

Tunneling History—Rabbi of the Lost Ark

by [Kenneth L. Hanson](#) (July 2020)



An Alley in Jerusalem, Zvi Raphaeli

In some ways archaeology reminds us of the Platonic notion of the demiurge, a mysterious, artisan-like figure who fashions and maintains the material universe. In our case, archaeology brings an entire people (long forgotten) back into existence in a manner not unlike the casting of spells. Like a fire throwing shadows on the wall of Plato's cave, those who interpret the daintiest artifacts are left to ask whether the grand designs they weave are anything more than faint forms on history's elaborate tapestry. Sometimes, however, the forms magically coalesce to present us with seemingly irrefutable evidence of a people's past, stretching from time immemorial down to the present. So it is with the Jewish people and the archaeological relics that bring us back to when and where they lived in the "Holy Basin" of Jerusalem.

Such observations are brought into focus by an incessant swell of Palestinian propaganda, alleging that the central and most important edifice in all of Jewish history, the great temple originally built by the venerable King Solomon and rebuilt in the sixth century B.C.E., and rebuilt again by the most unvenerable King Herod the Great, never existed at all. There could hardly be a greater affront to Jewish sensibilities, for according to tradition, it was here that God gathered the dust from the ground to fashion the first human being, Adam, and breathed into him the breath of life. It was also in this place, known in early days as Mount Moriah, that the first of the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, is believed to have nearly sacrificed his promised son, Isaac.

Magical Mystery Tour

The sanctity of the site for Muslims is summed up by the current Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, who declared: "We consider this the spot where the Prophet Muhammad began his ascent to heaven." His reference is to the Qur'an, which, in the chapter titled "Al-Isra" ("Night

Journey”), relates that in a single night, when Muhammad was living in Mecca, twelve years after his divine call, a mythological winged steed known as al-Buraq took the prophet on a “magical mystery tour” to the “farthest mosque.” Its location is never identified, but it was later assumed to be Jerusalem’s Temple Mount, the Haram al-Sharif. Muslims today believe that the rocky outcropping on which the Dome stands is the place where, as the Quranic *sura* (“chapter”) 17 continues, Muhammad dismounted his steed, prior to ascending (again on al-Buraq) into the various heavens. He received an audience with the prophets of old, and finally with Allah, who instructed the Muslims to pray fifty times a day, though relenting and reducing the number to five. Afterwards, al-Buraq returned the prophet to Mecca in the same night.



The story, fantastic as it is, remains central in

Islamic culture to this day, though many Muslims consider it to have been merely a vision, emphasizing the purity of Muhammad's heart. Moreover, the identification of this story with Jerusalem is tenuous at best. "The Farthest Mosque" (*al-Aqsa* in Arabic) is the name of the other great structure on the Temple Mount, decorated with a blackish dome, and still used for prayer. The Dome of the Rock, by contrast, is a holy shrine, but not a proper "mosque." Critics rightly point out that the Quran's "farthest mosque" could really be anywhere, and early commentators thought of it simply as a designation of heaven. Early Muslim warriors, however, may well have reasoned that if Jerusalem is important to Jews and to Christians, there needs to be an Islamic claim on the city as well, and this may have been motive enough for linking it with Muhammad's *Isra*. In any case, the Quranic account was enough to establish Jerusalem as the third holiest site in Islam (after Mecca and Medina).

This is what the gilded Dome of the Rock, completed in the year 692 C.E. at the order of Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik, commemorates. Why, however, must the two previous temples which stood here be delegitimized and ultimately denied? We know that Holocaust denial has taken root in the Middle East (notably Iran), but now we have to cope with a new phenomenon, "Temple denial." The seriousness of this lunacy was revealed during the failed Camp David Summit in July 2000, hosted by President Bill Clinton. To the president's astonishment, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat declared to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak that there never was a temple in Jerusalem: "I will not allow it to be written of me that I have . . . confirmed the existence of the so-called Temple beneath the Mount." Arafat suggested instead that the actual site of the Jewish temple may have been in the West Bank city of Nablus, known as Shechem in biblical times. It strains both credulity and common sense to imagine such a statement proceeding from the mouth of the leader of a proposed new Palestinian state, presumably to live side-by-side with Israel in peace.

Similarly, the head of the Islamic Supreme Council for the *Waqf*, Sheikh Salad Din Alami, declared, "There are no Jewish remains on the Mount. There never were Jewish antiquities here." Sheikh Ikrema Sabri, the former mufti of Jerusalem, added:

There was never a Jewish temple on al-Aqsa, and there is no proof that there was ever a temple. Because Allah is fair, he would not agree to make al-Aqsa if there were a temple there for others beforehand.

In 2008, Ahmen Qurei, the chief Palestinian negotiator with the state of Israel, declared:

Israeli occupation authorities are trying to find a so-called Jewish historical connection, but all these attempts will fail. The [Temple Mount] is one hundred percent Muslim.[\[1\]](#)

Sheikh Taysir Tamimi, Palestinian chief justice and among the most important Middle Eastern Muslim clerics, stated:

There was no Jewish civilization in Jerusalem. Many people live here throughout the ages and they left some artifacts, but so what? There is no proof of any Jews being here. Jews came to the [temple area] in 1967 and not before.[\[2\]](#)

Presumably, in Palestinian eyes, the testimony of the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius, who witnessed the temple with his own eyes, is fictitious and holds no weight. He described it as follows:

In the eighteenth year of his reign, Herod started to enlarge and reconstruct the temple at his own expense, which we knew would be his greatest enterprise. After removing the old foundations, he laid new ones, and raised the structure of hard, white stones. Purple

hangings covered the entrances, and a golden vine with grape clusters adorned the area below the cornice. Large porticos with one hundred sixty-two Corinthian columns surrounded the temple, which was supported by walls of unparalleled size. Beyond the first court was a second, surrounded by a stone balustrade with an inscription prohibiting foreigners from entering on penalty of death.[\[3\]](#)

Of course questions may be raised regarding such an account, admittedly written after the temple had been destroyed by the Romans. Can Josephus' words alone be counted as trustworthy, establishing that the temple once stood on the Haram al-Sharif? Can archaeology prove that the temple indeed stood in Jerusalem? If so, should the Muslim shrine itself be viewed as an "illegal squatter" on Jewish holy ground? What about other Jewish sites in the holy city, such as David's Tomb, on Mt. Zion, declared "bogus" by the Palestinians? Does the denial of the Jewish past effectively nullify its present? As if to ensure that nothing of the Jewish temple is ever brought to light, every Israeli attempt to explore anywhere near the Haram al-Sharif is condemned by the Palestinians as "provocative," becoming, as it were, the "*outrage d'jour*".

