

We Forget Thee, Jerusalem

Shmuel Berkovits

**“How Dreadful Is This Place!”
Holiness, Politics, and Justice
in Jerusalem and
the Holy Places in Israel**

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Reviewed by Emmanuel Navon

This past May, Israel celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Jerusalem’s re-unification, marking the return of Jerusalem to Jewish control for the first time in 2,000 years. In truth, however, Israel never really took control of Jerusalem’s holiest site, the Temple Mount. Even as Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Shlomo Goren famously stood at the newly liberated Western Wall and blew the shofar, Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan, contemplating his victory from nearby Mount Scopus, is said to have wondered, “What do we need all this Vatican for?” For Rabbi Goren, the Jews had rightfully

recovered their property, and a keystone of the Jewish faith. For Dayan, Israel was now burdened with a foreign religious artifact; the best it could do was to try not to upset Muslim sensitivities. These contrasting attitudes reflect two opposite approaches to Zionism: One that sees in it the partial fulfillment of the biblical vision of Jewish redemption, and one that sees in it a strictly practical answer to the problem of anti-Semitism and Jewish defenselessness.

As Shmuel Berkovits demonstrates in *How Dreadful Is This Place!*, a book on the political, legal, and religious significance of holy sites in Israel, the Israeli government has consistently adopted the second approach in its treatment of the Temple Mount since 1967. Focusing mainly on post-state policies toward holy sites, but drawing on a wealth of primary and secondary Jewish, Muslim, and Christian historical sources, Berkovits’ comprehensive work reveals a troubling state of affairs: While its Muslim neighbors have been calculating,

even shrewd, in their attempts to claim the Temple Mount as their own—and, concomitantly, to deny any Jewish link to the site at all—Israel has shown an astonishing lack of determination in defending it. Thus is Israeli control over the Temple Mount more precarious today than ever, and, absent a concerted effort on the part of Jews both in Israel and abroad, liable to disappear altogether.

In February 2007, Arab leaders threatened to unleash a wave of violence against Israel in order to stop its government from re-building a bridge at the Temple Mount's Mughrabi Gate. The construction, it was claimed, would cause the Temple Mount to collapse, thus destroying the Dome of the Rock and the adjacent Al Aksa mosque. Such ludicrous accusations regarding the Temple Mount have a long and fruitful tradition in the Muslim world. As Martin Gilbert shows in *Jerusalem in the Twentieth Century* (1996), Haj Amin al-Husseini, the former mufti of Jerusalem, claimed the Jews threatened the security of mosques and other Islamic holy sites in 1929, leading to the Hebron massacre of that year; he then hoped to repeat the bloodbath on a larger scale in 1931, when he convened a pan-Islamic conference in Jerusalem at which he disseminated photomontages of Jews with machine

guns attacking the Dome of the Rock. Husseini was likely also the inspiration for Yasser Arafat's incitement to terror against Israeli civilians in September 2000 (aptly named the "Al Aksa Intifada"), in which he called upon both the Palestinians and the entire Muslim world to "defend" the Al Aksa mosque from the Jews. No doubt, threats to the sanctity of the Temple Mount serve as effective incitement to violence in the Arab street. Yet as Berkovits' history of both Jewish and Arab treatment of the Temple Mount makes clear, it is hardly the Arabs who have cause for complaint.

When Israel liberated the Old City in June 1967, it immediately passed—and enforced—a law guaranteeing freedom of worship for the three monotheistic religions and the preservation of their holy places. However, as Berkovits explains, "The Israeli government, the Jerusalem Municipality, and the Antiquities Authority have been hesitant to enforce Israeli law on the Temple Mount." Over the years, Israel's High Court of Justice has rejected repeated petitions to enjoin the government to let Jews pray on the Temple Mount—even individual prayers, conducted silently and without ritual objects—for fear of upsetting Muslim worshippers and triggering Muslim violence. As of today, the Israeli police prevent Jews from praying on the Temple Mount,

and only in June 2003—three years after the PA-controlled Waqf closed all entrances to the Temple Mount to Jews—did the Israeli government order the police to allow Jews, under extremely limited conditions, to once again enter the Temple Mount.

