

Jan. 30, 2007

The Temple Mount

The Jewish connection to the Temple Mount dates back over 3,000 years and is rooted in tradition and history. When Abraham bound his son Isaac upon an altar as a sacrifice to God, he did so atop Mount Moriah, today's Temple Mount. It also is the site of both the First and Second Temples. The First Temple's Holy of Holies contained the original Ark of the Covenant, and both the First and Second Temples were the centers of Jewish religious and social life until the Second Temple's destruction by the Romans. Even today, Jews pray facing the Temple Mount and the Second Temple's only existing remnant, the Western Wall.

Palestinian Leaders May Dismiss The Temple Mount's Centrality To Jews, But Islamic Liturgy Does Not

After the destruction of the Second Temple, control of the Temple Mount passed through several conquering powers. It was during the early period of Muslim control that the gold-topped Dome of the Rock mosque was built on the site of the ancient Temples. The mosque was built on that spot precisely because it was the place where both of the great Jewish Temples had stood. The goal was to revive the holiness of the place dating back to the days of the First and Second Temples.

Palestinian officials have challenged the very existence of the Jewish Temples. At the Camp David summit in 2000, high-ranking Palestinian officials including Nabil Shaath, Saeb Erekat, and Abu Ala asserted that the "so-called temple" had never been there.

Unlike these Palestinian officials, the Koran – the holy book of Islam – is unequivocal about the existence and location of the First and Second Temples. Verse 34:13 describes Solomon's construction of the First Temple, while verse 17:7 recounts the destruction of the First and Second Temples. Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi addressed the question of the First Temple's existence as follows: "All believers in any of the Abrahamic faiths perforce must accept that it did."

Israel Has Ceded Day-To-Day Functions To Muslim Authorities On The Mount

While Israel maintains historical and religious attachment to its holiest site, it also recognizes that others too regard the Temple Mount as sacred, and ensures the right of all people to visit. "We do not claim exclusivity on all the holy sites," said Acting Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami before the U.N. General Assembly in September 2000. "Just as we do not question the sincerity of the sentiments of others toward their holy sites in Jerusalem, we expect that others will not question the Jewish people's deep, awesome attachment to Jerusalem and its holy sites."

Israel has the shared Temple Mount since 1967, when Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, upon reuniting the city of Jerusalem, permitted the Islamic authority, the Waqf, to continue its civil authority on the

Temple Mount. The Waqf oversees all day-to-day activity there. An Israeli presence is in place at the entrance to Temple Mount to ensure access for people of all religions, including visitors from nations such as Libya and Lebanon that do not even recognize Israel.

Strictly observant Jews do not visit the Temple Mount for fear of accidentally treading upon the Holy of Holies, which housed the original Ark of the Covenant, since its exact location on the Mount is unknown. Other Jews and non-Muslims do visit with the full knowledge and consent of the Waqf, respecting prayer schedules and dress codes.

Can The Palestinian Authority Be Entrusted To Protect Judaism's Sacred Sites?

Even if the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians resumes, many will have second thoughts about granting any additional authority to Palestinians over sacred Jewish sites. In 2000, the day before Yom Kippur, Joseph's Tomb, one of only two Jewish holy sites falling under complete Palestinian control, was ransacked and desecrated by a Palestinian mob. The Palestinians must demonstrate the same respect for Jewish holy sites that Israelis have demonstrated for the holy sites of all faiths if they seek to regain the trust and confidence that would underlie any future peace agreement.