Raiders of the Lost Ark

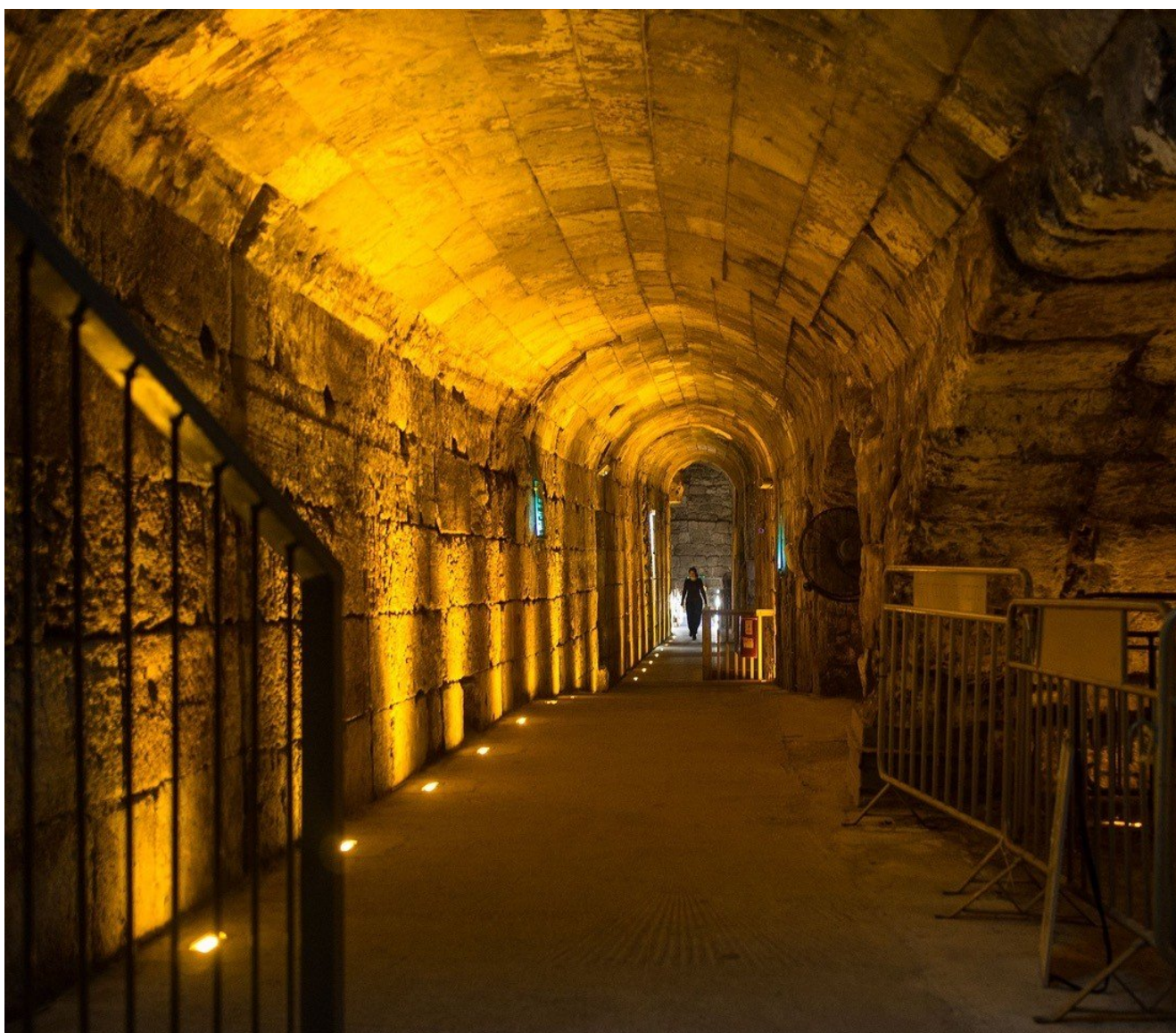
Taking the "long view," we cannot appreciate the nature of the rage without returning to the aftermath of the Six-Day War of 1967, in which Israel conquered the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, Judea and Samaria (otherwise known as the "West Bank") and, for the first time since the year 70 of the Common Era, East Jerusalem. Up until then, the area today governed by the Palestinian Authority had been annexed by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. There was no move to create a Palestinian state under either King Abdullah or King Hussein, nor would such an effort have been tolerated. Israel had won independence in 1948, but her citizens had no access to the holiest sites in Judaism, since Jerusalem was a

divided city and the eastern half belonged to Jordan. Suddenly, Israelis woke up to a new reality, as they listened to the recorded words of paratroop commander Motta Gur. Leading his brigade onto the sacred plateau, he had breathlessly exclaimed over a walkie-talkie: "The Temple Mount is in our hands!" The euphoria which followed was unlike anything the Jewish people had ever known during the long centuries of their worldwide dispersion. Battle-hardened soldiers were among the throng of Israelis who now streamed to the Western Wall to pray. Unable to contain themselves, they could only stand before the massive stones, weeping.

Not surprisingly, a group of Orthodox Israeli Jews, led by Western Wall "rabbi emeritus" Yehuda Getz, began to nurture a secret desire to get as close to the ancient shrine as possible. Getz was a complex individual, a secret philanthropist of deep spirituality, as well as an officer in the Israel Defense Force. His looks matched his mystical approach to his many endeavors. Always clothed in black with a white head scarf, he carried a Bible and a prayer book in his pocket, while armed with a pistol in a side holster. When the Jewish quarter of the Old City was conquered by Israel in 1967, he was one of the first Israelis to resettle there. Suddenly, the idea of excavating along the Wall was no longer an unrealizable fantasy.

