The Role of the Temple Mount Faithful Movement in Changing Messianic Religious Zionists’ Attitude toward the Temple Mount

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The Temple Mount is the most sacred site of Judaism and the third most sacred site of Islam, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The sacred nature of the site has made it one of the main foci of tension and friction in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The year 1996 marked an important milestone in the world of religious Zionism. The Committee of Yesha Rabbis (a group of Orthodox rabbis from the settlements in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip) ruled that Jews are permitted and even encouraged to enter the Temple Mount. The committee imposed restrictions regarding specific areas where entry is permitted and urged visitors to undertake special ritual purification before doing so. Nevertheless, every rabbi was encouraged “to go up [to the Temple Mount] himself, and to guide his congregants on how to do so in accordance with all the constrictions of Halacha (Jewish religious law).” Since 2003, when the Temple Mount was reopened to Jewish visitors after a three-year closure due to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this ruling has been put into practice. Every day, dozens if not hundreds of Jews, mainly students from the nationalist yeshivas, visit the Temple Mount and engage in solitary prayer. According to Israel Police records, some 25,000 religious Zionist Jews visited the mount in 2017.

The ruling by the Committee of Yesha Rabbis is contrary to long-standing religious edicts, to the position of the leaders of the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, to the position of the Chief Rabbinate, and to the opinion of the majority of Haredi rabbis. All of these authorities argue that it is a grave religious transgression for Jews to enter the Temple Mount. According to halacha, all Jews are considered to be impure due to contact with the dead, since they have come into contact with deceased persons or with others who have at some point been in such contact. During the temple period (536 BCE–70 CE), Jews were cleansed from the impurity of the dead by virtue of the “sin water”—the ashes of the red heifer mixed in water. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, red heifers have not been available. Moreover, the precise dimensions
of the temple have been lost, including the location of the Kodesh Kodashim [Holy of Holies]—the most sacred site—identified as the dwelling place of the Shechina, the Divine Presence. Entry into this section was absolutely prohibited with the exception of the high priest (who was cleansed with the sin water before performing his sacred duties) on the Day of Atonement.

Since the location of the Second Temple is no longer known and since red heifers are unavailable, it was ruled that Jews are prohibited from entering the entire Temple Mount area even though this area is known to be bigger than that of the temple itself. Accordingly, a person who enters the Temple Mount area incurs the (theoretical) penalty of *karet* [the divinely imposed death penalty]. This position that prohibits Jews from entering the Temple Mount has been supported in numerous halachic rulings.4

Until the Six-Day War (June 1967), when Israel had conquered the site, the question of Jews entering the Temple Mount was purely theoretical. Since the thirteenth century, Jews had not on the whole entered the Temple Mount both because of the rabbinical prohibition and because those controlling the site, and particularly the Muslim authorities, did not permit Jews to enter. From the thirteenth century, the Muslim authorities ruled that non-Muslims were not allowed to enter the site, and the death penalty was enacted for disobeying the rule.5

After the Arab-Israeli War (1948) the Temple Mount was left under Jordanian control, and Jews were not allowed to enter the old city of Jerusalem. The status of the site changed only after it was taken by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in June 1967.

Since the 1967 war, Israeli governments have always sought to mitigate the tension raised by this subject, allowing the Muslim *waqf* to maintain its control of the Temple Mount. The status quo arrangement that was introduced by Israeli security minister Moshe Dayan following the occupation of the holy sites, who stated that the Temple Mount would continue to serve as a Muslim place of prayer, while the Western Wall would be a Jewish place of prayer. Under this arrangement, Jews and Christians are permitted to visit the site. As a security measure, the Israeli government has agreed to enforce a ban on non-Muslim prayer on the site. In 1968, the Israeli Supreme Court decided not to intervene in the question of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, ruling that this was a political rather than a judicial matter. The court permitted the Israel Police to establish procedures for entry into the Temple Mount on the basis of security considerations.6
Since the occupation of the Temple Mount by IDF troops in the Six-Day War, however, a number of groups within Israeli society have demanded a change in the passive approach of the Jewish religious establishment and the Israeli government on the question of the site. These groups advocate action to end Muslim control of the site and to start a process that will lead to the establishment of the Third Temple. The restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the rebuilding of the temple are the zenith of Jewish messianic expectations. The return of the Jews to their homeland with the rise of the Zionist movement, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the conquest of the Temple Mount in the Six-Day War of 1967 opened speculation for the possibility of rebuilding the temple.

