

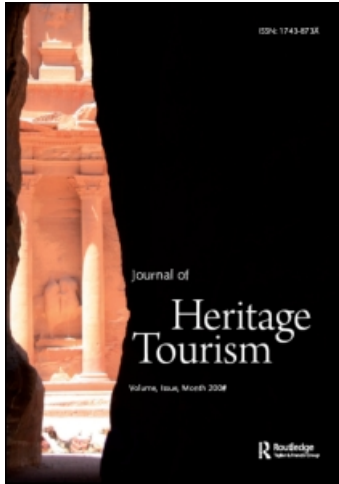
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Struggles at holy sites and their outcomes: the evolution of the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem

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The Western Wall in Jerusalem is the holiest of sites to Jews, a historical landmark, an archeological paradise, and a popular tourist attraction. After Israel gained control of the Old City of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War in 1967, it needed to address the question of what would be the layout and character of the Western Wall and the area adjacent to it. Both Israeli Jews and visiting Diaspora Jews wanted to pray next to the wall, though there was no agreement on what type of prayer would be allowed. The strict Orthodox movement demanded separate sections for men and women, while non-Orthodox movements wanted a mixed prayer area. Archaeologists wanted to dig in the area adjacent to the wall. And furthermore, the State wanted to hold military ceremonies there while also encouraging tourism to the area. This study uses a historiosophic approach to analyze these contradictory needs and the resulting decisions about the Western Wall's layout and character. It identifies the struggles between religion and state; the status of religious movements and denominations within the country; the status of women; and other social, cultural, religious, and economic issues.

Keywords: pilgrimage; sacred sites; Jerusalem; Western Wall Plaza

Introduction

Jerusalem's Western Wall is the most important site for Jewish pilgrims as well as the State of Israel's leading tourist site in terms of number of visitors per year (Shoval, 2009). Jewish tradition holds that the Western Wall is a remnant of the second Jewish Temple that was destroyed in the year 70 AD. Since then, Jews in the Diaspora have regarded the Western Wall as an object of yearning and prayer. No matter where in the world a Jew is, he or she faces in the direction of the Western Wall during prayers (Aner, Ben-Dov, & Naor, 1981; Berkovits, 2000).

As a result of the Six-Day War in 1967, the Western Wall, for the first time in modern history, came under Jewish and Israeli control. Any Jew who wished to do so could come pray at or visit this holy site in person. This new reality at the Western Wall after the Six-Day War raised many questions about its future character. As the paramount symbol for the entire Jewish nation, both Jewish citizens of Israel as well as Diaspora Jews needed to address the issue of religious control and the religious nature of the Western Wall. Would the strict Orthodox movement of Judaism determine prayer services at the wall? This would mean that there would be separation of men and women during prayer as

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well as strict requirements regarding head coverings and modest dress. Alternatively, would other movements have a chance to exert their influence? Furthermore, with regard to the sanctified status of the Western Wall, would it be solely a religious site or would it be considered a historical, national, and cultural site as well? The answers reveal the religious, political, and gender issues facing Israeli society at the time.

Naturally, religious circles maintained that the Western Wall must not be considered a historical site. They claimed that its sanctified status is what preserved the site for the past two millennia; and therefore, it must continue to be considered solely a religious site. Several state institutions in Israel along with non-Orthodox Jewish religious movements and many of the visitors and tourists who began flocking to the wall immediately after the war disagreed. They wondered why there could not be a part of the Western Wall open to tourists, mixed groups and families, and those for whom separation of men and women would be unwelcome. In addition, since the site was thousands of years old, a bitter dispute developed vis-à-vis the archaeological community that demanded that an archaeological dig be carried out. Their rationale stemmed from an academic desire to peer into the past. To a great extent, archaeologists at the foothills of the Temple Mount also saw their labor as one of patriotism, inasmuch as their findings could bear testament to the age-old connection between the Jewish nation and the Temple Mount and its environs. Thus, the archaeological digs at the wall were also a political statement in that the State of Israel could proudly carry out activities at the Western Wall that had been previously forbidden to Jews. These groups all struggled for the opportunity to determine the character and layout of the Plaza. Through their struggle, they attempted to secure status for themselves, not only regarding the wall, but also within the national consciousness of the Israeli public during those years.

This study provides a historical and sociological analysis of key events at the Western Wall Plaza. It further looks at how these events led to the character and layout of the Western Wall Plaza. It addresses religion vs. State challenges, gender issues, and cultural developments. From these, it is possible to learn about the power struggles that existed in Israeli society at that time.

The information for these events and their analysis comes mainly from literary sources, archived documents and media from the relevant period. These include the major stages of development that occurred at the Western Wall and the powers that contributed to the layout and character of the Western Wall Plaza and the nearby area from the end of the Six-Day War until the present day. Using these sources, it is hypothesized that the events at the Western Wall Plaza can be seen as a microcosm of Israeli society and can show the power struggles that occurred there in the years following the Six-Day War.

