Despite more than a century of excavation, little is known about certain aspects of daily life in ancient Israel and in late antiquity, particularly with regard to domestic structures and the functioning of households. At a number of Roman and Byzantine period sites, archaeologists have excavated parts of the domestic quarters, but final publications of these excavations, where they exist, have focused primarily on monumental public structures, in particular synagogues and churches. In the 1980s, archaeologists opened up approximately 1500 square meters of domestic space at the Jewish village site of Qasrin in the Golan Heights, with the goal of investigating daily life in Byzantine Palestine. At this site, they reconstructed a single household unit located to the east of the synagogue, which they designated as House B, with a view to providing an academic and popular interpretation of a Byzantine house for presentation to the public.
The excavations of Qasrin have spanned the Middle Bronze (Stratum IX), Iron II (Stratum VIII), Late Roman through Early Islamic (Strata VI–III), Mamluke (Stratum II) and modern (Stratum I) periods. From the fourth to eighth centuries CE (Strata V–IV), Qasrin was a Jewish village with a synagogue at the core of the settlement. From 1982–1984 Rachel Hachili, Zvi Ma‘oz and Ann Killebrew co-directed salvage excavations in the Byzantine period synagogue. In subsequent seasons (1985–1990) Killebrew focused on domestic structures in the village to the east of the synagogue, and excavated approximately ten percent of the village in an area measuring 45 meters (north–south) by 35 meters (east–west).

Stratum IV represents a development and expansion of the earlier Stratum V Jewish village founded in the fourth century. During its heyday in the sixth to eighth centuries, the smaller Stratum V synagogue was enlarged to the north. The original domestic structures underwent continual additions and remodeling, resulting in large family complexes with narrow alleys separating the different structures. Most of these later Stratum IV additions to the original houses were built of roughly hewn basalt blocks, square or rectangular in shape. Only a few chips were inserted between the courses of these blocks. The floors in the living quarters of the houses were paved in some cases with roughly cut, well-laid basalt blocks and in others, with fieldstones and pebbles. Thus we are not only dealing with a traditional “vertical” stratigraphy of the site but also a stratigraphy of architectural construction styles.

Excavations uncovered two basic village house plans. By far the most common type at Qasrin was the simple unit, which included a large room separated from a smaller room by a window wall, with a second story loft and an adjacent courtyard. House A (labeled I in the illustration), is one of the best-preserved structures excavated thus far and is unusual for its small size and location abutting the southeast corner of the synagogue against the eastern wall of the annex room. It consists of two chambers, one 4.4 by 4.2 meters and the other, to the north, 4.2 by 2 meters. Basalt slabs set on their edges at intervals forming a “window wall” divide the two rooms. Long basalt beams, which formed the ceiling of the small room, were found in situ. They originally rested on basalt corbels that crown the two sides of its walls, thus creating an upper story that may have been used as a sleeping loft.

This plan formed the most common basic family unit in the large multi-family complexes of Houses B and C.

House B (labeled II in the illustration), nicknamed in our reconstruction the “House of Rabbi Abun” after a Rabbi Abun whose grave marker was found in secondary use on the site (Urman 1985: fig. 23), was the last addition to a large, partially unexcavated multi-family complex continuing to the south in an area that was not excavated. It includes a large room (B2, ca. 8 by 2.7 meters), separated from the smaller space (B4, ca. 4.4 by 2.6 meters) by a window wall, and a second-story sleeping loft resting above a stone-beam-and-slab ceiling spanning the smaller room. A smaller paved room with an oven (B5, ca. 3 by 2 meters) was the last room added to this unit. To the east of these rooms, at a higher level, is an unpaved rectangular area (B1, ca. 7 by 5 meters). A low, L-shaped wall divides this room into different activity areas, including two ovens and a small paved space. House B...
represents the most common basic house plan that makes up one unit of several in a large family complex of late antique households in the Golan.

We uncovered only one example of the second type of house plan—a central courtyard surrounded on three sides by rooms. House C comprises several structures that were connected architecturally over time (labeled III in the illustration). This unit, which covers an area approximately 25 meters (north–south) by 20 meters (east–west), continues to the east (outside the boundaries of the current excavation). The northeast corner of house complex C incorporates a natural spring, the village’s main water source.

