



A New Vision for God's Holy Mountain

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Some three and a half millennia ago, Jews, Christians and Muslims believe, Abraham cast off the idols his father prayed to and devoted himself to the worship of God alone. Abraham stood fast by his devotion even when God asked him to sacrifice his son, and although God ultimately rejected the very idea of human sacrifice, Abraham's devotion would be held up as an exemplar for all who would walk in his path. According to Jewish tradition, the first and second Temples were built on the spot where Abraham performed his ultimate act of submission to God.

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Plaza, Dome of the Rock; photo, Cetta Kenney

According to Muslim tradition, it is where Mohammad ascended to heaven, after praying with Abraham, Moses and Jesus, and today it is the site of the

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Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It is of course also not far from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Chapel of the Ascension and many other Christian holy sites.

Ironically, instead of reflecting the three religions' shared belief in the supreme moral reign of the One God, the Temple Mount (al Haram al Sharif in Arabic) has become the ultimate symbol of strife and contention among believers. Even before the destruction of the Second Temple by the Roman general Titus in the year 70, its sanctity was tarnished by deadly infighting between Jews, and in the Middle Ages

it played a role in the bloody Crusader wars. In modern times, the Camp David negotiations of 2000 broke down in part over the issue of the Temple Mount, and the second intifada that followed was sparked by a violent incident there. The

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very mention of the site has become a rallying cry for millions – Jews, Muslims and even some Christians -- in what has been termed a "War of Civilizations".

In the intractable entanglement of today's Middle Eastern political reality, perhaps one of the only things everyone agrees upon is the unsolvable nature of the Temple Mount problem. Each religion seems to believe that it alone will ultimately survive as the expression of absolute truth, and that the structures on the Temple Mount will reflect its triumph. According to a commonly held Islamic doctrine, any attempt to give expression to other faiths at *al Haram al Sharif* is considered offensive. Jews, for their part – though religiously forbidden to rebuild the Temple today – pray daily for the ultimate restoration of the Temple on the very same spot where the Dome of the Rock now stands, implying, according to conventional belief, that the latter will someday cease to exist. Even some Christians believe that

Jesus will ultimately appear only after the structures on the Temple Mount are destroyed in a terrible war between Jews and Muslims. Seen in this light, it is quite understandable that political leaders and peace activists have tried to sidestep the issue. But can such a central place really be ignored? And even more importantly, doesn't such a holy place have more to offer?

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God's Holy Mountain, an independent study project under the auspices of the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) in Jerusalem, proposes that religious tradition can offer a new and positive vision for the Temple Mount. A group of observant Jews, who initiated the project and conducted several years of subsequent research, have found that there is room in even the most stringent Jewish legal discourse for a vision of a rebuilt Temple standing in peaceful proximity to the existing Muslim and Christian shrines. A revisiting of traditional Jewish sources on the issue, the group further asserts, could pave the way for a radical transformation of public perception of the Temple Mount, from a place of contention to "God's Holy Mountain", thus fulfilling Zechariah's

prophecy that "On that day God will be one and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9).

Founded in 2001, the IEA believes that religion must be a leading force in promoting mutual understanding, respect and trust between peoples, and not an obstacle to peace. As such, it works to promote peace and coexistence in the Middle East through interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural study. Comprised of Jews, Muslims, Christians and people of other faiths, this apolitical, grassroots organization maintains dozens of interfaith groups, as well as regular Palestinian-Israeli encounters. Rather than sticking to less contentious topics – such as the commandment to respect one's elders or love one's neighbor – participants are encouraged to explore their differences frankly and respectfully. (For more information on the IEA see www.interfaith-encounter.org).

Some ninety people attended the project's launching on June 18, 2009, preceded by an interfaith panel. Many of the attendants came in traditional garb: Jewish skull caps, colorful dresses and scarves, red and white Islamic cleric hats, Jewish ultra-orthodox black suits, white Druze head coverings, and priestly collars could all be seen in the audience. People came from all over Israel, and one Catholic priest even announced that he had made a special trip from his home town in Romania to attend the launching event.

Immediately before the project launch, the IEA held a panel discussion on, "On that Day God will be One: an Interfaith Perspective."