The Temple Mount Faithful movement is the oldest of the groups devoted to the Temple Mount and the temple. Gershon Salomon, the leader of the movement, has an international reputation due to his indubitable rhetorical capabilities that have kept his actions on the public agenda over a period of almost four decades. The Temple Mount Faithful was the first significant group to demand the removal of the mosques from the mount and the transformation of the mount into a Jewish center, and the movement drew together most of the activists in this field. Its supporters came from the maximalist circles of the Movement for the Greater Land of Israel, including veterans of the Lechi and Etzel underground movements in the preindependence period, and also from adherents of the messianic Religious Right. Over time, however, the movement lost its prestige, and a number of key activists left and founded other frameworks that gradually grew in strength, such as the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple, which was created from the religious faction in the Temple Mount Faithful. Today, only a handful of activists remain in the Temple Mount Faithful, attending the regular demonstrations held several times a year. This movement, which is not specifically Orthodox in character, seems to have lost its appeal and to have been reduced to a marginal status among the Temple Mount groups.

Although much of Salomon’s power and prestige has declined, there is a significance to his movement and the ideas it has manifested over time. In this essay, I examine the impact of the Temple Mount Faithful on the changing attitudes of the messianic religious Zionist movement regarding the Temple Mount. In order to understand the magnitude of change among religious Zionists over the question of the Temple Mount, I start my discussion with the opinions that prohibited Jewish presence on the Temple Mount.
THE ZIONIST ORTHODOX ESTABLISHMENT
AND THE TEMPLE MOUNT DILEMMA

THE CHIEF RABBINATE

After the Six-Day War in June 1967 and the occupation of the Temple Mount under Israeli sovereignty, the Chief Rabbinate decided to continue the passive tradition on the question of the Temple Mount. In other words, Jews were to confine themselves to the reintroduction of prayers at the Western Wall.

Just a few hours after the Temple Mount came under the control of the Israeli forces on June 8, Israel Radio issued the warning by the Chief Rabbinate not to enter the site. At the first convention of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate after the war, Chief Rabbis Nissim and Unterman continued to argue that Jews must not be permitted to enter the site.

The rabbinate’s announcement was drafted by Rabbi Bezalel Jolti, who was invited to the meeting even though he was not a member of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate: “Since the sanctity of the site has never ended, it is forbidden to enter the Temple Mount until the Temple is built.”

The minority position in the meeting was represented by Rabbi Chaim David Halevy, then rabbi of Rishon Lezion, who proposed that the question of entering the Temple Mount be left to the local rabbis, who would issue their edict to those following their authority. Shaul Israeli (a prominent teacher at Mercaz Harav Yeshiva) sought to prepare a map identifying the permitted areas on the Temple Mount. Despite the minority position, the Council of the Chief Rabbinate ruled that the entire Temple Mount area was out of bounds. Yitzhak Abuhatzeira, rabbi of Ramle, was the first rabbi to demand that warning signs be placed at the entrance to the site forbidding Jews to enter.

MERKAZ HARAZ YESHIVA AND THE TEMPLE MOUNT

The Six-Day War (June 1967) created a new reality in the Middle East. In the course of the war, Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. The Israeli victory in the war created fervent hope among the younger generation of religious Zionists. The dominant school within this population, the graduates of Mercaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook, propagated the perception that the Israeli victory in this war reflected God’s will to redeem His people. The postwar era therefore represented a higher stage in the process of redemption. The Gush Emunim mass settlement movement, established in
1974 and led by the graduates of the yeshiva, aimed to settle the territories occupied by the IDF in order to establish facts on the ground and to settle the biblical Land of Israel with Jews. They saw settlement as a manifestation of God’s will to redeem His people.

On the issue of the Temple Mount, however, Rabbi Kook continued to view the Temple Mount as out of bounds. Kook signed the declaration issued by the Chief Rabbinate immediately after the occupation of the site, prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount.

Indeed, Kook felt compelled to oppose in the fiercest possible terms the idea of Jews entering the Temple Mount area in order to pray. He ruled that the sanctity of the Temple Mount was so great that it was prohibited even to place one’s fingers inside the cracks in the Western Wall. Kook fiercely opposed the demand to undertake archaeological excavations on the Temple Mount, since it “is surrounded by a wall. We do not pass this wall and we have no need for [the site] to be studied.”

