ART AND JUDAISM IN THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

TOWARD A NEW JEWISH ARCHAEOLOGY

STEVEN FINE
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

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Multiple explanations of symbols are common in Jewish art of all ages: Zodiac and Helios, often represented in Palestinian synagogues during the Byzantine period, are perfect examples of symbols with diverse interpretations.

Leila Avrin, 1994

If at Dura the extant archaeological evidence is rich and the literary remains miniscule, in the Land of Israel the situation is far more complex. In Palestine, we find numerous “shards” of evidence: here an isolated rabbinic or Genizah text, there a Torah shrine aedicula, at another site a “chancel” screen, and still another a fragmentary mosaic floor. If in Israel the evidence for the Byzantine period is abundant, it is also frustratingly fragmentary. In this chapter, I attempt to reconstruct some of what we might say about the relationship between synagogue remains and the liturgical life of the synagogue. In the process, I look to Christian parallels to provide additional resources for interpreting the Jewish remains.
This approach makes particular sense in an environment where the large Palestinian Jewish community lived as a minority in the ever-expanding and intensifying Christian Holy Land. As a minority, Jews were receivers of the art of the majority. They seamlessly inculturated the visual culture in which they lived. Although Jews rejected some elements, as we have seen, the basic structures of late Roman and Byzantine visual culture were digested and made their own. This has been the case of synagogue art and architecture since.

We will focus on a group of synagogues that once bore carpet mosaics. These mosaics are particularly rich in imagery and inscriptions, which makes them an ideal focus for this discussion -- as opposed to, for example, Galilean-type synagogues, which provide few clues. The late-fourth-century synagogue of Hammath Tiberias B, the fifth-century synagogue of Sepphoris, and the sixth-century synagogues of Na`aran and Beth Alpha are particularly evocative. These mosaics form a definite group, bearing very similar and extensive iconography. This regional type is unique in ancient Jewish artistic production. In cities of the diaspora, no specific Jewish iconography may be found in floor mosaics, synagogue mosaics being representative of local techniques and having no relationship with one another. In the Land of Israel, on the other hand, a regional type existed for more than 200 years. What unifies these floors is that each bears the image of a zodiac wheel in the center, and a Torah shrine on the floor immediately before the podium (in Beth Alpha and probably Na`aran, the apse) where an actual Torah shrine stood.

In this chapter, I will assert close proximity between the remains of ancient synagogues and the vast numbers of Jewish liturgical texts and related literature that are extant. Some of these sources have been preserved in canonical texts such as the Talmudim, midrashic collections, and prayer books. Many others have come down to us because of the discovery of a great repository of books from Old Cairo, known to us as the Cairo Genizah. This assertion of proximity between these documents and extant inscriptions is legitimized, first of all, by comparison of the more than 100 inscriptions in Aramaic (with a few in Hebrew) from Palestinian synagogues from the fourth through the seventh centuries. Written in the same characters and languages as preserved documents in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic and “Rabbinic” Hebrew, these inscriptions preserve numerous formulae in common with preserved liturgical texts. Gideon Foerster has cataloged dozens of parallels between inscriptions and liturgical texts, and there is no need to repeat the similarities here. The use of the Biblicized phrase “amen sela” (and similar forms) in inscriptions, liturgy, and amulets; the designation of the synagogue as a “holy place”; and focus on the Biblically ordained priestly courses are just three of the many examples of continuity. The most profound example of continuity comes from the eighth-century Jericho synagogue. This Aramaic inscription translates:

Remembered for good, may their memory be for good, all of the holy community, the elders and the youths, whom the eternal King helped and who donated and made the mosaic. He who knows their names and the names of their sons and the people of their households will inscribe them in the book of life with the righteous.

All of Israel are interconnected (ba'aveim). Peace [Amen].

This inscription closely parallels versions of the Qaddish prayer that is preserved in a number of liturgies, including that of Aleppo in neighboring Syria. In a manuscript dated 1410, we find the following prayer:

Remembered for good, may your memory be for good, for a good name, all of this holy community, your elders and your youths.

He who knows your names will inscribe them in the book of life with the righteous.

Other versions of this prayer preserve the third person used in the inscription, and include the phrase “all of Israel is interconnected, amen.” The hope in the inscription and the prayer that God “inscribe” the donors “in the book of life [with all] the righteous” is the inverse of a version of the “blessing” against heretics of the Tefillah preserved in a Genizah fragment that we have mentioned. The close philological relationship between synagogue inscriptions and liturgical texts provides the first anchor for mooring this liturgical interpretation of the art.

As we shall see, parallels are not limited to liturgical formulae, but are expressed in the themes that occur in both synagogue art and in extant liturgical texts. This chapter is divided into two main parts. In order to assert the sense that despite the fragmentary nature of the extant evidence, we are dealing with complex spaces and not just with objects that may be explained through linear interpretation or as disconnected icons, I begin by focusing on the mosaic that bears the most extensive iconographic program, that of the Sepphoris synagogue. After describing the mosaic in terms of other extant pavements, I suggest one particularly...
illuminating parallel in late antique Palestinian Jewish literature that ties together many of the themes of this floor. I will exemplify a holistic reading of this floor that can then be applied to the rest of the corpus. In the remainder of the section, I turn to two specific iconographic themes in the synagogue mosaics and what they might mean in liturgical terms: “The Torah, Its Shrine, and the Decoration of Late Antique Palestinian Synagogues” and “The Zodiac.” Finally, I return to the notion of synagogue sanctity, a concept that provides an important rubric for understanding the art of ancient synagogues liturgically.

THE SEPPHORIS SYNAGOGUE: A LITURGICAL INTERPRETATION

The discovery of a synagogue mosaic during the construction of a parking lot at Sepphoris National Park in 1993 created immediate excitement among scholars. Little wonder, for no discovery of Jewish narrative art in Israel has matched this one since Kibbutz members digging a water channel uncovered the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaic and brought it to the attention of Eleazar Lipa Sukenik in late 1928. The Sepphoris mosaic contains unique images of not only a Torah shrine and zodiac wheel (Figure 31), but also of the visit to Abraham by the Divine messengers, the binding of Isaac (Figure 82), Aaron in the Tabernacle, and images drawn from the sacrificial cult itself (Figures 75, 76).

The general characteristics of the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic fit well with the synagogue discoveries that preceded it. As in the fourth-century mosaic of Hammath Tiberias and the floors at Beth Alpha and Na’aran, the center of the nave is dominated by a large zodiac wheel (Figures 24, 25). Close to the bimot of these synagogues was the image of a Torah shrine flanked by two seven-branched menorahs. This imagery appeared at times outside of the synagogue context, occurring first in graffiti from the Beth She’arim catacombs and later on a mirror plaque that some hold to have magical significance. The image of the binding of Isaac at Sepphoris was not unheralded, a less refined version from about a century later having been discovered at Beth Alpha (Figures 10, 82). The rest of the Biblical scenes, while unique and exciting, fall into well-established categories. Biblical narrative scenes were discovered at a number of sites: Noah’s ark was uncovered at Gerasa (Figure 77), Daniel in the lions’ den at Na’aran (Figure 24) and probably at Khirbet Susiya, and David the Sweet Singer...
Christian parallels – except, as we shall see, the zodiac. Ze’ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, the excavators, have shown important parallels to the binding of Isaac in the Ravenna wall mosaics, and close parallels can be found as well for the Showbread Table,\(^\text{12}\) the image of Aaron before the Tabernacle,\(^\text{13}\) and the zodiac.\(^\text{14}\) The image of Aaron before the Tabernacle strangely reaches into the register below. While the images within the upper scene are spatially well planned, the panel below bears no sign of perspective. It seems likely that the image of Aaron – which has parallels with the Dura panel of Aaron at the Tabernacle – was borrowed from a Christian or general Greco-Roman pattern book and cultic imagery added in the lower register to make the image more distinctively sacrificial and Jewish. Images of priests sacrificing before shrines are common in Roman art,\(^\text{15}\) and it is only natural that, as at Dura, Aaron would be depicted before the Tabernacle. The designer of this mosaic then added even more sacrificial content as well as a connecting Biblical verse. The rather pedestrian stature of the local mosaicist (be he a Jew or non-Jew) or the poor quality of his model probably also limited his iconographic options.\(^\text{16}\)

