

# The Vandalism of the Mosaics in the Severan Synagogue in Hammat Tiberias

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*In the third and fourth century CE, the ancient city of Hammat Tiberias, located in modern-day Israel, developed as a Jewish center. One of its synagogues, excavated in the 1960s, contains a remarkable floor mosaic, one of the earliest synagogue mosaics in the country. It is composed of several panels, depicting traditional Jewish religious objects, as well as a zodiac wheel, complete with personifications of the four seasons, plus the figure of the god Helios in the middle, riding in his chariot. The extraordinary nature and circumstances of the mosaic and synagogue make its recent vandalism all the more difficult to bear. This article analyzes the vandalism of the mosaics that occurred on May 29, 2012, which seems most likely to be attributable to the Haredim, an ultra-orthodox sect of Judaism. After a discussion of the history of the site, and an analysis of the mosaics themselves, I discuss the perpetrators and their motive, the physical damage, recent comparable acts, and what could be done to prevent future attacks of a similar nature. One can only hope that raising awareness of these acts will prevent them in the future.*

## Introduction

In 1920, the unsuspecting Jewish Labor Battalion was paving a road between the cities of Tiberias and Zemach in Israel. During construction, the workers came across a startling find that made them stop in their tracks – they had unearthed the ancient town of Hammat Tiberias,<sup>1</sup> part of the larger city of modern-day Tiberias, or in Hebrew, *Tverya*. It was, in antiquity, and remains to this day, a famed tourist attraction on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, located in the Lower Galilee area of Israel. Upon its discovery, there began an excavation of the site by the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society, from 1920-1921, the organization's first excavation.<sup>2</sup> Digs have been steadily ongoing for the last decade or so, and archaeologists under the direction of the Israel Antiquities Authority, or IAA, are still uncovering the main area of the ancient town. A grand archaeological national park the Hammat Tverya National Park, was built around the site, and is maintained by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, or INPA.

## Hammat Tiberias

Hammat Tiberias is located south of the ancient city of Tiberias, and north of the el-Hamam springs, between the Sea of Galilee and the mountains, and it therefore functioned both as the southern suburb of Tiberias, and also as a center for therapeutic baths, because of the area's natural hot springs.<sup>3</sup> Hammat Tiberias was the source of 17 hot mineral springs with a temperature of over 60° Celsius.<sup>4</sup> Many

years later, the Romans, always quick to take advantage of such a sought-after commodity, erected beautiful spas and turned the town into a popular resort.<sup>5</sup> Hammat is mentioned as a medicinal spring in the writings of Pliny the Elder and of Josephus from the first century C.E.<sup>6</sup> The remains of the hot springs are also part of the Hammat Tverya National Park.

During the third and fourth century C.E., Hammat Tiberias developed as a Jewish center, as is evident by the remains of many Jewish monuments in the town. It housed 13 synagogues, and was the seat of the *Sanhedrin* (the Jewish court), the *Sidra Rabbah* (the great academy), and the Patriarchate, which acted as the official channel of communication between the Roman Empire and its Jewish subjects.<sup>7</sup> The existence of these Jewish landmarks in Hammat Tiberias helped to create a national narrative for the modern Jewish state of Israel, as they were not only important in the history of the country, but also in the history of Judaism. The Jewish community remained a demographic majority in Hammat Tiberias, and the *Yeshiva* of Palestine remained there until moving to Jerusalem in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century C.E.<sup>8</sup>

Of the thirteen synagogues that once stood in Hammat Tiberias, two have been excavated. The first was uncovered in 1921 by writer and translator Nachum Slouschz.<sup>9</sup> The excavation of this temple was a watershed event in the history of Israeli archaeology, as it was the first synagogue excavation conducted under Jewish auspices.<sup>10</sup> The number of excavations



Figure 1: The Greek dedicatory inscription in the mosaic floor on the Eastern side of the Severan Synagogue. (Modified from photograph by Shulamit Miller).