Other Byzantine Period Sites in the Golan and Galilee

Evidence from other contemporary sites in the region provides important parallels to the Qasrin village. We examined contemporary village sites, rather than larger towns or urban centers, specifically sites in the Golan that share a similar environmental setting including the use of the local basalt stone for construction. Although the final reports of the domestic areas at the two most relevant comparative sites—Tell el Jukhadar (Giv’at Orha) and Horvat Kanaf—are thus far unpublished, the preliminary summaries offer some important information. Tell el-Jukhadar is a site in the eastern central Golan whose settlement history very closely parallels that at Qasrin. Excavations there have uncovered a large house complex formed by several joined “apartments” that are very similar in plan to House B. At least three household units form the complex, with each apartment comprising a large room separated from a smaller space by a window wall and an associated walled space that can be most likely interpreted as a courtyard (Ma’oz 1993a: 522). At Horvat Kanaf located in the southern Golan, archaeologists have excavated another similar “apartment.” The published plan of this partially excavated house and its suggested reconstruction indicates paved interior rooms and courtyards with beaten earth floors, similar to our interpretation of domestic space in the Qasrin village (Ma’oz 1993b: 849).

In addition to excavated sites, several villages have standing structures that date back to the Roman and Byzantine periods. The most important site for reconstructing the superstructure of the Qasrin house is Farj, a large village of approximately ten acres located in the eastern central Golan. Surveys have revealed numerous basalt stone houses with stone-beam-and-slab ceilings typical to the traditional Hauran style of architecture found at Roman and Byzantine period sites such as Qasrin. Some have proposed that Byzantine Farj included a mixed population of Christians, Jews and possibly pagans (Dauphin 1982; Dauphin and Schonfield 1983; but see Gregg and Urman 1996: 166–71). Several Byzantine-period houses standing to the second story and similar in plan to House B provide valuable information about the location of windows, the function of interior window walls, roofing techniques and evidence for a second story loft.

Experimental Archaeology

We attempted to replicate aspects of Qasrin material culture to aid in our interpretation of Byzantine daily life. Our experiments
This replica of a Byzantine firing oven was created based on a traditional "recipe" used by the Golan Druze. It was formed using the coil technique and fired at a low temperature in an open pit for several hours. Photo by Ann E. Killebrew.

included reconstructing ovens, plaster, roofing, stone masonry, basketry, mats, furniture, and pottery. Two of the most challenging projects were replicating ovens and wall plaster.

As we discovered during the course of our experiments, oven production was an especially skilled task. Based on a traditional "recipe" used by the Golan Druze, we mixed together two local clays: one bucket of red hamra clay and two and a half buckets of yellow calcite-rich clay. We then combined this clay mixture with two and a half buckets of clean sifted earth, water, and large amounts of straw temper. Using the coil technique, we recreated two types of ovens commonly used in the Byzantine period, a sunken cylindrical oven used to produce flat bread and a domed freestanding oven used to bake other items. We fired the leather-hard ovens at a low temperature in an open pit for at least twelve hours. The resulting replicas remarkably resembled ovens we excavated in the Qasrin village.

We also experimented with the plastering of house walls. Based on ethnographic analogy with the traditional Druze village homes, we concluded that mud plaster covered the interior walls (and possibly the exterior walls) of the Qasrin houses. Again, there was a definite "art" to wall plastering. After a series of rather unsuccessful experiments using modern, weather-resistant materials, the most successful method proved to be the traditional recipe using clean, sifted earth mixed with water and large quantities of straw. First, we applied a thick layer of mud plaster to the spaces between the basalt building stones. Then we spread a second thick layer evenly over the wall, completely covering the stones. Lastly, after the plaster had partially dried and cracks had formed, we applied a thin watered-down layer of mud plaster to the wall, covering the unsightly cracks as much as possible. This is a labor-intensive and time-consuming project and requires yearly maintenance.

This plan of a two room home belonging to Ali Subah, a resident of Buqata, bears a strong resemblance to House B at Qasrin. Above is a drawing of the house in section. Prepared by Heather Evans.

