

## *Zionism, Israel, and the Middle East*

Doron Bar and Kobi Cohen-Hattab, *Kedushah be'eyn hase'arah: hakotel hama'aravi bein yahadut leiyisreeliyut 1967–2000* (Holiness in the Eye of the Storm: The Judaism and Israeliness of the Western Wall, 1967–2000). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2021. 261 pp.; 34 illus.

Every year on Memorial Day, the president of Israel stands in front of the giant stones of the Western Wall and gives a speech in which, invariably, there is mention of the ceremony's location. Often, the Wall is described as Judaism's holiest place. This, of course, is incorrect. The holiest of places is the Holy of Holies, located on the Temple Mount. This repeated mistake is the result of an interesting transformation in Jewish consciousness that developed as a result of the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War; whereas it was always understood that the holiness of Jerusalem is driven by the sanctity of the Temple Mount, ever since the Jewish takeover in 1967, the Western Wall beneath it has become, de facto, its holiest site, a place for Jewish pilgrimage that is also one of Israel's most visited tourist attractions.

*Kedushah be'eyn hase'arah*, by Doron Bar (of the Schechter Institute) and Kobi Cohen-Hattab (Bar-Ilan University), the Hebrew version of a book originally published by Brill in 2020,<sup>1</sup> examines how the Western Wall became both a national sacred place that functions as an Orthodox synagogue and a continuing focus of dispute between non-Orthodox and Orthodox streams of Judaism. The blurring between the Jewish and democratic characters of the state of Israel highlights the tension underlying the question of whether the Wall is primarily a religious site of pilgrimage and ritual or a national secular symbol. In their conclusion, Bar and Cohen-Hattab argue that the former view eventually won out, and that consequently, many non-Orthodox Israelis no longer feel a connection to the place.

The book begins with a historical overview of the Western Wall and how it came to be considered the holiest Jewish site in the absence of Jews having access to the Temple Mount, which became a Muslim site of worship in the ninth century. With the rise of Zionism, the Wall took on growing importance as a national symbol; during the British Mandate, Jewish and Palestinian national movements quarreled over ownership of the place. British Mandate authorities strictly enforced the status quo whereby the Wall was exclusively a Jewish worship site (though it lacked Orthodox markers such as physical division between male and female worshippers). During the period of Jordanian rule of the Old City, from 1948 up to the Six-Day War, Jewish access to the Wall was denied, and no Jewish prayer services took place.

In the wake of the war and Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, the question arose as to who would manage the Western Wall site and what kinds of archeological excavation would be carried out in nearby areas. Four days after the end of fighting, Israeli bulldozers demolished the Mugrabi neighborhood next to the Wall, thus creating the large plaza that exists today. The Ministry of Religious Affairs was given responsibility to administer the Western Wall plaza. Sometime later, the government approved the demolition of the Abu Saud quarter—several houses adjacent to the southern portion of the Wall. Archeological digs began, headed by Benjamin Mazar, and soon the religious authorities who controlled the site were clashing with Mazar and his team. Rabbinical authorities were concerned that major archeological findings would overshadow the religious significance of the Wall and that if major revelations were found, the plaza could no longer be used for religious services. Mazar, for his part, was trying to uncover Second Temple layers, which were hidden under archeological layers of other periods. In the meantime, workers from the Ministry of Religious Affairs started their own unsupervised digs in a shaft next to the Western Wall, in order to get closer to the Holy of Holies. What they uncovered was later further excavated and developed into the Western Wall tunnel, which in recent years has become a major tourist attraction.

With the demolition of the Muslim houses near the Wall, the plaza was divided between an open synagogue and an adjacent area meant for visits by the general public. The synagogue area was partitioned, with two thirds designated for men. A number of political authorities—in particular, Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek—lobbied for an architectural design for the plaza, and in 1972, the renowned architect Moshe Safdie was asked to come up with a plan. In 1974, Safdie published a proposal to divide the plaza into four different layers, in a shape of an amphitheater, where the lowest level would be for worshippers next to the wall. Orthodox politicians strongly opposed the idea and demanded to leave the plaza as it was. Eventually, all plans to reconstruct the Western Wall plaza were shelved, the plaza was paved, and no changes were made. The site was established as an Orthodox synagogue, and over time the fences between the genders and between the synagogue section and the general public section of the plaza were raised ever higher.

From the outset, Israeli authorities struggled with the question of whether the Wall was primarily a holy or a national site. The authors' conclusion is that the decision to let the Ministry of Religious Affairs handle its maintenance made the Wall, *de facto*, a holy site, with a lesser status as a symbolic national site (p. 143). The latter was manifest as the Wall became the backdrop both for the Memorial Day opening ceremony and for army swearing-in ceremonies (as far back as 1967). Over the years, its status as national symbol was enhanced; increasingly, it was the site of mass gatherings (for instance, demonstrations) and commemorative ceremonies for fallen soldiers that were marked not only by mourning but by expressions of Jewish renewal and power.

In 1988, the Women of the Wall movement was established with the goal of enabling women wearing *tallitot* (prayer shawls) both to pray by the Wall and to read from a Torah scroll. Many times, their efforts met with vocal and often violent reprisals (for instance, the throwing of chairs) on the part of Orthodox worshippers. Since then, non-Orthodox movements have been clashing with the Orthodox monopoly, mainly in the courts, to allow for a non-Orthodox section by the Wall where men and

women can pray together. In 1997, the Neeman Committee recommended that non-Orthodox services take place in Robinson's Arch, which is technically part of the Wall but not part of the plaza. The Conservative Movement accepted the proposal, while the Reform Movement and Women of the Wall rejected it. When the Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that non-Orthodox prayer at the Wall should not be allowed, Robinson's Arch became the locale for joint prayers.

Regrettably, the book does not address the close relationship between the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. It could have been very interesting had the authors discussed the mechanisms that brought the Wall to substitute for the Mount—the holiness of the latter descending, as it were, to the Wall below. In addition, the call to change the Orthodox character of the Western Wall plaza, as the non-Orthodox streams demand, cannot be disconnected from the demand to allow Jews to pray on the Temple Mount. Both cases relate to prayer rights, and both argue for changing the status quo. Another useful (missing) feature is a map of the plaza showing the location of the different digs; the addition of such a map would be helpful for readers not familiar with the site.

*Holiness in the Eye of the Storm* offers a compelling story of how the Western Wall was transformed into a major Israeli holy site, and how the battles for ownership over it continue to shape the religious and political landscape. The Wall stands as a significant Jewish and Israeli symbol, and this book masterfully illustrates the tension between the sacred and profane, the national and spiritual.

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## Note

1. The English version was published under the title *The Western Wall: The Dispute over Israel's Holiest Jewish Site, 1967–2000*.