Participants included Sheikh Abdullah Nimar Darwish, founder of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Rabbi Yosef Azran Chief Rabbi of Rishon Le'Zion and head of religious Jewish court in Paris, Sheikh Abed Alsalam Manasra, Head of the Salam Qadiri Sufi Order; Fr. Dr. David M. Neuhaus, S.J., Patriarchal Vicar of the Hebrew Speaking Catholic Communities in Israel and Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, Head of Petah Tivah Hesder Yeshiva.

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The panel opened with a blessing from the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, She'ar Yashuv Cohen, read by IEA's Executive Director, Yehuda Stolov, calling for Muslims, Christians and Jews to unite in prayer for the fulfillment of the prophecy: They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

As panel moderator Yair Sheleg, a senior researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, explained, the choice to focus on the issue of the End of Days was meant to urge participants to go beyond the usual interreligious search for shared values. Instead of concentrating on temporary compromise between religions in today's imperfect world – an admirable

endeavor in its own right – the panel sought to grapple with the question of whether participants could truly and fully accept each other's faiths in a perfect world, "On that day". Did the speakers believe that people of other faiths would ultimately need to chose between converting and perishing, or would different religions continue to coexist in the End of Days? Moreover, could the recognition of the "One God" common to all monotheistic faiths, be itself the very fulfillment of the prophecy of "His name [being] One"?

Panel participants stressed that there

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are indeed basic issues they could not agree upon. Thus both Jews and Muslims said they could not envision a world in which they would accept any form of trinity, or the divinity of Jesus, and Jews stressed they could not accept Jesus as messiah either. However all present were adamant about the positive nature of religious diversity not only in the present, but for eternity. This was put most succinctly by Fr. Dr. Neuhaus: "It seems likely we won't all be the same at the End of Days, and personally that makes me very happy, because if we were all clones, the world would be a pretty boring place." Sheikh Manasra, the first of the speakers, emphasized that Islam has no problem with the notion of a plural-

ity of faiths at the End of Days, assuming they recognize the unity of God, since Islam already recognizes Moses and Jesus as true prophets. "At the End of Days there will not be an atomic war. There will be peace. A prophet will come, or the King Messiah – and I can tell you he will be an Israelite – and as a prophet he will judge the world justly; not according to Jewish, Christian or Muslim values, but according to wholesome perfection. This is the true meaning of the word Islam".

Rabbi Azran quoted the 10th century Jewish rabbi and philosopher, Sa'adiah Ga'on, who said "the Ishmaelite [i.e. Muslim] belief in God's unity is most perfect." "In other words," Rabbi Azran continued, "the well known Arabic proclamation 'Allahu Akbar' is not a murderous cry, but rather the true expression of the unity of God." Rabbi Azran pointed out that according to Jewish law, Islam is not idolatrous religion, and so a Jew can pray in a mosque, as he himself had done several times. Regarding religious practice at the End of Days, Rabbi Azran noted that only Jews are obliged to keep all 613 commandments of the Torah. According to Judaism, non-Jews must believe in the One God, but they need not observe anything beyond several universal moral commandments. At the End of Days, non-Jews and Jews alike would know God, but Jews would continue to fulfill the 613 commandments, while non-Jews could continue to follow their religious practices.

There could scarcely have been a better introduction to the launching event, than the honest openness with

which these religious leaders approached the question of their ideal relationships with one another's faiths. The audience was invited to a reception in honor of the event, where they could listen to multicultural harp music and admire an exquisite representation of the project's vision by painter Oscar (Asher) Frohlich.

interfaith ensemble; a group of children spontaneously forms a circle and begins to dance. As foreseen by Ezekiel, a stream flows from one of the Temple's gates, implying perhaps that the plateau itself has also expanded as he prophesied. The Temple Mount has shed all remnant of destruction and conflict and is once again is a joyous place, in which all



A Normal Future Day; original art, Asher Frohlich

The painting depicts a normal future day on the Temple Mount. Jews, Muslims and Christians, entering through the Gate of Mercy, are waiting for services to begin at the Temple, the Al Aqsa Mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher respectively. Friends of all three faiths, from places around the world, greet each other warmly, while some gather around an informal musical

worship in their respective holy shrines, while bearing witness to the same One God, supreme moral creator of all. The painting gives the clear feeling that if we asked the dancing children how this peaceful reality came about after generations of conflict, they would not have the slightest idea what we were talking about; to them this would simply be a natural reality.

