

On & Off The Beaten Track In

Ancient Synagogues in the Galil

By Peter Abelow

Baraam is one of the most complete of the ancient synagogues, with a full entrance facade as well as a row of Roman columns.
Photos: Jack Hazut

After the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE and the subsequent failure of the Bar Kochba Revolt sixty-five years later, the focus of Jewish life in the land of Israel shifted from the devastated area of Judea to the northern region: the Galil and the Golan. This shift is captured in a Talmudic passage that documents the “exile” of the Sanhedrin (*Rosh Hashanah* 31a, b).

Correspondingly, the Sanhedrin

Mr. Abelow is a licensed tour guide and the associate director of Kesbet: The Center for Educational Tourism in Israel. Kesbet specializes in running inspiring and enjoyable tours of Israel for congregations, schools and families. Mr. Abelow can be reached at 972-54-313-3712 or at peter@kesbetisrael.co.il.

wandered to ten places of banishment, as we know from tradition, namely, from the Chamber of Hewn Stone to Hanuth, and from Hanuth to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to Yavneh, and from Yavneh to Usha, and from Usha [back] to Yavneh, and from Yavneh [back] to Usha, and from Usha to Shefaram, and from Shefaram to Bet Shearim, and from Bet Shearim to Tzippori, and from Tzippori to Tiberias.

Usha, Shefaram, Bet Shearim, Tzippori and Tiberias are all in the north of Israel, and it appears that despite the destruction of Jerusalem and Judea, Jewish life continued to thrive in the northern part of Israel until the seventh century CE. The first solid archaeological evidence of Jewish life in this period came to light by accident. In 1928, as pioneers were plowing the lands of their

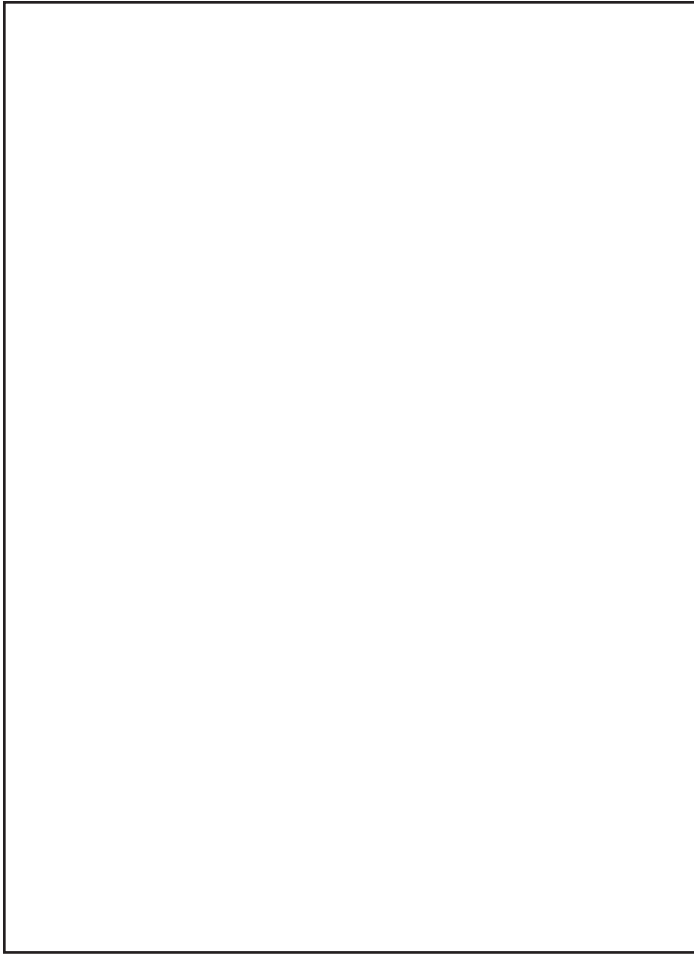
new kibbutz, Bet Alpha, only a few miles from Bet Shean, they came across what appeared to be a section of a mosaic floor. Professor Eleazar Sukenik, an archaeologist at the new Hebrew University of Jerusalem (established in 1925), was called in to supervise the subsequent excavations.

His work revealed the mosaic floor and foundations of an ancient synagogue. The exquisite floor, remarkably almost entirely intact, helps date the synagogue. An inscription in Aramaic near the entrance reads:

This mosaic was laid in the year of the reign of Justinian the emperor for the sum of one hundred measures of wheat donated by the people of the village.

Justinian is known to have reigned in the sixth century.

The upper panels of the floor, clos-



est to the Holy Ark, depict incense, a seven-branched menorah, a shofar and the *arbah minim*, all symbols that relate to the Beit Hamikdash, which had been destroyed 500 years before the floor was laid down. The lower section, closest to the entrance hall, depicts the Biblical theme of *Akeidat Yitzchak* (the Binding of Isaac). The scene shows two youths and a donkey, a ram with its horns caught in the bush and Avraham holding Yitzchak over the altar. Above them is a hand with the words, "Lay not," in Hebrew, taken from the Biblical verse in which God tells Avraham, "Lay not your hand upon the boy."

The center panel is the most enigmatic. It depicts the twelve signs of the zodiac, with their Hebrew names, surrounding a portrayal of Helios, the sun god. In the four corners are the names of the solar seasons: *tekufat Tishrei* (fall), *tekufat Tevet* (winter), *tekufat Nisan* (spring) and *tekufat Tammuz* (summer).

It is clear how the Beit Hamikdash symbolism and the Biblical theme were deemed appropriate for synagogue art. It remains a mystery, however, as to why the zodiac was chosen for the center portion of the floor. To further compound the enigma, these same three themes are also depicted on synagogue floors that were subsequently discovered at Hamat Tiberias and Tzippori. Although similar, each of the floors has its own particular characteristics. Nevertheless, it would seem that this particular combination of themes was common at that time.

A short film at the site tells the story of the mosaic floor and discusses life in a Jewish village during the Byzantine (Talmudic) period. The mosaic floors at Hamat Tiberias and Tzippori can be viewed in their national parks, respectively. Other synagogues from the period, which corresponds to the Mishnaic/Talmudic period, have also been discovered, though their floors have not survived. These include Korazim, Meron and Baraam. It is worth seeing Baraam, in particular, because it is one of the most complete of the ancient synagogues, with a full entrance facade as well as a row of Roman columns.

One of the most unique discoveries was made on the grounds of Kibbutz Ein Hanetziv, located about five miles from Bet Alpha and just south of Bet Shean. The surviving remnant of the synagogue floor has no pictures or symbols. Instead there is a twenty-nine-line inscription, based on a Tosefta, which instructs residents as to how the laws of *shemittah* (the Sabbatical year) are to be observed in the vicinity of Bet Shean. In the inscription, there are a number of places where the Hebrew letter *ayin* is used instead of an *aleph*, and vice versa. This brings to mind the Talmudic warning about not using a *ba'al korei* from Bet Shean because the people there confuse their *alephs* and *ayins*!

The large number of ancient synagogues in the Galil testifies to the extent of Jewish life that continued to thrive in the land of Israel until the seventh century. **IA**



The Bet Alpha synagogue floor depicts the twelve signs of the zodiac, with their Hebrew names, surrounding a portrayal of Helios.