This approach stands in stark contrast to the treatment Jewish holy sites have received at Arab hands. Jordan, for instance, violated the 1949 armistice agreement with Israel by preventing Jews from praying at the Western Wall; destroying the Old City's fifty-eight synagogues and Jewish schools; and desecrating the Mount of Olives Jewish cemetery by using gravestones for the construction of roads, military camps, and latrines. The Palestinian Authority (PA) also violated its commitment under the Oslo accords to protect Jewish holy sites when, in 2000, it destroyed Joseph's Tomb in Shechem (Nablus) and an ancient synagogue in Jericho, and called for the "liberation" of Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem by claiming that the building was actually an ancient mosque. Finally, the Waqf's massive digging and building activities on and under the Temple Mount have destroyed countless Jewish relics from the First and Second Temple periods.

Nonetheless, at Camp David in 2000, the Israeli delegation agreed to share Israel's sovereignty over

Jerusalem with a future Palestinian state. The United States even went so far, Berkovits writes, as to suggest Palestinian custodianship over the Temple Mount and full Palestinian sovereignty in the Muslim and Christian quarters of the Old City; the deal faltered only when the Palestinians rejected the American proposal in favor of full Palestinian sovereignty over all parts of Jerusalem conquered by Israel in June 1967, including the Temple Mount itself. To this, Prime Minister Ehud Barak replied that Israel's sovereignty over the Temple Mount was "the Archimedes point of our existence." In response, the Palestinians claimed that no Jewish Temple had ever existed in Jerusalem and denied any connection between Israel and the Temple Mount altogether.

Considering the position of the Palestinian side, further negotiation on the matter of the Temple Mount might have seemed pointless. Nevertheless, even after the failed summit, Israel suggested a division of sovereignty over the Temple Mount whereby a future Palestinian state would control the upper level, and Israel the lower one. Berkovits reveals that then-foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami told him that, in December 2000, he had offered the Palestinians full and exclusive sovereignty over the Temple Mount (including the lower level), provided merely that the

Palestinians *recognize* the site's holiness to the Jewish people and prevent the destruction of Jewish remnants on the Mount. Yet even that proposal was rejected by the Palestinians, who have, to this day, refused to concede the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount, and are reluctant even to allow Jews to pray in front of a small section of the Western Wall. Why are the Palestinians so determined not to share sovereignty over the site with Israel? According to Berkovits, one of the main reasons is that "nothing scares [the Palestinians] more than the discovery of remnants of the Jerusalem Temple underneath the Temple Mount."

As Berkovits shows, then, the real issue surrounding the Temple Mount is not one of sovereignty so much as it is of the recognition, demanded by Jews, of their historical, religious, and national connection to the site—and the Palestinians' fervent refusal to grant it. What this refusal reveals about the paucity of their own historical claims is exposed by the fascinating wealth of facts and sources Berkovits has so painstakingly amassed.

Jerusalem, which is mentioned 656 times in the Hebrew Bible, was the capital of Israel and the holiest site of the Jewish people one thousand years before it was considered holy by Christianity, and 1,700 years before

Islam declared it sacred. Moreover, Jerusalem is not mentioned once in the Koran, and, unlike the Jews, who pray facing Jerusalem's Temple Mount, Muslims pray with their backs to it, facing Mecca instead. Nonetheless, Islam considers Jerusalem a holy Muslim city because of Muhammad's journey there, and the Temple Mount a holy Muslim site because it is allegedly the place from which Muhammad ascended to heaven (although this idea, too, is not mentioned anywhere in the Koran). As with Judaism, however, Islam views abandoning the Temple Mount to another faith or turning it over to alien rule as inconceivable. Indeed, just as Israel's Chief Rabbinate warned Israeli diplomats who participated in the Camp David and Taba summits that abandoning the Temple Mount was forbidden by Jewish law, so, too, did the mufti of Jerusalem state that the entire Temple Mount, including the Western Wall, belongs to Islam, and Muslims are forbidden to relinquish it to "infidels." But how holy, exactly, does Islamic tradition hold the Temple Mount to be?