The sources indicate that the process of establishing the character of the Western Wall Plaza during the past four decades occurred in the following three stages:

- (1) Urgent and temporary preparations – It was important to ready the area for massive crowds of visitors and to codify new and binding rules of religious conduct during the first few months after the Six-Day War.
- (2) Permanent arrangements – Deliberations continued during the 1970s on how the Western Wall Plaza would permanently function, especially with regard to the plans of Moshe Safdie, the architect. This resulted in eventually making permanent the temporary arrangements from 1967.
- (3) On-going challenges – The struggle of the non-Orthodox movements regarding their status in the plaza resurfaced at the end of the 1990s and the first years of the twenty-first century. It was part of a wider array of struggles involving the

role of state and religion in the State of Israel during those years. The result was the decision of the Israeli Supreme Court to designate a special prayer area for non-Orthodox movements in the area of the Southern Excavations, at the edge of the main Western Wall Plaza.

Theoretical background

Pilgrimage is one of the oldest traditions in the history of mankind. It is characterized by a cyclical movement of people from their homeland to visit a specific place of great religious or spiritual importance. It incorporates psychological, sociological and tourism aspects and characteristics, as well, and holy sites are at the heart of the act of pilgrimage (Graburn, 1989; Osterrieth, 1997; Reader & Walter, 1993; Turner, 1987). The academic discussion of pilgrimage intensified with the advent of studies conducted by well-known sociologist Victor Turner and published at the beginning of the 1970s. Turner investigated societies in Africa, and was able to apply his findings to other societies as well (Turner, 1969, 1973; Turner & Turner, 1978). His studies emphasized the social aspect of the act of pilgrimage and claimed that social solidarity strengthens as a result of pilgrimage. Turner stated that participants completely disconnect from the social class structures of their native societies, that there is an openness to redesigning social order, and that relationships based on spontaneity and equality develop. In his study of pilgrimage, Turner used the term '*communitas*' where one can experience a society of equality, devoid of status distinctions and where connections become spontaneous and the other becomes a brother.

However, criticism of Turner's theory began to surface in the 1990s, primarily from several empirical studies that investigated what actually transpired. The brunt of the criticism was directed at Turner's main concept, which stated that the act of pilgrimage cancels existing social structures and that the central goal of the pilgrim is the pursuit of '*communitas*'. In the introduction to their book, *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, scholars John Eade and Michael Sallnow assert that several field studies conducted in other areas of the world failed to empirically support Turner's model. To the contrary, Eade and Sallnow found that pilgrimage is often characterized by feelings of disdain and is fertile ground for inter-religious, inter-class and inter-denominational strife. By delineating boundaries between groups of pilgrims, social structures persist and even grow stronger (Eade & Sallnow, 1991, pp. 1–29). These different groups experience the pilgrimage differently, and there is tension about the rules and the nature of the ceremonies held there. This is seen in other research as well, such as Olsen and Guelke's study of the controversy over the establishment of Brigham Young University in Jerusalem (Olsen & Guelke, 2004).

In an anthology of studies, Eade and Sallnow produce examples of how those exercising authority over a religious site tend to protect religious objects from anyone who has not received the direct authorization from the site authorities and try to impose one authoritative rule at the holy site. Eade and Sallnow further show that pilgrims who do not harbor fears of damaging things that are sacred often try to cross the official boundary between sacred and secular in order to come as close as possible to that which is revered or divine (Eade, 1991; Stirrat, 1991). One of the key conclusions drawn from Eade and Sallnow's study is that a site's universal character is a function of its ability to absorb and reflect a plethora of religious beliefs and provide a wide array of the faithful with what they seek. The holy site is a vessel into which pilgrims pour their hopes, their prayers, and their desires. It is clear, however, that there are dialectic relationships between rules of conduct at the sites and the pilgrims' freedom to do what they please. This persistent tension exists at holy sites between supervision and freedom of choice and between acquiescence and defiance.

Moreover, the shift in how holy sites are perceived is also caused by a changing reality characterized by a larger number of visitors to these sites who arrive for reasons other than religious conviction. In fact, a distinction has been created at holy sites between pilgrims, motivated by religious obligation, and tourists who may possess motives of a different nature such as an interest in culture and tradition. Over the past few decades, both the number of non-religiously motivated tourists and the number of religiously motivated pilgrims has increased considerably (Nolan & Nolan, 1989; Olsen & Timothy, 2006; Shackley, 2001). This complex reality of 'touristification' of religious sites' (Olsen, 2006, p. 104) also presents a major challenge to the way the holy sites are run, as they are gradually converted into attractive sites for tourists. These changes also have serious implications on the role of the local populace and its response to the changing reality in the area. (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2007; Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Digance, 2003; Gatrell & Collins-Kreiner, 2006).

