

The Secret Synagogue of Ein Gedi

By Peter Abelow

*A tent covers the magnificent mosaic floor of the ancient synagogue at Ein Gedi, which is just a few hundred yards from the Nature Reserve.
Photos: Jack Hazut*

The Ein Gedi Nature Reserve, a desert oasis along the shores of the Dead Sea, is a popular destination for Israelis and tourists. Youth groups and families come here to hike in the region where David sought refuge from King Saul (I Samuel 24), to see the wildlife—primarily ibex and hyrax—and to splash in the pool underneath a refreshing waterfall, which flows all year round.

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But only a small percentage of the many visitors to Ein Gedi take advantage of a fascinating attraction of an entirely different nature, located a few hundred yards from the main Ein Gedi parking lot: the restoration of a Talmudic-period synagogue. In the fall 2005 issue of *Jewish Action*, I wrote about the ancient synagogues of the Galil. Although the primary focus of Jewish life shifted to the Galil after Bar Kochba's rebellion failed in 135 CE, evidence of the persistence of Jewish life in Judea, including the area surrounding Ein Gedi, during the Mishnaic-Talmudic (or Roman-Byzantine, 135-638 CE) periods, has been uncovered as well.

We know from archaeological evidence and historical records that an exten-

sive Jewish community had thrived in Ein Gedi during the period of the Second Temple. Perfumes made from the indigenous balsam plants in Ein Gedi and nearby Jericho via a secret process were famous throughout the ancient world. Josephus describes Cleopatra's successful efforts to wrest control of this lucrative industry from King Herod and the king's success in regaining control after the Egyptian monarch's death. The Jewish community of Ein Gedi was destroyed and abandoned one hundred years later during the Great Revolt (66-70 CE).

However, during the late-second or early-third century Ein Gedi was re-established as a vibrant Jewish community. Eusebius, a fourth-century Roman writer,

describes Ein Gedi as a “very large Jewish village.” It was during this period that the community built a large synagogue to serve its religious needs.

The Ein Gedi synagogue, which was destroyed in the sixth century, had a simple mosaic floor and, similar to the ancient synagogues in the Galil, was built facing Jerusalem. In the fourth century, and then again in the fifth, the synagogue was renovated. A new decorative mosaic covered the old, and this is what was discovered in the 1970s in the course of excavations at the site. The section of the mosaic opposite the *bimah* depicts three seven-branch menorahs. Unlike the synagogue floors in the Galil



The mosaic floor of the Ein Gedi synagogue depicts flowers and birds.

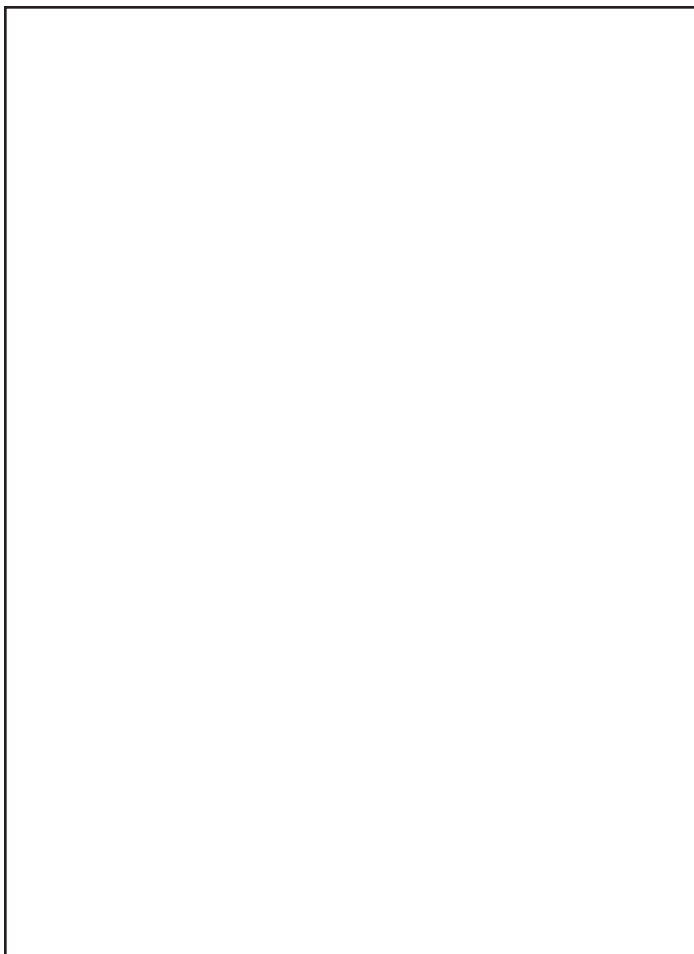
with their zodiac themes, the Ein Gedi synagogue floor portrays flowers and birds such as cranes, peacocks and possibly partridges.

The most fascinating section of the mosaic is along the western aisle. It includes five different inscriptions, some in Hebrew and some in Aramaic, the vernacular of the time. One of them credits the donors who contributed towards the renovations (some things haven't changed!). Another inscription, eighteen-lines long, lays down the rules of acceptable behavior for community members:

Whoever causes dissension between a man and his fellow, or speaks lashon hara [gossip] about his friend to the Gentiles, or steals an object from his friend, or reveals the secrets of the town, may He whose eyes look out over the entire earth and see all hidden things set His face against that person and his seed, and uproot him from under the heavens. And let everyone say, Amen and Amen, Selah (my translation).

(Researchers theorize that the phrase “secrets of the town” refers to the perfume industry!)

One of the other inscriptions enumerates the thirteen generations between Adam and Yafet listed in the book of Bereishit. Another, reminiscent of the pic-



torial theme of the Galil mosaics, lists the twelve Hebrew names of the zodiac and the twelve months of the Hebrew calendar.

Today visitors can marvel at the ancient synagogue floor and connect with the Jews who lived here centuries ago. A brief stop at the ancient shul can add a whole new dimension to a visit to Ein Gedi. **JA**



An inscription on the mosaic floor of the Ein Gedi synagogue lists the generations from Adam to the children of Noah.