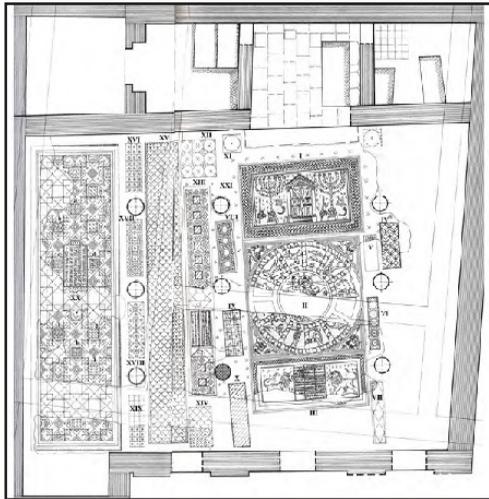


Figure 2: A floor plan of the Severan Synagogue, showing the location of the mosaic panels. Synagogue (Wikimedia Commons).

in Israel since this important moment in Israeli archaeology is a testament to the value placed upon the practice. Moshe Dothan, the Deputy Director of the Israeli Department of Antiquities and Museums,<sup>11</sup> directed the excavation of Hammat Tiberias and the second synagogue in 1960s.<sup>12</sup> This second synagogue turned out to be the remains of the Severan Synagogue from the fourth century C.E. It was identified as such by a mosaic inscription in Greek, found in the floor on the eastern side of the synagogue. The inscription is translated by the INPA as: “Severos disciple of the most illustrious patriarchs who completed [it]. Blessings on him and on Iouillos the supervisor” (fig. 1). Severos was a pupil of these “most illustrious Patriarchs,” who are most likely the Jewish religious leaders Hillel II and his father Jude II.<sup>13</sup>

### The Severan Synagogue Mosaic

Within the Severan Synagogue, a remarkable floor mosaic was discovered, one of the most impressive in the country. The majority of mosaics found in Tiberias and Hammat date from the third through the mid-eighth century C.E., many of them inlaid into floors. Floors



Figure 3: The eight-panel Greek dedicatory inscription in the mosaic floor of the Severan.



Figure 4: The zodiac wheel in the mosaic floor in the Severan Synagogue (Moshe Dothan, Israel Exploration Society, 1983).

were predominantly treated as a carpet; an extensive surface on which scenes and motifs could be displayed.<sup>14</sup> The main mosaic in the Severan Synagogue consists of three panels (fig. 2), and the bottom-most panel contains eight dedicatory inscriptions in Greek, flanked on either side by lions (fig. 3). The middle panel depicts a zodiac wheel, with images

of the four seasons in the corners, and the pagan god Helios in the center (fig. 4). The zodiac wheel itself consists of a double circle, divided into 12 voussoir-shaped segments, each depicting a sign of the zodiac facing outward, and accompanied by an Aramaic inscription labeling the sign. Subsequently, after the original construction of the Severan Synagogue, at least two reconstructions of the synagogue were built on top of it, and due to a change in orientation – to better face Jerusalem<sup>15</sup> – a wall was built straight across the zodiac mosaic, partially obliterating some of the motifs. The signs of Cancer and Sagittarius have been completely destroyed by this wall's construction, Gemini and Scorpio are partially damaged, and the Helios image is half cut-off (fig. 4).

The zodiac signs have elaborate coloring, and are rendered in fine detail, an effect achieved through the use of small tesserae. The Aries sign is depicted as a ram, mid-leap, with a luxuriant tail (fig. 5a); the Taurus as a charging bull, tail upright (fig. 5b); one of the twins of the Gemini sign has been lost, but the preserved twin is a male youth with brown hair, standing nude (fig. 5c); the Leo sign is depicted as a roaring, pouncing lion (fig. 5d); Virgo as a maiden standing with a torch ablaze in her left hand, wearing a long, red tunic, with a gray mantle over it (fig. 5e); Libra is a young, standing male, nude, save for a gray cape over his shoulder, holding a scale in one hand, and a golden scepter in the other (fig. 5f); the Scorpio sign, though half-destroyed, remains as the posterior of a darkly-colored scorpion (fig. 5g); Capricorn is depicted as a creature with the head, torso, and front legs of a goat, and the rear haunches and tail of a fish (fig. 5h); the Aquarius is a standing, nude male youth, leaning back and pouring water out of a large golden jug from over his shoulder (fig. 5i); the Pisces is depicted as two similar-looking fish, swimming past each other in opposite directions (fig. 5j).

Figure 5a-d (top to bottom): Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Leo (Photograph by Shulamit Miller).





