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The Jewish community and its synagogue were destroyed by fire, signs of which were very evident during the excavation. A hoard of linen-wrapped coins was found in the courtyard of an adjacent building; the latest coins dated to the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527-565 CE). Archaeologists conclude that the Jewish settlement and its synagogue were destroyed in a wave of persecution early in the reign of Justinian I, around 530 CE.
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The Inscription

The first section depicts the 13 ancestors of humanity: "Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mehailel, Jared, Enoch, Methusaleh, Lamech, Noah, Shem, Ham, Japeth."

The second section shows the 12 signs of the zodiac, the three patriarchs, the word "shalom," followed by the names of Daniel's three companions who, according to legend, are the three bases on which the world rests, and finally, a blessing for peace on Israel: "Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces. Nissan, Iyyar, Sivan, Tamuz, Av, Elul, Tishrei, Marheshvan, Kislev, Tevet, Shevat, and Adar. Peace, Hananiyah, Mishael, and Azariyah, peace on Israel."

In the third section, an inscription appears in Aramaic, which mentions the benefactors of the synagogue, Yose, Ezron, and Hazikin, sons of Halfi. The inscription also charges all inhabitants to conduct themselves according to the rules of the village. It warns of a curse on those who start quarrels, slander their neighbors before the Gentiles, steal, or "reveal the town's secret." Most scholars believe that En Gedi's economic welfare was based on a secret method for producing perfume from the balsam shrubs cultivated in the area. The inscription may hint at this possibility.

The fourth section contains an Aramaic inscription noting the names of the above-mentioned benefactors and calls for blessings on them for their good deeds.

In the fifth section (not shown in the picture at right) is an Aramaic inscription thanking the citizens of the town and "Yonatan the cantor" who paid their share toward the repair of the synagogue.

Map of the nearby surroundings

En Gedi Antiquities National Park encompasses a Jewish settlement from the late Roman and Byzantine periods. The site, as well as nearby Tel Goren, the Arugot Fort, agricultural terraces, and a Chalcolithic temple, are all part of the En Gedi oasis.

Follow these important rules:
- Walk only on the designated paths.
- Do not touch, climb, or deface the archaeological remains.
- Do not pour water on the mosaics.
- Obey all signs and rangers' instructions.

Text: Avivit Gera  Translator: Miriam Feinberg Vamosh  Photos: Avraham Hai, David Harris, Nikki Davidov Production Co.  Graphic design and drawings: Shalom Kweller
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The numbers in parentheses refer to the signs posted along the visitor’s route. The route is circular and is marked with arrows.

The Route

You are standing on a street dating from the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud (the late Roman period) (1). On your left is a stepped, two-meter-deep ritual purification bath (miqveh) from the late Second Temple period (2). The remains of buildings from the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud line both sides of the street (3). Another remnant of this community is a ritual purification bath (4). On your left is a selection of implements discovered in excavations. Note the remains of steps, which led to the synagogue’s second floor (5).

You have now entered the synagogue’s western entry hall and are facing a basin used for washing hands and feet (6). A clay water jug and a stone bowl were discovered near the basin. On your left, a long aisle contains the synagogue’s dedicatory inscription (7). The eighteen-line inscription is horizontally divided into four sections. A fifth, three-line section was added later. During later renovations in antiquity. See the other side of the pamphlet for the translation of the inscription.

You are now in the central hall of the synagogue. Its mosaic floor is adorned with a leaf pattern surrounding four birds within a medallion. A diamond within a square surrounds the medallion. A pair of peacocks grasping a bunch of grapes in their beaks stands in each of the four corners of the square. The mosaic contains no human forms, from which it may be concluded that the residents carefully heeded the biblical precepts in this regard. For this same reason, the 12 signs of the zodiac are indicated by their names but not depicted on the mosaic, as opposed to most other synagogues of the same period.

Note the location of the Holy Ark (8). In the northern wall behind it is a niche where archaeologists discovered the synagogue’s repository of out-of-use sacred writings, several scorched scrolls, many bronze coins, a bronze cup, and a silver seven-branched menorah (apparently used as a decoration on the Torah scrolls). Beside the ark is a stepped seat (9), known as the “seat of Moses” for the head of the congregation or community leader. Near the niche, a bronze seven-branched menorah was discovered. It was 22 cm wide and 15 cm high and served as decoration. A bamah (platform) (10), stood before the ark and may have been encircled by wooden decorative screens. The bamah and the Holy Ark may also have been made of wood. The portion of the mosaic floor nearest the bamah depicts three small seven-branched menorahs. Notice the bases of columns (11) that formed three long aisles that surrounded the prayer hall on the east, south, and west.

Continue to the end of the elongated space. Turn left at the steps to the balcony overlooking the synagogue, and continue on the route around it. Note that the ideal observation point for the mosaic depends on the way the light falls at various times of the day.

Excavations at the Site

In 1965, remains of a mosaic floor were discovered accidentally 300 meters north of Tel Goren. The site was excavated from 1970-1972 by Profs. D. Bar Giora and E. Netzer of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and by Dr. Y. Porath of the Department of Antiquities (today the Israel Antiquities Authority). Additional excavations were carried out in 1992 by G. Hadass on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, and from 1995-1999, and in 2002, by Prof. Y. Hirschfeld on behalf of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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