

Prayer Denied: The Temple Mount Travesty

Shavuot (Pentecost) is one of the three biblical festivals at which the Jewish people would bring offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. We observe the anniversary of Moses receiving the Torah, and commemorate and reaffirm it as if we were there.

Among the traditions of Shavuot are studying Scripture all night, reading the book of Ruth, which prophesies the coming of the Messiah as the descendent of Ruth and Boaz (a Jew and a Gentile), and eating dairy meals because, until receiving the Torah, we did not have the rules of keeping kosher. Personally, there's nothing like a really good cheesecake to celebrate.

Recently, a law was proposed in Israel's Knesset (parliament) to make Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount legal. If you're not aware that it's illegal now (as is Christian or any non-Muslim prayer), please be in touch and I'll be happy to share some of the history as to how that's the case. Of course, it's shocking to think that of all places in the world, Jews and Christians would be denied the right to pray at this sacred site.

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a friend and veteran Israeli tour guide, Shalom Pollak, recounting an experience on the Temple Mount, reminding me how different things are now from when the Temple stood and making the current news more relevant. With his permission, this is a story that he correctly points out is something that needs to be shared.

"I know it is not hard news, but it happened to me just yesterday. I carefully thought out my preparations for the experience I was planning for my tourists on the Temple Mount. I went to the Mikva [ritual immersion] early that morning and

made sure to wear non-leather shoes as Jewish tradition instructs.

“Then I prepared my backpack, and even the contents of my pockets, making sure there was nothing that could incriminate me at the security check before entering the site. My tzitzit [ritual fringes] were well tucked into my pants. I wore a hat, and hid my kippa in a secret compartment (I can’t disclose where—who knows who might be reading this article.)

“As we approached the security check, I was confident that I would pass by as easily as the other non-Jewish visitors with me. I recognized Motti the Israeli police officer who has a reputation for his keen sense of smell: he can sniff out a Jew a mile away. He looked me over and I thought I had passed when I was discovered, outed. All my fault. I forgot to remove one obvious thing! I totally had forgotten about the small printed prayer, on behalf of Jonathan Pollard. I was caught red-handed, like a criminal! He demanded to know if I knew what this is. I said ‘yes, a prayer for our brother Jonathan Pollard.’ He frowned and declared that it is forbidden material to bring to the Temple Mount, and was being confiscated. I could pick it up later. Then I was warned not to pray or make any trouble.

“I asked myself how these Jews could allow themselves to be used as kapos—in the very heart of what is the most holy place to our people. How do they sleep at night? What do they tell their families when they come home from another days work? That they were able to confiscate so many prayer books and other religious articles, and keep Jews and Christians from uttering a word of prayer while on the Temple Mount?

“How shamed and shocked I felt, as the long line of visitors filed by. As I was being questioned and threatened by Motti, I couldn’t help but wonder if they realized that I just did not succeed in passing for one of them! Fifteen long minutes later, I was allowed to join my rather shaken tourists on the

Mount. But the best was yet to come.

“As we proceeded, I heard a chanting din coming from another part of the plaza. It sounded much like the chanting of Arab rioters that I have heard so often in the media.

“Coming towards me from the direction of the shouting was an elderly bearded man dressed in traditional ultra-Orthodox attire. He was accompanied by a few young boys. None were trying to hide their Jewish appearance, but had a distinct look of fear in their eyes after running the gauntlet of threats and taunts by the Arab crowd I had heard moments before.

“I greeted him warmly and he responded as one might greet a stranger on a deserted island. He and his group were shadowed by two policemen, making sure that they did not move their lips in prayer and thus arouse the sensibilities and ire of the Arabs. (I wondered how Arab boys playing soccer on this holy site did not upset their sensibilities.) Our meeting was immediately reported by the nervous police escort as the walkie talkies came alive.

“After we parted and proceeded on our way, I realized that we were being watched not only by the police but a large group of Arab youth who had marked us by our association with the bearded Jew.

“It was now our turn. They dogged us with chants of ‘Allah hu Akbar!’ [‘God is great’] The yelling of their God’s name spurred them on to increasing taunts, threats, and physically bumping us.

“The police were not there to stop this assault. After all, they were not offending anyone’s sensibilities by praying to the God of Israel.

“Once cleared of this threat, we proceeded alone. I was suddenly ashamed of myself. The elderly Jewish man and

children did not try to hide their identity or fool Motti at the entrance. They underwent the humiliations as Jews with pride, not hiding in the shadows of a false identity—certainly not in Jerusalem, at our holiest site in the world!

“I removed my hat and place my kippa on my head. I let my tzizit out to fly like a Jewish flag.

“The response was not long in coming. It was interesting to watch the reaction of the Arab men, women and small children—the hate in their eyes, the curses on their lips, the spit out of their mouths.

“My tourists were not Jewish. After this experience they said they were so very pleased to stand with the Jewish people, feeling that they had the opportunity to stand with good vs. evil on this day.

“No, this was not a newsworthy item, but for me and my tourists, it was unforgettable and will leave indelible reminders of who we are and why visiting the Temple Mount is so important.”

Indeed. Prayer on the Temple Mount is just one element of the wider movement to strip Judaism from Jerusalem. This undermines the foundation of both Judaism and Christianity.

If there was no Temple on the 35-acre manmade plateau, all the archeological proof notwithstanding, where was it that the Jewish people brought offerings for centuries? Why did Jews yearn for millennia to return to this place, and why do we still weep and pour out our hearts to God at the remnants of the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount? Why is it that Jerusalem is mentioned hundreds of times in Scripture, that Jews pray facing Jerusalem no matter where they are, yet not only is Jerusalem not mentioned once in the Quran, but Muslims turn their back on Jerusalem in prayer, facing Mecca?

If Jesus was to ascend to the Temple Mount today to worship,

as he did during the biblical festivals some 2,000 years ago, he'd likely be harassed, met by the chant "Allah hu Akbar," or have stones or Molotov cocktails thrown at him. When Pope Francis ascends to the Temple Mount this week, will he be met with jeers and rocks assaulting him? Will he have to hide or remove his cross?

This video captures some of the challenges we face together. It was created by an Orthodox Jewish rabbi and Christian pastor.

There's no place better for Jews and Christians stand together to affirm this reality than on the Temple Mount and no time better than now, when we relearn the messages of Ruth's unhesitant affirmation that "your people are my people and your God is my God."

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