The floors at Hammath Tiberias, Beth Alpha, Na’aran, Horvat Susiya, and Sepphoris reflect the creativity of both the local artisans and the communities they served through the organization of the various panels. While the large zodiac was always placed at the center and the ark near the bema in synagogue mosaics, the Biblical scenes were set out in a number of different arrangements. At Beth Alpha, the binding of Isaac appears near the northern entrance to the basilica and at Na’aran Daniel is situated immediately before the ark in an orans position that may be reminiscent of a late antique synagogue prayer position.\(^\text{17}\) At Susiya, the organization is entirely different because the hall is a broadhouse and not a basilica. The organizing principle at Sepphoris, it seems to me, is, first and foremost, the placement of the zodiac near the center of the long nave, and the image of Torah shrine image near (though not adjacent to) the ark. The Abraham narrative was then grouped together below the zodiac, and the Temple/Tabernacle above the zodiac and below the Torah shrine due to the architectural resonances shared with the synagogue ark.
Still, what does all this “mean”? The answer is difficult, specifically because I am not willing to construct a singular metanarrative beyond the thesis that the enactment of Scripture within a liturgical structure is the uniting glue of the composition. I would imagine that the imagery of the binding of Isaac would have a different meaning at Rosh Hashanah than it might at other times, just as the Temple imagery would be seen differently at Passover than on Tisha be-Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples. Fortunately, literary sources provide some relief. Large quantities of more or less contemporaneous local literature are extant, much of it discovered in the Cairo Genizah, through which to interpret this floor. Many examples are cited by Weiss and Netzer. The rich literature of late antique Palestinian Judaism ranges from homiletical midrashic collections to liturgical texts to Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture, the *targumim*. While it is useful to draw parallels from throughout the rabbinic corpus to interpret individual images, this practice creates a kind of textual free-for-all when one attempts to construct an all-encompassing consecutive narrative. Fortunately, the large number of extant liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) provide a kind of control.

Reading through one poet’s corpus of work, as we did in our discussion of the menorah during late antiquity, one can observe how a single Jew in late antique Palestine formulated and reformulated tradition within the synagogues of his day. I again draw on the work of Yannai the Paytan, because his 163 published poems cover the entire Pentateuch and festival cycle, were written just a century or so after Sepphoris mosaic was laid, and are the work of a single author. The striking fact is that all of the issues that appear in the Sepphoris mosaic are dealt with by Yannai, from the binding of Isaac to Aaron in the Tabernacle to the Table for the Showbread to the first fruits, the menorah, and the zodiac. By reading how this author understands these subjects, it is possible to imagine how one particularly learned and creative Jew who well could have visited the Sepphoris synagogue might have understood the themes that were set in stone by the mosaicist.

I will cite one acrostic poem by Yannai that within just a few lines utilizes many of the themes represented in the Sepphoris floor. The poem was recited on Rosh Hashanah eve. This extended poem reflects upon the liturgical themes of the day as it poetically embellishes the themes of the central *Tefillah* prayer that it celebrates. I am in no way suggesting that this particular poem influenced the floor, only that the selection and arrangement of themes to decorate the Sepphoris mosaic and the selection and arrangement of themes by the liturgical poet both reflect how Jews constructed the synagogue environment through image and word at nearly the same time. The literary and the visual artists each assembled similar building blocks in constructing their own unique presentation for a synagogue setting. The section of Yannai’s poem that concerns us translates as follows:

\[\text{8 Then the shofar will be blown for the Complete} \]
\[\text{[One] (אשלאי).} \]
\[\text{The hope that the complete [shofar blast] be} \]
\[\text{received like peace offerings ([דולא] [in the} \]
\[\text{Temple].} \]
\[\text{ב Hence any shofar that has a crack ( glBegin).} \]
\[\text{Is not fit, for it interrupts the sounding ([זוקן]).} \]
\[\text{ג Come forth with a broken soul (גנוזו) and not with} \]
\[\text{a broken horn (גנוזו),} \]
\[\text{With a broken heart and not with a broken shofar} \]
\[\text{(גנוזו).} \]
\[\text{ד Lovers (זמר) drawn after Him, and like the girdle} \]
\[\text{cleave (זר).} \]
\[\text{They will sound a long shofar that has no} \]
\[\text{[impermissible] adhesions (זר).} \]
\[\text{ס For from the ram come the horns (זר),} \]
\[\text{To remember the merit of the ram stuck by its horns} \]
\[\text{(זר) [at the binding of Isaac].} \]
\[\text{ת Sound, O sons of God (גנוזו), sound to the God of} \]
\[\text{gods (גנוזו),} \]
\[\text{Who covers over and removes ([זר] [sin].} \]
\[\text{י A time of concealment when the moon is concealed} \]
\[\text{[בורם].} \]
\[\text{To conceal sins well, just as the moon [is concealed]} \]
\[\text{[בורם].} \]
\[\text{ו The sun, how can it bear witness [to the new month] alone (ברך)?} \]
\[\text{When one witness is not enough [for a court] to} \]
\[\text{inflict the death penalty ([זר].} \]
\[\text{ז The [heavenly] array of the seventh month, its} \]
\[\text{constellation is Libra (בירה),} \]
\[\text{For sin and righteousness God will lay upon the} \]
\[\text{scales ([זר].} \]
\[\text{ח His hand will remove sin and the day we will proclaim} \]
\[\text{with the shofar (זר).} \]
\[\text{To the scale of utter righteousness He will incline} \]
\[\text{[זר].} \]
Themes of the shofar; the binding of Isaac; and the sun, moon, and zodiac are among the building blocks for Yannai's Rosh Hashanah liturgy. It is important to note, however, that the binding of Isaac (representing the doctrine of "merits of the ancestors") in the zodiac (representing the heavens and the Jewish solar-lunar calendar), and the sacrificial system are extremely common throughout Yannai's corpus, because of their centrality to the **Tefillah** prayer upon which our author artistically expands. Reflecting upon the Scriptural readings of Rosh Hashanah, upon the ceremonies of that day, and upon the calendrical cycle, Yannai brought together imagery that gives texture to his liturgical creation.

That all of this imagery appears in the Sepphoris floor is no accident. These themes were central to Jewish liturgical life during this period. Elsewhere in his corpus, Yannai weaves these themes and many others together in other ways depending on the reading for the day and the festival context. At other seasons, Yannai stresses different subjects, many of which are expressed in the synagogue mosaics. We have seen that the menorah is the subject of Yannai's Hanukkah and liturgical poems for Numbers 8. At **Tisha be-Av**, the Tabernacle/ Temple is dealt with differently than on **Sukkot**, and so on. One might even conjecture that on various occasions the synagogue was furnished in different ways. We know that this was the case in contemporary churches. In Gaonic Babylonia, for example, women's jewelry was placed on Torah crowns for the festival of **Simhat Torah**. These crowns, apparently used throughout the year, were made of silver, gold, and myrtle. Since medieval times, it has been customary to dress the synagogue and congregation in fine (white) textiles for **Yom Kippur** (and more generally for the tall festivals), and in Ashkenaz to adorn the synagogue in greenery and flowers for **Shavuot** (Pentecost). It seems likely that ancient Jews had their own distinctive ways of decorating their synagogues in accord with the liturgical cycle. The various elements of the synagogue, the visual, the textual, and the human actors, were as many molecules, interacting with one another in different ways at different seasons and in different contexts. The art and the liturgy of the synagogue are cut from a single cloth, reflecting differing but interwoven aspects of the synagogue religiosity in Byzantine Palestine.

To conclude: The Sepphoris floor, like all synagogue appurtenances, is preeminently a liturgical object. Its iconography, drawing from a tradition of synagogue art that was highly influenced by the iconographic possibilities of late antique Christian art, was organized so as to complement and give visual expression to the Biblically infused prayers, Scriptural reading, and homiletics of the synagogue. I suspect that the elements of the floor were chosen on a consensus basis based on convention, availability of models, the preferences of the community as a whole, and those of the patron whose name appears prominently at the top of each panel. What unified the composition was the Biblical text that stood within the ark at the focal point of the hall, which, through the refractive lenses of the literature of the synagogue, was projected onto the synagogue pavement.

In the end, it is important to remember that this pavement is just a floor. The images of Aaron, the sacrificial cult, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, the angels, and even citations of Biblical verses were regularly trodden upon by the Jews of Sepphoris. Imagine if the walls, the ark, the menorahs, and the other lamps that illuminated this synagogue were extant. We would barely notice the pavement below, covered with furniture and perhaps with reed mats. Walls painted with images like those of the Dura Europos synagogue or covered with mosaics like the churches of Ravenna and Bethlehem would require of us a completely different attitude toward the Sepphoris floor mosaic and toward its ultimate "meaning" - both as an art object and as testimony to the rich liturgical life of late antique Palestinian synagogues.

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**THE TORAH, ITS SHRINE, AND THE DECORATION OF LATE ANTIQUE PALESTINIAN SYNAGOGUES**

... liturgy, art and preaching worked together to mediate an experience of worship. Biblical motifs, if not always particular biblical narratives, richly inform all three.