According to Berkovits, contemporary Palestinian claims to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall are quite new to Islam. Muhammad, he points out, made a point of eliminating pagan sites of worship, and sanctifying only *one* place—the Kaaba

in Mecca—to signify the unity of God. Indeed, according to one Islamic tradition, Muhammad’s last words were “God cursed the Christians and the Jews for turning their prophets’ tombs into places of worship.” Thus does an ambivalence, if not outright disregard, toward the status of Jerusalem pervade the writings of Islam’s great scholars for centuries to come. Indeed, as Dore Gold shows in his book *The Fight for Jerusalem* (Regnery, 2007), as late as the fourteenth century, Islamic scholar Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya, whose writings influenced the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, ruled that sacred Islamic sites are to be found only in the Arabian Peninsula, and that “in Jerusalem, there is not a place one calls sacred, and the same holds true for the tombs of Hebron.” (This ruling is echoed today by Abdul Hadi Palazzi, the current imam of the Italian Islamic community, who holds that the space between the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aksa mosque is *not* holy to Islam; thus, Muslims will eat or smoke there, and do not take off their shoes—behavior that is strictly forbidden at a Muslim holy site.)

Until the seventeenth century, there was no consensus among Muslim scholars regarding the exact place where Muhammad, in his journey to the Mount, tied his horse. Throughout history, different places, mainly on the southern side of the Temple

Mount, were recognized as the site in question. It was only in the second part of the nineteenth century that some Muslim clerics started to claim that Muhammad had tied his horse to the Western Wall. Incidentally, Berkovits shows, this is precisely the period in which the Jews in Palestine began to bring Tora scrolls to their prayers at the Wall, asked the Ottoman authorities to repair the floor of the praying area, and tried to purchase ownership rights over the Wall from the Muslim Waqf. It is thus not hard to conclude, as does Berkovits, that the Jews’ heightened demonstrations of connection to the place led Muslims to “realize” the great significance it held for them, too:

During the British Mandate, the national struggle between Jews and Arabs intensified, and so too did the religious struggle between Jews and Muslims over the Western Wall. The Jews’ attempts to purchase the Western Wall and to improve the praying conditions there were understood by the Muslims as a first step in order to take control of the Temple Mount and rebuild the Third Temple in place of the Al Aksa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Hence did the mufti decide to grant a religious and international dimension to the national struggle by trying to recruit to this struggle the masses of the Muslim world.

And yet, during the British Mandate, Palestinian Muslims showed

a shocking disregard for the holiness of the site. Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, for example, claiming that the Jews were trying to purchase the Western Wall from the Waqf in order to exact an eventual takeover of the entire Temple Mount, destroy the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aksa mosque, and rebuild the Temple, sought to prevent Jewish access to it by building the Mughrabi neighborhood and piling up garbage in front of it. Al-Husseini even went so far as to build a latrine just one and a half meters away from the Wall—an act that, had it indeed been considered a holy Muslim site, would certainly have been forbidden.

Nonetheless, when the Israeli government opened the northern entrance to the Western Wall's tunnel in September 1996, the Arab League was up in arms: It declared that the tunnel—in fact a combination of two tunnels, one dug by Israeli archaeologists in 1987, and the other (the Hasmonean tunnel) dating back two thousand years—ran underneath the Western Wall *of the Al Aksa mosque*, and was thus illegal. This statement was blatantly false: The tunnels do not run under the mosque, or even under the Temple Mount. Yet the facts did not stop Arafat from then adding that the true name of the Western Wall is “Al Buraq,” that it is a *Muslim* site, and that the Koran

says so (it does not). And in February 2001, the Jerusalem mufti issued a *fatwa* declaring that the Western Wall is in fact part of the Al Aksa mosque. Of course, anyone versed in elementary biblical or archaeological history knows that the Western Wall is the last remnant of the Jewish Second Temple—a remnant that stood 635 years before the construction of the mosque in the year 705. Nonetheless, the mufti insisted that the Wall is exclusive Muslim property, and “not one stone of this wall has any connection whatsoever with Hebrew history.”

Thus, when Arafat shocked the Israeli and American delegations at Camp David by claiming that the Jerusalem Temple had never existed, he was not merely playing a tactical card; he was expressing what has now become a widespread Palestinian myth, one openly expressed by the leaders and representatives of Israel's Arab citizens as well. These individuals—such as Sheikh Ra'ed Salah, head of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel; Arab Knesset members (or former members) Abdulmalik Dehamshe and Muhammad Barakeh; and the chairman of the Israeli-Arab Follow-up Committee, Shuki Khatib—all claim that the Temple never existed, and therefore the Jews have no rights whatsoever over the Temple Mount. This myth has been embraced and

widely propagated in the larger Arab world: In Saudi Arabia, for example, academics claim that the Temple was actually a mosque.