Figure 5e-f (top to bottom): Virgo, Libra  
(Photograph by Shulamit Miller)

These mosaics are of particular importance as well because it is the first time that Jews are known to have used the zodiac in their synagogue decorations.<sup>16</sup> The use of the zodiac wheel was quite common in ancient synagogues, as there are many examples, but less common was the representation of the pagan sun god Helios in the center (see fig. 4); to date, only seven zodiac panels incorporating Helios have been uncovered, all in synagogues, all within Israel.<sup>17</sup> While every other element in the mosaic is labeled, Helios is the only element that is not, perhaps expressing some discomfort of the use of this borrowed iconography.<sup>18</sup> The god is depicted as a magnificent figure, crowned with a halo, and protruding seven rays of light from his head. His right hand is raised, as if waving, and he holds in his left hand a globe and a whip. He is flanked on either side by the moon and a star, which, given the context, could be seen as either the Sun or just a star in general. He wears a long-sleeved blue



Figure 5g-j (top to bottom): Scorpio, Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces  
(Photograph by Shulamit Miller)

tunic, with a red cape draped over his shoulder. Although the depiction is cut off and damaged by the construction of the later wall, there exist the hints of horses' hoofs and a mane, as well as clouds and water, which may imply that the mosaic once showed Helios rising from the sea on his *quadriga*.

The spandrels between the outer circle of the zodiac and the framing square are occupied by four female busts, personifying the four seasons. Each season is accompanied by a Aramaic inscription identifying it, as well as by attributes representing the agricultural activities of the season, and the location of each bust corresponds with the appropriate signs of the zodiac that fall under each season. Spring is represented as a young brown-haired woman, wearing a red tunic and gray mantle, with part of her wavy hair put up, and the rest hanging down over her shoulders (fig. 6a). She also wears a wreath of flowers on her head, as well as a necklace and bracelet. She raised her right hand, holding a bowl of flower buds, and a budding flower grows up behind her. Summer is represented in a similar manner to Spring (fig. 6b), but depicted as holding a sickle, and with a sheaf of grain instead of a flower growing behind her. She wears a wreath of leaves, and her curly brown hair falls behind her shoulders. Autumn, dressed similarly to the other seasons, has her hair mostly covered by a large wreath, which, according to Shulamit Miller, contain figs and pomegranates (fig. 6c). She raises her hand up, holding a grapevine branch as well as another branch with leaves, which could be an olive branch.<sup>19</sup> The panel that portrays Winter is partially damaged, but still depicts a woman wearing a gray tunic, whose head is covered by a mantle (fig. 6d). At her left shoulder is jar with an S-shaped handle, with water spurting out.

The mosaic floor at this synagogue was executed some time in the 360s C.E. by a workshop of the highest class, brought to Israel from one of the great metropolises of the Roman Empire, possibly Alexandria, Nea Paphos, Antiochia or Apamea.<sup>20</sup> According



Figure 6a-d (top to bottom): Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter (Photograph by Shulamit Miller)

to Miller, the combination of these elements – the zodiac, the four seasons, and the pagan god Helios – is unique to synagogue mosaic pavements of the Byzantine period, though the use of pagan elements within the synagogue is not inconsequential. The reasons for these iconographic choices may likely be linked for the most part to the preferences of the mosaics' patrons, who were in turn subject to the changing fashions and tastes of the times. Perhaps the mosaic exudes a pagan mood just because Hillel II had nothing but pagan calendar models to choose from. Even with the appearance of pagan iconography, the mosaics contain a few minor modifications to symbolize

the new Jewish liturgical calendar, such as the introduction of the motif of the moon and stars, and choosing to use the 12 signs of the zodiac instead of the 12 months.<sup>21</sup> However, it is possible that, given the geographic diversity, and the extended time period during which these symbols were used, the interpretations and ramifications varied from one community to the next, making it problematic to offer a single interpretation applicable for all cases.

The uppermost panel of the floor mosaic in the synagogue depicts a Torah ark with an ornamental curtain, flanked by two seven-branch candelabras, or *menorahs* (fig. 7a). This imagery appeared in both Jewish and Samaritan synagogue mosaics, and also in bas-reliefs and ritual objects.<sup>22</sup> This part of the mosaic also contained other important Jewish symbols, such as a coal pan (fig. 7b), the *shofar* (fig. 7c) – a horn made from a ram’s horn used during the Jewish holiday of *Rosh Hashanah* – and a ceremonial palm frond, or *lulav* branch, with its accompanying citron, or *etrog* (fig. 7d), used during the holiday of *Sukkot*. These features commonly appeared together in imagery from Palestinian and diaspora communities, and distinguished representations of Jewish menorahs from Samaritan ones,<sup>23</sup> which were otherwise similar, due to the fact that there was a population of Samaritan Israelites.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 7a: Torah ark and menorahs mosaic (Photograph by Moshe Dothan, Israel Exploration Society, 1983)