Wayne A. Meeks and Martha F. Meeks, describing early church mosaics, 2002.

Raising our eyes from the mosaic pavement of the Sepphoris synagogue and looking down the nave, we are likely to have seen a Torah shrine, perhaps flanked with lighted menorahs. This was not an unusual feature, for the focal point of the synagogue was the Torah. The placement of the Torah cabinet against the Jerusalem-aligned wall of the synagogue goes back to Tannaitic times, if not before. While this Jerusalem alignment was not immutable (the Sepphoris synagogue is aligned to the west), it was
ubiquitous. Where in churches an apse at the far end of the hall would be taken up with the Eucharist table, in synagogues the focal point was the Torah shrine. This cabinet stood on a large platform, by the late fifth and sixth centuries constructed within an apse.

The image that I have suggested emerges from the Torah shrine panels in our mosaics. A large shrine, crowned with an aedicula, in some cases with a lamp suspended from its apex, stood at the focal point of the synagogue. In fact, all of the elements of such a Torah compound have been discovered at one site or another. The most interesting preserved aedicula was uncovered in the synagogue of Nabratein in the Upper Galilee (Figure 78). This gabled structure is topped with rampart lions, with a suspension hole at its apex for a lamp. This shrine is markedly similar to the shrine illustrated at Beth Alpha, although at Beth Alpha birds appear rather than lions (Figure 79). Cloths like those illustrated before mosaic images of synagogue Torah shrine, called in rabbinic parlance a *vilon or parokhet* (reminiscent of the veil of the Biblical Tabernacle and later the temples, the *parokhet*), are well known from extant Egyptian textiles and images in non-Jewish contexts (particularly church mosaics). In some instances, the curtain is pulled back to reveal the shrine—a standard late antique convention. Even sculptured three-dimensional lions like those illustrated flanking the Beth Alpha ark were found at Chorazin and Baram, and the base of a Torah shrine bearing large carved lions was found at En Samsam in the Golan Heights (Figures 36, 37, 38). The Chorazin and Baram lions are among the only examples of three-dimensional sculpture in any ancient Jewish context. In short, the large artifacts that are illustrated were, to a large extent, what actually stood in the synagogue (Figure 80).

Seven-branched menorahs blazed on either side of a cabinet that by the third century was already being associated with the Ark of the Covenant, and was called an *arona*. These lamps reflected a connection between the synagogue and the Temple. On a practical level, they served to focus the eye of the visitor on the Torah shrine. The lamp suspended from the Torah shrine (which was later called an “eternal lamp”) would have provided an additional spotlight for the true focal point of the synagogue: the Torah. At times, other lamps were crowded into the apse, hung from the menorahs and the ark itself. Lamps were sometimes suspended from the lowest branches of the menorahs, as is illustrated in the mosaics at Na‘aran (Figure 24) and on tomb doors from Kefar Yasif and Khirbet Kishor. In the study house/synagogue at Beth Shean, a lamp and an incense censer are illustrated in the mosaic, and two lamps (perhaps incense censers) appear on a screen from Khirbet Susiya. Within churches, lamps were sometimes suspended from large crosses in a similar manner. A pottery fragment from Nabratein shows a Torah shrine literally crowded with hanging lamps. All of these lights together served an important practical function: They provided the light necessary for the reading of Scripture in otherwise dark (and in the winter, cold) halls. When later traditions publicly bless those who provide lamps for illumination, *ner le-maor*, they reflect a true need within the synagogue.
context and a real opportunity for participation in synagogue life that is somehow beyond those of us who live in a world changed forever by Mr. Edison. Anecdotally, participants in a recent reenactment of the 1866 dedication of Cincinnati’s neo-moresque Plum Street Temple complained of the dimmed light that “almost put us to sleep!” The brilliance of light at the focal point of the ancient synagogue must have been quite striking. Although no Jewish text describes this effect, Paulinus of Nola describes a similar construction at the tomb of St. Felix:

Paulinus elsewhere describes the total effect of precious metals, fine cloths, and lights within the church of St. Felix:

I grant that others may outdo me with the costliness of their service in the precious gifts they bring, when they provide fine curtains, made of gleaming white linen or of material colored with bright shapes, for covering the doorways. Let some polish their smooth inscriptions on pliant silver, and cover the holy portals with the metal they affix there. Others may kindle light with colored candles, and attach lamps with many wicks to the vaulted ceilings, so that the hanging torches cast to and fro their flickering frames.

Paulinus’s description could well have been written about a Palestinian synagogue. Fine cloths are illustrated in synagogue mosaics and were most certainly suspended before Torah shrines and elsewhere in the meeting halls. Inscriptions too are common, and although gold and silver accoutrements have not been discovered from synagogues, the donation of precious metals is mentioned in a dedicatory inscription at Hammath Tiberias B.

Remembered for good everyone who donates and contributes, or will (in the future) give in this holy place, whether gold, silver or anything else. Amen. Their portion is in this holy place. Amen.

Polished bronze was certainly common. The bronze polycandelon now in the Musée de Mariemont in Belgium that lit “the holy place of Kefar Hananyah” (be it a synagogue or a study house) is important in this context,
81. "Ancient Synagogue Apse" in the exhibition installation of Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World, Yeshiva University Museum, 1996. The displayed aedicula is from the Chorazin synagogue, screen fragments are from (left to right) Tiberias, Hammath Tiberias A, Tiberias, and Dalton. The menorahs are facsimilies of the Hammath Tiberias A menorah (photograph by Steven Fine).

as are a large bronze plate bearing the images of a menorah and a Torah shrine from Naanah in the Judean Shefelah (now in the Louvre), a chalice and small menorah from Ein Gedi, and a bronze incense censer decorated with images of animals from a Samaritan (?) synagogue in Beth Shean. The image of a similarly fashioned censer (without animal imagery) appears suspended from the lowest branch of a menorah in a study house (or synagogue) mosaic from Beth Shean. In the continuation of his text, Paulinus describes pilgrims who “eagerly pour spikenard on the martyr’s burial place, and they withdraw the healing unguents from the hallowed tomb.” This usage, of course, is unthinkable within synagogue settings. It is a real point of discontinuity between the Christian and the Jewish sacred spaces. Jews, by contrast, would wax midrashic that the synagogue, like the Temple, must be illuminated perpetually as a mark of its holiness.

In curating Yeshiva University Museum’s exhibition, Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World, I was given the opportunity to construct a full-scale model of a synagogue apse and furnish it with actual artifacts (Figure 81). A basalt aedicula from Chorazin was flanked by two reproductions of the limestone menorah from Hammath Tiberias A, with fragments of synagogue "chancel" screens from Dalton and Tiberias before the shrine. On the floor before the model was a life-size photograph of a mosaic from a Beth Shean synagogue, created with a process that allowed visitors to walk on it. Represented on this mosaic were images of a Torah shrine flanked by menorahs. The sight was quite evocative, and expresses my sense of the interconnectedness of visual representations of the Torah shrine flanked by menorahs and the reality of synagogue furnishings during late antiquity.

Scholars have long asked why, if the furnishings illustrated actually existed, it was necessary to illustrate them on the floor. The answer is a simple one: The ark panels of our mosaics are reflections of the Torah shrine and menorahs of the synagogue. Christians used the same technique within churches, paralleling the ritual furnishings of the church in its wall and floor decorations. The best examples are the strikingly similar image of the Torah shrine at Susiya and its parallel in the Church of the Priest John on Mount Nebo. Closer to the Jewish context, Samaritan synagogue communities seem to have used this approach as well. Mosaics discovered in the Samaritan synagogues of Khirbet Samara and El-Hirbeh all bear images of shrines. At El-Hirbeh the menorah and a table that represents a ritual meal of some sort appear (Figures 66, 67). The
mosaic that we used in the Yeshiva University Torah shrine model, from the synagogue at Beth Shean A. may also be Samaritan – if a Samaritan inscription in a side room of that synagogue is any indication. This mosaic was fabricated by the same artisans who laid the Beth Alpha floor, Marianos and his son Hanina. These mosaics serve the same function that a reflecting pool does (and did) before a major public building. These reflections add dignity to the shrine and to the Torah within it.