All of this also holds true for ancient holy sites that have captured today the interest of the faithful and other interest groups. Chidester and Lindenthal assert two main reasons why competition will arise at these sites today: The first reason is because its spatial quality means that there will always be issues about how it is organized and controlled. The second reason is because its very sacredness leaves it open to many claims about its significance. This is particularly true since such sites supposedly exude 'spiritual magnetism', which develops at shrines for a variety of reasons (Chidester & Lindenthal, 1995, pp. 1–42).

Jerusalem is a case where pilgrimage to a holy and ancient site is valued both for its modern tourism value and for its unique religious status. It is also where opposing viewpoints clash. Jerusalem is a holy site for three religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and this reality is often reflected in expressions of deep mistrust and occasionally overt hostility between the people of the various religious convictions. Moreover, Jerusalem's progression as a tourist city that attracts non-religious visitors, especially to its holy sites, makes the already complicated reality at the holy sites even more problematic (Shachar & Shoval, 1999; Shoval & Cohen-Hattab, 2001). Furthermore, there are conflicts within each of the city's three religions. For example, a study on Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem showed how three groups – Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Christian Zionist – espouse very different views of Jerusalem's sanctity when on pilgrimage (Bowman, 1991; Shapiro, 2008). The gaps within the Christian religion in the way Jerusalem's sanctity is perceived are disparate. Consequently, the very center of sanctity to Christian tradition has paradoxically become a global stage for the display of deep doctrinal divides that are tearing it apart (Collins-Kreiner & Kliot, 2000; Fleischer, 2000).

Conflicts and struggles have also erupted because of the divergent views within the Jewish population. The internal Jewish struggle over the Western Wall is concretely represented in how the prayer area has been formed. This case illustrates Eade and Sallnow's primary assertion that competing dialogs exist at the holy site and are based on the power struggles between religious movements and various power groups. These mirror some of the central issues faced by Israeli society over the past few decades, namely the relationship between the State and religion, the status of non-Orthodox movements in Judaism and in Israel, and the status of women in Judaism.

New rules of conduct in the aftermath of the Six-Day War

The Western Wall is the main pilgrimage site for Jews, both in Israel and from abroad. As is the case with other major holy sites in the world, the Western Wall is also a leading tourist

site for visitors to Israel. According to official statistics, 90% of the tourists that visit Jerusalem visit the Western Wall (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2009). The Western Wall began assuming its status as a national and international attraction immediately after the Six-Day War when a massive influx of visitors and worshippers began inundating the site.¹ The massive quantity of visitors expected at the Western Wall was one of the main factors that accelerated the decision, made only four days after the end of the war, to destroy the Mughrebine quarter, an Arab neighborhood that extended to the west of the Western Wall. It was further decided to build a wide open esplanade in front of the Western Wall. Until the War of Independence (1948), Jews were forced to make do with a small prayer area of only a few dozen square meters that was under the auspices of the Arabs of the Mughrebine Quarter. The Arabs of the Mughrebine Quarter often disturbed prayers at the wall and had also desecrated the area over the years (Figure 1). Several days after the end of the war, the families that lived in the Mughrebine Quarter were evacuated. Bulldozers destroyed the neighborhood and installed in its place a wide prayer esplanade measuring several hundred square meters that was better suited to massive quantities of visitors (Bar, 2007, pp. 206–207; Kroyanker, 1988, pp. 159–167). Essentially, in the days following the war, there was a great deal of uncertainty regarding responsibility for each of the holy sites in the territories captured during the war. When the war was still in its course, then Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol initiated a meeting of all of the



Figure 1. The Western Wall Plaza before the destruction of the Mughrebine neighborhood.
Source: Cassuto, 1976, p. 44.

heads of the various religious groups in the Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem. He informed them that the administration of the holy sites in the city would be entrusted to the religious heads. He explained that this was done in order to prevent any damage to the sites and to allow the continuation of unobstructed religious rituals. The motive for this move was first and foremost to dispel global fears of Israeli sovereignty over the various religions' holy sites. Eshkol's declaration underlined Israel's intent to preserve the integrity of the holy sites and transfer responsibility for the sites to the religious authorities (Benziman, 1973, pp. 104–107). In a move coordinated with the Minister of Religions, the prime minister announced that arrangements regarding the Western Wall would be determined by the Chief Rabbis, arrangements regarding Muslim holy sites would be determined by a council of Muslim clerics, and arrangements regarding Christian holy sites would be determined by a council of Christian clerics.² The Ministry of Religions was therefore the first civil governmental authority that quickly created facts on the ground near the Western Wall. Given the absence of clear prayer protocol and binding codes of conduct in the days following the end of the war, one of the first steps taken by the Ministry of Religions was to erect two fences. One separated visitors from worshippers, and one separated the worshipping men from the worshipping women. Parallel to the Western Wall at a distance of twenty meters, a transportable iron fence was set up. The fence was meant to delineate the holy area from the general area. A second fence divided the holy area into two sections – the northern section for men, and the smaller, southern section for women. Guards were posted at the openings in the fences that prevented men from entering their holy area without a head covering and enforced the separation of women and men. Visitors, who were mostly secular, were furious at these measures. They asked, 'Who said that the Western Wall was purely a religious site – isn't it a historical remnant and national site as well?' The questions of the Western Wall's boundary of sanctity and which movement of Judaism would determine how the wall would be run surfaced at the very beginning, and soon became the key issue of a long-standing, bitter conflict (Benvenisti, 1976; *Haaretz* Newspaper, 19 July 1967).