The area to the immediate left, while facing the Wall, was covered by centuries of debris. Above the landfill, the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem had taken shape, dating back to the seventh century, when Arab armies had taken the city from the Byzantines. In 1967, Rabbi Getz (who coopted a dedicated corps of young Yeshiva students) was authorized by Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs to begin digging a fresh tunnel, horizontally and northward, along the previously covered section of the Western Wall. Archaeologists at the time were uninterested, and governmental oversight was lacking, but the digging continued, unabated, for decades. In 1981, the

tunneling rabbi chanced upon a long-sealed ancient entrance to the Temple Mount, known as Warren's Gate, situated about forty-six meters from the tunnel's entrance. Originally identified by the illustrious Charles Warren, its outlines were clearly visible among the massive Herodian ashlar. In due course, Getz converted the area opposite Warren's Gate into a small synagogue, which can still be seen today. Known as "the Cave," Rabbi Getz would pray there each morning, believing it to be the point closest to the location of the temple's most sacred inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies.



The revered rabbi and his disciples realized that they had come upon an entrance to an enormous complex of

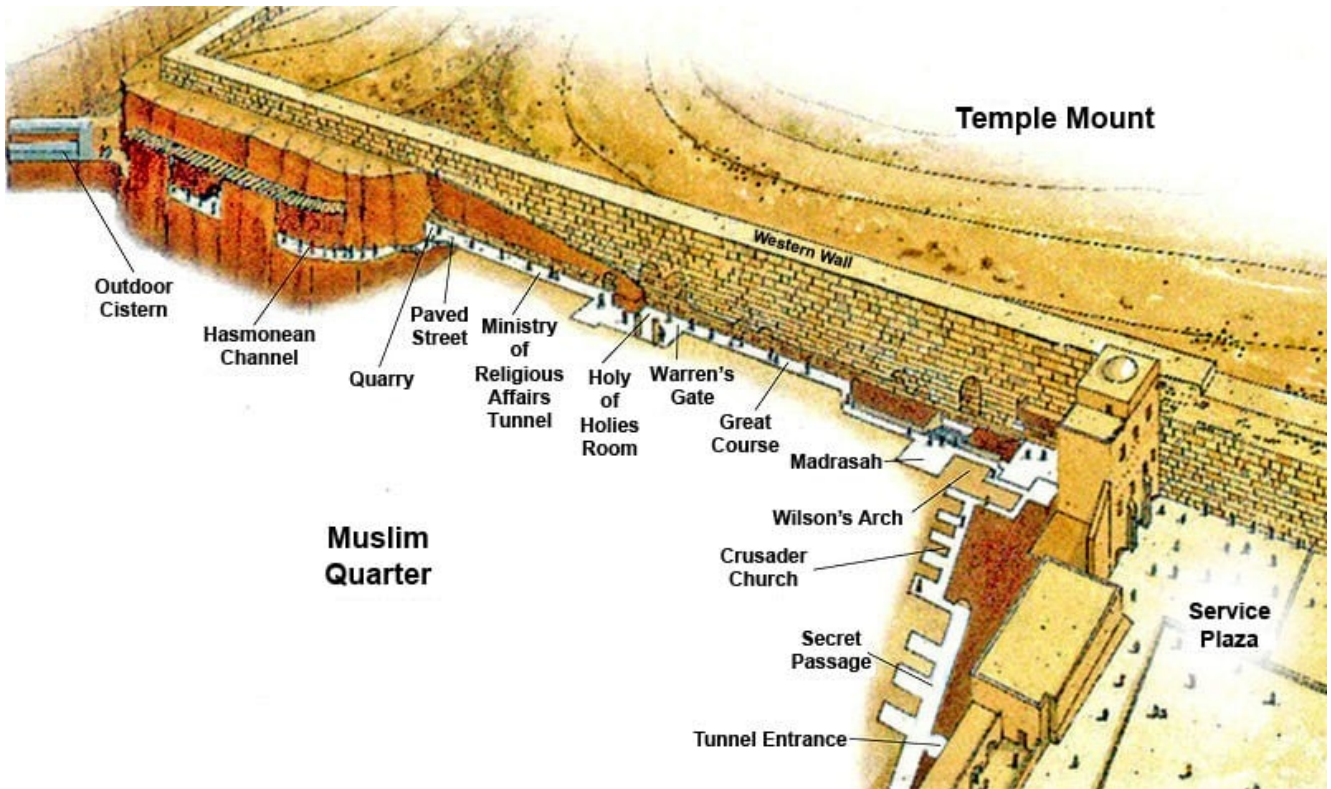
subterranean vaults that honeycomb the artificial portion of the great plateau, upon which Herod had erected his vastly refurbished Jewish temple. They clearly believed that the cavernous underground chambers on the other side might even lead them to the foundations of the temple (theorized to lay directly beneath the Muslim shrine known as the Dome of the Rock), including the Holy of Holies. Rabbi Getz and his team now turned their digging equipment on the gate itself. They managed to break through the subterranean portion of the ancient rampart, finding an enormous carved tunnel, six meters wide and twenty-eight meters long, leading eastward toward the remains of the temple foundations. The floor was covered with mud and water.[\[4\]](#) Getz wrote in his journal:

I immediately ran to the site and was overwhelmed with excitement. I sat there for a long time sprawled helplessly as warm tears were streaming down my face.[\[5\]](#)