A second debate has been whether this imagery represents the synagogue furnishings or is a projection of the Jerusalem Temple, with all sorts of rationales offered for choosing one over the other. My own sense is that this choice is unnecessary, for from the third century on, the Torah shrine was conceived in terms of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant. We have seen this in the tradition attributed to Rabbi Huna the Elder of Sepphoris, who speaks of the local Torah cabinet as if it were the Ark of the Covenant. Throughout our period, the two are closely linked in rabbinic literature (as they were earlier at Dura), until in some midrashim the Biblical ark was treated as a Torah shrine and the Tabernacle itself as a big synagogue. An inscription from the Syrian Golan town of Nawa (Naveh) refers to the Torah shrine as the bet ha'aromah, the “house of the ark.” Still, late antique rabbis were not oblivious to the distinctions between their local arks and the Holy Ark. The Torah ark is not referred to as the “Ark of the Covenant” or the “Holy Ark” in Palestinian Amoramic or post-Amoramic literature or in inscriptions. Drawing on a midrashic mind-set that is known well from the literature of this period, I posit that the potential to read the local ark in terms of the Biblical Ark, and vice versa, is the best explanation for this mosaic imagery and group of synagogue furnishings.

The mosaicist at Na'aran went a step further. Below the image of the Torah shrine at Na'aran, the artist set the image of Daniel in the lions' den (Figure 2A). Daniel’s hands are raised in an orans position in Christian art, called vessit kappayim, the “raising of hands” in Biblical and rabbinic sources. Elsewhere in this mosaic, we find other figures, both male and female, assuming this position. This image of Daniel is not unique. It appears on a Torah shrine base from En Samsam in the Golan (Figure 38) and apparently appeared in the synagogue mosaic at Susiya in Mount Hebron. In fact, the orans position seems to have been a Jewish prayer stance in Byzantine-period Palestine. It is my suggestion that “Daniel” was placed before the ark so as to reflect another important feature of synagogue “furnishings”: the sheliah tsibbur (prayer leader) who stood before the ark during public liturgy, in the technical language of the period, over (or, yoreh) lifne ha-torah. In a sense, the flesh-and-blood sheliah tsibbur fills the ritual space between the three-dimensional ark and the two-dimensional representation of the same ark. The actual image of Daniel, drawn from Christian art, was placed in a position in our mosaic that reflects an essential element of Jewish spirituality. Like the sheliah tsibbur, Daniel directs his prayers toward the ark – and through it – toward the Holy City of Jerusalem. Daniel here is illustrated acting out the verse in Daniel 6:10, which describes how he “went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. . . .” Closing the loop, this text was taken by the rabbis to be the Biblical warrant for their own alignment toward Jerusalem in prayer.

Another possible reflection of the sheliah tsibbur seems to occur at Sepphoris. Within the Tabernacle panel, immediately “below” the image of the Torah shrine is a horned altar. I would argue that the shape of the top of the horned altar, a kind of rhombus, visually parallels the image of the ark with which it is aligned and the three-dimensional ark of the synagogue towering above. When the prayer leader stood to lead the community in prayer, he would have essentially stood, de facto, in the position of Aaron. This would be particularly meaningful on the festivals, and even more so at the musaf liturgy on Yom Kippur morning, when to this day the prayer leader takes the persona of the high priest in the Temple. This reliving and revitalization of the priestly service is well reflected in piyyut literature. According to the internal logic of this liturgy, the prayer leader “is” the high priest, while the congregation in the synagogue imagines that they stand in the great plaza of the Temple on Yom Kippur morning as participant observers in the sacrificial liturgy. The images of the Tabernacle implements and sacrifices, some interpreted in accord with rabbinic prescriptions, all provide the stage for this drama. Aaron at Sepphoris was dressed, as far as we can tell, in clothing that suits the Byzantine period, just as the youths are in the binding of Isaac panel and as Abraham and Isaac must have been as well. In a real sense, the sheliah tsibbur looked like Aaron, and Aaron looked like him. Michael Swartz’s comment regarding the role of the prayer leader in the Yom Kippur liturgy must certainly have been true as the leader towered above mosaic representation of Aaron at Sepphoris: “. . . the poet – who, we must remember, was usually the performer – identified with the priest.”
Unique to the binding of Isaac scene at Sepphoris is the image of Abraham's and Isaac's shoes left at the base of Mount Moriah (Figure 82). This theme is known from Christian illustrations. This detail is unknown, however, from Jewish art or literature. Nowhere do we hear in midrashic literature God ordering Abraham to "put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy," taken over from Moses' encounter with the Divine in Exodus 3:5. Whether the source of this detail was Christian, or whether by one of those circuitous paths of relationship by which Jewish sources made their way to Christian audiences, this detail reflects a notion that the rabbis and other synagogue goers in antiquity would have well understood. A hint of the need for clean feet within synagogue contexts may be found in Genesis Rabha 42. In this text, clean feet are clearly described as a virtue for one who was entering the synagogue context. According to this tradition, when Abraham and his men chased after the kings to rescue Lot in faraway Dan, miraculously, "their feet did not become dusty." They were "like he who walks from his home to the synagogue." The necessity of removing shoes before going up to the Temple Mount appears in m. Berakhot 9:5, and the requirement of removing shoes (and washing feet) before entering synagogues is well-documented. In a document preserved in the Cairo Genizah, this is stated explicitly:

"And so the Sages said: One shall not enter the Temple Mount with his staff and shoes" (m. Berakhot 9:5).

Though by our sins the Temple Mount is not ours, we do have the small sanctuary (the synagogue), and we are obligated to behave (towards it) in sanctity and awe. For it is written: "My Temple, fear" (Leviticus 19:30, 26:2). Therefore the ancients decreed in all synagogue courtyards that layers of living water for the sanctification of the hands and feet [be set up]. If there was a delicate or sick person, unable to remove (his shoes), and he was careful as he walked [not to dirty them], he is not forced to remove [the shoes] . . .

This passage suggests that piety toward the synagogue, and particularly ritual ablution of the feet and entry to the synagogue barefooted, was taken over from the Temple to the "small sanctuary." The notion that ritual purity was necessary for entrance into late antique synagogues first appears in post-Amoramic literature. An interesting parallel to our text is the liturgy of Anan son of David (c. eighth century), who, on the model of the Temple, decreed that worshippers wash their hands and feet before entering into synagogues. A washing installation (gome) in the synagogue compound (forecourt?) is evidenced as early as the Jerusalem Talmud. Evidence of ritual ablution is found in synagogue ruins from the Byzantine period. A particularly well-preserved washing installation was discovered in the narthex of the last stage of the Ein Gedi synagogue. By placing the images of shoes near the entrance to the synagogue, the Sepphoris artist, inadvertently or not, suggests that like Abraham and Isaac on the Temple Mount, shoes are to be removed before entering the synagogue.

The binding of Isaac at Beth Alpha and the image of David, "sweet singer of Israel," also bespeak liturgical life. Avigdor Shinan has surveyed the ways that the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) is presented in midrash, liturgy, and Targum. This panel is unusual in late antique art specifically because Abraham, "the father of faith" in Christian contexts, is not the focal point of this composition. Rather, at the focal center of the panel is the Hand of God reaching down from the heavens, the ram caught in the thicket immediately below. The focal point is the redemptive moment, when God cries out, Don't do it! and the ram is revealed ready to serve as Isaac's substitute. This focus fits well with Jewish reflection on the binding of Isaac, where Abraham's faith is subsumed to God's eternal pledge to
redeem the children of Israel. The horn of the ram is much brighter than the rest of the creature and draws attention. My sense is that this is intentional. The ram's horn is emphasized specifically because of its enduring liturgical significance. Its blowing on Rosh Hashanah was considered to be a reminder of the Covenant, the binding of Isaac the fullest statement of zekhut avot, the protective and enduring "merit of the fathers." The notion of zekhut avot, so central to rabbinic theology and so often expressed in liturgy, provides ample reason for the presence of all images of the ancestors that appear in synagogue mosaics - from Noah and the ark at Gerasa to the visitation of Abraham, the binding of Isaac, and Aaron at Sephoris to the list containing Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Hananyah, Misha'el, and Azariah in a synagogue mosaic from Ein Gedi. David at Gaza is a particularly interesting case. For anyone versed in Greco-Roman lore, this image, like David in the Dura synagogue, is clearly Orpheus. However much Jews in late antique Palestine knew of Greco-Roman lore, the Hebrew label, "David," removes any chance of "error." There is no evidence that Jews played instruments in synagogues during this period, and the Gaza David is no help in this regard (any more than images of instruments in medieval and modern synagogues are evidence for this practice). This image was taken over in the synagogue, and into churches as well, to bespeak David's role as psalmist.