It should be emphasized that the principled position of Kook against Jews entering the Temple Mount was not intended to weaken the demand for Israel to demonstrate its sovereignty on the site. He argued that the Jewish people enjoyed “property ownership” of the area of the Temple Mount. However, he explained that the State of Israel had not yet attained a spiritual level permitting Jews to enter the area of Mt. Moriah. Only after the state has been built in the spirit of the Torah, in both the practical and spiritual realms, he said, would it be possible to enter the holy site.

OPPOSITION TO THE MAINSTREAM:
RABBI SHLOMO GOREN

Despite the firm ruling of the assembly of the Chief Rabbinate prohibiting entry to the Temple Mount, there have been chief rabbis who, in a personal capacity, have permitted Jews to enter. Most famous among them was Rabbi Shlomo Goren.

Goren was chief rabbi of the IDF at the time of the Six-Day War. This biographical fact constitutes a key point in the development of his personal approach and his vigorous campaign to open up the Temple Mount. After the war, he initiated the mapping of the site by soldiers from the Engineering Corps in order to identify areas prohibited to Jews, since the Temple Mount site of today is considerably and indisputably larger than the original dimensions of the First and Second Temples. When he realized that his initial
expectation that the Islamic presence would be removed would not materialize and that the mosques were to remain, Goren sent a confidential memorandum to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol demanding that entry to the Temple Mount be closed to both Jews and Gentiles, but this was rejected.

After the war, Goren established his office on the Temple Mount. On Tisha B’Av (a day of mourning to commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples), the rabbi and a group of his supporters brought a Torah scroll, an ark, and prayer benches to the Temple Mount, where they prayed Mincha [the afternoon service]. After the prayer, Goren announced that he would also hold Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) prayers on the site. His plans were thwarted by the intervention of Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin.¹¹

In 1972, Goren was appointed the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel. In this capacity, he attempted to change the position of the Chief Rabbinate on the subject of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount. He initiated a discussion in the plenum of the rabbinate and at two sessions in March 1976 lectured at length on his research. Despite his vigorous demand, the council refrained from making any changes to its original decision while nonetheless urging Goren to publish his studies. They later added that when his recommendations were presented in writing, it would be possible to convene a broader forum than the Council of the Chief Rabbinate. This served as a pretext for removing the issue from the agenda.¹² At the same time, Goren’s efforts in the political arena to persuade Prime Minister Menachem Begin to ease the government position regarding Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount also failed.¹³

In the absence of political and rabbinical support, Goren was unable to issue an official and public permit allowing entry to the Temple Mount. Moreover, the question of the entry of women was one of the aspects that deterred him from issuing an independent declaration opening the Temple Mount to all Jews. Goren believed that women must not be permitted to enter the Temple Mount area due to the question of ritual impurity and was afraid that a sweeping permit for Jews to enter would also result in women entering the site.¹⁴

TEMPLE MOUNT FAITHFUL

Gershon Salomon is the founder and unchallenged leader of the Temple Mount Faithful movement. He comes from a well-known family of rabbis who settled in Jerusalem in 1811 out of messianic motives. He is also descended from Yoel Moshe Salomon, one of the founders of Petach Tikva and one of the
earliest Zionist pioneers in Palestine. In 1958 as the commander of an infantry unit, Salomon was involved in combat action on the Golan Heights. During the course of the fighting an IDF tank run over him, causing severe injury to his legs. After spending a year in the hospital he managed to recuperate, and after a long struggle with the military authorities he returned to his previous unit and served as an operations officer. Salomon never completely recovered from the injury and suffers from a severe limp. Despite his injury, Salomon marches on demonstrations alongside the other members of his movement, although this is visibly a strain for him. As a soldier, he also participated in the battle for Jerusalem in the Six-Day War.

The connection between Salomon’s disability and his activities in the Temple Mount Faithful is explicit and direct. Salomon claims to have experienced divine revelation on the day he was injured. When the Syrian soldiers came to kill the IDF soldiers lying in the field, they suddenly fled in fear after thousands of angels circled above him, protecting his injured body. Since then, he reports, he has become an agent of God bearing the message of the
reconstruction of the temple. Salomon states that since this event he has regularly experienced divine revelation and that his ongoing efforts for the Temple Mount are the product of this direct connection.  