Looking past the virulent anti-Jewish Palestinian screed of “temple denial,” we are told in the Hebrew Scriptures that the first “Holy House,” long pre-dating Herod, was commissioned by the wise King Solomon, around 1,000 B.C.E. The fabled Ark of the Covenant was said to have once resided within, nestled securely in the most holy chamber, having been brought up to Jerusalem by none other than Solomon’s father, the mighty King David. However, forasmuch as the golden chest was celebrated, it inexplicably vanished from the biblical narrative, never to be referred to again, except in non-canonical works such as 2 Maccabees. In that apocryphal text, it was said to have been spirited out of the city by the prophet Jeremiah, just before the temple’s destruction by the Babylonians, and hidden away in a desert cave until the end of days. Other legends attempt to trace its melancholy journey to a church in Ethiopia, while a number of “pop scholars,” crawling onto the fragile limb of speculation, postulate that Judaism’s most sacred relic was lowered into a

subterranean cavity during the siege of the city, escaping the fiery conflagration which engulfed the sanctuary in 586 B.C.E. If that were the case, then the most important holy relic in world history might still rest in the vaulted chambers beneath the Temple Mount platform. Indeed, Rabbi Getz claimed that during this forbidden foray, he actually laid eyes on the hallowed Ark but that he covered its position and never discussed it again, so as not to be targeted by the Muslims. [\[6\]](#)

Meanwhile, atop the expansive plateau of the Haram al-Sharif, the curious sounds of digging, rising up through one of the many cisterns in the vicinity of the Dome of the Rock, were overheard by Palestinian workmen, who reported the underground activity to guards from the *Waqf*. A number of stalwart young men were immediately dispatched through the entrances to the cisterns, carrying cinderblocks and trowels to erect their own wall for protection from these Jewish "invaders." They came face-to-face with Rabbi Getz and his team, engaged in clearing the debris from the gate complex and the adjacent vaulted passageway veering off into the darkness. In an attempt to "discourage" the rabbi's adventure, physical violence erupted, and the two sides came to blows. There were multiple injuries, while up above, the *Waqf* incited rioting across Arab East Jerusalem.



Why would Islamic authorities (the *Waqf*) consider the rabbis' search for secret treasures, including perhaps the Ark of the Covenant, an unthinkable provocation, for which calls for holy *jihad* are issued? The grounds for incitement have included the idea that such subterranean digging might endanger the foundations of the golden dome and other Muslim structures, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Another charge is that Zionist intruders might even attempt the unthinkable—detonating explosives underground so as to bring down the holy sites. To be sure, such fears are not entirely unfounded, since, as we shall see, certain fringe elements in Israel, spurred by religious fanaticism, have in fact plotted to bring down the Dome of the Rock. But beneath the motivation to protect sacred shrines, a desire shared by Israeli authorities with regard to all religious sites in the Holy Basin, lies a deep-seated Palestinian rejection of the Jewish state itself. A cursory look at history tells us that while Jews were to be tolerated in Islam, they were to be in a special category, designated as *ahl ul-dimmah* ("protected

people”), whose “protection” meant living forever as second-class citizens.

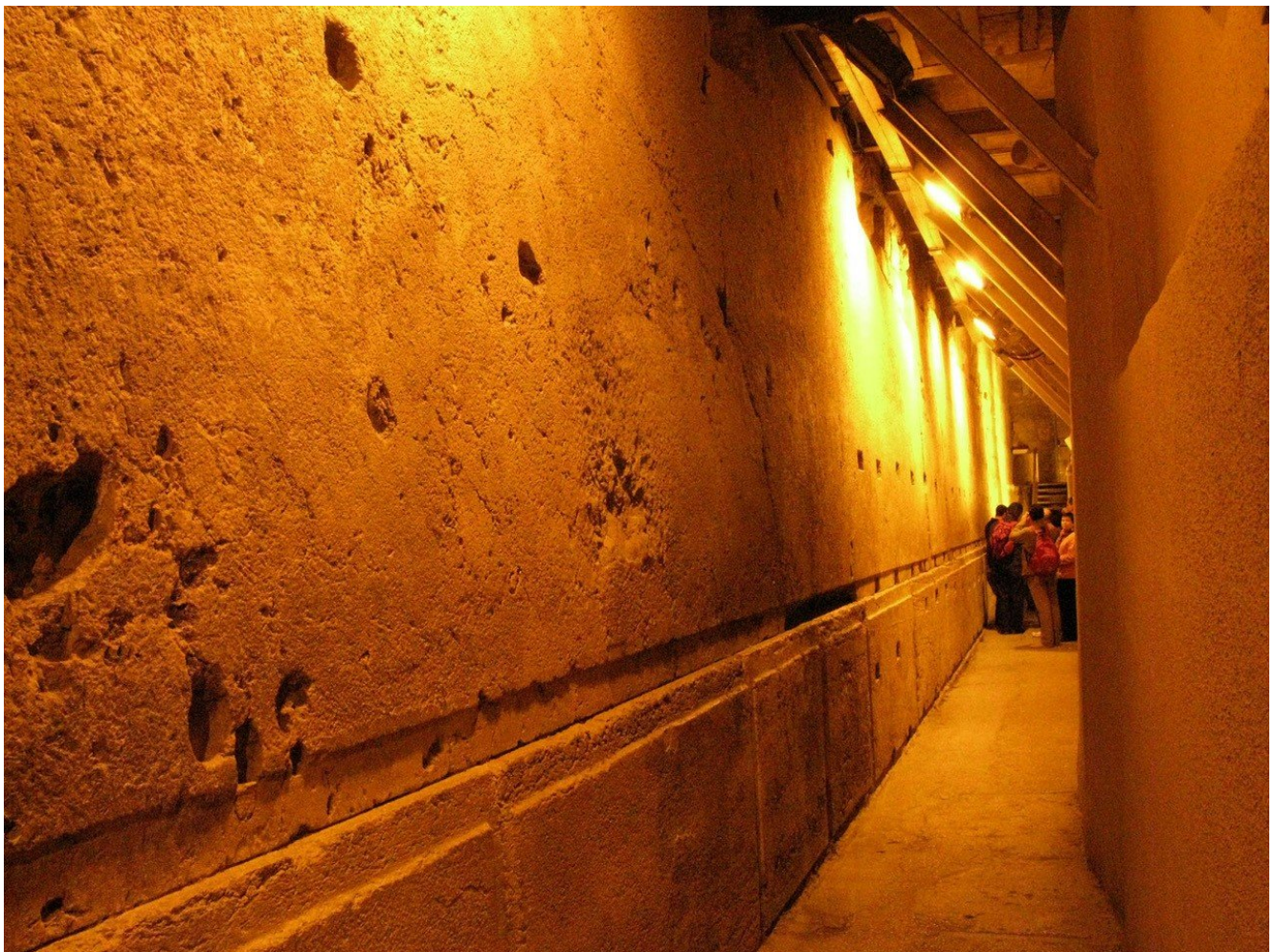
As observed by orientalist scholar David Farhi, the toleration of Jews in the Muslim world was contingent upon their being an enslaved people, whose rights did not extend to the political arena.[\[7\]](#) Another oriental scholar, Moshe Sharon, pointed out that the modern Jewish nation was created in the heart of the so-called “Dar al-Islam,” namely, land on which holy sites are located. It is worth noting that there is no separation of religion and state in the Islamic world. The prophet Muhammad declared, “Religion and the state are twins.” Jews are to be beneath and subordinate to Muslims, never being allowed to rule over them. As recounted in countless Friday sermons delivered in mosques for decades, Jerusalem is to be a Muslim city, the third holiest in the Islamic world.