The use of Biblical characters to presage and reflect contemporary practice is a common feature of rabbinic sources, and is common in Christian sources as well. For example, in the wall mosaics of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna (Figure 83), we find that all scenes allude to the eucharist sacrifice. To make this significance plain, an altar is depicted between Abel and Melchizedek, on which are placed a chalice and two leaves of bread, identical in shape with that which Melchizedek offers and also with the eucharistic bread which the church used during the sixth century. The altar motif appears again in the opposite mosaic: Isaac is shown kneeling upon the altar, and even the table behind which the three angels are seated resembles the simple wooden altar of Christian antiquity. The three round cakes which Sarah has placed before the heavenly messengers are marked with the sign of the cross and recall again the eucharistic hosts of that time.

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The art of the Church, so influential in so many ways upon the art of the synagogue, provides a reasonable parallel for interpreting Daniel at Na'aran, Aaron and the empty shoes of Abraham and Isaac at Sephoris, and perhaps even the ram's horn at Beth Alpha. Like Melchizedek at San Vitale, these images legitimize contemporary practice and project it into the eternal present.

Not illustrated in the Torah shrine panels, but present in numerous sixth- and seventh-century synagogues, are partitions separating the bima from the nave. Extant examples are made of marble, and evidence of a wooden screen was uncovered in dry Ein Gedi. This element was borrowed from the church context in its entirety, where it served as a screen between the laity and the chancel area that was reserved for priests. Synagogue and church screens were often made in the same workshops, as was the case of screens discovered in the Beth Shean region. In the Beth Shean examples, a wreath encircles either a cross or a menorah. At Susiya, however, we find a much more
complex group of images, one of which is a narrative scene that includes the hand of God. Gideon Foerster ingeniously identifies this scene with the giving of the Torah. The screen seems to have been fully integrated into Jewish ritual contexts together with the entire Byzantine building, an integration so complete that screens were taken to be “natural” elements of the environment. A fine example of this process is a text discovered in the Cairo Genizah that projects protective screens separating the places where Scripture is publicly read into the heavenly study house. In the Cairo Genizah version of Perea Mhashah, we read:

R. Eliezer son of Jacob says: The great study house of the Holy One, Blessed be He, in the future will be eighteen thousand myriad parsangs (in size), for it is written: “Its circumference [will be] 18,000” (Ezekiel 48:35). The Holy One, Blessed be He, sits on the chair among them, and David sits before him, for it is said: “His chair is like the sun before me” (Psalm 89:37). All the teaching women who educate and pay so that their sons may be taught Torah, Scripture and Mishnah, manners, pious sincerity and honesty stand by (or, within) reed mats made as a partition for the bima (platform) and listen to the voice of Zerubabel son of Shaltiel when he stands as interpreter (meturgeman). ... What is most distinctive about this text is the complete lack of self-consciousness with which Jews assimilated this church furnishing. It was undoubtedly assimilated to Jewish notions of spatial sanctity and modes of distinction that are represented in rabbinic sources. This inculturation is part and parcel of the process by which the entire basilical structure — with its three doors reminiscent to Christians of the Trinity and its narthex from which catechumens (proselytes in the process of conversion) could listen to the liturgy was seamlessly taken over by Jews. This ritual space was Judaized, and constructed as a “holy place” (a Biblical term also used by Christians beginning during the fourth century), as a “set” where Torah could be enacted and celebrated through the choice of themes chosen to decorate the mosaics and the furnishings of the synagogue.

THE ZODIAC, SYNAGOGUE MOSAICS, AND JEWISH LITURGY

... few scholars realize that the zodiac signs, as well as other symbolic figures used as ornaments, cannot and should not be treated as fixed ideograms, which, once deciphered, have always the same unchangeable connotations.

Isaiah Sonne, 1953–54

Images of the zodiac appear in the mosaics of Byzantine-era synagogues discovered in many areas of Jewish habitation in the Land of Israel. They have been uncovered in Hammath Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee in the north, in Beth Alpha in the Jezreel Valley (Figure 32), westward to Sepphoris and Huseifa in the Carmel Mountain range (Figure 85), and perhaps in Yaffa, near Nazareth in the Lower Galilee. In the south, zodiac mosaics were found in Na’an near the Dead Sea and probably at Susiya in the Hebron hills. The sheer quantity of zodiac mosaics, dating from the fourth
to sixth centuries, is startling. This assemblage is unique for the Byzantine period, a time when the zodiac was systematically suppressed within non-Jewish contexts by the Church. The zodiac in Palestinian synagogue floors is a highly complex example of the "inculturation" of non-Jewish imagery and its resulting Judaization.

The fact that Jews maintained this art form long after its diminution in the general culture is not unprecedented in Jewish history. Describing early modern Italy, Kenneth Stow discusses the Judaization and maintenance of culture traits even after their abandonment by the majority culture. Stow shows that Jews selectively absorbed the majority culture, refracting it through their own cultural lens — sometimes conservatively maintaining elements of earlier absorption long after the majority culture had abandoned them. It is my suggestion that Jews borrowed and maintained this image within synagogues long after they had been abandoned by the general culture because of the considerable and growing significance of cultural issues that the zodiac represented within late antique Palestinian Jewish culture. This significance is represented in the literary remains of the liturgical tradition. As the "sets" upon which liturgical texts were enacted, ancient synagogues with zodiac mosaics reflect a real continuity between the aural and visual aspects of the liturgical experience.

Archaeological and Art Historical Contexts
The stylistic and iconographic parallels between the extant synagogue mosaics have been amply discussed by Moshe Dothan, Rachel Hachlili, Ze'ev Weiss, and Ehud Netzer. These authors have shown in intricate detail the common sources of these synagogue mosaics as well as the elements that distinguish each mosaic. Although there is much variation, each is designed as a large ring set within a square frame. At the center of the ring is a chariot pulled by four horses, in all but one case, at Sepphoris, driven by the sun god Helios. The ring is divided into twelve parts, each containing a sign of the zodiac, labeled as such in Hebrew. At Sepphoris, a personification of the labors of that month appears, and also is labeled. The corners of the squares contain personifications of the seasons, these too labeled in Hebrew. The zodiac panels are set at the center of each of the synagogue naves and serve to draw together the entire hall.

Writing in the prestigious American journal Art Bulletin in 1945, German-Jewish expatriate Karl Lehmann was the first classical art historian to integrate synagogue mosaics into general art historical research. In "The Dome of Heaven," Lehmann shows in exquisite detail how common the zodiac motif was in late antique art, arguing, by and by, that the synagogue mosaic at Beth Alpha is a projection of the heavenly dome onto the floor of the hall. Although Thomas F. Mathews has rightly shown Lehmann's dome to contain many conceptual "cracks," Lehmann's then-revolutions in the Sepphoris mosaic, where the god Helios is removed from his quadriga. A mid-third-century mosaic from Munster-Sarnsheim, Germany, contains a zodiac wheel with a large Helios riding his quadriga in its center, the corners of the panel decorated with amphora flanked by fish. Another, the image of a zodiac wheel inhabited by Selene and Helios (without chariot), the four winds of heaven depicted in its corners, was found at Sparta and dates to the fourth century. Neither, however, is an exact parallel to the Jewish mosaics. They are also considerably earlier than all but the fourth-century mosaic at Hamath Tiberias. Imagery of the zodiac wheel preserved in other media from throughout the Roman world are cataloged by Hans Georg Gundel in Zodiakos: Tierkreisbilder im Altertum (1992).

The lack of images of the zodiac that parallel precisely the synagogue mosaics allowed some scholars to consider the synagogue floors — or at least certain design elements, — to be distinctly Jewish. This search for elements to consider uniquely Jewish is of one piece with the general search for a uniquely "Jewish art," and so was given great significance.
Illustrations in synagogue mosaics stand out because the dedicatory inscriptions are written in Aramaic and Greek. This is at least in part because Hebrew was a liturgical language, the “language of the holy house.” This use of Hebrew connects the mosaics to a synagogue-based liturgical tradition. The Hebrew designations were known beyond the liturgy. This is demonstrated by the fact that Epiphanius, the fourth-century churchman, knew them, and later Aramaic and even Jewish magical texts in Arabic still maintain the Hebrew designations.

