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We Cannot Give Up the Western Wall to ultra-Orthodox 'Forces of Darkness'

Rabbi Leon A. Morris and Rabbi Joel Levy Jun 27, 2016

Israelis cannot allow our most sacred places to be controlled exclusively by a messianic, supremacist minority whose Judaism doesn't place human dignity at the center of Jewish life.



Ultra-Orthodox protesters argue with Reform and Conservative worshipers at the Western Wall on June 16, 2016. Emil Salman

In his thoughtful and challenging essay, [Avraham Burg](#) critiques the Women of the Wall as yet another example of a Judaism that is “[the essence of idolatry.](#)” Many Israelis – and many non-Orthodox Diaspora Jews – would agree with him when he says, “I have no longing for the Temple that was, nor do I yearn for the Temple that I hope will never be.” He criticizes Women of the Wall as creating a fundamentalist partnership “between anachronistic rabbis and allegedly progressive women, who want to bring a broken institution back into the center of our spiritual experience.”

In part, Burg is right. We must indeed be wary of what he calls the “contemporary Judaism of wood and stone.” Yet, Burg’s argument errs in three ways.

First, Jewish life does involve lofty and abstract ideas, but Judaism has always allowed those ideas to burst into life in the prosaic and the concrete. Place does in fact matter. Zionism itself reminded the Jewish people, many of whom had recast their Judaism as faith alone, that the decidedly non-abstract aspects Jewish life – land and people – matter deeply, and have within them the power to reignite our spiritual lives. Despite our widespread embrace of universalism, the Western Wall can remind us that our religious drama, in addition to playing out in the entire universe, is experienced most fully in a specific city “and in its heart a wall.”

Sophisticated practitioners of Judaism should not fall into the trap of ascribing "intrinsic holiness" to physical places but that does not mean that they are forbidden from feeling and using the constructed sanctity of place, built up over millennia by our people's dreams and prayers. The fabricated nature of religious sites, practices and symbols need not turn us away from them. As post-moderns we can turn toward them, but with our minds, eyes and hearts open.

Second, if we fail to appropriate the language, symbols and pathways of our religious culture, then there is little to connect our struggles to the Jewish past. We need to be more careful and subtle; while we try to drive Israeli Judaism toward more universalist, more open, more inclusive, more humanitarian forms of religious expression, we must do so as a living commentary on those texts which have already been written. Of course, we are the spiritual heirs of the rabbis who reshaped Judaism after the Temple's destruction. But just as the religious forms of life they produced drew upon the imagery of what came before, so we must draw cumulatively upon all of our past.

For many modern Jews, sacrifice is an anathema. Those ancient forms of worship seem primitive and outmoded. The notion that God is to be found in one central place alone is objectionable. Yet we may not want to discard the conceptual basis for the Temple -- that proper human action allows God to dwell among us, while sin distances us from God's presence.

Furthermore, the texts and liturgy centered on the Temple and its sacrifices loom large in classical Jewish sources. From the names of our daily, Shabbat and festival services, to our table rituals such as *netilat yadayim*, the memory of the Temple ritual remains central. That centrality has allowed us through an expansive interpretive tradition to ascribe the importance that sacrifices once had to prayer, to study, and to eating a meal. Imbuing those more ordinary sorts

of acts with sacrificial import requires keeping alive the memory of the Temple. The interpretive and imaginative possibilities for our own age rely on the very concrete referent of the Temple as a focus of our present religious lives.

Finally, the battle for the Western Wall is not just about religious freedom. It's about what sort of Torah will flourish in the State of Israel. Those who choose to engage our symbols and our holy sites are the full inheritors of our tradition. If the rich, rooted imagery of the Temple as the focus of Jewish messianic yearning is ceded to religious fundamentalists then we are guaranteeing their ultimate victory. Strains within Orthodoxy paint a vivid and real picture of their messianic vision for the Temple Mount – a vision which is chillingly supremacist and anachronistic. But that should not cause us to turn our backs on the Temple as a religious image, but rather to redouble our efforts to paint a messianic vision for this country that actually reflects the values that we know to be true. What might a Temple look like that was the focal point of our yearning for human dignity, equality and compassion?

Many Israelis yearn for a Judaism that is expansive and adaptive, open and inclusive; a Judaism that places human dignity at the center of religious life. We cannot allow our most sacred places to be controlled exclusively by a minority of Jews whose message will not take us forward. Burg is an unwitting collaborator in that desecration. The forces of religious darkness in this country are always delighted when their enemies cede interest and involvement in what they value most. Their ultimate victory is ensured by our handing them the job of interpreting Judaism's core religious imagery, such as articulating Judaism's messianic vision. When their foes renounce Judaism they know that their ultimate victory is assured. Their fury is reserved for those brave Israelis who dare to challenge the exclusivity of their narrow interpretations and paint a liberal, and profoundly Jewish, picture of our collective future.

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