It takes little imagination to understand why any form of archaeological exploration at or near the Haram al-Sharif would be considered as undermining not just the foundations of the structures above, but the entire fantasy of Muslim sovereignty over the entire city. The creation of the *Waqf* under Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan was a clear and some say misguided attempt to placate Muslim sensibilities, for the bulk of the Palestinian population continues to reject the sovereignty of the Jewish people in their ancient land.[\[8\]](#) Any attempt, archaeological or otherwise, to demonstrate the historical Jewish presence in this land must be met with the fiercest resistance and defeated at all cost. In the end, the Israeli government ordered the sealing of the gate opened by the tunneling rabbis with six feet of reinforced concrete. Would this be enough to satisfy the *Waqf*? Hardly, especially since Rabbi’s Tunnel, now known as the Western Wall Tunnel, was extended, ever northward during the years to come.

Tunnel of Terror

More archaeologically-linked unrest was destined to

erupt. As the din of indignant Palestinian voices slowly subsided, Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs cautiously allowed the northward digging of the Western Wall Tunnel to proceed, unabated. To ensure no damage to the structures above, safety engineers were engaged. Along the way, this new round of digging happened upon the most massive Herodian ashlar ever discovered on the Temple Mount, or anywhere else in the land of Israel. It is a single stone block, 13.6 meters in length, between 3.5 meters and 4.5 meters in width. It is estimated to weigh a staggering five hundred seventy tons, and is among the heaviest objects ever raised by human beings without mechanized cranes. Proceeding further along the newly revealed courses of finely chiseled limestone, the persistent diggers eventually arrived, years later, at the northern extremity of the vast Temple Mount platform.



At this point the artificial tunnel being excavated suddenly intersected with an even more ancient water channel, dating to the pre-Herodian Hasmonean Dynasty, of the first two centuries before the Common Era. Significant amounts of water would in fact have been necessary in those days, in order to cleanse and purify the area around the temple's altar, soaked on a daily basis with the blood of sacrificial animals. The period of this "Second Temple" was the last historical moment that the Jewish people were truly free in their own land (save for two catastrophically failed anti-Roman revolts), until the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. Indeed, today's Israelis live directly on top of such reminders from antiquity, with that which lies beneath constantly fueling the desire to resettle the whole of their ancient homeland—to create "facts on the ground." Faced with the true stories in stone which dot this Holy Land, the Palestinian Arab claim that they are its true natives, displaced and disenfranchised by white European colonists who happen to be Jewish, is on its face patently absurd. Indeed, a majority of today's Israeli Jews are partly descended from Middle Eastern or North African families.

In any case, while the Western Wall Tunnel and the so-called Hasmonean Tunnel were stabilized and officially opened to the public in 1988, there was no exit, and those who made the long trek through its dimly lit recesses were compelled to retrace their steps, some three hundred eighty meters, back to the beginning. Significant interest began to develop around the possibility of opening a northern exit from the tunnel. Israeli authorities approached the Sisters of Zion convent on the famed Via Dolorosa (the traditional path on which Jesus carried his cross to Mount Calvary), in the hope of finding a spot for the diggers to break through. The Sisters, however, declined, not wanting to become involved in the geopolitical ramifications of a simple archaeological dig. Next, the Arab owner of a souvenir shop on the Via Dolorosa was approached. Surprisingly, he agreed, given that crowds of tourists exiting the tunnel at his shop could hardly be bad for business.

Nonetheless, after some consideration, he too declined, since his fear of being targeted by his Palestinian compatriots trumped his profit motive. To be sure, the murder of Palestinian “collaborators” with Israel—by fellow Palestinians—goes largely unnoticed, even while UNESCO busies itself with its next official condemnation of the Jewish state. Israeli authorities nonetheless persisted in their attempt to find an exit for the tunnel, next considering an opening on the street itself. The issue was elevated directly to the office of the prime minister at the time, Yitzhak Shamir, who vetoed the plan, due to concern over the unrest that might well erupt.

In 1996, however, another Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, decided that the long years of delay must come to an end. Possessing considerably more archaeological chutzpah than his predecessors, he authorized the construction of a staircase leading up from the tunnel to a spot on the Via Dolorosa adjacent to a school. Officials of the *Waqf* were given a tour of the tunnels and an opportunity to examine maps, indicating their precise location and proving that they in no way undermined the Haram al-Sharif. They were also invited to open a new gate to Solomon’s Stables (an underground vaulted area at the bottom of a set of stairs descending from the al-Aqsa Mosque, beneath the Temple Mount), as well as the right to hold Muslim religious services there.

None of this mattered, as Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert, sledgehammer in hand, joined in breaking through to the street above.^[9] The tunnel’s new exit was separated from the street itself by an ordinary-looking stone wall, but the inconspicuous opening from below did nothing to mitigate the fierce reaction from Jerusalem’s Arab inhabitants. Moreover, the *Waqf* was alarmed by the prospect of fresh hordes of Jewish tourists being belched forth from the depths of the earth into the heart of Jerusalem’s Muslim quarter.

