogue, known as the Synagogue of Severus, is famous for its amazing mosaic pavement. This building was probably originally built for other purposes, but by 230 CE it was a synagogue. It was soon somehow destroyed, then reconstructed in the fourth century, but then destroyed by an earthquake. Rebuilt in the fifth or sixth centuries, it seems to have ceased operation in the eighth century. The beautiful mosaic dates from the fourth-century structure. Again, there are three sections to the mosaic: (1) a panel featuring the *aron kodesh*, menorahs and other ritual objects like a

*lulav* and *esrog*, an incense shovel and a shofar; (2) a zodiac; and (3) a group of Greek inscriptions flanked by two lions. The inscriptions are quite interesting, including the name of a major donor: “Severus, student of the most illustrious patriarchs.” In this context, “patriarchs” probably refers to Jewish communal leaders. Various people are thanked for their donations.

Moving over to the Golan, the modern city of Katzrin has not only an ancient synagogue but also a restored house that provides a good sense of ancient Jewish life. Like many sites in the Golan, the synagogue and village were discovered by Israeli archaeologists working under military command in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. This synagogue was probably built in the fourth century and abandoned in the eighth. It was a two-story colonnaded building with a platform on the southern wall, facing Yerushalayim, which is assumed to have held the *aron kodesh*. The walls were plastered white, and stone benches surrounded the main prayer area. Besides the synagogue, the restored house—which includes an olive press—is set up so you can actually walk through the various rooms. You can also get a sense of the manner in which the village as a whole surrounded and related to the synagogue. Indeed, throughout the Golan, piles of stones that were once ancient homes can be seen around quite a number of excavated synagogues.

In an interesting case of secondary usage of stones from synagogues by non-Jewish residents, a house was discovered in Dabbura in the Golan with a stone that had once been the lintel of an ancient *beis midrash*. The inscription that originally hung over its entrance reads, “This is the

*beis midrash* of Rabbi Elazar Hakappar.” Rabbi Elazar Hakappar was a contemporary of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, who edited the Mishnah towards the end of the second century. According to Talmudic sources, he was known to have lived in Lod. Some interpreters now assume that he moved to the Golan later in life. However, it is just as possible that this *beis midrash* was constructed at a later date and named for him.

One of the most exciting recent discoveries was the synagogue at Huqoq, in the Galil, not far from Magdala and Kefar Nahum, where another ancient synagogue was excavated. Dating to the Byzantine period (early fifth century CE), the excavations have yielded a synagogue building paved with stunning mosaics depicting a variety of Biblical scenes: Noah’s Ark, the Tower of Babel, Moshe parting the sea, the Israelite spies, Shimshon and the foxes, Yonah and the whale, and probably the first non-Biblical story ever discovered decorating an ancient synagogue, Alexander the Great accompanied by soldiers and war elephants. The synagogue’s walls and pillars were painted in bright colors, as can be seen from fragments that still survive. As excavations progress at this site, additional scenes are being discovered.

Let me conclude with a synagogue I had the opportunity to visit for the first time several weeks ago. The village is called in Arabic Umm el-Kanatir, literally “Mother of the Arches,” because of the arches that used to be near the spring around which the ancient Jewish village was built. In Hebrew, it has been given the name Ein Keshatot, “Spring of the Arches.” The *shul* was reconstructed with a special computer program designed to determine how the stones of a collapsed building should

be placed. For this reason, it and the surrounding complex appear to lack nothing more than a roof. The large synagogue was probably built in the sixth century CE and destroyed by an earthquake in the year 749 CE, when its inhabitants would have abandoned it. One of the fascinating things about this synagogue is its stone *aron kodesh*. Its design looks so close to what we see in many synagogues today that one can easily imagine the building full of worshipers in ancient times.

Fascinating to see here is the distribution of houses, some of which have been restored, and an olive press in the village around the synagogue. One gets a good sense of the small communities of agrarian Jews that dotted the landscape of the Galil and Golan in the years when the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, the *Targumim*, many of our *midrashim* and much of the *piyyutim* (liturgical poetry) we recite were being composed and edited.

Eretz Yisrael has many ancient synagogues. The experience of visiting these monuments to ancient Jewish life and observance provides an amazing opportunity to learn about the history of our forefathers. These archaeological sites testify to the reality and vitality of the world of *Chazal* and imbue us with a sense of continuity with our past. Seeing these synagogues, we truly understand the meaning of the words we recite thrice daily, “May You willingly accept their prayer, and may the service of Israel, Your people, be acceptable to You at all times!” ●

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