On a warm June day in summer 2015, Maha Darawsha stepped down into a 6-foot-deep excavation hole at an archaeological site in Nazareth, Israel. Kneeling in the pit, she began to remove a final layer of dirt, revealing an incredible sight: an ancient, predominately blue and white tile mosaic floor that is an important part of world history.

The mosaic floor appears to be from one of the earliest churches in the history of Christianity and was uncovered at the Church of the Annunciation (Greek Orthodox). The team of archaeologists was led by Professor Richard Freund and Adjunct Professor Darawsha of the University of Hartford and Professor Shalom Yanklowitz of the University of Haifa in Israel. Collaborating with the University of Hartford on the project are Professor and Dean Philip Reeder from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa., and Professor Harry Jol from the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. The site is licensed by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The Church of the Annunciation is recognized by Christians worldwide as a shrine of great significance dating back to the origins of what became Christianity. According to ancient belief, the Archangel Gabriel “announced” the forthcoming birth of Jesus to Mary at a spring or well that she was visiting. It became the place where Greek Orthodox officials located their church in the Byzantine period. The church was destroyed multiple times and rebuilt there in the pre-modern period.

The mosaic floor is thought to have been created in the fourth century, when Queen Helena, mother of Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, came to the Holy Land to establish Christian pilgrim sites for the new religion of Rome.
Despite the summer heat, the young men say they enjoyed their experiences at both the Nazareth and Bethsaida archaeological sites. Zosh says he would like to go back and work at the Nazareth site next summer, although he thinks his ultimate career path will involve working in the Jewish community. Arieh, who says he enjoys the research aspects of archaeology, has begun applying to graduate schools to study museum administration.

While both students have been to Israel numerous times, this past summer was the first time they had gone to work at an archaeological site for Freund. In addition to their time at Bethsaida and Nazareth, the students and Freund visited other well-established archaeological sites in Israel.

For the past 14 years, Richard Freund has pursued his primary area of interest, Biblical archaeology. The director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies, Greenberg Professor of Jewish History at the University of Hartford, and director of the University’s Nazareth Excavation, he has worked in the Nazareth area on the Mary’s Well and Bathhouse Project, the Church of the Annunciation, and Mary’s Cave, on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Arab Orthodox Council, and the Israeli Antiquities Authority. The work has tracked archaeological remains from the Roman period to the Byzantine and Crusader eras to the modern period.

The Nazareth Excavations Project is just one of many conducted by Freund. He has directed six archaeological projects in Israel—including at Bethsaida, Qumran, the Cave of Letters, Yavne, and Har Karkom (Mount Sinai)—and three projects in Europe: the mapping of a former Nazi extermination camp at Sobibor, Poland; the Great Synagogue in Vilna, Lithuania; and the potential site of the Lost City of Atlantis off the coast of Spain.

Freund is the author of six books on archaeology, most recently Digging through History: Archaeology and Religion from Atlantis to the Holocaust (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), as well as two books on Jewish ethics, and has appeared in more than a dozen television documentaries.

Fluent in 10 languages, Freund earned his bachelor’s degree in Judaic studies at Queens College in Flushing, N.Y. He received his master’s degree in Talmud and Rabbinics and his PhD in philosophies of Judaism from The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

“The mosaic floor is beautifully decorated with multiple stylized crosses and iconography,” Freund says. The floor was discovered as a result of ground-penetrating radar and electrical resistivity studies sponsored by the University of Hartford.

Darawsha is credited with finding the magnificent mosaic floor, and she spoke about the find at a press conference organized at the site by the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Nazareth in mid-June. She was born just outside of Nazareth and teaches Arabic language and culture and archaeology at UHart. She is also a faculty member at the University of Connecticut in Arabic language and culture.

Freund, who is the director of the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies and Greenberg Professor of Jewish History at UHart, notes that “the bishop and the entire Greek Orthodox community are very excited by the discovery of the ancient mosaic. The church is already preparing the site for pilgrims and visitors. They are putting in glass viewing stations [through which one] will be able to see the mosaic beneath.”

Two UHart seniors, Judaic studies majors Arieh Fried ’16 and Zosh Simonson ’16, had the incredible experience of being brought to Nazareth by Freund to help out at the site. They had been working at the Bethsaida archaeological site in northern Israel for about a month before.

Zosh admits that he didn’t initially understand how significant this find was. “But when we were told that we couldn’t take any pictures at the site, we realized something was up.”

They began assisting the archaeologists and others at the site by removing buckets of dirt. As they listened to the people around them, Arieh says they began to get a sense of how important the mosaic floor was.