Like the “Islamization” of the Western Wall, the Islamic denial of the Temple’s existence is also a recent phenomenon. During the early Muslim period (between the seventh and eleventh centuries), the Arabs used to call Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, interchangeably, *Bayt Al-Maqdis*, an Arabic transliteration of the Hebrew *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple). There was no question of the Jewish connection to the site. Indeed, after the Arab conquest of the land of Israel and during the first period of Arab rule, Jews were allowed to pray freely on the Temple Mount.

Up until the late twentieth century, in fact, the Muslims recognized that the Temple Mount was the site of the Jerusalem Temple. For instance, a guidebook published by the Supreme Muslim Council in 1924 says about the Temple Mount: “This site is amongst the oldest in the world. It is, beyond any doubt, where King Solomon’s Temple once stood.” The same guide describes the site of Solomon’s Stables, explaining that they, too, are remnants of King Solomon’s Temple. Today’s visitors, however, are no longer told about Solomon’s Stables, nor can they see testimony of their

existence. In 1996, the Palestinian Authority turned them into the largest mosque ever built in Israel.

Even Araf al-Araf, a Palestinian historian who, as a close collaborator of Haj Amin al-Husseini, could hardly be suspected of pro-Jewish bias, wrote in his book *Tariah Al-Quds* (1951) that “Al Haram Al Sharif [the Temple Mount] is on Mount Moriah, mentioned in the book of Genesis... It was bought by David to build the Temple, but it is Solomon who built it in 1007 B.C.E.” And in his book *A Detailed History of Jerusalem* (1961) al-Araf writes that “The Western Wall is the outside wall of the Temple erected by Herod. It is frequently visited by the Jews, especially on the Ninth of Av. There, they remember a glorious and unforgettable history.”

Perhaps the most shocking part of Berkovits’ narrative of Israel’s “loss” of the Temple Mount is the recounting of the country’s own role in the affair. After the Six Day War, Israel’s political and judicial leaders were eager not to upset Muslims. But it was in the Oslo era that Israel’s self-proclaimed elite seemed near determined to get rid of “all that Vatican” in the name of an all too elusive peace.

For instance, Israeli law strictly forbids the desecration of *all* holy places, even going so far as to seek to protect the feelings of the faithful. Further

Israeli laws (such as the 1978 Antiquities Law) seek to protect holy places from unauthorized archaeological digging. Yet, when the PA turned Solomon's Stables into a mosque, Israel's High Court of Justice, when petitioned by an Israeli NGO, did not order the Israeli government to enforce the law by stopping this undeniable act of archaeological vandalism—even though, it should be noted, the court itself had previously ruled that it is illegal to conduct a religious service on a site that is considered holy by another religion, as it may upset the feelings of that religion's followers.

Over the years, the High Court of Justice has rejected petitions to enjoin the government to let Jews pray on the Temple Mount (the petitioners follow Rabbi Goren's ruling authorizing Jews to enter certain parts of the Temple Mount), as well as petitions to enjoin the government to protect antiquities on the Temple Mount, on grounds that doing so would upset Muslims and trigger violence. Thus has the court consistently placed Muslim sensibilities before Jewish civil rights, and appeasement ahead of the rule of law. But, as Berkovits argues, "The attempt to avoid confrontation with the Waqf for fear of violence... will actually bring us to a clash, because it convinces the Muslim authorities that they can do whatever they want."

The Israeli government also contributed indirectly to the erosion of Israel's rule over the Temple Mount. In October 1993, then-foreign minister Shimon Peres wrote to his Norwegian counterpart that Israel would not interfere with the activities of "all Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem... and holy Muslim places." Although Peres' letter did not specify what it meant exactly by Muslim holy places, Arafat nonetheless later claimed that Israel had implicitly recognized the PA's jurisdiction over the Temple Mount.

Berkovits concludes, "The Israeli government has systematically ignored the High Court of Justice's injunction to supervise all archaeological works on the Temple Mount and to save the antiquities there." Thus has the Temple Mount become an extra-territorial legal entity in the capital of Israel, where Israeli law does not apply. Indeed, since Arafat launched a wave of riots against Israeli civilians in September 1996, the Waqf has ceased to cooperate with Israel on its activities on the Mount, instead carrying out illegal construction projects. It has also restricted the access of Israel Antiquities Authority inspectors to the Mount, making their work there impossible—all in flagrant violation of Israeli law, and after the refusal of the High Court to accept the petition of leading Israeli

archaeologists that the Wakf's actions on the Mount were causing irreparable damage to the site's antiquities.