Ethnographic Evidence

To reconstruct the functional use of space in the Qasrin house, we examined the traditional Druze villages in the northern Golan Heights. Ethnographic analogies between the material culture of modern traditional populations and the material culture of ancient populations raise a number of methodological and theoretical difficulties. However, we still found it useful to compare the architectural plans and features of the two kinds of sites, based on an observable architectural continuity and similar environments. We conducted two ethnographic projects in the Druze village of Buqata, which
The home of Abu Shahin is one of the oldest houses in Buqata. As seen in this plan, a mudbrick partition wall with niches and a central stone column divides the room into a smaller storage room and a larger multi-purpose room. Prepared by Heather Evans.

Two of the houses proved remarkably similar in plan, size and construction to House B at Qasrin. The two-room home of Ali Subah includes a large rectangular room divided by a partition wall that incorporates an ancient stone column into one larger room (ca. 4.5 by 4 meters) and a smaller room (ca. 4.5 by 1.7 meters). The entrance to the house is via the smaller room, which serves as a storage room. The larger room functions as a multi-purpose room in which all indoor family activities take place, such as sleeping, reception of guests, dining and some household activities. An irregular shaped courtyard provides an exterior space for activities associated with food preparation and household chores and in which small barnyard animals roam. The toilet is outside the house next to the courtyard.

The Abu Shahin home is one of the oldest houses in Buqata. It is similar in plan, layout, construction and use of space to the Ali Subah house. A mudbrick partition wall with niches and a central stone column divides the room into a smaller storage room (ca. 4.5 by 1.5 meters) and a larger multi-purpose room (ca. 4.5 by 3.1 meters). In the storage room, there is a mudbrick closet with niches and storage space located to the left of the entrance. A large wooden beam spans the length of the room, resting on the stone column in the partition wall. Wooden crossbeams resting on this central beam support a roof of canes and a thick layer of beaten earth. Whitewash or painted mud plaster covers the interior walls, while undecorated mud plaster coats the exterior walls.

Both of these simple houses are part of larger family compounds that include more modern houses for the younger generations. During conversations with the villagers, the older generation often said that they prefer to remain in the smaller traditional houses even though more modern housing is available. Modern cinderblock houses tend to be very cold in winter and hot in summer in comparison to the traditional basalt stone and mud plastered houses. The inhabitants of several of the older houses that we surveyed no longer used the original structures as

has a population of approximately three thousand inhabitants. A basalt sculpted head and two Greek inscriptions found in the village together with sherds dating to the Roman, Byzantine and Mamluk periods indicate that Buqata was constructed on top of an ancient settlement that was previously inhabited during the late antique and medieval periods (Gregg and Urman 1996: 284–87).

In Buqata, Killebrew examined four houses that are, according to their elderly occupants, over seventy years old.
The partition wall in the small storage room of the Abu Shahin house contains niches for storage. Photos by Ann E. Killebrew.

accommodations, but had instead converted them into general storage rooms following the construction of more modern houses (for a similar observation see Ziadeh-Seely 1999: 131). The Buqata village houses provide additional invaluable insight into the functional use of space in traditional Golan village houses.

The Faunal Evidence

Faunal evidence from archaeological sites provides an additional source of information with regard to daily life and the functional use of space in domestic structures. During the course of excavations at Qasrin, we screened all removed debris, creating an unusually complete faunal sample from the site. We saved all the bones we recovered for analysis. When we examined the entire collection, we identified bone fragments, when possible, to the species level. When specific identification proved impossible, we assigned bones to the most descriptive analytical category possible. We labeled bones we could not identify either by species or size, as unidentified mammal or animal.

Sheep, goat and cattle bones account for over fifty percent of the sample. When medium and large mammal counts (the bulk of which probably represents sheep, goat and cattle) are added to these figures, over eighty-five percent of the sample is accounted for. In addition to the main species we also found a small number of chicken, donkey, horse, camel, pig, carnivore (dog, fox, cat and one hyena), gazelle, bird (other than chicken), fish, reptile (tortoise, turtle and snake), deer and rodent. The distribution of species was examined with respect to house area. During the Byzantine period, out of a total of 646 identifiable bones, the distribution of the main species from House B is sheep/goat: 421, cow: 144, and chicken: 81 (Grantham 1992: 115–16).

The Ethnographic Data

As part of the investigation into traditional butchery and cuisine practices, Grantham conducted an ethnographic study of traditional cuts of meat in the Druze village of Buqata (2000). This study aided the analysis of the faunal collection and the interpretation of patterns of food preparation, consumption, and disposal. The nature of Druze society and their relative isolation in remote mountainous regions make the Druze an excellent source of information about traditional food systems in the Near East.

