

Are we confusing “historical” with “holy”?



by Lev Tsitrin

Human propensity for manufacturing man-made “holiness” is as old as humanity itself. Centuries after the exodus from Egypt and settlement in Canaan, biblical prophets fulminated, time and again, against Hebrews’ idolatrous worship of local deities, and of the sites dedicated to them. In fact, the first such instance followed exodus itself, as narrated in the story of the golden calf, made and worshiped while Moses was away at Sinai getting from God the tablets of the Law. Unforgettably, what followed was the first recorded act of iconoclasm – enraged by the worship of the calf, Moses smashed the just-received tablets, though they were God’s own handiwork. Clearly, their “holiness” – as evidenced by the fact that they were fashioned by God – mattered nothing to Moses. What mattered was that that the message was not obeyed; the object on which that message was recorded, mattered

nothing. Iconoclast *par excellence*, Moses did not care for the tablets themselves.

Later prophets merely followed his lead. The biblical Arc of the Covenant was a mere location of the new tablets of the Law, and the temple's Holy of Holies was a mere location of the Arc – the focal point of the Law, “holy” only insofar as the Law was God-given. It is not even clear from the biblical narrative (in 2nd Samuel, chapter 7) that God desired the temple to be built; the notion that God who made the Universe needed a human-built home was at best a stretch, and once the temple had been built, the message pounded by the prophets over and over again was a repetition of Moses' outburst: the mere observance of the rites was useless unless the spirit of the Law was followed in everyday life. A mere building was not, in and of itself, “holy” even when it contained what was called the “holy of holies.” “Holy” rites did not excuse unholy acts.

This is what crossed my mind as I read reports of this year's violence on Jerusalem's Temple Mount (like the New York Times' [“A Site Holy to Jews and Muslims Returns as the Nexus of Conflict,”](#) Not that an excuse for violence was ever wanting; yet this year, the week of Passover came during the month of Ramadan, inflaming Moslem desire to protect what they saw as the “holy” site of the al Aqsa Mosque from being desecrated by the presence of the Jews on the Temple Mount, resulting in clashes with the Israeli police when Palestinians threw stones at the visiting Jews.

Their problem? In a nutshell, the two historical sites are located on the same land: the al Aqsa compound was built on the site of the Jewish temples. To both Jews and Moslems, the place is “holy” – exclusively “holy” for them, that is. Hence, diplomatic maneuvering focuses on keeping them both partially satisfied. The present arrangement is that Jordan administers the site, and Jews are allowed to visit but not to pray (I guess Moslems think that God hears prayers from that location

more clearly, and they don't want Him to hear prayers of the Jews, preserving His ear exclusively for themselves.)

Needless to say, this makes zero sense. God sees all and hears all. There is nothing "holy" per se about this piece of land. God being the author of the Universe, everything we see and touch – or at least everything of what we can see and touch is made of – was made by God. Every atom of every object is His handiwork. I suspect that in declaring some place or object to be "holy" in the belief that God is connected to it, we compare God to exceptional people, making an analogy that is completely fallacious. People's time in this world is limited, and so is everything they touch and make. If you want an autograph of Mozart, or Newton, or Washington, you've got to hunt for it, to follow auctions, to pay huge sums of money. Not so with God's work – he made all, and unlike autographs of mere geniuses, His autographs are all over the place. No need to go far to get them. If what He made is "holy," then all that's around us is holy – every rock and every grain of sand we step over; everything and anything is holy.

And so it is with the Temple Mount. It sure is a historical place – like Mount Vernon or Monticello – but this hill in Jerusalem is not any more holy (nor any less historical). Temple Mount/al Aqsa is not filled with "holiness" the way an oil well is filled with oil, or the gold mine is sprinkled with nuggets. Its "holiness" is imagined, is man-made – it is something otherwise known as an "idol."

And of course Moslems – just like Jews – are by no means an exception to human tendency to make idolatrous "holiness" out of the mundane. Al Aqsa ranks third on the Moslem register of "holiness." The first is Mecca, its "holiness" being defined by Kaaba stone – a hunk of rock that, way back when, fell from heaven. Had it happened today, no one would consider it "holy," for what can be "holy" in a meteorite? Back then, it was another matter. What is surprising, is that Kaaba's designation as something "holy" (rather than merely

“historical”) continues to this day. The only explanation I have, is that we tend to venerate (and idolize) ancestors in following the traditions they left behind – not because those traditions make sense, but out of natural love for the ancestral creators of those traditions. And yet, traditions are products of history; they are mere historical artifacts embedded in human mind. On its own merits, Mecca’s Kaaba is just as holy as any hunk of metal or rock in the Hall of Meteorites in New York’s Museum of Natural History – that is, it isn’t “holy” at all. But add human history to it, and it becomes “holy” – the human-made piece of “holiness” that is precisely the idol of the kind against which the Hebrew prophets of old fulminated so much.

So, it seems to me, the best way to deal with the problem of the Temple Mount/al Aqsa is to get our terminology straight, and stop calling it a “holy” site. A contested site, yes. A historical site, sure. But a site that is “holy,” a site that is somehow located apart in God’s universe, not just in human psyche? That’s unprovable, and, hence, cannot be used as an argument.

There is no point fighting over what can’t be proven. Temple Mound/al Aqsa is public property, and should be shared accordingly – in accordance with the fact that there is plenty about it that is historical, and absolutely nothing about it that is provably “holy.”

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