It is truly odd that UNESCO never deigned to condemn

the anti-Semitic attitudes of the Palestinians, outraged as they were that Jews might dare to surface from beneath the ground on land which belonged to the ancient Israelites long before Islam ever existed. No one should need reminding that in the United Nations, double standards rule. In the Security Council, following a complaint by the representative from Saudi Arabia that Israel had opened a tunnel "in the vicinity of the al-Aqsa Mosque," Resolution 1093 was adopted, once more condemning the Jewish state. Of course the tunnel has nothing to do with the mosque, nor did it violate Israel's Interim Agreement with the Palestinians, which does not cover archaeological projects. At the U.N., however, facts hardly matter, and anti-Israel resolutions are piled from floor to ceiling. If the tunnel excavation proved anything, it was to underscore that the Muslim Quarter had obviously been built directly on top of land seized by conquest from the Jewish people long ago. It was the Arabs who were relative latecomers to Jerusalem, not the Jews.

The tunnel was opened on a Tuesday, prompting immediate rioting in Jerusalem and other locations. It quickly turned deadly, as Israeli police employed increasingly forceful measures to defend themselves. Amid a growing unrest, Netanyahu called in the I.D.F., deploying tanks and attack helicopters. By Thursday, at least sixty-eight people had died, mostly Palestinian, though several Israelis were also shot dead. Of course, it was Israel that received growing international condemnation. Prime Minister Netanyahu summed up his government's position:

Unfortunately, what we saw here was an attempt to cynically manipulate a non-issue: a fabrication that says that we in any way affected or hurt the Islamic holy places... The underground tunnel does not do that in any way. The chairman of the Palestinian Authority and his spokesmen knew exactly that. We always respected the Muslim holy places. [\[10\]](#)

By the end of the week, however, more trouble was brewing. In anticipation of what was to come, a squad of Israeli security forces, having donned riot gear, assembled on the Haram al-Sharif. Simultaneously, a mass of some ten thousand Arab rioters, having finished their Friday prayers, began to vent their rage, hurling stones at the police and, worse still, at Jewish worshipers down below, praying at the Western Wall. As if on cue, the security police charged into action, firing tear gas, followed by rubber bullets, at the advancing rioters. Fifty were wounded, including five Israel policeman, in the ensuing ruckus. The Palestinian account amounted to an exercise of orchestrated incitement. While the Israelis on the scene reported "massive stone throwing," the other side declared that only a few stones had been hurled and that the Israelis had responded with live ammunition, killing three of the protesters.

PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, who many argue was himself an arch terrorist with Jewish blood on his hands, declared " . . . the attempt to attack worshipers inside the mosque is something that cannot be tolerated." [\[11\]](#) Such words certainly had an effect, even though Arafat later said that he had ordered his underlings to prevent attacks on Israelis. The incitement, however, ran its logical course, with extensive rioting erupting in other Arab neighborhoods as well as other cities in the Palestinian territories. In the vicinity of Jericho, three Palestinians were killed during the unrest, and in Tulkarm, a Palestinian and two Israeli paramilitary officers were slain. An Israeli colonel was killed in Rafah, near Gaza's border with Egypt, and on the other side of the border, an Egyptian police Lieutenant was killed by stray fire from an Israeli helicopter gunship. Israel dispatched Cobra helicopters to Ramallah, while tanks took up position opposite Nablus. Many more Palestinians were wounded in incidents in Hebron, Qalqiliyah, and Bethlehem. To be sure, the ongoing Arab propaganda war was not about to subside. In Gaza, Arafat thundered: "Our blood is cheap in the face of the issue for

which we are gathered here.” [12] On Palestinian radio, a caller announced the need “ . . . to slaughter all the Jews [and] to appoint a caliph for Palestine.” [13] Incredibly, all of this was over nothing more than a tunnel and a new access route to an archaeological treasure.

Ancient Sewer, Modern Muck

Recently, as another tunnel, this one connected to one of the most tragic events in Jewish history, was being prepared for a “grand opening,” an exiled leader of the terror group Hamas declared that Israel was “playing with fire”—sadly, “par for the course” in today’s Middle East, as archaeology and politics butt heads. The modern controversy, like so much else in the ironically dubbed “city of peace,” is rooted in antiquity’s mists, yet precipitated only recently, beginning with an accidental discovery. The year was 2004. Location: the “Holy Basin,” a compact area of just one square kilometer, where some of the most important sites of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are located. At the southern extremity of the ancient City of David, a subterranean sewage pipe had burst. The municipality of Jerusalem promptly dispatched a work team to make appropriate repairs. Due to the sensitive nature of the locale, a small cadre of competent archaeologists accompanied the workers. As work progressed and the ground was penetrated, the digging was punctuated by the sound of scraping—steel against stone.

Work immediately halted, and another kind of excavation, archaeological in nature, commenced in earnest. In due course the remnants of a stair-lined road of sorts, clearly ancient, began to emerge. These, however, were no ordinary steps. The archaeologists were aware of another set of steps, nearly identical, leading up to the southern end of the Haram al-Sharif, the “alleged” Temple Mount, and dated to the time of King Herod the Great, in the first century before the Common Era. Nowhere else in the land of Israel have steps of this particular style and character been discovered. Might

this “road” of steps have been directly connected in some way with the Jewish temple that once stood where the Dome of the Rock now stands? It appeared, moreover, that these newly excavated steps had, in bygone days, led down to the ancient Pool of Siloam, revered in Christian Scripture as the place where Jesus of Nazareth commanded a man “blind from birth” to wash, thereby returning to him his sight. There was indeed good reason for what was essentially an enormous ritual immersion bath (*mikveh*), as large as two Olympic-sized swimming pools, to have been situated in precisely this location, since pilgrims ascending to the holy hill were first required to attain ritual purity. According to estimates, well over two million people (certainly including Jesus of Nazareth) would, during Jewish festivals, have made their way up to the temple (nonexistent, according to Palestinian creed) subsequent to immersion in the pool.[\[14\]](#)



The destination, which was situated some considerable distance to the north, was an enormous artificial platform supported by multiple rows of subterranean vaults, which effectively extended the original hill identified in Solomon's day as Mount Moriah. This "Court of the Gentiles," as it was called, covered an area of some 480 x 300 meters, one side of which includes the Western Wall and the adjacent underground tunnel, which had been a flashpoint of controversy and violence in years past. The southern end of the temple complex has, since the conquest and reunification of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War, been thoroughly excavated. Rows of shops, still visible, were constructed along the base of the Temple platform on several sides, along with the remains of the great "Double Gates" and the "Triple Gates" that once served as the entrance (via underground ramps) to the great courtyard above.