One of the first major incidents occurred in the middle of 1968 when the Global Reform Movement of Progressive Judaism, based in the USA, requested to conduct a prayer celebration with a mixed crowd of men and women, with no fence separating them (*Maariv* Newspaper, June 20, 1968). The Ministry of Religions informed the movement that no such arrangement could be reached, since it would offend the masses of worshippers who insist on the separation of men and women. A stormy debate erupted at the *Knesset*, the Israeli parliament. Soon after, the Reform Movement informed the prime minister that they had decided not to hold prayer sessions at the wall until the day when they would be able to worship based on the principle of religious freedom and freedom of conscience.³

The Reform Jews originally tried to undermine the religious reality that had come to exist at the Western Wall during the days following the end of the war, but ultimately, they retracted their request. The Orthodox movement and the political authorities that represented it in the *Knesset* triumphed in this struggle, but the outcry from non-Orthodox movements resurfaced several years later. During those first few years, the Minister and the Ministry of Tourism, which had become one of the most adamant fighters against the separation of men and women at the Western Wall and particularly the fence, joined those facing off against the Ministry of Religions and its actions. The Minister of Tourism's fundamental view was that there never had been such a fence near the Western Wall, and that it was unnecessary. He believed that the Western Wall belonged to generations of Jews, collectively, and that all Jews should be allowed to visit the wall in a way that was consistent with their traditions and to worship as their communities saw fit.⁴

The subject of separation of the sexes and keeping non-Orthodox groups away from the Western Wall as well as denying them the opportunity to worship as they saw fit came within the context of a wider debate on the principle of how different Jewish groups could properly express their bond to the holy site. This debate soon became the subject of political and coalition polemics. Most in the Israeli government at the time did not want to foment a crisis on such an emotionally charged topic, and the government resolved to keep allowing the Ministry of Religions to deal with it. By the end of 1967, the Minister of Religions had already passed legislation termed the 'Law of Holy Places' and referred to as the 'Western Wall Law'. The law sought to grant legal backing to the arrangements that had been reached, and it recommended that the position of 'Western Wall Custodian' be created, which would have the authority to maintain order. The Minister of Religions, who was the 'Western Wall Executive', was granted the authority to determine prayer protocol, to include separation of the sexes, to prohibit desecration of the Jewish Sabbath, and to prohibit eating, drinking, assembling, walking around with one's head uncovered or in 'indecent' clothing, begging, or selling souvenirs.⁵

In addition, the results of the Six-Day War and their implications on the Western Wall were not restricted to the subject of its religious character. The history of archaeology in Jerusalem was also profoundly affected, in retrospect, in terms of how Israeli nationalism was instilled in the eastern part of the city. After the war, archaeological digs in the Old City of Jerusalem on an unprecedented scale and in unimaginable locations had now become feasible. The first team of archaeologists came from the Hebrew University, headed by Professor Benyamin Mazar. They began digging in 1968 to the south and south-west of the Western Wall.

Mazar and his team was supported and sponsored by 'The Society for the Study of the Land of Israel and its Antiquities', the Hebrew University, the Israel National Academy of Science and the National Parks Authority. Even Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, supported the digs, and by the beginning of 1968, Mazar had acquired a permit to dig from the Antiquities Department. Meanwhile, the chief rabbis of the time expressed their opinion of archaeological digs, and reinforced the need to adopt religious standards that would be the sole guide for how the Western Wall and its surroundings would be managed. Chief Rabbi Nissim's writings clearly outlined the power struggles and the tension that characterized the relationship between religious, tourist, and archaeological figures, in a place so unique for its historical and national significance (cited at Benvenisti, 1976, p. 256):

The digs may last for many years. If ancient structures are discovered, people would be unable to pray [at the wall], and there is serious concern that the Western Wall might become a historic and touristic site. . . We concur that the area should be widened and that its original form should be restored, but this doesn't mean that professionals concerned only with scientific studies and historical curiosity should be the ones to create the long-term plans. We are responsible for safeguarding the area from desecration. We must make sure that no action might somehow damage the sanctity of this place, since prayer near the Western Wall is the main issue, and all of the rest is subordinate.