Ethnographic research focused on the range of processes from butchering to disposal of the bones and on how meal preparation and consumption affected potential archaeological variables. Butchering is done in two spheres: domestically, for those who own herds, and commercially, at the several butcher shops in the village. Whether in the household or at the butcher shop, the carcass is dismembered in the same manner.

Hooves are considered the only true slaughter offal (the parts of the animal that are not used and discarded in the initial phase of butchering). Both the butchers and herd owners discard these parts. Households that perform their own slaughtering often sun dry the feet (metapodials and first and second phalanges) for later use as seasoning, but several informants said that in Cairo, Egypt metapodials are considered a delicacy and are expensive. The head, neck, vertebral column (thoracic and lumbar vertebrae and proximal ribs), two rib sections, the kas (sternum and distal rib section), the tail, forelimbs and hind limbs constitute the basic cuts that contain bones. At the household level, bones are discarded casually, if they are in small enough amounts so as not to be bothersome or odorous. People dispose of them out the back door, in the courtyard or in a nearby alley.

Meals consisting of meat dishes were offered on special occasions such as weddings and parties and call for the whole animal to be cooked, usually over an open fire. On less festive occasions smaller dishes are prepared. Traditional dishes include the head and kas, kubah, kabob, shishlik, and soups. Kubah is a ground meat mixed with spices and bulgur wheat. It is occasionally served raw. Kabob is a ground meat formed into patties of sorts and cooked. Shishlik is made with cubes of meat that are roasted on skewers over an open fire. There are also various traditional soups that contain meat.

Several archaeological predictions can be made based on Druze patterns of meat preparation and bone disposal. Men cook shishlik outdoors over open fires in courtyards or porch areas. Bone refuse from the process consists of vertebrae (thoracic and lumbar) and...
Who Are the Druze?

The Druze, many of whom assert that they still follow the lifestyle of their ancestors, trace the origins of their faith to Islam. At his death (996 CE), Imam al-'Aziz Billah, the fifth caliph of the Fatimid Caliphate, named al-Hakim bi Amrillah, a boy of eleven, his successor. During his reign (ca. 996–1021 CE), Syria was brought under Fatimid control and the caliphate of al-Hakim bi Amrilloh reached from the modern country of Tunisia to Lebanon and southward to the Holy cities of Medina and Mecca (Betts 1988: 4).

Al-Hakim’s followers believed him to be the expected redeemer or messiah (Abu Izzeddin 1984: 101). Quoted passages from revealed scripture supported their recognition of al-Hakim as the “fulfillment of the promise.” Missionaries assumed the responsibility of the da‘wa or Divine Call and began spreading the new religion (Betts 1988: 10–11).

Before it closed, the da‘wa, we are told, reached the four corners of the earth. In the scriptures themselves we have ample evidence that it was widely spread. Syria was the center of its activity and the home of the largest communities; and these were not only in the mountain areas—south Lebanon, the Hermon region, and al-Jabal al-A‘la in north Syria, but large congregations existed as well in the principal cities—Antioch, Aleppo, and Damascus, and their surrounding countryside. (Abu-Izzeddin 1984: 106–7)

With al-Hakim’s disappearance in 1019 CE, al-Zahir assumed the role of caliph and wiped out most of the enclaves of followers of the Druze faith except for a few isolated villages in “the Wadi al-Taym region on the slopes of Mt. Hermon and in the Jabal al-A‘la region west of Aleppo” (Betts 1988: 12). Today the largest populations of Druze are found in Lebanon, Israel, Syria and Jordan.
emphasis could be more specific and reflect localized activity such as a cumulative deposit of trash from household cleaning. Generally speaking though, deposits from alleys will not likely reflect an emphasis on any particular carcass part.

In addition to the variability of carcass parts based on the cuisine, we also predict that various domestic-activity areas should reflect varying degrees of bone density per square unit of measure (DSUM). This figure reflects floor area rather than volume, because the depth of earth loci varies and the ethnographic model is based on floor area. Consumption areas should display a low DSUM because relatively small amounts of bone actually arrive in the consumption area. Food preparation areas (both courtyards and indoor preparation areas) should reflect a somewhat higher DSUM due to the fact that relatively more bones arrive in these processing areas. Alleys should be still higher because they reflect accumulations of trash from multiple activities.