Salomon established the Temple Mount Faithful movement at the end of the 1960s. The movement is essentially one of protest, and the activities are arranged according to the Hebrew calendar. In the period leading up to the Jewish festivals—and particularly festivals that have a connection with the ancient rituals on the Temple Mount, such as the three pilgrim festivals, Hanukkah, and Tisha B’Av—a demonstration takes place in the form of a pilgrimage including elements from the rituals performed on the Temple Mount as related in Jewish tradition. At the festival of Sukkot [Tabernacles], for example, the procession passes through the Siloam tunnel in order to create a symbolic water-related element recalling the ritual pouring of water and the joy of the water libation ceremony. At Hanukkah the marchers carry torches, and at Shavuot [Pentecost] the first harvest offerings are brought to the mount. Similar demonstrations also take place on Zionist occasions such as the Memorial Day for Fallen IDF Soldiers and Jerusalem Day.

Having participated in several of these demonstrations, I can report that they have a uniform character. The event effectively begins a few days before the march, when Salomon asks the Israel Police for permission to hold a prayer service on the Temple Mount on the given date. After receiving a negative response, as is invariably the case, Salomon petitions the High Court of Justice. The judicial ruling that has become established is that the court permits the Temple Mount Faithful to enter the site but not to pray there. Entry is conditioned on the professional opinion and discretion of the Israel Police, which in practice invariably determines that such entry is not to be permitted due to the security situation. This situation has its origins in the status quo arrangement introduced by Moshe Dayan following the occupation of the holy sites, which stated that the Temple Mount would continue to serve as a Muslim place of prayer, while the Western Wall would be a Jewish place of prayer.

The police always reject Salomon’s requests to enter the Temple Mount. Accordingly, the demonstrative procession of the Temple Mount Faithful stops at the entrance to the Temple Mount, on the embankment leading up to the Mograbi Gate. The following is a description of one such procession that takes place every year at Hanukkah. The Temple Mount Faithful gather in Jerusalem and travel together to the tombs of the Maccabees near Modi’in. This location was chosen due to the connection between the festival and the movement’s demand to end the Muslim administration on the Temple Mount. Salomon
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Gershon Salomon, head of Temple Mount Faithful, wearing a bag as an act of mourning for the destruction of the Temple on the 9th day of Av. The picture was taken at the Western Wall plaza. National Photo Collection, Moshe Milner photographer.

delivers a speech by the side of the Maccabean tombs reviewing the history of the Hasmonean family, which rebelled against the Greeks and purified the Temple Mount from idol worship—a process he compares to modern-day reality, urging the prime minister of Israel to learn the lesson of Hanukkah and remove Islam from Mount Moriah. A symbolic torch race to Jerusalem the takes place; a number of individuals begin to run in the direction of Jerusalem, carrying torches, and after covering a certain distance they board busses and continue their journey to the capital.

After arriving at the Jaffa Gate at the entrance to the Old City, the group carries signs, flags, and a symbolic model made from cardboard and intended to denigrate the emblems of Palestinian nationhood (such as a coffin for Yasser Arafat or a Palestine Liberation Organization flag). The group marches toward the plaza inside Jaffa Gate so as to enable the press photographers to record the procession. Here Salomon stops and makes a speech (in Hebrew followed
by English) demanding the removal of the Muslims from the Temple Mount. He also addresses current affairs in Israel, emphasizing his hawkish views on various issues relating to Israel and the Arab world. He then proceeds to take the cardboard model and tear it to shreds, sometimes also burning it, as the media cameras flash away. Salomon then holds an impromptu press conference, answering questions from the reporters.

The group then continues toward the entrance to the Temple Mount, where it is stopped at the Mograbi Gate by dozens, if not hundreds, of police officers. There is a glaring discrepancy between the number of demonstrators, which is sometimes as few as twenty individuals, and the number of police personnel securing the demonstration, which is sometimes as high as three hundred. Salomon again makes a speech, quoting extensively from the Bible. The pilgrimage ends at the gates of the Temple Mount with a sense of pain and disappointment. Salomon urges the government to open the mount and bemoans what he considers its weak and defeatist behavior. The event ends with “Hatikva,” the Israeli national anthem, and with words of thanks to the Israel Police for protecting the demonstration.

The application for police permission, followed by the petition to the High Court of Justice, as well as the words of thanks to the police and the singing of “Hatikva” all reflect that Salomon is essentially a Zionist. He views the Temple Mount as a national symbol that should be the home of the national institutions; the military ceremonies that currently take place in the plaza by the Western Wall should properly be held on the mount itself. It is his Zionist perspective that leads Salomon to request a permit for the demonstrations and to contact the official bodies of the Israeli state (the police and the courts). He is extremely careful to ensure that members of the movement observe the legal instructions and refrain from confronting the police. The same approach leads him to thank the police for their protection.