Figure 7b-d (top left going clockwise): detail of the coal pan , shofar, lulav and etrog (Photograph by Shulamit Miller)

### The Vandalism

On 29 May 2012, severe vandalism of the Severan Synagogue was discovered by employees of the INPA.<sup>25</sup> The night before, vandals had sprayed graffiti and torn up the mosaic. Blue and black spray paint covered the floor mosaic, obscuring ancient Aramaic and Greek inscriptions (fig. 8), and slogans were scrawled along the rock walls of the synagogue (figs. 9-10). Some parts of the mosaic were smashed with a hammer, and ground to a fine powder, while other parts were badly scratched.<sup>26</sup> The zodiac wheel in particular appears to have been hit by a pickax, and Dror Ben Yosef of the IAA was quoted as saying, “the perpetrators drilled a hole in the drawing of the Holy Ark and damaged the menorah drawing as well. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* reported that the vandals “worked very hard trying to take apart the floor,” and “one corner of the mosaic was completely taken apart.”<sup>27</sup> Several holes were also gouged in the mosaic floor (fig. 11).<sup>28</sup> IAA deputy director Uzi Dahari said a fringe group of extremist ultra-Orthodox Jews, called the Haredim, were suspected of causing the damage.<sup>29</sup> However, as of the publication of this paper, there was no claim of responsibility by the Haredim, but they appear to tend not to do so after their attacks.



Figure 8 (left): Spray paint over the inscription mosaic (Photograph by Moti Dolev).

Figure 9 (below): Spray paint on the synagogue walls (Photograph by Moti Dolev).



Two of the slogans spray-painted onto the walls that night said, “a site for every grave [desecrated],”<sup>30</sup> and “a response over the years,”<sup>31</sup> referring to the other, similar acts of vandalism that have been carried out at other archaeological sites in Israel.<sup>32</sup> Another piece of graffiti said, “For Shuka,” most likely referring to Yehoshua “Shuka” Dorfman, the head of the IAA.<sup>33</sup> This targeting of Dorfman was just one occurrence out of a string of many, as he has repeatedly been the victim of attacks perpetrated by young Haredi Jews.<sup>34</sup> Besides the emotional tolls that this vandalism had on Dorfman and other members of the IAA, it had huge ramifications in both a historic-archaeological and religious context. As Ben Yosef said about the mosaics, “whoever vandalized it desecrated its holiness. These people damaged our historic heritage.”<sup>35</sup>

Not only were these mosaics some of the best preserved of its period according to archaeologists,<sup>36</sup> they were also unique. According to Miller, the iconography and motifs found in these mosaics at Hammat Tiberias fit in to the repertoire of mosaic art in the region throughout the late Roman and Byzantine periods, but are distinctive in the combination of their elements. In some aspects, such as the appearance of Helios and the zodiac, the mosaic art in Tiberias may have been “trend setting,” since this is the first-known appearance not only of Helios in a synagogue setting, but also of the combination of Helios with the zodiac and the seasons in a single panel, and in conjunction with the adjacent panel of Jewish symbols.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, according to Gilad Kinamon,

an archaeologist for the IAA, the mosaic was also unique because it listed the names of the synagogue’s chief patrons in ancient Aramaic, Latin and Greek as well.<sup>38</sup>

*Haaretz* reported that Ben Yosef posited that the synagogue was “probably the site where the Jerusalem Talmud was completed,” and Dina Avshalom-Gurney, the head archaeologist of the Eastern Galilee and Golan region of the IAA, stated that “it will never be the same mosaic that people prayed on 1,600 years ago... you can feel and learn here how people once lived, prayed, studied and talked. It will never be the same. We’re facing a vandalist drive against heritage sites that’s gaining momentum. Something has to be done to stop it.”<sup>39</sup> She goes on further to say that “the damage is irreversible, it’s doubtful we will be able to see the mosaic like it was before... the mosaic floor was here for 1,600 years until these vandals destroyed so many years of history.”<sup>40</sup> The site served as a center for research, and thus the vandalism of these mosaics not only takes away from the impact of the unique features of these mosaics, but also their importance in learning about the history of the various cultures that occupied ancient Israel.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 10: Spray paint on the synagogue walls (Photograph by Moti Dolev).

Figure 11: Hole drilled in Torah ark mosaic (Photograph by Moti Dolev).