Zooarchaeological Analysis of House B

An analytical model was constructed based on the Druze ethnographic data and applied to the sheep/goat remains recovered from the House B area. The model examines two variables, carcass part indices (=CPI) and bone recovery density per square unit of excavated area (DSUM). Bone fragments were assigned to one of two categories based on the model:

1) Consumption — those bones that remain with the meat until it is served. This category includes the crania, sternum, distal ribs and rib shafts.

2) Preparation — those bones that are removed prior to cooking the meat. This category includes scapula, humerus, radius, ulna, innominate, femur, tibia, proximal ribs, thoracic and lumbar vertebra.

The neck was not used in either category because it can be used to make dishes in both cases. The metapodials and toes were not considered because they are not used to make traditional dishes, the one exception being that metapodials are occasionally sun dried if slaughter is done on the household level. They were recovered in very small numbers in most excavation units.

An index was devised so that a single number could represent the distribution between these two categories. The zooarchaeological expectations of the model are as follows:

1) Consumption areas should be represented by relatively higher percentages of bones that were not removed from the meat before serving and a relatively low density of bones per square unit (DSUM).

2) Food preparation areas should be represented by relatively higher percentages of bones that are removed before serving and a somewhat higher DSUM.

3) Courtyards should resemble indoor food preparation areas if food preparation activities took place there.

4) Trash deposits in the alleys could be variable both in proportions of carcass parts represented and DSUM due to the variety of activities that took place adjacent to the alley. Generally speaking however, alley deposits are expected to represent all carcass parts more or less evenly due to the fact that in most cases there will be an accumulation of bones from multiple activities.

Distribution indices and DSUMs were computed for A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, and B5. The paucity of bones from B3 and B4 did not permit calculation of the DSUM and is probably a reflection of the functional use of space in these two areas that ethnographic and archaeological analysis indicates was used for storage. Presenting the data graphically demonstrates the segregation of units by function. When the two variables are intersected and plotted on the graph, B5, which has a carcass part distribution index of -.31 and seems to represent food preparation, appears on the extreme left side of the chart and has a DSUM of .29. B2, which seems to represent food consumption, appears on the extreme right side of the chart and has a much lower DSUM. The distributions from alleys A1, A2, and A3 have indices between .05 and .23 and their DSUMs range from .06 to .34. The distribution index from B1 is .36 and the DSUM is .04. As predicted by the model, both food preparation and consumption remains were recovered from the alleys. The model suggests B2 was used for food consumption, and B1 and B5 were food preparation areas.

These analyses suggest that the ethnographic model for zooarcheological interpretation of household room use is useful when applied to sheep/goat carcass part distributions. The study further suggests that the basic premise of the model, that different food-related activities should produce different archaeological distributions, may be applicable to species distributions. When applied to the site of Qasrin, the model is useful for the interpretation of household space with respect to food-related activities. The results of the analysis clearly suggest distinct areas in House B that were used for food preparation, consumption and disposal of animal bones as part of these processes and correspond well to the archaeological and ethnographic analyses presented above.

Rabbinic Sources: Heritage and Historical Reconstruction

Once we completed the process of excavation and general reconstruction based upon archaeological and ethnographic parallels, we sought to put the site in its broader context using literary sources. We turned to Rabbinic literature as the natural “context” for the house as part of our attempt to integrate architectural and textual data as it relates to our academic and popular interpretation of the Qasrin house and its presentation to the public. The naturalness of this decision was occasioned by a number of factors. The first was the proximity of the house to the nearby synagogue. We assumed that if the inhabitants of Qasrin were Jews, and if they prayed in a synagogue, then the obvious literature to which to turn was that of the Talmudic Rabbis. This connection to Rabbinic literature was intensified by the grave marker of “Rabbi Abun” written in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic with its typically square script. House B was even named after this “Rabbi Abun” in order to drive home the Talmudic connection between the “Talmud” and the “Talmudic House.” The reconstructed house was not “merely” that of a Jewish peasant, but the fiction was created that the “Talmudic house” belonged to one steeped in Rabbinic literature.
The “Talmudic House” of Rabbi Abun