The first evidence for this Jewish borrowing is the fourth century at Hammath Tiberias B synagogue (Figure 29). All of the signs of the zodiac, as well as the seasons, are labeled in Hebrew in this fine mosaic. Oddly enough, Aquarius and Aries are written in mirror image. At the point where this imagery was adapted for the Jewish context, the Hebrew was added — although not without error. The Judaization of the zodiac pattern was still fresh at this date. In later mosaics, no such mirror imaging takes place. Other examples of the transfer of the zodiac from the general context to Hammath Tiberias are the images of Aquarius and Libra, which are nude. Libra and Gemini are uncircumcised — a minor detail clearly taken from a non-Jewish source (that led the excavator, Moshe Dothan, to suggest that the mosaic may have been made by gentile workmen). In later floors, all of the images are dressed. Finally, I note that at Sepphoris the image of Helios, the personification of the sun, has been removed from his chariot and replaced with a radiating sun disk. Sixth-century mosaics contain Helios, by that time a “dead” god. It should be remembered that by this time mythological gods appear even in Orthodox Church contexts! The type of borrowing that I have described is the norm in the design of Jewish architectural and ritual objects, where forms taken from the general culture are taken over by this minority community and “Judaized.” The Sepphoris floor is transitional in another way (Figure 31). It includes both the signs of the zodiac and the works of each month. Both the zodiac symbol and the human laborer are labeled. So, for example, the first month is labeled both Taurus (šōr) and Nisan. In this, it is like the Vatican Ptolemy, with the exception that the Ptolemy presents the works and the zodiac in separate concentric circles. It is also like the Ein Gedi synagogue mosaic, which includes lists of both the months and the zodiac signs. Christian sites use the works exclusively, as at the Monastery of Lady Mary in Beth Shean. The sixth-century mosaic at Beth Alpha seems to be modeled by some scholars (although notably, not by Sukenik). In her 2001 Israel Museum exhibition volume, The Realm of the Stars, Iris Fishoff wrote, for example, that “in synagogues an interesting change occurred [from the standard Roman zodiac]. The emphasis transferred from the images of the pagan gods in the center to the area of the zodiac signs.”

The assumed uniqueness of the Jewish zodiac was shown to be incorrect by an unexpected discovery. Visiting the isolated eastern Aegean island of Astypalaea, archaeologist Ruth Jacoby came upon a previously unnoticed fifth-century bathhouse mosaic whose overall composition closely parallels our synagogue mosaics. The Tallaras Baths were first excavated by Italian archaeologists during the 1930s and have still not been properly published (Figure 86). They therefore went unnoticed. Like the synagogue mosaics, it is designed as a square panel. At its center is a proportional image of Helios holding both a globe and a staff (though not riding a chariot), and in the surrounding band are the signs of the zodiac. In the corners are personifications of each of the four seasons, each in an annum position. The signs of the zodiac are very similar to those presented in Jewish mosaics. No doubt, other such mosaics will come to our attention in the future. Jacoby has conclusively shown that there is no reason to consider Jewish zodiacs a unique manifestation of “Jewish art.”

Perhaps even more interesting, however, are the features of synagogue mosaics that do not exist in the Vatican Ptolemy or at Astypalaea. In all of the extant synagogue mosaics, the signs of the zodiac and the seasons are labeled in Hebrew. In adopting zodiac iconography, Jews “Judaized” the standard form and made it their own by adding Hebrew designations. The use of Hebrew in the zodias and Biblical...
on a source that was in many ways akin to the mosaic at Hammath Tiberias.

Jews maintained the zodiac as an art form long after the general culture, by now dominated by Christianity, had discarded it. The Astypalaea mosaic is the rare example for the continuance of this iconography that proves the rule. Gundel cites strikingly few sources beyond the third century. The decline of the zodiac in public architecture relates directly to the rise of Christian ecclesiastical influence. An excellent example of this is Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, a fourth-century Church father who lived in Beth Guvrin, known to the Romans as Eleutheropolis. Epiphanius's intent was to chastise Jewish attachment to the zodiac. He does this by tarring the Jews with the brush of "paganism".

Also fate and astrology were quite popular notions with them. For instance, the Greek names from the astrology of those gone astray were translated by them into Hebrew names, such as the sun being called heme and semen, and the moon ieree and altbana, whence it is also called mene (for the month is called ieree, the moon mene, just as it is by the Greeks because of the month). Mars is called cocheb okbol, Mercury cocheb omod, Jupiter cocheb baal, Venus ze'era or fourfet, and Saturn chocheb sabeth (they also call him other names, but I could not explain their nomenclature exactly). In addition the names vainly adopted by those gone astray accord with the number of the elements, and which [the pagans who?] lawlessly seduced the world to impiety called the "Zodiac," they translate into Hebrew as follows: tela, sor, thomim, sanatan, ari, bethula, moznnea[un], akab, keset, gadi, dalli, deghim. They, I mean the Pharisees, vainly following the pagans, convert the names into Hebrew ones thus: Aries they call tela, Taurus, sor, Gemini, thomim, Cancer sanatan, Leo ari, Vingo bethula, Libra, moznnea[un], Scorpio akab, Saggitarius keset, Capricorn gadi, Aquarius dalli, and Pisces deghim.

Whether Epiphanius knew of Jewish astrology, as he claims, or simply knew that Jews set great store in the horoscope, we do not know. For Epiphanius, the Jews of Jesus's time (and hence of his own time) were no better than the pagans from whom they learned astrology. By "blaming" Jewish astrology on the pagans, Epiphanius redeems Biblical Israel for the Church, while damning Israel of the flesh. The Church's campaign against the zodiac was but a piece of its campaign to destroy the religious content of Roman art. In place of the zodiac, Orthodox Christian imagery was installed in the heavens. Mathews notes:

The fact that the planets and the signs of the zodiac have no role in Early Christian imagery is not accidental. They were deliberately excluded. The celestial divinities of Roman art (and they were fairly common in many areas outside of ceilings) were not innocent decoration. They were astrological and the refutation of astrology was a theme of universal concern of the Fathers of the Church, whether one looks at scholars from Syria, Alexandria, Cappadocia or the Latin West.

Gazing at night at the heavens, the Christian beheld a different universe from his pagan neighbor. To Tatian (c. 160) the planets and the signs of the zodiac were demons introduced to men by the fallen angels. ... Hence when the Lamb is set in the heavens in S. Vitalis, it is against a background of "fixed" stars. So too, the splendid crosses that appear in the starry sky at the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and the apse of Saint Apollinaris in Classe. The old divinities have fallen out of the skies; the heaven to which Christ ascended is above and beyond the erratic movements of planets.

The continued use of the zodiac as a decorative feature by Jews should be seen against this background. Jews borrowed this iconography by the fourth century C.E. They continued using it during the following centuries, even as this motif was being dropped by Christians. The zodiac was not used in religious buildings by Christian designers (who did, however, portray the labors of the months). The Jews, however, kept using the zodiac — specifically, as we shall see, because the zodiac fit so well with their own religious conceptions. The use of this imagery was untouched by the Church, even as it was disdained.

Interpretations of Synagogue Zodiac Mosaics
Why did Jews continue to use this Judaized iconography in the decoration of their synagogues? While Lehmann saw in synagogue zodiac mosaics a manifestation of a generalized Greco-Roman "dome of heaven," Judaica specialists have sought out a singularly convincing Jewish interpretation. Armed with the notion that Jewish mosaics were somehow unique, most have assumed, with Rachel Hachlili, that ancient Jews "were seeking a design that could be used to express a certain concept or idea." In their own ways, individual scholars set about to figure out what that singular, unitary, and unchanging idea was. As usual, E. R. Goodenough offered the most provocative theory. He, and after him certain other modern scholars, have seen in the zodiac mosaics visual evidence of a nonrabbinic Judaism that has left behind few literary texts. Convinced that the rabbis were anti-art, anti-zodiac, and, for Goodenough,
otherwise puritanical, these scholars located Jewish zodiac mosaics, with their images of Helios, at the very center of the debate on the role of the Talmudic rabbis in ancient Judaism. Together with the Dura Europos paintings, synagogue zodiac wheels were seen by Goodenough to be the most unrabbinic archaeological evidence yet uncovered. As I have argued, however, Goodenough's view of rabbinic attitudes toward art was skewed.

Responding to Goodenough, in 1964 Michael Avi-Yonah suggested an interpretation that was diametrically opposed:

Without trying, therefore, to look for esoteric meaning in the zodiacal representations, which would imply serious deviations for the synagogue authorities (and those supervising them) from the rules of the halakhah, we can regard the zodiac panel as a reminder of the duties toward God implied in a fixed calendar and of God's bounties given in return (in the representation of the seasons accompanying it).

It is not clear to me who saw a fixed calendar as "a reminder of the duties toward God" or of his "bounties given in return." Still, Avi-Yonah's association of the zodiac with the calendar was common among scholars of Jewish art during his day. Returning to the subject of the synagogue zodiacs in 1973, Avi-Yonah suggested a variant of his original interpretation. Again responding to Goodenough, he argued that

... the signs of the Zodiac with Helios in the center and the seasons in the corners were divested of all idolatrous associations. Instead they were given specifically Jewish significance, so that the Zodiac itself, for instance, stood for the ordering of the Temple services throughout the year... Avi-Yonah does not explain explicitly why the zodiac mosaics stood for the Temple service, except that he was aware of texts of the priestly courses discovered in various synagogues (including one that he found in Caesarea Maritima) and was attempting to connect these two time-based systems. Crossing the boundary from archaeologist to religion scholar, Avi-Yonah was less successful. His specific interpretations of the mosaics are not supported by extant evidence. The general connection between the zodiac and the Jewish calendar, however, is correct.