According to Dahari, “It was the best of Jewish art of its time, of the late Roman and early Byzantine period,” and the perpetrators “destroyed what was in front of them without thinking.”<sup>42</sup> The vandalism is most likely attributable to the Haredim – being the most theologically conservative stream of Orthodox Judaism – firstly because, for very religious Jews, the disturbance of Jewish graves is a deeply offensive act, and secondly because of the Haredi’s previous threats against the IAA and its employees, paired with the fact that the graffiti statement “a site for every grave” refers to the IAA’s excavation of Jewish graves from antiquity.<sup>43</sup> If perpetrated by the Haredim, their beliefs can be seen as at least a partial explanation of the severity of the damage to the mosaics, and why the vandals lashed out in such a manner. However, it seems strange that, of all the religious and ethnic groups to have attacked a synagogue, it was a group of Jews, and very devout ones at that.

According to Ben Yosef, the reason why they would attack this Jewish site is that “there are Haredim who believe that if a zodiac wheel is drawn there, it can’t really be a synagogue...the zodiac wheel, in this case, is actually a Judaized

Hellenistic motif.”<sup>44</sup> The vandalism is further attributable to the Haredim due to the fact that ultra-Orthodox Jews have frequently turned up to many of Kinamon’s archaeological sites in the past to demonstrate, sometimes violently, against his work that supposedly involved Jewish gravesites.<sup>45</sup> For instance, just a week before the incident at Hammat Tiberias, a similar case of vandalism was discovered at Tel Yavne, in which a kiln dating back to the sixth century C.E., used for making ceramic vessels, was spray painted with the question: “What’s more important – a kiln, or honoring the dead?”<sup>46</sup> The attack on the kiln was also attributed to ultra-Orthodox opponents of the archaeological excavations, and additionally, in the past two months, several other archaeological sites have been damaged as well, and the attacks attributed to the Haredim: another rare mosaic from the Byzantine era was smashed up and covered with Hebrew graffiti – reading “the magnitude of destruction equals the magnitude of desecration” – at Khirbet Hanut site in the Elah Valley just outside Jerusalem,<sup>47</sup> and a container holding artifacts was set on fire in the city of Afula in northern Israel.<sup>48</sup> Avshalom-Gorni added that “public servants who safeguard our historical heritage

have also been threatened recently...it's definitely a frightening situation."<sup>49</sup> Regarding the mosaics at Hammat Tiberias in particular, if opposition to archaeological work was in fact the motivation behind the attacks, experts bitterly noted that the vandals irrevocably damaged and desecrated the very site whose sanctity they purportedly wanted to uphold.<sup>50</sup>

*Haaretz* reported that a police spokesman said that the Tiberias police are investigating the case, while the authority is trying to tally the damages and figure out if anything can be restored. After the discovery of the vandalism, one employee burst into tears when viewing the vandals' work, and another stated, "Afghanistan is right here."<sup>51</sup> Though the specific vandals have not been identified, authorities are still investigating "the authors of the awful act of vandalism," according to Jacques Neguer, Head of Art Conservation at the IAA, whom I contacted in December 2014, and was kind enough to elaborate on the current situation at Hammat Tiberias. INPA Director General Shaul Goldstein stated that those at the organization "view the incident at Hammat Tverya in the severest light and will work to see that the offenders are punished. These are cultural and heritage sites that are hundreds of years old...this is millions' of shekels worth of damage, but as soon as we have an exact estimate we will begin the long restoration process."<sup>52</sup> As of the publication of this paper, there have been no disciplinary actions taken regarding the vandalism. The individual perpetrators of the physical vandalism must certainly be punished if identified, as should any authority figure within any organization, religious or otherwise, responsible for suggesting or planning the attack at Hammat Tiberias and other ancient sites.

The vandals caused widespread and irreversible damage, and Goldstein says, "It's impossible to put a price on damage done to pieces of heritage from centuries ago... There is no

justification for such a cheap shot against the fundamental values of our culture," and added that he hoped the police would bring the culprits to justice for their crimes.<sup>53</sup> Avshalom-Gorni stated that conservation and restoration work on the mosaic would be carried out, but it would not be enough.<sup>54</sup> According to Neguer, the damage to the site and the mosaics was immediately repaired by the Conservation Department of the IAA, with one exception: the Northeast corner of the mosaic, which was completely destroyed. This part will take more time to be restored and the work will be done according to the existing documentation using the original stones of the mosaic. According to an announcement released by the INPA, the mosaics have been closed off to visitors since July 1, 2014, and will be until March 1, 2015, for conservation of the floor panels.