As idyllic as this picture is, many Jews and Muslims, thinking in traditionally conventional terms, might consider it outrageous. However, as demonstrated by the research conducted by project Director Yoav Frankel, recently published in *Tehumin*, a leading Jewish law journal in Israel, traditional religious and even legal thinking can be surprisingly innovative. Starting out from the Jewish

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legal assumption that prophets after Moses may not make prophetic claims regarding Jewish law, Frankel explored the question of whether a prophet (one deemed authentic by contemporaneous sages) would have the authority to proclaim that the Temple should be built in a place other than over the Rock of Foundation. One would expect that in accordance with the general rule, such a prophet would automatically be considered a false prophet (previous authentication notwithstanding), and that his misdeeds would be punishable by death. However, as Frankel shows, a long line of sages, basing themselves on the Talmud, have ruled that prophets have extraordinary authority in all matters pertaining to the Temple. According to the Talmud,

it was a prophet who determined where the altar of the Second Temple should stand, and according to authorities such as Rabbi Moshe Sofer of the 18th century, Ezekiel could describe the future Temple as so different from any that existed previously, because of his special authority in Temple related matters.

a Jewish Temple in peaceful proximity to Al Aqsa Mosque and nearby Christian shrines would be in keeping with the Jewish view of the relationship between the faiths, as expressed by Maimonides:

A prophecy that allowed the Temple to be built next to, rather than in place of, other shrines, would actually be in keeping with the universal nature Jewish sources have always ascribed to the Temple. In his dedication of the First Temple, King Solomon asked God to accept the prayer of strangers, who would come to the Temple from afar. Similarly, the prophets speak of "God's Holy Mountain" as a house of prayer for all peoples at the End of Days. The Talmud goes out of its way to allow for non-Jewish offerings at the Temple, and historical sources record that such offerings were indeed accepted in Second Temple times. Moreover, a Jewish Temple in peaceful proximity to Al Aqsa Mosque and nearby Christian shrines would be in keeping with the Jewish view of the relationship between the faiths, as expressed by Maimonides: And



Top to Bottom: Western Wall, Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Dome of the Rock; photos, Cetta Kenney

all these occurrences of Jesus of Nazareth and this Ishmaelite who came after him [Muhammad] – are only meant to pave the way for the Messiah King, and to mend the entire world so that all worship him together, as it is written: "For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve Him with one consent" (Zephaniah 3:9).

Interestingly, Theodore Herzl, the preeminent secular Zionist, detailed the same vision for a rebuilt Temple in peaceful proximity to Islamic and Christian shrines on what he called "the holy region of mankind."

Before the project was launched, it was presented to dozens of rabbis and other religious leaders. Significantly, not one of the rabbis denied the validity of the legal argument presented by Frankel, and many rabbis and Muslims expressed support for continued study and discussion of the topic.

Not that the project doesn't raise some objections. As Sheikh Nimar-Darwish put it when speaking in the panel, "If in the End of Days the Messiah says God told him to build the Temple here, no one will disobey his command. But tell me, where is this messiah that says: 'I have come in the name of God and want to build a synagogue or Temple next to Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock'?! As long as

we have not arrived at the time of the messiah, or the [Muslim] al-mahdi... the status quo in Jerusalem must not be changed, because this could lead to a lot of bloodshed... However if this [i.e. building the Temple] is the will of the messiah, I will bring the stones on my shoulders!"

The goal of "God's Holy Mountain" is not to create an architectural blueprint for a new Temple Mount complex, nor to provide a political plan of action. Rather, it is an invitation to people of faith to reexamine their traditions in a positive light and find innovative ways to fulfill God's original purpose for the Temple, to manifest Him to the world. It is a long-term process that still requires a great deal of study, thought and, above all, dialogue. We are not prophets and we cannot predict the turns that history might take in the future. However, a vision of the future that allows Jewish and Muslim shrines to stand side by side around the site of Abraham's devotion has tremendous potential to help bring us closer together today and hasten the time when "He will be One and His Name One".

For more information and to join the discussion please see www.godsholymountain.org, or write to Ohr Margalit, ohr@interfaith-encounter.org.