The dispute between the rabbis, supported by the Ministry of Religions, and the archaeologists caused the question of the Western Wall's character to resurge: would it be considered solely a holy site where archaeological digs would be seen as sacrilege, or would it be recognized as an important historic site where digging and scientific study would be in order. Ultimately, a compromise won the approval of all sides. It stipulated that the Western Wall Plaza would be sectioned into the following three areas:

- (1) The approach to the Mughrebine Gate would split the western part of the plaza into two major areas



Figure 2. The compromise over the three areas in the Western Wall (photograph taken by the author).

- (2) Archaeological digs to the south side would be outside of the jurisdiction of the religious authorities
- (3) The north side would be designated for prayer and would be under the sole jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religions.⁶

Clearly, a new reality materialized near the Western Wall: the area where prayer had traditionally been held would remain under the auspices of the Ministry of Religions, where, as is the case in an Orthodox synagogue, the sexes would be separated (Figure 2). The area to the south of the Mughrebine Gate would be put under the control of a secular authority and be regarded as a ‘historical area’ where archaeological digs would take place. However, this compromise between the archaeologists and the strict delineation of prayer areas did not curtail the ongoing debate and discussions over the character and future design of the Western Wall Plaza.

The prayer area: when temporary becomes permanent

The issues of separation of the sexes, standardization of the prayer protocol in the spirit of traditional Jewish Orthodoxy, and the exchanges with archaeologists over their role and right to dig in the area had all, by the end of the first few days following the Six-Day War, been discussed in connection with the structural design of the Western Wall Plaza. In effect, from the moment when the Mughrebine Quarter was destroyed, the character of the area, which had been reduced to a large, open field of building remains, had been called into question: how should it be redesigned (Cohen, 2009)? By July 1967, an architect working for the Ministry of Religions had drafted a general plan, which did not seek to resolve all of the fundamental problems, but to propose a temporary arrangement that would solve the pressing issues, such as removing the rubble, cleaning the esplanade,

created public restrooms for worshippers, and preparing adequate approach areas. The proposal included lowering and paving the esplanade and dividing it into two sections at different heights. The eastern section, adjacent to the wall, would measure 25 m long and would be reserved for prayer and personal reflection. The western section, further from the wall, would be an assembly area, or a visitors' area, and raised slightly above the prayer area. It would be designated for the general population who had not come to pray⁷ (Benvenisti, 1976, pp. 254–256).

Another important milestone was the Western Wall's new designation as the place where assemblies and the swearing-in ceremonies of IDF (Israel Defense Force) soldiers would take place. In addition, the opening ceremonies for the annual Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers began to take place there. The Western Wall had now, in addition to being the traditional religious symbol and place of pilgrimage, become an area with a national-establishment and military character.⁸ However, the religious conflict continued as well. For example, in 1991, the 'Gadna', an Israeli organization for pre-military education (the 'Hebrew Youth Battalions'), wished to hold their annual end-of-summer ceremony at the wall with about five thousand young 'Gadna' men and women participating. Rabbi Ganz, the Rabbi of the Western Wall, disapproved of the plan. His reasoning – 'there was tremendous licentiousness there, including (men and women) kissing and hugging each other in public' (*Haaretz* Newspaper, July 30, 1991). His disapproval caused an uproar in the general population. At a certain point, Rabbi Ganz resigned from his position, but the commander of the 'Gadna' and the Minister of Religions reached a compromise. It called for the separation of men and women in the group and that the plaza be quickly emptied of them (Berkovits, 2000, pp. 264–265).

Overall, it can be said that within a year of the end of the Six-Day War, fundamental arrangements on the Western Wall Plaza had been formed and remained for years to come. All of the area to the west of the wall, where the Mughrebine Quarter had once stood, was subordinated to the Ministry of Religions. The platform adjacent to the wall (the 'prayer area') became a 'holy spot', managed the way Orthodox synagogues were. Archaeological digs were conducted to the south, where no religious activity occurred. To the west of the 'prayer area' was a platform designated for tourists. This platform, which had originally been earmarked as temporary, became permanent, and nationalist ceremonies have often been held there. However, the designation of areas around the wall for various and separate uses did not dispel the tension that persisted between the various people involved in developing the area. This situation led to several proposals aimed at finding the golden formula for the permanent design of the Western Wall Plaza.

The best-known plan was one presented by Moshe Safdie, invited at the behest of the Society for the Development and Rehabilitation of the Jewish Quarter in 1973 (Figure 3). Safdie's plan incorporated several basic assumptions that influenced the planning principles (Cassuto, 1976; Safdie, 1989). The first principle was that the Western Wall is a sanctified and holy area. The second principle took on the additional roles of desirable venue for tourists and prime location for national assemblies. Consequently, the main planning issue was how to make the area one where individuals could connect with their Creator, as well as one where various groups could express their own desires. Yet another principle was to include several of the very knowledgeable archaeologists from the area in the planning process (Aner et al., 1981, pp. 174–187).