Salomon does not lead illegal action; he refrains from entering the Temple Mount without permission and repeatedly files requests with the authorities. Although he has received a negative response for almost fifty years, this has not led him to despair or anger, and he has steadfastly maintained his position. Indeed, his movement publicly condemned the plan by the Jewish Underground, led by Yehuda Etzion, to blow up the mosques on the Temple Mount. “The Temple Mount Faithful Youth announced that while it supports any action to end the disgrace on the Temple Mount, it believes that independent actions of this type can at present only damage the struggle, since there
can be no greater disgrace than for the Israeli government to rebuild with its own hands the mosques on the Temple Mount.”

Although Salomon ensures that his movement does not engage in any illegal or violent activities, its central message—the removal of the mosques from the Temple Mount—may be perceived as conveying an aggressive message for Islam and, accordingly, may cause serious conflicts on the mount between Muslim worshippers and the Israeli law enforcement agencies. In 1987, for example, thousands of Muslim worshippers, throwing stones at the Western Wall plaza, protested against entry into the site of the Temple Mount Faithful. This incident ended after intervention by the mayor of Jerusalem at the time, Teddy Kollek. In October 1990, however, during the height of the First Intifada, mediation efforts were to no avail, and a demonstration by the Temple Mount Faithful led to a bloodbath. The incident occurred during the festival of Sukkot, when the *waqf* exploited the announcement by the movement of its intention to lay the cornerstone for the temple (an announcement lacking any real substance) in order to incite passions, calling on the Muslim
masses to come in person and defend the holy sites of Islam. The clarifications by the police that Salomon would not be permitted to enter the Temple Mount and that there was no intention of laying a cornerstone for the temple were of no use. Thousands of Muslims gathered at the site and were incited by slogans called by the muezzin in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

A mistake by an Israel Border Guard policeman, who accidentally dropped a gas grenade close to the plaza by the Dome of the Rock, led to a mass riot. Protracted clashes erupted between the police and the crowd, and the Muslims managed to take control of the police station on the Temple Mount, forcing the police officers to retreat from the site. The police action to retake the mount resulted in seventeen killed and several hundred wounded on the Palestinian side and thirty-four injuries among the Israel Border Guard police and Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall. This incident is considered the most serious on the Temple Mount since the site was conquered by Israel in 1967.

THE MOVEMENT FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE TEMPLE

As noted above, the Temple Mount Faithful was once the central grouping of temple activists. During its early years the movement was joined by right-wing maximalists, both religious and secular, and managed to include the divergent perspectives within a single framework. As time passed, however, it became impossible to maintain this combination, and the Orthodox circles left the movement. Yosef Elboim, a Jerusalemite and a member of the Belz Chasidic movement, initiated the crisis. In a personal interview, Elboim explained to me that the purpose of the split was to increase the number of people involved in the Temple Mount issue. He claimed that after a number of activists from the settlement of Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, refused to remain in the Temple Mount Faithful because of Salomon’s “secular” approach, he realized that there was no alternative but to establish a new Orthodox group. While for Salomon the Temple Mount was a Zionist and national symbol, for Elboim the site held first and foremost a religious and ritual importance. Accordingly, Elboim and his friends felt that the Temple Mount Faithful could not meet their needs, since Salomon attached less significance to the religious function embodied by the temple.

Yosef Lerner and Israel Ariel joined Elboim, and in 1987 they founded the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple. This breakaway group did not consider itself bound by the approach taken by the Temple Mount
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Faithful and anticipated that the divisions would increase the number of people involved in the field by creating alternative frameworks for different target populations. A further reason for the division, as noted by Elboim and Lerner (and by other activists I spoke to during my research), relates to Salomon’s forceful personality and his centralized approach to leadership.

A further point of disagreement between the Temple Mount Faithful and the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple related to the question of the ideal of rebuilding the temple. During its early stages, the Temple Mount Faithful did not include the construction of the temple as a practical objective; its messages focused on the national aspects of sovereignty over the mount. For example, the movement’s “Declaration of Allegiance” included the following:

I declare allegiance to the Temple Mount, the sacred national and religious center of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, and I undertake to act with all my strength for the return to the Jewish People of this national symbol of the resurrection of the Jewish people in its Land.

