

Israel

# IS THE TEMPLE MOUNT STILL OURS?

By Mordecai Rabinovitch

*An aerial view of the southeastern corner of the Temple Mount.  
The structure above is the El-Aqsa Mosque  
(refer to diagram on page 3).*

*Photo: Flash 90.*



It is well known that as a consequence of the Six Day War, sovereignty over the Temple Mount was restored to the Jewish people. It is also well known that almost immediately, the State of Israel went to great lengths to reassure the Moslem world of its peaceful intentions; not only was the Moslem *waqf* given de facto control of the Mount, but for all practical purposes Jewish entry and worship on the Temple Mount was prevented. Indeed, the latter prohibition was bolstered by rabbinic rulings declaring it forbidden by Jewish law to enter the entire Temple Mount compound.

What is less well known, however, is that for the last several years, the Arabs have been engaged in a determined effort to permanently change the status and character of the Temple Mount. In the course of this campaign, the laws of the State of Israel are flagrantly violat-

ed, sometimes under the cooperative eye of the Israeli police, with no consequences whatsoever. Thousands of tons of earth are dug from the Temple Mount and discarded in a local garbage dump, with no archeological supervision. Artifacts of immense significance are mutilated or destroyed, particularly if they hint of some ancient Jewish connection with the Mount. Moreover, much of this information is intentionally hidden from the media and the public, in a conspiracy of silence.

It is difficult to imagine that all this can happen to the holiest place on earth, with little more than an occasional whimper of public protest. Possibly with all the strife to which the citizens of Israel have been subjected over the last decade, their apathy can be understood. But the rabbis have already taught that neglect of the Temple is a national crime that can

bring national punishment.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps all we need is to stop this crime to improve our entire situation.

## The Modern Day Destruction of the Temple Mount<sup>2</sup>

Among the five calamities which befell the Jewish people on Tisha B'Av, the Mishnah *Ta'anit* 4:6 lists the "plowing of the city." Rambam (*Hilchot Ta'anit* 5:1) following Yerushalmi (*Ta'anit* 4:5) explains that the wicked Turnus Rufus plowed the Temple sanctuary and its surroundings. It is not likely that Turnus Rufus wanted to plant wheat at the site of the Temple ruins; most likely, he wanted to eradicate whatever Jewish remains had survived the destruction of the Temple. Evidently, this is also part of the destruction of the Temple, and warrants mourning on the part of the Jews.

In 1996, two ancient underground structures, in the southeastern corner of the Temple Mount were converted into a huge mosque. The two structures, dating from the Second Temple period, were Solomon's Stables and the Eastern Hulda Gate passageway, neither of which had ever previously been used as mosques. The new mosque extends over an area of one-and-a-half acres, and accommodates 10,000 worshippers; it is the largest mosque in the State of Israel. In 1997, the Arabs converted the Western Hulda Gate passageway, which is situated below the El-Aqsa mosque, into yet another

Thousands of tons of earth are dug from the Temple Mount and discarded in a local garbage dump, with no archeological supervision.