Avi-Yonah's students, Hachlili and Gideon Foerster, focused on different parts of this interpretation in their own work. For Hachlili, the zodiac is preeminently a calendar, whereas Foerster stresses the zodiac as symbol of Divine cosmic order. Building on Foerster's insight, Ehud Netzer (who also studied with Avi-Yonah) and Netzer's student Ze'ev Weiss have set a variant of the Avi-Yonah/Foerster approach within a global interpretation of the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic. For them, the Sepphoris zodiac is a representation of "God's centrality in creation." Why the zodiac is given the seemingly exclusive charge of expressing either the covenant or God's strength is unclear to me.

Avi-Yonah is almost certainly correct that synagogue mosaics of the zodiac emphasize the Jewish year. This is expressed most clearly through the Hebrew inscriptions that label each sign, and in Sepphoris each sign and symbol for the monthly works. Avi-Yonah is also correct that calendrical issues were important to Jews. Living by what amounted to a separatist calendar, by their own months and ways, Jews asserted their distinctiveness. The significance of the calendar for Jewish self-definition, both internally and in terms of how Jews perceived non-Jewish reactions to the calendar, is expressed in a tradition preserved in b. Shabbat 75a:

Said Rabbi Samuel son of Nahmani said Rabbi Johanan: Whence is it a commandment for a person to calculate the seasons and the constellations? For it is said: “Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples” (Deuteronomy 4:6). What is referred to by “your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples”? Let us say: This is the calculation of seasons and constellations.

Jewish attachment to the calendar was indeed an important element of Jewish identity during this period. Jewish literature beginning during the Second Temple period and particularly after the destruction of the Temple shows extreme concern with proper calculation of the years, and hence with the dates of the festivals. From the early Roman period on, the distinctly Jewish lunar–solar calendar was an important marker of Jewish identity – particularly as the Roman solar calendar spread throughout the Levant during the first century C.E. Often based on local observation of the new moons and intercalation of the year by individual communities (including the rabbis), the establishment of Jewish dates was an essential communal task throughout late antiquity. Although experts proposed standardized calendrical systems, such a unified approach did not predominate until the ninth or tenth centuries. Calendrical calculations in sixth-century Zoar, an isolated village to the south of the Dead Sea, reflect the type of
concern for the calendar that existed even in areas far distant from Jewish urban concentrations. Evidence of the calendar used at Zoar is preserved in numerous extant tombstones. As Sacha Stern has pointed out, the calendar of this community was based on firsthand observation of the moon. It is nonetheless quite different from what we might expect based on rabbinic approaches. Stern notes that this distinction may be related to the high mountains surrounding Zoar that preclude precise observation of the waning and new moons. For our purposes, what is most interesting is the care this local center took to get the calendar “right.”

The relationship between the dates of Easter and Passover made Jewish calendrical calculations of much broader concern, particularly for eastern churches that continued to associate these holidays long after the Orthodox Church disassociated them at Nicea in 325. An Armenian Monophysite chronicle, for example, asserts that a Tiberian Jew by the name of Phineas participated in a Christian conclave consisting of thirty-six experts to determine the correct date of Easter. The connection between the mosaics and the calendar should not be overstated, however, nor should these representations of the Jewish year be treated in some functional manner.

In recent years, liturgist Joseph Yahalom has resurrected a way of looking at the zodiacs in ancient synagogues that was first considered by E.L. Sukenik. Sukenik was well-aware that the theme of the zodiac is expressed throughout the corpus of late antique liturgical poetry (piyyut). Sukenik also knew of the relationship between these poems and visual representations of the zodiac found in medieval Ashkenazi manuscripts, where images of the zodiac are quite common and piyyutim for rain and dew by Qalir are often accompanied by images of the zodiac. Sukenik applied this relationship to the art of ancient synagogues. In its use of piyyutim and in many other liturgical and religious areas, medieval Ashkenaz was the inheritor of the Palestinian tradition. While it is doubtful that a continuity of Jewish art existed, the impulse to illustrate synagogue floors and later liturgical, magical, and astrological texts (not to mention ceremonial objects and synagogue walls) with zodiac themes that were common to the liturgy seem to be phenomenologically related (Figure 87).

Yahalom has emphasized that references to the zodiac in liturgical poetry point toward the significance of the Jewish year for late antique Jews. Somewhat romantically, Yahalom envisions the Sitze im Leben of these poems: “we may conjecture that these poems, based on lists of the signs of the zodiac, were recited while the community was gathered on the floor around a zodiac mosaic, a common feature of ancient Palestinian synagogues.”

To their credit, Sukenik and Yahalom deal with the Sitze im Leben of the mosaics and do not posit any singular interpretation. Liturgy, midrash, and targum, as well as the Talmudim often reference the heavens in general and the zodiac signs in particular. Michael Klein has shown, for example, the large number of Targumic texts that focus on zodiac issues. The theme of the zodiac is extremely
important in midrashic literature as well. Thus, in the translation of Scripture, in its homiletic explication, and in liturgy that was closely aligned with the liturgical cycle—the three most important facets of the liturgical lives of synagogue communities—we find real interest in the zodiac. This seems to me sufficient to explain why Jews took over and preferred to use zodiac themes in synagogue decoration over a very long period. The art fits the general themes of their theology as expressed in the liturgical life of the synagogue, and over time, may even have increased focus on this theme through the mere presence of zodiacs in the synagogue.

To begin to explain the parameters of what Jews thought when they placed zodiac mosaics on the floors of their synagogues and kept them there, I will focus on liturgical texts, both standard prose texts and piyyutim. I argue that issues of time were indeed central to Jewish liturgy, and that the calendar was a part of that—particularly because the Jewish calendar was separatist. The zodiac was more than a calendar, however. That only one zodiac panel, at Sepphoris, is explicitly labeled with both zodiac and calendrical terms suggests that more is going on than issues of calendration. It was a projection of the “dome of heaven,” the place of the Divine court that is beseeched in prayer. These themes provide enough justification for the presence of the zodiac on floors and in liturgy. All of these themes might have been sensed by at least some late antique Jews in their synagogues.

Jewish attachment to the zodiac and its relation to the calendar is expressed in numerous Hebrew and Aramaic synagogue poems that are roughly contemporaneous with the mosaics. We have already seen one usage in a piyyut of Yannai. The most famous zodiac piyyut, written by Eleazar ha-Qallir, is recited to this day by Ashkenazim on Tishah be-Av eve:

Because of our sins, the Temple was destroyed.
Because of our crimes, the Sanctuary was burned.
In the city that was once bound firmly together,
Lamentations were heard,
And the host of heaven
Sounded a dirge…
Aries, first of all the constellations
Wept bitterly, for his sheep
Were led to slaughter.
Taurus howled on high for the horns of the firstling bull
Were brought low…

Different in tone is a recently published Aramaic piyyut from the Genizah, apparently recited at the “sancification” of the month of Nisan in the spring. This delightfully playful text presents Nisan vehemently defending its right to be the first month of the Jewish liturgical year. In supporting its claim, Nisan plays between the historical events of each month and its zodiac sign:

1 All the months (ןַנְנִי) gathered together (each month and its zodiac sign).
   Because of Nisan, which is called the Redeemer.
2 Violence we scream before Nisan.
   We are eleven and he beats us (?)?
3 Bellowed Nisan with all his heart and thus said to them:
   Receive from me all that I say to you.
4 Do not say another word, Nisan said to Iyyar.
   You are compared to an Ox. You shall not redeem!
5 You should know that the [golden] calf that was made
   was a heifer and you are like him.
6 And what of you Sivan, bellow and come,
   for Sinai is your accomplice.
7 Muzzle your mouth, do not speak, said Nisan to Tammuz.
   You are a water crab. You shall not redeem!
8 Av became dull (תב) and did not know. Said Nisan
to Av:
   You are all laments and all songs,
   Can you redeem the sons of the lion (Israel)?
   I (Av) am destined to raise up the lion (Nebuchadnezzar) to Ariel
   (that is, to destroy Jerusalem).
9 Shut your mouth, said Nisan to Elul.
   … to the virgin, to cover yourself.
10 Don’t say another word, said Nisan to Tishri.
   … the scales
11 They beseech within you in fasts and prayers.
   I [Nisan] am accustomed to eating roasted [meat] and matzot.
12 Guard yourself, do not speak, said Nisan to Marheshvan.
   You are ruled by the scorpion. You shall not redeem!
13 Do not hold your anger, said Nisan to Kislev.
   There is no reason to ask you to go to war.
14 Responded Nisan and said to Tevet:
   You watch your kids, and I [will watch] my lambs.
15 Do not enlarge your mouth said Nisan to Shevat,
   for the cold and the snow enslave you….
I rule, and am head of all of you.  
I am compared to a [Pascal] lamb, and in me a lamb is distributed to each household.