The planning concept called for the construction of a series of terraced platforms, rising and narrowing to the west, from the section of the Herodian Quarter closest to the wall to the Jewish Quarter. The advantages of this program, according to Safdie, were that the terraced platforms allowed for connecting the various types of visitors and small groups to the

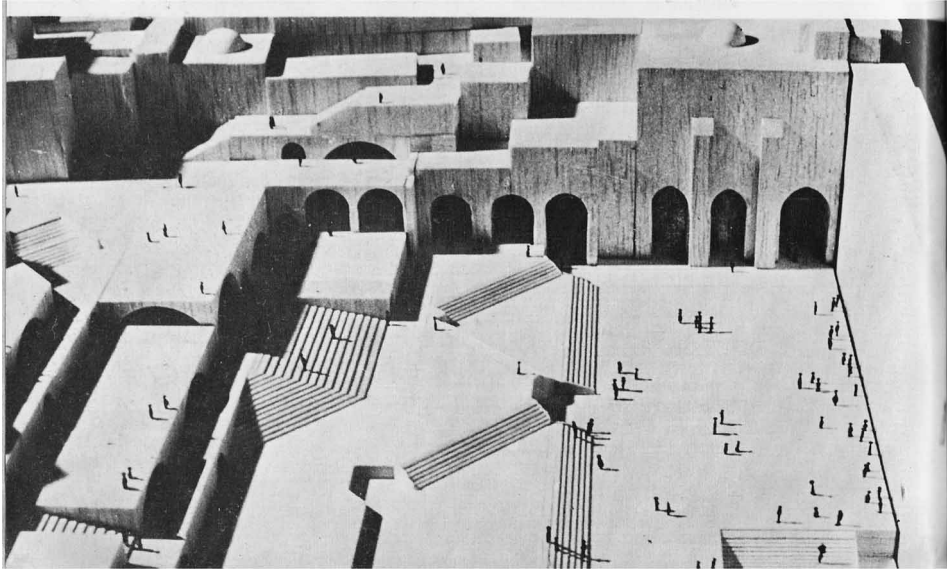


Figure 3. The Western Wall Plaza Safdie plan, 1973.
Source: Cassuto, 1976, p. 73.

atmosphere of the area. Small groups, mostly groups of worshippers, would congregate at the lowest platform, enveloped in its intimacy. Larger groups, mostly those coming to the wall for reasons other than religion, would remain on the upper levels, without compromising the pleasant view of the wall or their ability to bond to it.

Opponents of the plan came mostly from the religious circles. The Minister of Religions claimed that the plan called for changing the character of the Western Wall Plaza and such sweeping innovations that it would transform the area into a tourist site and divest the wall of its unique status as a place of worship. Moreover, he claimed that the Western Wall Plaza could not be divided into sub-platforms in order to achieve 'various levels of holiness'. The terraced division that the plan envisioned would transform the holiest place for Jews into an 'oriental bazaar devoid of the Divine Presence'.⁹

Safdie's plan to redesign the Western Wall Plaza was never effectuated, and the temporary areas built near the wall became the permanent design that still exists today. Safdie's program was buried under pressure from government coalition members and political figureheads. In the coalition deal reached to form Menachem Begin's first government in 1977, it was agreed upon that 'the Western Wall and the Southern Wall in Jerusalem shall remain under the auspices of the Ministry of Religions'. This was the outcome of negotiations to create the coalition in which the religious parties demanded a complete freeze on any plans to redesign the Western Wall Plaza (Kroyanker, 1988, p. 164).

The struggle of non-Orthodox movements and the determination of their status at the Western Wall

Despite the pastoral atmosphere and the desire for a pious place of prayer and reflection at the Western Wall and even with the layout finalized, there were still substantial disputes between State and Religion. The first manifestations of this dispute occurred during the

first few months after the Six-Day War when the Reform Movement tried to secure a foothold at the Western Wall. The most prominent resurgence of the political debate on the roles of religion and the state, however, surfaced in the years 1996–1999 when Benjamin Netanyahu was prime minister. His rightist government was sustained by right-wing factions in the parliament. The Reform Movement found itself pitted against his government over three main issues: the recognition of Conservative and Reform conversions, the incorporation of their representatives into religious councils, and the struggle for the right to mixed non-Orthodox prayer near the Western Wall.

On 11 June 1997, during the Jewish holiday of *Shavuot*, members of the Conservative Movement attempted a mixed prayer session on the upper platform of the Plaza. Violent scuffles erupted for the first time that summer. Media reports from that time asserted that unrest had erupted, as thousands of *Haredim* (ultra-Orthodox Jews) immediately concluded their *Shavuot* prayers. A group of Conservative Jews praying near the entrance gate were attacked by dozens of *Haredim* who cursed, pushed, and spit on them. The commotion began, according to one member of the Conservative group, after they had taken out the *Torah* scroll and a female member of the group began reading from it. Hundreds of *Haredim* crowded around them, shouting offensive words such as ‘Nazis’, ‘worse than Nazis’, ‘murderers’, ‘Reform Jews’, and ‘whores’ (*Haaretz* Newspaper, 12 June 1997).