In 1989, Ann Killebrew completed a physical reconstruction of House B at Qasrin, built on top of the ancient walls and complete with an interior interpretation of the functional use of space (2004). The plans and sections appearing here present the final results of her work. In her reconstruction, “Rabbi Abun’s” house was entered from alley A3 via the main entrance in room B5. The appearance of a paved floor that, based on six seasons of excavations in the village, indicated a roofed area, and the discovery of an oven indicated that this room served as an indoor kitchen. The chimney constructed over the oven is interpretive, providing for the exit of smoke. Two doorways from room B5 led to the large rectangular room, B2, and to the smaller room, B4, on either side of the window wall. Based on the archaeological evidence, ethnographic analogy, and the paucity of bone fragments recovered, she interpreted B4 as a storage area. Similar sources of evidence indicate that B2 functioned as a multi-purpose room. Over room B4, drawn largely on strong evidence
These drawings of the reconstructed “Talmudic House” in the Qasrin village include a plan of the lower level interior kitchen, a multi-purpose room and a storage area (above) and a plan of the upper level sleeping loft and courtyard (below). Drawings by Erez Cohen; prepared by Heather Evans.
From a scholarly standpoint, this turning to Rabbinics bespeaks an approach that dates back to the legendary Rabbinics scholar Samuel Krauss, an “arm-chair archaeologist,” who began the modern scholarly attempt to contextualize archaeological evidence in terms of this literature, and in turn Rabbinics in terms of archaeology. Called by Krauss “Talmudic Archaeology” (1910–1912) or by his contemporaries, “Jewish archaeology” (Blau 1926), this approach is now usually called “Talmudic realia” (Sperber 1993: 3–23).

Contextualizing Rabbinic sources broadly in terms of contemporaneous material culture has shown impressive results. What becomes clear from this scholarship is that the world of the Rabbis and the material culture of their time are part of the same fabric. When the Rabbis discuss houses, tools, foods and the broad range of objects of daily life, their words fit the material culture of late antique Palestine well. That is to say that Jews, ever a “minority culture,” share the same material culture with their neighbors—whether in antiquity, the Middle Ages or in the present.

In a 1991 article, Killebrew and Fine presented the correlation between Rabbinic literature and the discoveries at Qasrin in a “natural” way, as if the natural environment of Rabbinic literature, and the natural environment of Rabbinics is the artifacts—mitigating any temporal difference between the Jews who lived in the ancient “Talmudic village” and those who live (or appreciate) a modern Talmud-based life. This connection has been deepened far beyond the intentions of the authors through publications produced by the park itself since 1991, and through a recently added multi-media “Talmudic Experience” where “you are invited to attend an urgent Sanhedrin session to take place in the Talmudic Experience in Qasrin.” This despite the fact that there is no evidence that the “Sanhedrin” ever visited Qasrin.

The use of Rabbinic sources for interpreting the “Talmudic house” is indeed a complex undertaking. In general, the material culture described by the Rabbis is congruous with the artifacts and spaces at hand. In other words, a Talmudist can easily “recognize” or “imagine” his or her literature in these spaces. So, for example, Mishnah Ma’aserot 3:5:

>[In] what types of courtyards [must edible plants that are brought there] be tithed?
Rabbi Ishmael says: A Tyrian courtyard, in which household vessels are stored.
Rabbi Aqiva says: Any [courtyard] in which one [resident] opens the gate and another locks [it] is exempt [from the law of tithes].
Rabbi Nehemiah says: Any [courtyard] in which a person is not embarrassed to eat is subject [to the law].
Rabbi Jose says: Any [courtyard] into which one might enter and no one says to him, “what do you want?” is exempt.
Rabbi Judah says: Two courtyards, one within the other: the inside [courtyard] is subject [to the law], the outside [courtyard] is exempt [from the law of tithes].
The chapter goes on to adjudicate the status of roofs, gateways, porticos, storage huts, potter's huts, fig trees, grapevines, pomegranates, coriander, savory, sweet marjoram, thyme and other foods growing in courtyards. The subject of this tractate is tithing, specifically what kinds of spaces and what foods within those spaces required tithing. The purpose of our Mishnah text is to define spaces where tithing is not required and spaces where it is required. All in all, this text tells us much about courtyards, what is done in them, what could conceivably grow in them, and many other details. Jews of the Byzantine period were certainly concerned with issues of tithing. In an agricultural village south of Beth Shean (today known as Rehov) a twenty-nine line inscription was found in the narthex of the synagogue. Drawn in the main from previously known Rabbinic sources, this text instructed locals how to maintain agricultural dietary laws in the complex environment of Byzantine Palestine (Sussman 1973/74). Read in this way, Mishnah Ma'asrot 3: 5 (and following) provides a sense of ancient courtyards, and of distinctly Jewish concerns for Biblical agricultural law.