I shall bear allegiance to Jerusalem, the eternal capital of Israel.

I shall be proud to serve as a soldier in the IDF in all the liberated sections of the Land of Israel, and to carry the message of the Temple Mount wherever I may go.  

This declaration does not state that the movement seeks the rebuilding of the temple; neither does the name of the movement embody this objective. Another declaration by the movement demanded the “removal of the disgrace” and the opening of the Temple Mount to the Jewish people in order “to transform it into the national, religious, and spiritual center of the Jewish People and to remove our alien enemies from it.” Once again, these publications do not mention the rebuilding of the temple. Accordingly, the breakaway faction decided to emphasize its distinct identity in the name it chose—the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple—and by positioning this objective as its central operational goal.

THE IMPACT OF THE OSLO ACCORDS ON MESSIANIC RELIGIOUS ZIONISM

The messianic school of religious Zionism was profoundly shaken after the disclosure of the Oslo process (1993), which was based on an attempt to secure a compromise between Israel and the Palestinians regarding the territories of
Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, within the framework of a political process, and was expected to culminate in a further compromise on the Temple Mount. While the followers of the approach of Mercaz Harav Yeshiva believed wholeheartedly in a determinism that is leading the Jewish people and the State of Israel toward complete redemption, the emerging reality showed precisely the opposite position—the State of Israel seemed, in some respects at least, to be growing more secular, and its governments were leading a political process founded on painful concessions of parts of the Land of Israel in return for a partial peace agreement. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and Israel’s recognition of this body inevitably challenged the vision of the Greater Land of Israel. In the background, there was also concern that the Temple Mount would be lost and handed over to Palestinian control. Thus, the zenith of messianic expectation—the anticipated establishment of the temple as the peak of the messianic process—now faced a grave danger due to the gradual surrender of sovereign territory.

In this situation, an increasing number of religious Zionist authorities, including leading elements of the settlement movement, began to express positions that interpreted the Israeli withdrawal from territories in Judea and Samaria as divine punishment for the lack of Jewish attention to the Temple Mount, due to the rabbinical prohibition against entering the site. For example, Dov Lior, rabbi of Kiryat Arba and one of the leading spiritual leaders of contemporary religious Zionism, stated:

> We, who believe in reward and punishment and in Divine providence, must know that one of the main reasons why we are suffering torment is the profound apathy among large sections of our people concerning the Temple Mount in general and the construction of the Temple, in particular.22

The fear of further concessions led to practical measures designed to thwart any such developments. In 1996 during the high point of the opposition to the Oslo process among the settlers, the Committee of Yesha Rabbis issued a bold ruling urging all rabbis who held the position that it was permissible to enter the Temple Mount to “ascend the Mount themselves, and to guide their congregants in ascending the Mount within all the limitations of Halacha.” The argument behind the ruling was that the lack of a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, due to the halachic prohibition against entering the site, had led the Israeli governments to see the site as one that could easily be
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relinquished. Accordingly, if masses of Jews began to enter the Temple Mount in order to pray, it would be harder for the Israeli government to transfer sovereignty over the site to the Palestinian Authority. This decision also constituted an expression of defiance vis-à-vis the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, challenging its repeated rulings.

THE OPENING OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT IN 2003

The Temple Mount was closed for Jewish visits during 2000–2003 due to the Al-Aqsa Intifada. As soon as the Temple Mount reopened, dramatic changes were observed regarding visits to the site. During the first three months after the Temple Mount reopened for Jewish visitors, some 4,000 Jews entered the site. This trend has continued, and almost every day Jewish religious communities, sometimes numbering hundreds of people, come to pray on the mount.

The journalist Nadav Shragai has reported, based on police records, that there is a growing trend among religious Zionists to visit the Temple Mount. Thus, in 2009 there were 5,650 visits, but in 2015 the number doubled to 10,770. In 2016 the number rose to 14,050 visits, and in 2017 the estimation was of about 25,000 visits. Shragai also observed that hundreds of rabbis, including leading rabbis, permit these visits.

