

Temple Mount Access: Oh, the Irony

The recent visit of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Israel brought a lot of excitement. It was a week when I could not have been prouder to be a Canadian-Israeli.

Harper's support for Israel is both trailblazing and legendary. In fact, his support for both the Jewish people and the state of Israel is unwavering, and ultimately for one reason—"Because it's the right thing to do."

I doubt whether there is any other leader of comparable dignity and integrity in the entire Western world.

There was one unfortunate issue with Harper's visit, however, which is worthy of discussion in this week's column, and that is his visit to the holy sites in the Old City of Jerusalem. His visit to the *Kotel* (Western Wall) was supposed to be followed by ascending the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock, just above and beyond the wall. But the tour was canceled. Why? It's because two of the prime minister's bodyguards were Jews. (No, there is no typo here.)

How can it be that Muslims decide who gets to visit the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism? What's more, Jews (those who are eventually granted access to the Mount) are forbidden from praying on the Temple Mount! That's right. It is not true that a Jew is permitted to pray anywhere and everywhere in the State of Israel. It is against the law for Jews to pray on the Temple Mount.

Although Israel liberated the Temple Mount in 1967, the government has allowed the Jordanian Waqf (Islamic Trust) to retain control of the site. Since then, the Waqf does not cease to destroy any trace of Jewish history or identity there.

Not only is this policy an abomination of our political independence and sovereignty, but it also contradicts the entire purpose of the Temple and the Temple Mount. There is no better place in the entire state of Israel where Jews, Christians and Muslims should all be welcome to pray than at the Temple Mount. As the prophet Isaiah says:

“I will bring them to my holy mountain and I will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. I will accept their burnt offerings and sacrifices, because my Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Is. 56:7).

That being said, I would be remiss not to point out that there is a school of thought within Orthodox Judaism that forbids Jews from ascending the Temple Mount. This is not for any political consideration, but rather for a religious one. This is because nowadays, we are considered to be ritually impure. Today, we do not have the ability to fully purify ourselves. In Temple times, one could be purified with the ashes of the red heifer. Now, however, in the absence of a functioning temple, this ritual cannot be carried out.

Today, Jews are able to attain a certain level of purify by immersing themselves in a *mikva*, a ritual bath. Nevertheless, this purifies a person only to a certain point, not to the fullest extent. Complete purity, which is required in order to enter the holier areas of the Temple Mount, can be attainable only with the arrival of the Messiah and the rebuilding of the Temple.

According to all authorities of Jewish law, a *mikva* does sufficiently purify a person for ascension to the outer areas of the Temple Mount. The question is: Do we know exactly where on the Temple Mount the holier areas—where we may not enter—was located? According to one line of thought, the answer to that is yes: Due to compelling archaeological evidence, we do know where the holiest areas, including the Holy of Holies, were situated. At the very least, we know

where the holier areas are *not* situated. Therefore, the outer areas of the Temple Mount may be visited after immersing in a *mikva*.

Throughout the ages, rabbinic scholars had personally ascended the Temple Mount, including the 11th-century famous Torah authority, philosopher and physician Maimonides. Those who ascend nowadays follow his ruling.

Other Torah scholars, of which there are many, feel that since the transgression for even accidentally entering the area where the Holy of Holies had once stood is so severe, we should not take any risk. As such, they rule that all ascent to the Temple Mount is forbidden. This is also the ruling of the chief rabbinate of the state of Israel.

As pointed out by Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky in an article posted on the Orthodox Union website, "Advocates [for visiting the Temple Mount] insist on extreme caution and intense reverence, but see a value in establishing a connection between the Jewish people and the awesome holiness of Judaism's most sanctified site."

So, where does that leave Stephen Harper, the prime minister of Canada? Well, he is not Jewish and therefore not subject to Judaism's rules of purity and impurity. As such, he is welcome to tour the Temple Mount anytime. We look forward to his return.

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