Visitors to Qasrin, reading our 1991 article, might assume that Rabbi Abun of Qasrin sat and recited texts like this one, and adjudicated for the people of his village accordingly. This romantic image is not wholly beyond bounds, and is fitting for a heritage site. There were "Rabbis" in Byzantine Palestine who adjudicated for local communities. One is reminded of the inscription from Dabura, also in the Golan, that reads "this is the study house of Rabbi Eleazar ha-Qappar," and another study house may have been discovered at Beth Shean (Fine 1997: 101-2). Whether the "actual" residents of the "house of Rabbi Abun" shared the Rabbinic concern for tithing, or were among the Rabbinically-defined ammei ha-aretz, those whom the Rabbis did not consider to be scrupulous in their religious observance, we do not know.

In a similar way, Mishnah Ketubot 5: 5 describes the work of a "typical" woman in late antique Palestine: "These are the tasks that a woman does for her husband: grinding [grain], washing [clothes], cooking, and suckling her child; preparing his bed and making wool." It is impossible to know, of course, whether the assumed "Mrs. Abun" did all of these tasks, nor is this an exhaustive list. Privileging Rabbinic literature, this is the one source that we chose to give visitors a sense of meaning at the "Talmudic" house (see Killebrew and Fine 1991 for more sources).

In imagining the "Talmudic house" we provided readers with the impression that they could participate in Rabbinic discourse during their visit. Tosefta Baba Qama 2: 9 describes:

Five [people] sat on a bench and it broke. All of them are liable to pay [compensation to the owner]. If it broke [solely] because of the last one, the last one must pay compensation on behalf of all of them.

In our 1991 article (p. 52) five people are illustrated sitting on a bench in the Talmudic house. The caption below refers to this text. "This bench is reconstructed based upon archaeological models." It certainly sets the reader into the Rabbinic legal mindset—and that may well have been the mindset of some of Qasrin's residents. Only Rabbinic specialists would have known this particular text however (unless someone broke a bench, and found out the hard way!).

Once the site was designated as Talmudic, this "house of Rabbi Abun" was "naturally" interpreted in terms that would have been appreciated by the good rabbi—and by contemporary Jews steeped in Rabbinic literature. The "naturalness" of this decision is supported by the close proximity between Rabbinic literature and the general material culture of late antique Palestine, though this insight does not mean that the "Talmudic" house should then be treated as a mere appendage to Rabbinic literature or unproblematically as a prop in a "RabbiLand" amusement park. The "Talmudic" house, our modern construct, is nonetheless a site designed for imagining the world of the Sages. As at Plimoth Plantation, in Colonial Williamsburg, and in the recently opened "Nazareth Village," the visitor is asked to fantasize life in a far and distant time that still resonates with our own sense of self. This is an important exercise, though the fiction of historical veracity is always a flawed one. As David Lowenthal titled his seminal volume, The Past is a Foreign Country, or as Thomas Wolfe reminded us in a wholly different context, You Can't Go Home Again. Still, such very concrete exercises in historical imagination, when carried out with scholarly rigor, can often lead to new insights and understandings both of the material culture and of the supporting literature. They require broad, three-dimensional thinking and not the narrative kinds of reconstructions that historians, archaeologists and text scholars are accustomed to writing. The placement of this village in an actual archaeological site obscures for the archaeological and historical purist the various possibilities of interpretation, giving precedence of one over many others. This dilemma is, of course, par for the course for scholars engaged with any heritage site.