The turmoil subsided after the police intervened and separated the two groups. However, this was only the beginning of a series of incidents that summer. The culmination of the confrontations was when the Conservative Movement decided to conduct a massive prayer session on the evening of the holiday of the *9th of Av*, which fell on 11 August 1997. The holiday of the *9th of Av* commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples at that very site. Many people believe the Temples’ destruction was caused by blind hatred among Jews. The Conservative Movement therefore chose this day to illustrate that the tension over what to do at the Wall was, essentially, blind hatred. (Rabbi Einat Ramon, interview with the author, 20 November 2007).

A press release submitted by the Conservative Movement stated that ‘... tomorrow, on the eve of the *9th of Av*, the Masorati (Conservative) Movement in Israel will hold a mixed prayer session for men and women on the grounds of the Western Wall. Members of the Conservative Movement from all over Israel who wish to return to the wall and pray in an egalitarian service, dispute, and in many ways, in response to the violence of *Haredim* at the Western Wall during the *Shavuot* holiday, will attend. The service will include *Arvit* (the evening prayer), the reading of the *Eichah* (Lamentations) scroll, the reading of *Kinot* (laments), and studying the dangers of blind hatred. The *9th of Av* is a day of national reckoning, and this service expresses a hope that the nation of Israel has internalized the danger posed by violence, and will advance towards a future of blind love’ (Rabbi Einat Ramon, private archives). Nevertheless, this event ended with the police carting away Conservative worshippers from the Western Wall Plaza. The police claimed that their service had disturbed public order, and feared that a confrontation with the *Haredim* might erupt (*Yediot Ahronot* Newspaper, 12 August 1997).

These incidents, paired with the growing tensions over issues of religion and state during that period, led the Israeli government to appoint a committee that would discuss the various issues. In 1998, the government accepted the committee’s proposal that the southwestern corner of the Western Wall (Robinson’s Arch and the Southern Excavations of the Western Wall) should be designated as a prayer area for non-Orthodox Jewish groups. The Robinson’s Arch solution enabled finding a suitable prayer area that would meet the needs and demands of non-Orthodox movements while refraining from insulting other worshippers at the Western Wall or damaging local traditions.¹⁰

Today, Robinson's Arch, which is part of an archaeological site with paid admission, is open to Conservative worshippers. Morning services and rite-of-passage ceremonies (mostly *Bar Mitzvahs* and *Bat Mitzvahs*) can be performed until 10:30 a.m., which is also when other visitors are admitted. According to the statistics, the number of prayer events has grown steadily since the site was officially opened: Forty-six events and approximately 1100 worshippers visited the site in 2006 (from July to December), 326 events and about 9600 worshippers in 2007, and 448 events, and about 12,600 worshippers in 2008.¹¹

Ever since non-Orthodox movements have tried to institutionalize their activities, Conservative rabbis have begun offering their services for a fee for ceremonies to groups of worshippers coming to pray at the wall. The growing demand has also put the site on Jerusalem's tourist map, and tourist agencies catering to groups of Conservative Jews visiting Israel have included visits and prayer events at Robinson's Arch as part of their tours.¹²

Even this compromise, however, did not end the dispute at the Western Wall. Disputes regarding what is permissible for women to do at the Western Wall continue to this day (Charmé, 2005; Chesler & Haut, 2003; Shakdiel, 2002).

Conclusion

For generations, the Western Wall has been a symbol embodying the memory of the destruction of the Holy Temple, the Jewish Diaspora, and the yearning for a return to Zion. The site is unequalled in its centrality to Jewish culture, tradition, and history. Recent generations have also attached importance to the Western Wall not necessarily out of a deep connection to holy places, but rather, or perhaps mainly, because of a sense of historical connection to the Jewish people. The wall has also attracted many visitors who are not Jewish.

A new reality surfaced in 1967, when Israeli sovereignty was imposed over the area and the Mughrebine Quarter was destroyed, raising the wall's status as the holiest and most important place in the State of Israel. However, this process was difficult, and many confrontations occurred over the Western Wall Plaza – the nature of prayer services, visits, and the way it was designed. Given the wall's centrality, the events that occurred at the wall are doubtlessly a microcosm of power struggles that raged in Israeli society in the years following the Six-Day War. These disputes echo a wide range of subjects that Israeli society and the Jewish world at large had been addressing. These include the following:

- (1) The issue of religious authority in the State of Israel, particularly with respect to the institution or rejection of Orthodox religious tradition, along with the status of non-Orthodox traditions and the status of women in Judaism
- (2) The status of modern Israeli archaeology that represents academic research and the values of scientific evaluation and criticism
- (3) The status of the state in terms of religious and national prominence, represented by military ceremonies held at the wall
- (4) The status of modern culture, represented by today's tourist industry, through which all kinds of visitors, personifying the vast scope of modern tourist culture, arrive at the holy city and its holy sites

Contrary to the traditional approach proposed by Victor Turner on holy sites, the study of the development of the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem since 1967 definitively shows

the complex reality that existed in these areas and still exists today. It is an area where tension and conflicts often erupt between religious groups and convictions, where the authority responsible for the holy site tends to establish an official ritual and delineate clear boundary lines that determine what is allowed and forbidden at the site, and where groups not affiliated with the establishment search to find their place. All of this is occurring as modern tourism in the area continues to grow.