In order to make the seven-hundred-meter trek from the Pool of Siloam to the upper temple precincts, throngs of Jewish worshippers would have traversed the stair-lined road of pilgrimage, beneath which was a subterranean drainage tunnel, now entirely revealed to the amazed archaeologists.[\[15\]](#) An estimated ten thousand tons of quarried rock had been required in the construction of the road itself, which, according to archaeologist Nachson Szanton, could be safely dated to a time no earlier than 30–31 of the Common Era, concurrent with the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate.[\[16\]](#) Touring the site, Szanton observed:

Every step on the street brought the pilgrims closer to the temple. Imagine . . . the joy, the songs, the prayers, the spiritual journey that these people experience when they know they are just meters away from reaching the gates of the temple.

Following clues provided by archaeological maps and charts spanning the last century and a half, the digging proceeded apace, in a manner that would have dazzled Charles Warren himself. Dozens of fiber-optic camera cables were

utilized in the effort to determine the proper places for excavation, while engineers were brought in to stabilize the tunnel and to ensure that none of the structures above would sustain damage. Along the way a stepped structure was uncovered, likely put to service as an ancient podium (*bimah*), from which religious and political figures would hold forth in oratory.

As the ground was cleared, what was found confirmed the tragically melancholy tale, told by Josephus Flavius, of the great Jewish Revolt against Roman domination of the land of Israel. In the year 66 of the Common Era, the notorious Nero Caesar, ensconced in the city on the Tiber, dispatched his most illustrious General Vespasian to put it down. In the year 70, the glorious temple of King Herod was burned to the ground. Josephus wrote: "Around the altar were heaps of corpses, while streams of blood flowed down the steps of the sanctuary." A mass of Jewish refugees fled below ground, to the drainage tunnel, beneath the pilgrimage road, now being excavated. The Roman legionnaires, discovering their whereabouts, broke through the road with massive hammers, entering the subterranean sewer, and unleashing carnage on some two thousand hapless refugees. So ended the siege of Jerusalem, which was more than the suppression of an uprising. It was a holocaust, said by Josephus to have resulted in more than one million Jewish casualties.



What the modern team of archaeological sleuths discovered uncannily confirmed the description of the ancient historian. Cooking pots and other domestic items littered the tunnel's dark recesses, suggesting that the refugees had been sheltering there for days, weeks, or even months prior to their merciless slaughter, as attested by the presence of a Roman sword and scabbard, abandoned in *situ*. Most hauntingly, the huddled Jewish inhabitants of this last hiding place in the city scratched into the wall an etching of a menorah, the golden lamp stand which once adorned the temple's inner chamber. Greeting the eyes of the modern team for the first time in two millennia, they instantly recognized that this was the earliest depiction of the sacred menorah ever to come to light.[\[17\]](#) There were also hundreds of coins, struck with the Hebrew words: "For the freedom of Zion." It was as if those refugees, from their shrouded gloom, had telegraphed a declaration, across twenty centuries, that there was indeed a great Israelite temple here, and that this land, notwithstanding conquest and pillage by countless invading foes, is the one place on earth that belongs to the Jewish people.

Nonetheless, the ongoing excavations were to be dogged by controversy, for they were located in an area of Arab East Jerusalem, officially over the Green Line, that marked the demarcation of the city into Jewish and Palestinian sectors prior to Israel's annexation. As expected, the cabal of anti-Semitic ambassadors at the United Nations were no more impressed by messages from the past than by the reasoned arguments of modern Israeli archaeologists, laboring tirelessly to uncover the tunnel and its secrets. UNESCO brazenly condemned the new archaeological activity taking place in the Holy Basin. This, after all, is supposed to be Arab land, part and parcel of East Jerusalem – the capital of the future Palestinian state.

Opening Day

After decades of Israel-bashing, advancing an uninterrupted narrative of dark and olive skin minorities being cruelly oppressed by Western colonialists, the United States unceremoniously withdrew its participation and membership in UNESCO. Moreover, when the tunnel was ceremonially opened to the public, in June 2019, the Trump Administration dispatched its ambassadors to France, Denmark and Portugal, along with presidential adviser Jason Greenblatt and the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman. Among the crowd of nearly one hundred was Sara Netanyahu, Israel's ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer, former mayor of Jerusalem and Knesset (Parliament) member Nir Barkat, Senator Lindsey Graham, and Republican Party donors Miriam and Sheldon Adelson.

A special papier-mâché wall was constructed for the ceremony, to be broken through by Ambassador Friedman, wielding a diminutive sledgehammer. It was a commingled moment of pathos and celebration, commemorating the sacrifice of so many lives on the spot, while adumbrating the tenacity of the Jewish people, who yet live. Indicating tacit American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem, Friedman remarked:

It confirms with evidence, with science, with archaeological studies that many of us already knew, certainly in our heart—the centrality of Jerusalem to the Jewish people. The spiritual underpinnings of our society, the bedrock of our principles in which we honor the dignity of every human life came from Jerusalem. This place is as much a heritage of the U.S. as it is a heritage of Israel. [\[18\]](#)



Following Friedman's address, Barkat stood up and declared that this archaeological excavation will ". . . hopefully [allow] the world [to] understand why we will never, never divide the city of Jerusalem." To be sure, in today's Israel, it might be observed that archaeology and Zionism are "joined at the hip."