Focusing on the Qasrin house, we have demonstrated the great variety of approaches, disciplines and sources (including the difficulties in utilizing this evidence) that we employed to reconstruct daily life in the Byzantine period. Many of the details, especially with regard to perishable household objects, such as furnishings (e.g., benches and beds) and the functional use of space, are based on the Rabbinic literature and ethnographic analogy. In our architectural reconstruction we draw on the actual excavations and on analogy with traditional Druze housing in the Golan today and abandoned but standing houses in the Golan Heights whose origins date to the Byzantine period. Our independent analyses intersect and complement each other in our reconstructed house. We regard this work as an opening statement in what we hope will encourage a broader interdisciplinary discussion of the still neglected topic of households in antiquity.
Americans who have studied the connectedness of Rabbinics and the domestic context, using feminist hermeneutics as a bridge between the material and literary cultures (Peskowitz 1997; Baker 2002). Students of archaeologist Eric M. Meyers are among the few Conservative Jewish identity construction (Miller 1997; Fine 2002). A major interest of Smith and his students has been the search for "non-Rabbinic Jews." S. J. D. Cohen asserts that "epigraphic rabbis" scholars generally might assume that Rabbi Abun was a member of the Rabbinic community, Smith's students problematize this approach. "Talmudic realia" scholars). Thus, for example, where "realia" topics of daily life (Zevulun and Olenik 1979).

1. Thus our approach combined meticulous stratigraphic excavation with independent internal phasing of each structure and often each room. A one hundred percent silt of all the debris removed during excavation substantially increased our recovery rate of material culture.

2. This figure was arrived at by subtracting the number of bones in the preparation category from those in the consumption and dividing the difference by the sum of both categories. This produces a figure with a range from -1 to 1. If the distribution is skewed completely toward the preparation category the formula produces a -1. If it is skewed completely toward the consumption category a value of 1 will result. If the distribution is unbiased the formula produces a 0. The density of bones by square unit of measure (DSUM) was determined by dividing the number of bones used in an analysis from within a unit by the square area within the unit. The square area within the unit was determined by overlaying a top plan of the site with graph paper and counting the number of squares within the boundaries of the assigned units. This produces a relative figure that can be used for comparative purposes, though depth could not be specifically determined. These two variables were then graphed on an X-Y chart and the results examined.

3. Although the ethnographic model was constructed to apply only to sheep/goats, there was a large enough sample of cow bones recovered from the Byzantine period in House B that analysis could be performed. The results suggest that the model is less applicable to cattle. No significant correlation between units and cow carcass parts could be detected.

4. In 1981 Saul Lieberman described the purpose of this work: "In recent times the number of books dealing with realia, in the physical context as expressed in Rabbinic literature, has increased." He continues that "it is impossible to explain correctly neither the Halakhah nor the Aggadah without understanding the form of the millstone [the subject of his article], its history, development and use" (Lieberman 1981: 128). The subfield of Talmudic "realia" sees a close relationship between Rabbinic sources and archaeological discoveries, particularly those pertaining to daily life issues. Important work over the last half decade includes Joshua Brand's 1953 volume, Ceramics in Talmudic Literature, Yaakov Sussman's 1974/75 monograph-length essay on the Rehov synagogue inscription, discovered in the narthex of a sixth-century synagogue, Yizhar Hirschfeld's The Palestinian Dwelling in the Roman-Byzantine Period (1995), and most prominently commentaries on various issues of "realia" by Daniel Sperber and his students (1994, and the extensive bibliography cited there). An important exhibition at Haaretz Museum (now the Eretz Israel Museum) in Tel Aviv in 1978, "Form and Function in the Talmudic Era," presented the results of this type of study to the general public, neatly paralleling Rabbinic and archaeological sources on various topics of daily life (Zevulun and Olenik 1979).

5. An alternative scholarly approach, associated with E. R. Goodenough (1953–1968) and more precisely with Morton Smith, and Smith's students, has problematized the relationship between archaeological sources and Rabbinics, positing that the Rabbis were not as influential as once thought (and still thought by most "Talmudic realia" scholars). Thus, for example, where "realia" scholars generally might assume that Rabbi Abun was a member of the Rabbinic community, Smith's students problematize this approach. A major interest of Smith and his students has been the search for "non-Rabbinic Jews." S. J. D. Cohen asserts that "epigraphic rabbis" were probably not members of a presumed "Rabbinic class" (Cohen 1981). An approach that was recently questioned by Stuart M. Miller, and Steven Fine has discussed its significance for contemporary Conservative Jewish identity construction (Miller 1997; Fine 2002). Students of archaeologist Eric M. Meyers are among the few Americans who have studied the connectedness of Rabbinics and the domestic context, using feminist hermeneutics as a bridge between the material and literary cultures (Peskowitz 1997; Baker 2002).

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