Photo courtesy of Dr. Dan Bahat

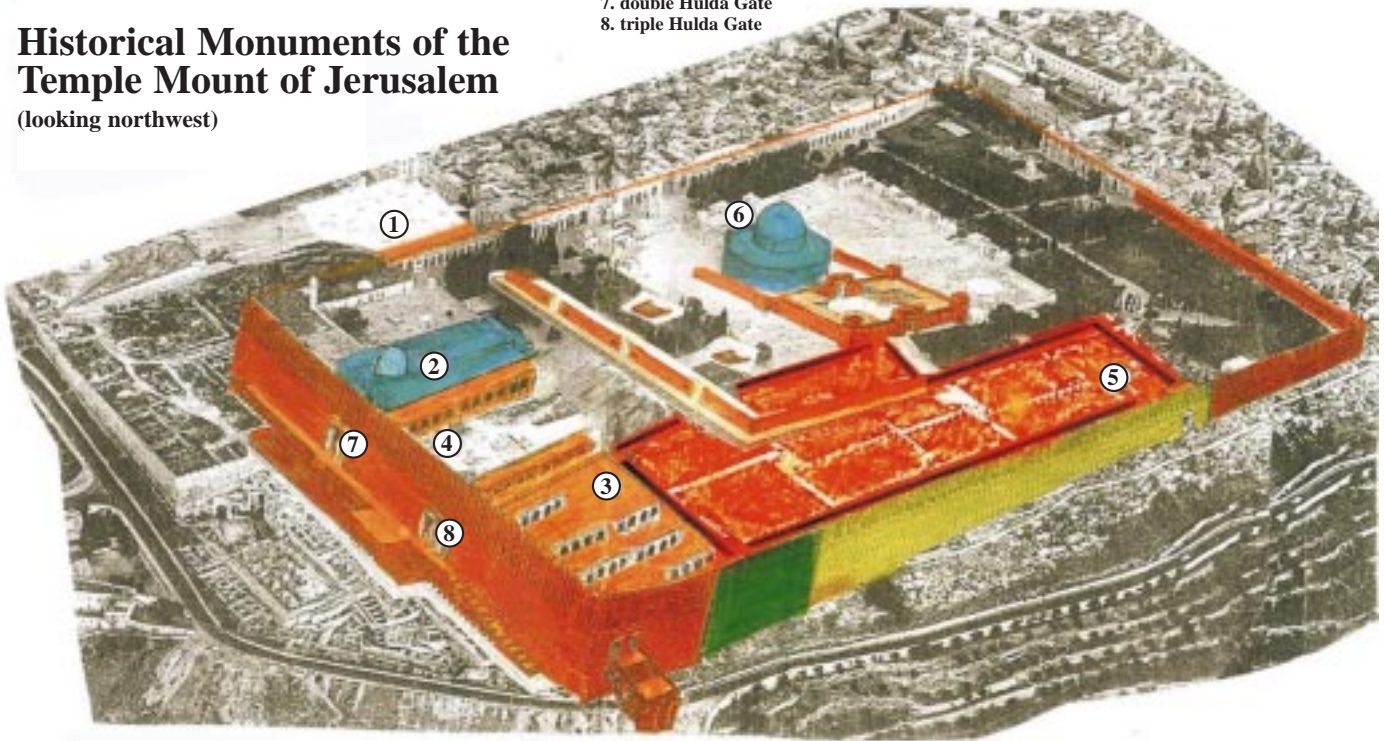
*Rabbi Rabinovitch serves as the co-coordinator for Vaad Rabbanei Yesha of the special committee established to deal with all matters relating to the Temple Mount. A resident of the Jewish settlement Kochav Yaacov, where he lives with his wife and eight children, he has authored numerous volumes of the Yad Avraham ArtScroll commentary on the Mishnah, as well as Mayim Rishonim (on tractate Yadayim) and Birkat Ha'Aretz (novellae relating to the order Zeraim).*

- Early Second Temple Period (6th century BCE)
- Hasmonean Period (2nd century BCE)
- Late Second Temple Period (20 BCE-70 CE)
- Islamic (7th century CE and later)
- Current Construction area

1. Western Wall Plaza
2. el-Aqsa Mosque
3. Stables of Solomon and Eastern Hulda Gate passageway  
(Underground structures, recently converted to a mosque)
4. Western Hulda Gate passageway  
(Underground structure, recently converted to a mosque)
5. Golden Gate
6. Dome of the Rock
7. double Hulda Gate
8. triple Hulda Gate

## Historical Monuments of the Temple Mount of Jerusalem

(looking northwest)



All rights reserved to Dr. Eilat Mazar

mosque, conveniently naming it the “original” El-Aqsa mosque.

In the meantime, the Arabs began to clamor that the huge mosque structure in Solomon’s Stables was unsafe, since there wasn’t a fire or emergency escape route. Instead of immediately declaring the building unfit for use, and closing it off, the Israeli authorities approved opening an emergency exit. The Arabs took complete advantage and in a 72-hour period, dug an enormous hole—as much as 36-foot deep in places—covering an area of 18,000-square feet. Thousands of tons of fill from this site were dumped unsupervised into the Kidron Valley.

In February and March of 2001, bulldozers razed an ancient structure built against the Eastern Wall of the Temple Mount enclosure in order to further enlarge the “emergency exit” from the mosque in Solomon’s Stables.

During all this time, building mate-

rials were taken into the Temple Mount with no supervision, and hundreds of square meters were paved with tiles and declared “open-air” (roofless) mosques.

More recently, it has become known that the Arabs plan to import “sacred” water from the ZamZam fountain in Mecca, and mix it with water on the Temple Mount. This will upgrade the sanctity of the Temple Mount in Moslem eyes, and make it a destination for pilgrimage almost as desirable as Mecca itself. In preparation for this, the Arabs are engaged in cleaning and clearing various underground vaults on the Mount.

### The Jews and the Temple Mount<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the miraculous redemption of Jerusalem in the Six Day War, leading rabbis representing the various factions of the observant community in Israel issued a ruling

prohibiting entry into any and all parts of the Temple Mount. To understand the basis for this ruling, it is necessary to understand that *halachah* divides the Temple Mount enclosure into two distinct zones: zone one, the Camp of the *Shechinah* (which is roughly equivalent to the site occupied by the Temple); and zone two, the Camp of the Levites (which is roughly the rest of the Temple Mount enclosure, outside the Temple). It is unanimously agreed that a *tamei met* is forbidden to enter the Camp of the *Shechinah*. Likewise, it is unanimously agreed that a *tamei met* is permitted to enter the Camp of the Levites. Since all persons today are presumed to have *tumah*, and since this *tumah* can only be removed through use of the ashes of the no longer extant *parah adumah* (red heifer), it is clear that entry into the Camp of the *Shechinah* is forbidden. At the same time, however, it would seem equally clear that



*tumat met* should not be an obstacle to entry into the Camp of the Levites.<sup>4</sup> Why then did the rabbis issue a stringent ruling?