Thus, if in the past yearning for the Temple Mount was the obsession of a marginal, ostracized (sometimes violent) minority within the religious Zionist public, today it has become one of the most significant voices within that community. Scholar Tomer Persico quoted in his research a survey conducted in May 2014 among the religious Zionist public, according to which 75.4% said that they favor “the ascent of Jews to the Temple Mount,” compared to only 24.6% against. In addition, 19.6% said that they had already visited the site, and 35.7% said that they had not yet gone there but intended to visit. In response to the question “What are the reasons on which to base oneself when it comes to Jews going up to the Temple Mount?,” 39.2% said that the ascent is needed in order “to witness the special site,” 54.4% thought that a visit should be made in order to carry out “a positive commandment [mitzvat aseh] and prayer at the site,” 58.2% claimed that the ascent “will raise awareness about the Temple and its meaning,” and fully 96.8% replied that visiting the site would constitute “a contribution to strengthening Israeli sovereignty in the holy place.” Apparently, concluded Persico, for the religious Zionists who
took part in the survey, the national rationale in ascending the Temple Mount was far more important than the halachic grounds. “Ethnocentric consciousness is replacing halachic sensibility.”

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I observed how the religious Zionist movement has changed its attitude toward the Temple Mount. In Jewish traditions, the reestablishment of the temple is perceived as the zenith of the messianic process. In the Jewish eschatological vision, when Jewish exile would end, the return of the Jews to their homeland would take place as promised by God, and the reconstruction of the temple as a place of worship for God would be one of the heights of redemption. However, Jewish tradition learned to put restraints on messianic expectations, and Jews were banned from entering the Temple Mount or doing anything active to hasten the End of Days.

After the Six-Day War in 1967, the attitude of religious Zionism toward the Temple Mount remained according to tradition, and many authorities banned Jews from entering the site. However, this ban has weakened, and since the 2000s most religious authorities are actually encouraging their followers to visit the Temple Mount. As Tomer Persico has shown, overwhelmingly a majority of religious Zionists see the visits to the Temple Mount from the perspective of promoting the site as a national symbol.

In the essay, I recorded a dispute that took place during the 1980s among activists, followers of the Temple Mount Faithful. These followers, who came from Orthodox background, were unhappy with Salomon’s concentration on the Temple Mount as a national symbol; they wanted to focus on the site as a place of worship. The splitting movement called itself the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple in order to sharpen these differences.

Over the years, the Orthodox branch has gotten stronger, while Salomon’s power has weakened. The Movement for the Establishment of the Temple was able to bring new energies into the advocacy of the Temple Mount, and one of its major successes was influencing the decision of the Yesha Rabbis, discussed above, to permit Jews to enter the site. Salomon was left behind, and his movement became marginalized.

However, from the survey quoted above, it is clear that among religious Zionists the idea that the Temple Mount should serve as a national symbol is much more prominent than that the site should serve as a place of worship. Here we can see how Salomon’s ideas have gained prominence and influence.
Although as a leader he was disregarded, his message has gained much impact on Israeli society especially among the sector of religious Zionism.

Note: Sections of this essay were previously published in Motti Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount* (SUNY Press, 2009), 79–89.

NOTES

1. *Decision of the Committee of Yesha Rabbis* [Hebrew], 8 Shevat 5756 (February 7, 1996).

2. This figure is mentioned in a letter from Minister Tzahi Hanegbi published in *Yibaneh Hamikdash* [Hebrew] 206, no. 7 (2005): 9.


4. For further discussion of the prohibition of *Karet*, see *The Talmudic Encyclopedia* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1972) 7, 14:553. On the halachic debate concerning entering the Temple Mount, see *The Oral Law* [Hebrew] 10 (1967); Shaul Sheffer, *The Temple Mount—Crown of Our Glory* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Self-published, 1968), 61–68. A list of thirty halachic rulings prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount was collected by scholars at Ateret Cohanim yeshiva and collated in the booklet *Iturei Cohanim* [Hebrew] 16 (1985). The list includes the ruling issued by the Chief Rabbinate in 1967. In a groundbreaking step, the leaders of the Haredi public at the time added their names to this ruling, as did Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook, head of Mercaz Harav yeshiva.


8. A summary of the meeting held on 1 Sivan 5727 (June 11, 1967) can be found in Yoel Cohen, “The Chief Rabbinate and the Temple Mount Question” [Hebrew], in *The Israel Chief Rabbinate—Seventy Years since Its Foundation* II, ed. Itamar Warheftig (Jerusalem: Heikhal Shlomo Publishers, 2003), 769.


15. From a movement publication.

16. With the exception of one occasion in April 1981.


24. *Hatzofe*, February 2, 2004. This figure is based on information from the Israeli Police.