#### The Haredim

With all of the tension that has constantly been plaguing Israel of late, it is a great pity that such devastation might have been undertaken by the Haredim, within their own culture and religion. Though if the ideology of the Haredim is considered, one can begin to understand why they did what they did at Hammat Tiberias and elsewhere. What unites the Haredim is their absolute reverence for the teachings of the Torah, including both the Written and Oral Law. It is thus the central and determining factor in all aspects of life, and consequently, many Haredim are fundamentally opposed to a secular, modern, pre-messianic Jewish state. Though resistant to active participation and affiliation with Israel's mostly secular democracy, Haredi political groups function with the aim of aligning Israel's policies with *halakhah*, or Jewish law.<sup>55</sup> The Haredim's ardent and uncompromising devotion to their principles led to the formation of the *Atra Kadisha*, a small extremist ultra-Orthodox group, which in the 1950s, took upon itself the goal of protecting Jewish graves from disturbance. All ultra-Orthodox groups agree that exhuming graves is not legitimate, and

even if the graves uncovered contain the remains of gentiles, most ultra-Orthodox agree that they should be left untouched, lest their disturbance lead to the encouragement of the desecration of Jewish graves abroad. There is a feeling within the Haredi community that the *Atra Kadisha* are waging a controversial battle, which not everyone within the broader group supports.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, while the press has attributed the vandalism at Hammat Tiberias to the greater Haredi people, it may in fact just be the work of this outlying, smaller group of Haredim. Considering the stated goals of the *Atra Kadisha*, the group looks probable for the crimes, and so maybe the media should have put the official blame of this smaller faction as opposed to the Haredim in general, as was the case for most news sources.

Compromise between the Haredim and the IAA has been attempted in the past few years, with Dorfman beginning an ongoing dialogue with Rabbi David Shmidel, who heads the *Atra Kadisha*. He spoke to the Israeli newspaper, *Haaretz*, a month after the vandalism at Hammat Tiberias, saying, “There were confrontations, but we kept up the dialogue...I was criticized by archaeologists and secular Jews, but we managed to maintain a reasonable level of cooperation.” However, this dialogue ended with the Ashkelon affair, in May 2010, where Haredim opposed the construction of a new emergency room at Ashkelon’s Barzilai Medical Center over ancient graves. Dorfman told the paper that the ultra-Orthodox behaved in a matter that was “aggressive - the graves were not the real issue. I had a meeting with Shmidel and I proved to him that this was a pagan site that had nothing Jewish about it. But these people began to engage in acts of vandalism against my workers and against me personally. My wife was hospitalized. That is when I gave up trying to get them to cooperate with us. The real issue is not the graves; what is going on in fact is a power struggle within the Haredi community. Today, I am not in dialogue with them. I work with the religious establishment, with the Chief Rabbinate.”<sup>57</sup>

A month after the incident at Ashkelon, the Haredim protested yet again at the IAA’s excavations of graves in Nazareth. The IAA made clear that they “gathered the bones with meticulous care for the respect to be paid to the dead,” and transferred them to the Religious Services Ministry. Even with these facts clarified Rabbi Eliahu Caufman, who was asked by the *Atra Kadisha* to help mediate in the affair due to his experience in interfaith dialogue, said, “We have different standards than the Antiquities Authority for determining the identity of graves...all we asked was that the works at the site halt, to give us the opportunity to examine the graves.”<sup>58</sup> So it becomes evident that this is a delicate situation that requires give and take from both parties. Unfortunately, as of the time this paper was published, this balance could not be achieved, and with such differences in ideology and beliefs, it is difficult to say when, or even whether it ever will be.

#### Responsibility and Prevention

One must wonder if there was anything that could have been done to prevent this vandalism at Hammat Tiberias. Kinamon said the mosaic was located in a fenced-off enclosure, but that it was not guarded overnight.<sup>59</sup> However, of all of the desecrations of archaeological sites in Israel in recent months, this particular occurrence marked the first time that such vandals have broken into a closed site. “They just broke in. The site isn’t hermetically sealed, but there’s a fence. This is a national park and part of the mosaic is exposed – that was the section that sustained the most damage,” a spokesperson for the INPA said. The IAA and INPA seem to have taken the burden of blame for the incident, as Goldstein was quoted as saying, “the INPA and the IAA are charged with protecting the precious historic treasures of Israel and we will work together to fully erase the damage done to the artifacts and the ancient synagogue at the site.”<sup>60</sup> Though the INPA is directly responsible for the daily upkeep of the national park that contains the site, it is the IAA that has archaeological responsibility over the synagogue and its