The Rock (God) made me redeemer of his people,  
And within me He in the future will redeem them (Israel).

The identification of the zodiac with the calendar is well documented. This is made explicit in a variant to the first line of this poem, which has both each month (moon) and its zodiac sign assembling. I would suggest, however, that it is an expression of a more generalized Jewish interest in time. Time, as calibrated through the heavenly cycles, is central to all of Jewish liturgy and identity, on an hour-by-hour basis, and not just on a weekly, monthly, and yearly cycle. Abraham Joshua Heschel was not off the mark when he wrote poetically that

Judiasm is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. ... Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as architecture of time. Most of its observances — the Sabbath, the New Moon, the festivals, the Sabbatical and the Jubilee year — depend upon a certain hour of the day or season of the year. It is, for example, the evening, morning or afternoon that brings with it the call to prayer. 

As Tamar Rudavsky suggests, “the marking of time assumes overwhelming significance in the rabbinic period.”

Much of rabbinic literature is dedicated to the articulation of sacred and regular time, the Mishnah itself opening with “from what time do we recite Shema in the evening?” A fine example of this focus on time appears in the statutory evening prayers. For the sake of convenience, I cite the contemporary Ashkenazi version:

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who by His word brings on evenings, with wisdom opens gates, with understanding alters periods, changes the seasons and orders the stars in their heavenly constellations according to His will. He creates day and night, rolling back light before darkness and darkness before light. He causes day to pass and brings night, and separates between day and night, the Lord of Hosts is His name. May the living and enduring God always reign over us, for all eternity. Blessed are you, Lord, who brings on evenings.

Ancient versions of this text are particularly important because this blessing, and the parallel formulation in the morning prayers, was recited on a daily basis. Thus, it is reflective of a central and recurring concern in synagogue liturgy. This consciousness of time affords meaning to the zodiac mosaic in broad strokes, placing the cycles of day, night, week, month, and ultimately the entire Jewish year graphically within sight of the community. The zodiac mosaics are in part emblematic of Judaism’s strong focus on time. The presence of the zodiac within synagogues thus participated in the Divinely mandated construction of time, and hence the Jewish (counter-) reality in late antique Palestine.

The Zodiac and the Dome of Heaven

Lehmann was right in calling the zodiac the “dome of heaven.” In Jewish thought, and particularly liturgy, the separation between the heavenly and earthly realms was quite small. The heavenly realm is invoked at every turn. This closeness is expressed throughout rabbinic literature, and with greater complexity in liturgical and mystical sources from late antiquity. During the sixth century, for example, the synagogue poet Yannai explicitly asserted the closeness of the synagogue community to the heavenly host in regard to the recitation of the Shema prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4):

The nation is called Jews (Yehudim)  
Because they thank the name of God (Yah modim).  
In truth, they are called one  
Because they constantly unify the One.  
Rejoice in fear and trembling  
Serve him with awe and quivering.  
Come forth with praise and thanks  
Call out to Torah and to testimony.  
The multitudes will not say “Holy” above  
Until the believers say “Blessed” below.  
And when they stand and whisper in their mouths below  
Standing, [the angels] will slacken their wings above [and recite ...].

In fact, the Yotser prayers recited as an introduction to the Shema and the Qedushah, recited in public repetition of the Tefillah, stress closeness to the Divine realm together with a sense of praying with the angels. Bridging the chasm between the heavenly court and the synagogue community is essential to these prayers, which are close in interest and language to liturgically charged professional mystical literature of this period. I would suggest that the synagogue zodics are well suited to this vertical orientation, bringing the dome of heaven into the realm of the prayer hall.

This closeness to the Divine realm is not merely that of humans reaching upward, but also of God and the angels...
reaching downward. The signs of the zodiac were thought by some Palestinian Jews to influence human behavior (we have no idea what percentage of them, but I would guess that this was a broadly held belief). This too is reflected in liturgy, although it appears most profoundly in professional magical literature. Such speculation has a very long history in the Near East, and was reinforced and possibly invigorated by Greco-Roman astrological concerns. An Aramaic liturgical poem points to the calendrical significance of the zodiac as well as prognostication based on the appearance of the moon. This poem, recited at the monthly “sanctification” of the new month, encompasses the entire yearly cycle. I cite several sections in order to give a sense of the poem:

8 The moon (יַלְדוּת) was chosen for the sanctification of the months (יָכֵּךְ)
To festivals and fixed times and for pleasant [sacrificial] scents (יָכָה לִדוּת).
2 In it are signs and also omens;
when it rises experts study it (יָכִּ֣ה מֹשַׁ֣מְשְׁמָֽץ).
3 Uncover your eyes and tell the observer
to raise his eyes and to look at the moon.
4 If when it rises, its horns are of equal size,
the world is in danger.
5 If you saw the moon straight up pointing southward,
and its other horn pointing downward toward the north,
that will be a sign for you: beware of evil,
for from the north distress comes forth.
6 If the moon is seen straight up, pointing to the north,
and its other horn pointing towards the south,
there will be great rejoicing for the entire royal court;
there will be low prices and abundance in the world.
8 The sign is good (בר) if it is pointed downward to the south,
for the year will be fruitful and there will be
abundance in the world.
9 If its face is yellow-green (גָּרָה) on the north side,
high prices and famine will be in the world.
11 If it is eclipsed in the middle of Nisan,
a great man (בֵּן שָׁבָת) will fall from the Sanhedrin.
13 This will always be to you a trustworthy sign
For in it are eaten pure cattle (יָכִּ֣ה בָּדָ֣רְבֹּ֑נָה) [for the
pascal sacrifice]. ... 
14 If it is eclipsed in the month of Adar,
there will be pestilence and mice will multiply.

These are the signs of the lunar calculations
For all the signs (or, sanctifications) of the months
of the year.

Jonas C. Greenfield and Michael Sokoloff have discussed this poem in relation to omen texts from the ancient Near East. Other omen texts are known from the Genizah, and these too are related to omen texts that were prevalent in late antiquity. What is fascinating about this tradition is its liturgical setting. Unlike other extant traditions, which seem to be guidebooks for professional omen readers, this text was recited on the new moon of the month of Nisan, apparently within synagogues. Thus, the boundaries between “astronomy” and “astrology” and between professional literature and public liturgy were seemingly breached in the performance of this piyyut.

To conclude: Zodiac mosaics were not unique to Jews during the fourth century. Jews did, however, adopt and adapt this iconography for their synagogues and keep using it long after their neighbors had abandoned it. The zodiac became at some level emblematic of their unique culture. This absorption from the general culture was successful because it fit well with the beliefs and concerns of local Jewish communities. Over time, the zodiac became a “traditional” synagogue decoration – a position that it kept until modern times in Western Europe and continues in some Jewish communities to this day. Only when the notion that the zodiac is antithetical to Judaism took hold in very recent times did this iconography cease to be used by Western Jews.

It is my suggestion that the zodiac within ancient synagogues was indeed related to the calendar. It was more than a calendar, however. The zodiac panels in the floors of ancient synagogues represented distinctly Jewish notions of time, notions that were especially Jewish as they were separatist in the Roman and Byzantine world. Zodiac images were projections of the “dome of heaven” into the synagogue building. This dome contained within it a plethora of associations and meanings. Some were related to the proximity between the Divine and human realms that is expressed in prayer, others to astrological prognostication, others to the calendar, and still others to the generic significance of time within Jewish culture. These conceptions existed in Jewish liturgy of the Byzantine period. There is no reason for us to give priority to one of these aspects over the others, for they were coexistent as they were interwoven. All appear in extant liturgical texts, and all were at play.
at different times and perhaps among differing audiences within the late antique Jewish population. By focusing on liturgical texts to the virtual exclusion of other forms of Jewish sources, I have suggested a control that pushes to the sidelines both academic rabbinic discussions and the literature of professional magicians and mystics. The synagogues were the province neither of academics nor of magicians – but rather of local communities. To the best of our knowledge, extant liturgical sources are the closest we have to "their" sources.