Not surprisingly, more vociferous condemnations followed swiftly. The foreign ministry office of the Palestinian Authority accused Israel of "imperialistic Judaization plans" designed to change the "status quo" in the holy city. The chief negotiator of the Palestinian Authority, Saeb Erekat, tweeted:

I hope all the world, including Americans, can see this. That is not a U.S. ambassador; that is an extremist Israeli settler, with Greenblatt also there, digging underneath Silwan, a Palestinian town. [\[19\]](#)

The Donald Trump administration was accused of "fully supporting the imperialistic settlement enterprise led by the

far-right in the occupation state.”

Israel of course is a democracy, the only democracy in the Middle East, the result of which being that voices of dissent among Israelis, including the secular left, who have no interest in claims arising from the land’s archaeological heritage, are given free expression. The leftist group, Peace Now, which favors unconditional Israeli withdrawal from the territories conquered during the Six-Day War of 1967, opined that the opening of the tunnel was effectively turning the Arab neighborhood of Silwan “ . . . into the messianic Disneyland of the far-right in Israel and the United States—several meters from the al-Aqsa Mosque and the temple mount.”[\[20\]](#) They dubbed the Pilgrim’s Road the “Controversy Tunnel,” declaring that it had been “ . . . dug under the homes of Silwan residents, caused the evacuation of Palestinians’ homes in the neighborhood and increased the tensions between Palestinian residents and the Jewish settlers acting more intensively than ever in recent years to Judaize the neighborhood, as part of an effort to sabotage the two-state solution.”[\[21\]](#)

Another left-wing Israeli organization, Emek Shaveh, intent on delegitimizing the use of archaeology to advance Zionist goals, broadcasted its own criticism of the project: “ . . . the horizontal excavation method, and the paucity of scientific publication, do not allow us to know for sure when the street was built and how it was integrated into the urban layout of Jerusalem. Greenblatt’s response to all of this brilliantly epitomizes the nature of Jewish settlement of the ancient Jewish homeland:

We can’t “Judaize” what history/archaeology show. We can acknowledge it and you can stop pretending it isn’t true! Peace can only be built on truth.[\[22\]](#)

Against this backdrop, a *New York Times* correspondent tweeted his own condemnation, repeating the propaganda points

that Palestinian homes above were being undermined and damaged by the excavations beneath. Not the slightest concession was made to the overwhelming care taken by archaeologists and engineers alike to maintain the structural integrity of modern buildings and infrastructure above while allowing access to ancient Jerusalem below. Ambassador Friedman quipped that we seem to know how to build subways without damaging anything at ground level; uncovering an ancient tunnel ought not to be an impossible task. Nonetheless, the same *New York Times* correspondent, in a longer article, described the “sledgehammer” used by Ambassador Friedman to symbolically break into the tunnel as evocative of the destruction of the “peace process” with the Palestinians.

Such a peace process would of course imply the division of the holy city into Jewish and Arab sectors, based on the 1948 armistice. It would place an international border through the heart of Jerusalem, effectively turning it into the Berlin of the Middle East. It would require that Israel surrender sovereignty over the holiest site in Judaism, the Western Wall, the last vestige of the Jewish temple which Palestinians claim never existed. Nonetheless, the fact of the matter is that almost every day archaeologists are uncovering the serious connections between the Jewish people and the city of Jerusalem, across millennia, contradicting the narrative that modern Zionists, representing European interests, essentially “stole” Palestine from its Arab inhabitants. As we have seen, however, the very name “Palestine” was invented by Rome’s brutal conquerors, who lay waste the land and murdered her inhabitants, almost to extinction. That the Jewish people survive at all is one of history’s greatest anomalies. They are, to be sure, “back home,” and they are not going away.

[1] See Aaron Klein, *The Late Great State of Israel: How*

Enemies Within and Without Threaten the Jewish Nation's Survival (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2009), 77.

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Antiquities* 15:380; *War* 1:401. See Paul Maier, *Josephus, the Essential Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 250.

[4] See *JPRS Report: Near East & South Asia*, Issue 91052 (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, 1991), p. 72.

[5] See Gershom Gorenberg, *The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 125. <https://cryforzion.com/has-the-ark-of-the-covenant-ever-been-found/>.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See David Farhi, "The Muslim Council in East Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria Since the Six-Day War," *ha-Mizrah he-Hadash*, 28/1-2 (1979): 3-21.

[8] See Yitzhak Reiter, *Contested Holy Places in Israel–Palestine: Sharing and Conflict Resolution* (London: Routledge, 2017).

[9] See Gorenberg, *op. cit.*, 182 ff.

[10] Storer H. Rowley, "Netanyahu: Riots Aren't Israel's Fault," *Chicago Tribune*, Sep. 28, 1996.

[11] Serge Schmemmann, "10 More Die in Mideast as Violence Erupts 3d Day; Mosque is Scene of a Clash," *New York Times*, Sep. 28, 1996.

[12] Nadav Shragai, "The Seeds of Calamity," *Ha-aretz*, Sep. 27, 1996.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ze'ev Orenstein, Director of International Affairs for the City of David, interview on *Mark Levin Podcast*, July 1, 2019.

[15] See Amanda Borschel-Dan, "On an Ancient Road to the Temple, Archaeological Innovation, Mystery and Dispute," *The Times of Israel*, Oct. 17, 2019.

[16] See Owen Jarus, "Archaeologists Identify 'Lost' Jerusalem Street Built by Pontius Pilate," *Live Science*, Oct. 21, 2019: <https://www.livescience.com/pontius-pilate-street-jerusalem-found.html>.

[17] <https://www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/archeology/finds/rare-menorah-etching>.

[18] Jacob Magid, "Under Palestinian Homes, US Envoys Hammer Open an Ancient East Jerusalem Road," *The Times of Israel*, Jun. 30, 2019.

[19] Ibid.

[20]

<https://peacenow.org.il/en/the-disputed-tunnel-in-silwan-inaugurated-with-american-support>.

[21] See Jacob Magid, "Palestinians Slam US 'War Crimes' after Envoys Open East Jerusalem Tunnel," *The Times of Israel*, Jul. 1, 2019.

[22] Tal Polon, "Greenblatt: We Can't 'Judaize' What History Shows," *Arutz Sheva*, Jun. 30, 2019.

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