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# Bet Alpha National Park



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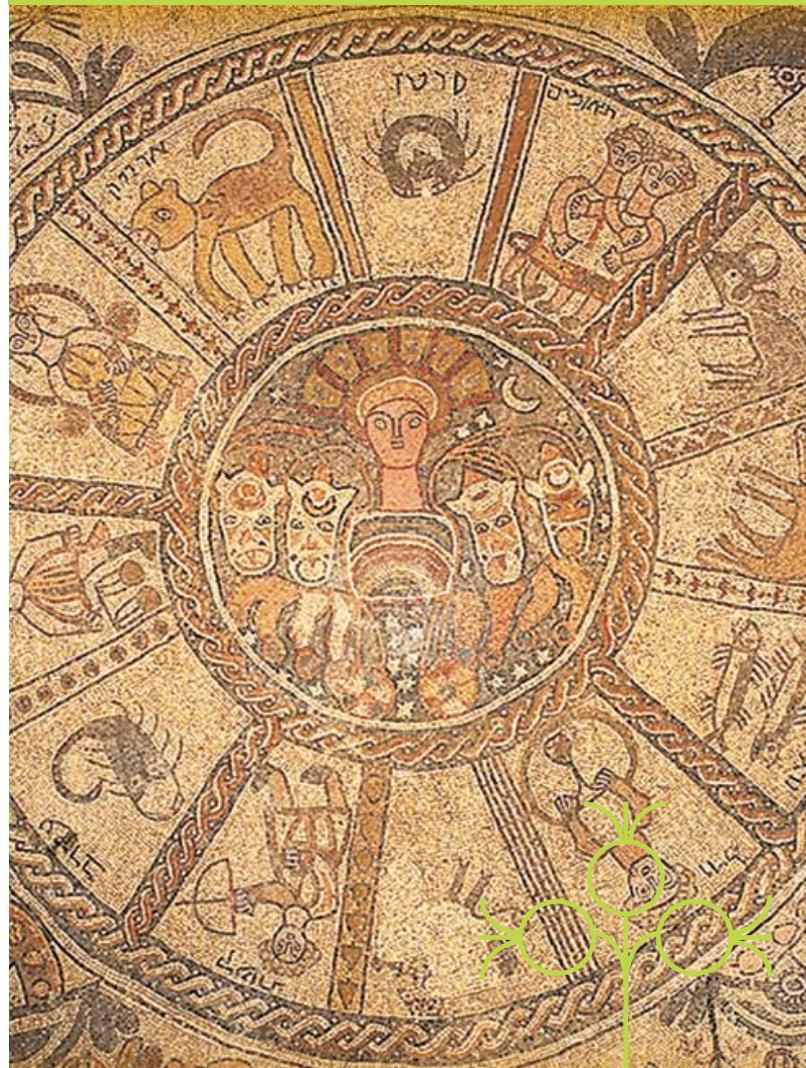
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# Welcome to Bet Alpha National Park

The ruins of the synagogue, which dates from the sixth century CE, were discovered in 1928 by members of the kibbutzim Bet-Alpha and Hefzi-Ba. The synagogue is located in Kibbutz Hefzi-Ba at the foot of Mt. Gilboa. The site was excavated in 1929 by E.L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Additional buildings surrounding the synagogue were discovered in an exploratory dig in 1962. The synagogue is aligned to the southwest, facing Jerusalem.

The mosaic floor is one of the most beautiful discovered in Israel. The synagogue itself included a central hall and two aisles, which were separated from the hall by two rows of columns. In the southern wall was an apse (a semi-circular niche) that protruded from the building, where the Holy Ark probably stood. The women's gallery seems to have been in the balcony, over the aisles. In the center of the apse, beneath the Ark, archaeologists found a small cavity covered by stone slabs, which served as the synagogue genizah (depository for sacred texts). The structure was covered with a tiled roof, remains of which were found in the main hall.

The entire area of the synagogue was carpeted with an elaborate, well-preserved mosaic. The main decoration was in the nave. In this part of the mosaic, near the ark, are depictions of Jewish ritual objects – a Holy Ark flanked by lions, birds and menorahs (candelabra) and surrounded by animals, fruit and geometric designs.

The central section of the mosaic contains a zodiac with the symbols of the months and their names in Hebrew and Aramaic. In the center is the sun god Helios, riding in a chariot drawn by four horses. In the four corners are figures of women, symbolizing the four seasons of the year.

At the base of the mosaic is a depiction of the offering of Isaac, accompanied by passages in Hebrew. Two inscriptions near the main entrance state: *"The well remembered artists who carried out this work Marianus and his son Hanina"* (in Greek) and *"The mosaic was laid in the year...of the reign of Emperor Justin (517-528 CE.) for the price of one hundred measures of grain donated by the villagers"* (in Aramaic).

By the time the zodiac was laid, idol worship had lost its hold. The zodiac was probably used in the mosaic solely for decorative purposes. Among the important finds uncovered at the site were bronze coins from the Byzantine period. These were discovered in the genizah and had been minted by emperors between the fourth and sixth centuries.

The synagogue was probably destroyed by an earthquake at the end of the sixth century CE.

The Israel Nature and National Parks Authority has carried out partial reconstruction of the site, built a roof over the mosaic, landscaped the area and prepared (with the support of the Government Tourist Corporation) a short sound-and-light presentation describing how the local residents built the synagogue, together with a brief history of ancient synagogues in Israel.