mosaics. According to the “Law of the Israel Antiquities Authority” the IAA is “responsible for all the antiquities of the country, including the underwater finds. The IAA is authorized to excavate, preserve, conserve and administrate antiquities when necessary.”<sup>61</sup> They are also responsible for enforcing the 1978 Law of Antiquities, which was enacted in order to protect the antiquities of the country, “i.e., any object, which was made by man before 1700 C.E., or any zoological or botanical remains from before the year 1300 C.E.”<sup>62</sup> The IAA has gone through great lengths to ensure the safety of the antiquities in Israel, as one can tell from the aforementioned policies, but perhaps the problem does not lie with their enforcement of the safety protocols that protect antiquities.

Perhaps it should instead be considered that the Hammat Tiberias site is a very popular tourist attraction, both for visitors to the Northern Galilee region and to Israel in general, and frequently draws large crowds. Furthermore, due to the site’s location within a national park, many organizations related to Israeli tourism encourage visiting the site, which is open to the public year-round. However, perhaps this wide accessibility contributed to the targeting of the synagogue and its mosaics. If the site had been kept more private and secure, perhaps it would not have been targeted for the vandalism. Appreciating the mosaics *in situ* is important to understanding their context and significance, but perhaps the mosaics could have been transferred to a museum, where they could be stored indoors in a secure environment, with replicas of the panels inserted into the floor of the synagogue. Surely they would be safer from vandalism behind glass, guard and locked doors.

Take, for instance, the Lod Mosaic, a Roman work discovered in the city of Lod, in Israel, which was the ancient site of Lydda. Though the mosaic has been on a worldwide exhibition tour since 2011,<sup>63</sup> when the tour eventually ends, the mosaics will be moved to a permanent display venue in Lod: the Shelby White and the Leon Levy Lod Mosaic Archaeological

center.<sup>64</sup> This plan for display is clearly more secure than that of the mosaics at Hammat Tiberias, as the Lod Mosaic will always be inside a museum or other building dedicated to protecting it. While putting the Lod Mosaic in such a venue keeps it safe, it also deprives them of some of their its cultural value; the mosaics at Hammat Tiberias are at risk, but the site offers a more authentic experience. Judging by the sheer number of ancient mosaics located *in situ* in Israel, it becomes clear that the country encourages visitors’ exposure to the mosaic in its original, even when the safety of the mosaic is at risk, as seen at Hammat Tiberias and the other vandalized archaeological sites.

Another approach for the display of mosaics can be seen in the practices of the Good Samaritan Museum, located on the main road between Jerusalem and Jericho.<sup>65</sup> It is the only museum in Israel dedicated solely to mosaics, and one of only three such museums in the world,<sup>66</sup> and it is thus a crucial test case in the debate over how best to exhibit mosaics. It is well frequented, as it is conveniently situated on the route commonly traveled by pilgrims and tourists traveling from Jerusalem to the holy sites in the Galilee; plus, the museum itself is situated within the Inn of the Good Samaritan archaeological site, which has been an important site for Christians throughout the ages. The mosaics in the museum, taken from their sites in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip in order to protect them, are divided into two groups: those on open-air display and those located inside the museum building.<sup>67</sup>

Like the Lod Mosaic, many of the museum’s objects are taken from their original sites to protect them and to exhibit them more easily to the public, but interestingly, the museum has chosen to openly show reproductions of some mosaics,<sup>68</sup> perhaps to protect the originals, whether they are still *in situ* or being conserved or restored elsewhere. One must wonder, however, if putting all of these priceless mosaics together in one place is asking for trouble. If the Good Samaritan Museum were

to be attacked by vandals or other antagonists, there would be a high concentration of destruction of important mosaics from the region, and these irreplaceable parts of history would be lost. This is a risk that must be calculated when gathering a large number of a certain type of object in one place, but thus far, the Good Samaritan Museum has handled its monumental cargo well.