**T**he answer is that the precise location of the Temple structure within the Temple Mount is not known. Consequently, the precise boundaries between the Camp of the *Shechinah* and the Camp of the Levites are not known. Since permitting entry into the Camp of the Levites runs the risk of violating the sanctity of the Camp of the *Shechinah*, the rabbis saw fit to issue a blanket prohibition, thereby insuring that nobody would inadvertently enter the forbidden zone.

To buttress this approach, it was pointed out that the Torah (Leviticus 19:30) demands especial reverence for the holy place. If a person willfully enters an area on the Mount that might be part of the forbidden Camp of the *Shechinah*, this is an act of irreverence that constitutes a violation of the command to be especially reverent; an especially reverent person would not risk even a questionable illegal entry. Consequently, entry ought to be forbidden even to areas with an uncertain status.<sup>5</sup>

The result of this approach has been that by and large, observant Jews who might have been expected to covet the Temple Mount more than any others, have completely avoided entering the area, and have thus effectively abandoned it to the Arab *waqf*. And as described earlier, this abandonment has led in recent years to an active Arab attempt to change the character of the Mount.

**N**otwithstanding the aforementioned rabbinic edict, during the approximately 40 years since the Six Day War, there have been observant Jews (some of them prominent rabbis) who have made a point of entering the Temple Mount. The halachic counterargument to that presented above is simply that even though the precise boundaries within the Camp of the *Shechinah*

are not yet known, there are nevertheless definable areas within the Mount that were certainly not part of this extraholy zone. Entry into those parts does not involve any irreverence to the Camp of the *Shechinah*, and therefore, after following the appropriate halachic directives,<sup>6</sup> entry into such areas should be permitted.<sup>7</sup> [Editor: However, it should be noted that most leading halachic authorities do not permit entry.]

In recent years, with the acceleration of the Arab attempt to convert the entire Temple Mount into an open-air mosque, the movement towards permitting entry into specified areas of the Mount has gained popularity in various rabbinic circles. The Counsel of Yesha Rabbis issued a lenient ruling in this vein, and even the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, while not veering from its earlier stringent ruling, has nonetheless appointed a committee to study and investigate the possibility of constructing a synagogue on the permitted area of the Temple Mount.

Undoubtedly, if more Jews were to enter the Mount, the ability of the Arabs to engage in illegal construction and destruction would be severely hampered. However, during the last year and a half, even those who follow the lenient rabbinic rulings have been denied access. Because for the last year and a half, the Arab *waqf* has prevented all non-Muslims from entering the Mount. Thus, the question arises: Given a situation in which most observant Jews are reluctant to enter the Temple Mount, and in which in fact, no Jews can enter, what can be done to stem the Arab conquest?

## Changing Our Focus

An unfortunate side effect of the perception of the Temple Mount as being off limits to Jews, is the widely quoted—but completely erroneous—depiction of the Western Wall as the “holiest” site in Judaism. If only to combat this blatant distortion of the truth, it would seem that all Jews, even those who are not prepared to enter the Mount, must do things that indi-

cate the true focus of our prayers.

A number of activities can be undertaken. Foremost among these is participation in the monthly circling of the Temple Mount. For several months now, following an ancient tradition, hundreds of Jews gather on the eve of Rosh Chodesh, and follow a route around the outside of the Temple Mount that includes stops opposite the various gates to the Mount, where ancient prayers, which were composed for this purpose, are recited. The more people participate in this activity, the clearer it will become that our yearning is for the Temple Mount and not for the Western Wall plaza.

**S**econdly, the area of the Hulda gates deserves special attention. There is still an underground passageway, between the double and the triple gates that has not been overtaken by the Arabs. According to *halachah*, such passageways are not endowed with sanctity, and it is permitted to enter them even without immersion in a *mikveh*.<sup>8</sup> If access to this passageway could be arranged from the outside, it would enable a Jewish presence within the walls of the Temple Mount, in a manner that would not raise any halachic objections. However, in order to gain such access, enormous public pressure on the Israeli government is needed. If enough letters were written to Police Minister Uzi Landau and Prime Minister Sharon about this, some progress might actually be made.

Even if the government authorities are not prepared to authorize such a move, one may still demand that areas outside the Temple Mount walls, on the southern and eastern sides, be designated as permanent prayer zones. As things stand at present, the southern wall Hulda Gates are part of an archeological park to which there is access only after paying an admission fee. We should demand that the area at the top of the ancient steps leading to the triple gates be designated as a prayer

