

Should Jews Pray on the Temple Mount?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



When Israel came into the possession of the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan decided that in order to minimize friction with Arabs on the Temple Mount, Jewish visitors would be prohibited from saying prayers at the holiest site in Judaism. And not only were they prevented from saying prayers aloud, but they would also be forbidden to silently mouth prayers. This rule has been enforced ever since by Israeli guards. It has not won Israelis any points with the Arabs. They pocket the capitulation and find something else – many somethings – to complain about. Had Dayan been more sensible, he would never have instituted such a rule but, from the very beginning of Israel taking control of the Temple Mount, would have allowed Jews to pray. The Arabs would have resigned themselves to the practice long ago, and Jews would all these years have been able to do what they

have every right to do: to say prayers at what is the holiest site in Judaism. This is one contretemps where the Arabs look bad, while the Jews look good for denying themselves – to prevent trouble – the simple right to pray at such a spot.

Now, back-to-back reports in the Israeli media leave more confusion. Had Israel already decided in recent months – without making a public announcement to that effect – to let Jews pray on the Temple Mount? Or did Naftali Bennett misspeak when he seemed to be endorsing the right of Jews to pray at that holiest site in Judaism? Or was he simply misunderstood, as is now being claimed? Did Israel decide to backtrack only when Arab states – Jordan and Egypt – protested at this change of policy that would allow Jews to pray on the Mount, or did Israel never mean to allow such prayers, even though they had been going on, unhindered, for months? The story of this back and forth – before the status quo again appeared to be back on Monday – is told here: “Israel quietly letting Jews pray on Temple Mount, in break with status quo – TV,” [Times of Israel](#), July 18, 2021:

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett asserted on Sunday that both Jews and Muslims have “freedom of worship” on the Temple Mount, potentially hinting at a change in policy at the most contentious site in Israel...

Bennett “thanked the public security minister and the Israel Police [chief] for managing the events on the Temple Mount with responsibility and consideration, while maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount,” according to the Prime Minister’s Office.

What else can “freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount” mean if not the right to say prayers? What is more essential to worship than praying? Was Bennett declaring a new policy, or wasn’t he, rather, trying to silently put this new policy in place by making it seem as though this right to prayer has

always been the “policy,” but only now is it being implemented? Jewish prayers have been said on the Mount for some months, without drawing attention, and without any of the Arabs on the Mount making an issue of it. Apparently they were willing to acquiesce. Or was it that they took the Jewish prayers, said in whispers, to be merely conversation among Jewish visitors? Now, of course, after the practice of prayers by Jews on the Mount has been made the subject of a report on Israeli television, Prime Minister Bennett has to clearly come out on one side or another. Or rather, he did both – first he came out on one side, and then he came out on the other.

Bennett also “emphasized that freedom of worship on the Temple Mount will be fully preserved for Muslims as well, who will soon be marking the fast of the Day of Arafah and the Eid al-Adha.”...

On Sunday, did Bennett mean to declare that Jews could now say prayers on the Temple Mount, as they had been doing beneath the radar for months, as part of exercising “religious freedom”? It seems to me that is what he intended. He had hoped this change would take place quietly, one that the Israelis, unlike the irresponsible television reporter who could have put a very different, favorable slant on his story, could present to the world as merely applying the right to religious freedom in its fullest, and fairest meaning – one that since 1967 had been wrongly limited by an insensate desire to please the Muslim Arabs at the expense of Jewish religious freedom. Bennett was doing his best to present this not as a “revolution,” but as a return to the true meaning of “religious freedom” for Jews as for Muslims; Bennett was careful in the same breath with “religious freedom for Jews” to mention the same freedom for Muslims, citing the freedom to observe the Day of Arafah and the Eid al-Adha, on the Temple Mount.

But that was not the end of the matter.

The Times of Israel asked the Prime Minister's Office to clarify whether Bennett's statement marked a change in policy, but no response had been received by Sunday evening. Channel 12 news reported that no previous Israeli prime minister is known to have spoken of "maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount."

In 2015, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu specifically assured Jordan that Israel would not allow Jewish prayer on Temple Mount. "Israel will continue to enforce its longstanding policy: Muslims pray on the Temple Mount; non-Muslims visit the Temple Mount," he said in a statement.

A spokesman for Public Security Minister Omer Barlev told The Times of Israel that there is "no change in policy" atop the Temple Mount...

More than 1,600 Jews reportedly ascended to the Temple Mount during Tisha B'Av. Earlier in the day, dozens of Muslim worshipers barricaded themselves on the Mount and clashed with police ahead of the arrival of the Jewish visitors. Some of them briefly chanted: "With spirit, with blood, we'll redeem Al-Aqsa."

This is what usually happens when a large influx of Jews are expected on the Mount, and they always come out in force on Tisha B'Av. The Arabs arrive early on the Mount, ideally before the Jews arrived in a futile attempt to prevent – with a barricade, with rocks – those visitors from exercising their right to visit the Mount; the Arabs ominously chanted this Tisha B'Av that "with spirit, with blood, we'll redeem Al-Aqsa." "With blood" means murderous violence. And we will "redeem" Al-Aqsa means we, the Arabs, will take complete possession of the Mount, sealing it off from any Jewish visitors.

The Arabs were not protesting Jews saying prayers; they were protesting, and rioting against, the mere presence of Jews on

the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Jerusalem.

Naftali Bennett's statement on Tisha B'Av about guaranteeing "religious freedom for Jews as for Arabs on the Mount" meant one thing: that as quietly as possible, without getting the backs up of Arab states, and especially of those states that Israel has now normalized ties with in the Abraham Accords, he intended to let Jews pray quietly on the Temple Mount. On Sunday, it seemed that he was prepared to try to convince the world that that had always been the "policy" to be enforced, but that for too long the "practice" differed from that "policy."

Bennett also appeared at first to be showing his coalition partners on the right that he has been willing to go where former Prime Minister Netanyahu had been unwilling to go, for in 2015 **Netanyahu assured King Abdullah of Jordan that "Israel will continue to enforce its longstanding policy: Muslims pray on the Temple Mount; non-Muslims visit the Temple Mount."**

Then it all came apart. First, Jordan and Egypt – two countries with which the Jewish state has peace treaties – bitterly criticized the change that would allow Jews to pray on the Mount. Second, there was internal pressure on Bennett from coalition partners, including Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, to walk back – or to "clarify" so as to undo – his remarks on Tisha B'Av. And that is what happened.

On Monday, there was another statement issued by his office to "clarify" what Prime Minister Bennett had said on Sunday. It was reported on here: "Bennett's office backpedals after he seems to say Jews can pray on Temple Mount,"