Unfortunately the kind of iconoclasm that occurred at Hammat Tiberias is not confined to Israel, or even to mosaics, as the religious extremism that causes it is a reality in many other parts of the world; works of art and architecture are often collateral damage when extremist actions are involved. For when great objects of cultural heritage are targeted, a piece of that culture's history is irrevocably destroyed, and thus the attacks have the most impact on the intended victims. Sites and objects with religious importance are even more vulnerable, due to the inflammatory nature of certain peoples' deeply embedded religious beliefs. Neutralizing the cause of these antagonistic actions by radical groups is an unthinkable difficult task for these reasons, but minimizing the opportunity for damage is a whole other problem entirely. As seen from the various pros and cons of other methods of displaying mosaics, the manner in which they are "best" exhibited is a dilemma that cannot be easily solved. Until it is, casualties like those at Hammat Tiberias will continue to occur, due to the vulnerable nature of ancient mosaics *in situ*. Society has charged archaeologists and art historians with the duty to avert damage to such artifacts to the fullest extent that is possible, and to protect their integrity for as long as possible. Looking forward, one can hope that one day, this will be a universally uncontested undertaking. By observing how other mosaics are displayed within the country, and comparing their situation to that at the Severan synagogue at Hammat Tiberias, prevention of further vandalism of this kind to mosaics in Israel and elsewhere will hopefully be achievable.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 2 Fine 2005, 24.
- 3 Miller 2011, 8.
- 4 Hence the name, "Hammat," meaning "hot" in Hebrew.
- 5 Goldberg, "Ancient Tiberias reveals all her glory."
- 6 Miller 2011, 8.
- 7 Miller 2011, 5.
- 8 Miller 2011, 7-8.
- 9 Miller 2011, 124.
- 10 Fine 2005, 10.
- 11 The Israeli Department of Antiquities and Museums later became the Israel Antiquities Authority.
- 12 Miller 2011, 126.
- 13 Olszewski 2005, 18.
- 14 Miller 2011, 30.
- 15 Dothan 1962, 154.
- 16 Fine 2005, 90.
- 17 Miller 2011, 34-35.
- 18 Fine 2005, 90.
- 19 Miller 2011, 33-34.
- 20 Olszewski 2005, 18.
- 21 Miller 2011, 32.
- 22 Fine 2012, 102.
- 23 Fine 2012, 107.
- 24 Fine 2012, 102.
- 25 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 26 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 27 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 28 Agence France-Presse, "Vandals Smash Mosaic in Ancient Galilee Synagogue."
- 29 Hadid, "1,600-year-old Mosaic at Israeli Synagogue Damaged."
- 30 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 31 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 32 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 33 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 34 Hasson, "Great Excavations: Israel's Antiquities Authority Head Won't Cave in Just Yet."
- 35 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 36 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 37 Miller 2011, 43.
- 38 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 39 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 40 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 41 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 42 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 43 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 44 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 45 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 46 Reinstein, "Mosaic Floor of 4<sup>th</sup> Century Synagogue Vandalized."
- 47 Agence France-Presse, "Vandals Smash Mosaic in Ancient Galilee Synagogue."
- 48 Reinstein, "Mosaic Floor of 4<sup>th</sup> Century Synagogue Vandalized."
- 49 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 50 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 51 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 52 Reinstein, "Mosaic Floor of 4<sup>th</sup> Century Synagogue Vandalized."
- 53 Shmulovich, "Vandals Cause 'irreparable Damage' to 1,600-year-old Mosaics in Tiberias Synagogue."
- 54 Ashkenazi, "Vandals Desecrate Ancient Tiberias Synagogue; Authorities Suspect Haredim."
- 55 Weiss, "Haredim (Charedim)."
- 56 Fogelman, "Are the Ultra-Orthodox Digging Their Own Grave?"
- 57 Hasson, "Great Excavations: Israel's Antiquities Authority Head Won't Cave in Just Yet."
- 58 Mandel, "IAA Excavates Ancient Nazareth Graves despite Haredi Protest."
- 59 Hadid, "1,600-year-old mosaic at Israeli synagogue damaged."
- 60 Reinstein, "Mosaic Floor of 4<sup>th</sup> Century Synagogue Vandalized."
- 61 Israel Antiquities Authority, "About Us: IAA Law - Chapter Two: The Law and Its Foundations."
- 62 Israel Antiquities Authority, "About Us: Antiquities Law - Chapter One: Interpretation."
- 63 Matthews, "Exhibition Schedule"
- 64 Matthews, "Discovery and Context."
- 65 Israel Antiquities Authority, "Press Release - The Museum of the Good Samaritan Opens to the Public."
- 66 Israel Ministry of Tourism, "The Good Samaritan Museum."
- 67 Israel Antiquities Authority, "Press Release - The Museum of the Good Samaritan Opens to the Public."
- 68 Israel Ministry of Tourism, "The Good Samaritan Museum."

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