As a result of the Israeli government's inaction, vindicated by the High Court of Justice, the Waqf was able, in November 1999, to open a "small emergency exit" for the enormous mosque built in Solomon's Stables that required the digging of a 1,600-square-meter, fifteen-meter-deep pit at the site, and the removal of more than ten thousand tons of archaeological rubble containing artifacts dating back to the First Temple period. Decorations and inscriptions were polished away from ancient stones, and stones with Hebrew writings and Hasmonean stars were thrown into Jerusalem's municipal garbage dump. The "small emergency exit" became a new mosque named Al Aksa Al-Qadim.

Berkovits relates that he visited the Al Aksa Al-Qadim mosque in November 2004 together with his students:

On the ceiling were four domes. Two of them still bore rare artistic inscriptions, which are the work of Jewish artists from the Second Temple period. I noticed that those inscriptions had been covered with plaster, and reported this to the Antiquities Authority after the tour. A senior representative of the Antiquities Authority told me that he was aware of the plaster that had been used to cover the Jewish inscriptions. When I asked

him why he didn't send workers with a ladder to remove the plaster, he replied that whoever climbs up the ladder will never be able to climb it down.

Thus do the Palestinians publicly deny the Temple's existence even as they actively erase proofs to the contrary; thus does Israel's High Court of Justice acquiesce to the destruction of evidence of the Temple's Jewish past for fear of upsetting Muslim sensitivities. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Waqf has succeeded over the past decade in building, illegally, two enormous mosques underneath the Temple Mount (the Solomon's Stables mosque and the Al Aksa Al-Qadim mosque), and plans to connect them with underground tunnels, thus effectively turning the Temple Mount into an exclusively Muslim site. Should this state of affairs continue unimpeded, in the near future the last remnants of the Jerusalem Temple will effectively disappear, and the Palestinians will be able to deny its existence without having to be burdened by new archaeological counterevidence.

With Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas still demanding Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state, the question the Jews must ask themselves is this: If Israel could allow the PA to turn the Temple Mount into an exclusively Muslim site even while it was still

officially under Israeli sovereignty, how would Israel manage to prevent the further Islamization of the Mount after formally abandoning its sovereignty there? Moreover, given the takeover of the PA by Hamas, and Hamas' ideological connection to Wahhabism (which calls for the destruction of non-Muslim sites in "Muslim lands"), it takes little in the way of imagination to figure out what would happen to the Temple Mount if Israel were to relinquish its control there.

Dayan likely did not realize the irony of his words when he described the Temple Mount as a "Vatican." Today's radical Islam does, indeed, aspire to conquer the Vatican, but the road to Rome first passes through Jerusalem. The leaders of al-Qaida, Hezbollah, and Hamas have all declared in recent years that "liberating" Jerusalem is the prelude to Islam's victory and world domination. Abandoning the Temple Mount to Islam is thus far more likely to encourage jihad than it is to satiate the jihadist thirst for conquest and deliver some elusive "peace."

Berkovits, however, as explained in conversations with this reviewer and in various articles and other writings, reaches the opposite conclusion. Indeed, while the views drawn in *How Dreadful Is This Place!* rest on legal and juridical aspects of the controversy,

Berkovits in fact would *encourage* Israel to keep trying to achieve some sort of shared arrangement, such as an "international management" of the Mount, if it can achieve the long-desired peace. This conclusion obviously stands in stark contrast to the evidence Berkovits himself presents in his book, attesting to the fact that Palestinian intransigence over the Temple Mount stems from an unwillingness to accept Israel's existence—both today, and three millennia ago. One might rightfully ask: How does vindicating the Muslims' ideological rejection of Jewish history convince them to accept the Jewish state? To this, Berkovits has no answer.

In the end, Israeli Jews must make a choice between claiming their Jewish past and relinquishing it altogether. Throughout recent history, some have believed that by choosing the latter option, they would finally be left in peace. But as history has shown, the opposite is true: Denying our past, as well as our historical mission as a people, is as hopeless an act in our own land as it was in exile. Instead, the time has come to reclaim our past—indeed, to fight for it.

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