The aim of this study was to expand the currently accepted view of scholars by maintaining that when a holy site is central and important, a historiosophic analysis of events that shape its physical appearance may also shed light on several key issues that local societies grapple with, such as the relationship between religion and the state, the status of religious movements and denominations within a country, the status of women, and other social, cultural, religious, and economic issues. Consequently, the study of a particular site not only expounds upon the local struggles, but also provides a snapshot of its society and tells its story.

This study of the Western Wall Plaza has unveiled the relationships and the tension between several power brokers throughout the evolution of the Western Wall Plaza:

- *Holiness* – The Western Wall is a holy place and site of pilgrimage for Jews
- *Heritage and nationalism* – The wall has become a site embodying Jewish history and collective memory, an archaeological site as well as a venue for military parades
- *Tourism* – The site has developed into an attraction that draws both Jewish and non-Jewish tourists, including groups and individuals from various ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The growing importance of modern tourism, particularly in the case of the development of the Western Wall, can demonstrate and highlight both its role in holy places and how it should be dealt with when conducting studies of holy places in the present day. Indeed, the nature of the Western Wall, which has evolved substantially during the past few decades, demonstrates the ongoing conflict between the many types of visitors and worshippers.

Notes

1. Much has been written about the Western Wall, its sanctity to Jews, and its role in history and Jewish culture, which is not discussed here. An extensive bibliography on the Western Wall can be found in the sources section of the following article: Aner et al. (1981, pp. 269–282); Berkovits (2006, pp. 124–126, 252–256); an extensive description of the Western Wall as center for Jewish prayer from a historic-anthropological standpoint, without specifying the confrontations that erupted there during recent years, can be found in this article: Storper-Perez and Goldberg (1994).
2. Prime Minister Levi Eshkol at a meeting with the Chief Rabbis of Israel and spiritual leaders of all of the religious groups in the country, 7 June 1967. Source: Israel National Archives, 98, 2603, GL-2.
3. Statement issued by the World Union for Progressive Judaism, undated (apparently from the end of June, 1968), Israel National Archives, 43, 6423, G-12.
4. M. Kol, Minister of Tourism, addressing the Minister of Justice, Jerusalem, 13 October 1971, Israel National Archives, 77, 7341, A-2.
5. ‘Rules of Conduct for Jews at Holy Places, according to regulations on maintaining holy sites to Jews’, undated (probably from mid-1971), Israel National Archives, 98, 2603, GL-6.
6. Y. Sheinberger, addressing the Minister of Religions and Chairman of the Ministerial Committee for Holy Places, undated. Israel National Archives, 77, 7341, A-2.

7. Israel Ministry of the Interior, Jerusalem Regional Authority, Jerusalem District Planning and Building Committee, protocol from the second meeting of the Subcommittee on the Special Area of East Jerusalem, 3 October 1967, Israel National Archives, 56, 4010, GL-18.
8. The first swearing-in ceremony at the Western Wall was probably the one held for Paratrooper Recruits in March 1968. See: S. Afek, Central Command J-1, re: 'Protocol for swearing-in ceremony of new recruits', March 1968. IDF Archives, 222, 60. The first remembrance candle lit for fallen IDF soldiers by the President of the State of Israel on the eve of Memorial Day, at the Western Wall, was probably conducted for the first time in 1969. See Y. Raviv, Military Secretary to the Minister of Defense, to the Aide-de-Camp of the IDF Chief of Staff, 24 January, 1969, 864, 23.
9. Y. Refael, Minister of Religions, Committee on Internal and Environmental Issues, Session on Planning the Western Wall Plaza, 25 May 1976, Israel National Archives, 60, 501, K-20.
10. Israel Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Aharon Barak, deliberating with group of nine judges, 6 April 2003. Published in *Psakdin*, 57(3), pp. 289–336.
11. Statistics provided by the 'Coordinators of the Masorati Kotel', the Masorati Movement, Jerusalem.
12. There are several agencies that specialize in educational tours for Conservative Jews (e.g. 'Keshet', 'Ramah'). Some agencies are an 'Israeli subsidiary' to agencies operating abroad, which specialize in arranging tours for synagogue groups. In most cases, the agencies work with permanent rabbis, and sometimes the groups are accompanied by a rabbi from abroad who performs the ceremony.

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