

## On Tombs and Rage

*Nir Boms and Ido Mizrahi*

### Jerusalem

Once again, these are “Days of Rage” in Jerusalem and the TV news is replete with those fanning the flames of Arab and Muslim anger over the supposed new threat to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This time, the pretext appears to be the renovation and rededication of a ruined Synagogue located quite a ways from holy site on the background of the ongoing dispute regarding construction in East Jerusalem. And it might be only the beginning. “Do not fear a religious or nonreligious war,” declared Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, since Jerusalem will “always remain Islamic.”

This recent escalation was preceded by a separate round of violent protests in Hebron and elsewhere following a dispute over another holy site. The Israeli decision to renovate a number of heritage sites including the Cave of the Patriarchs and Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem has raised a storm among the Palestinians and even succeeded in creating a rare unified front between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

Mahmoud Abbas termed the Israeli decision “a provocation” that “could provoke a religious war,” and Sheikh Taysir Tamimi, head of the Shari’a Courts in the Palestinian Authority, said it “will lead to a religious war in the area, which will threaten the security of the Middle East and the entire world.” In a prelude to the riots in Jerusalem, he added that it was another part of the plan to take over the Al-Aqsa Mosque and build the Third Temple in its stead.

The district office of Fatah in Hebron called for a general strike and urged schoolchildren to take the streets in protest. It is possible that the seventh grade students missed the lesson on “Muslim holy sites in Palestine” while participating in the protests. In the official PA schoolbook entitled “National Education,” they could have learned about the holy place of Ibrahim (Abraham) which was erected by him and includes the Cave of the Patriarchs and the tombs of “Our Lord Ibrahim, his wife Sara (Sarah), Ishak (Issac) and his wife Rifka (Rebecca), Ya’akub (Jacob) and his wife Laika (Leah).” However, any Jewish connection to the site and the Patriarchs is omitted. A few pages before, there appears a lesson on “attempts to efface the

Palestinian heritage,” and one of the sites mentioned is none other than Rachel’s Tomb, which is called the Mosque of Bilal bin-Rabah (a Habashi slave who converted to Islam and became one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad and the first muezzin in Islam).

But this was not always the case. The schoolbook ‘National Education’ was preceded between 1995 and 2001 by an experimental edition for sixth graders which told of the second-most important religious site in Bethlehem – after the Church of the Nativity – the “Tomb of Rahil (Rachel): the mother of our Lord Joseph and the wife of Ya’akub (Jacob), peace be upon them both.” In the year 2000, Palestinian sixth graders who studied in the experimental edition about the sanctity of Rachel’s Tomb, read one year later that it was an attempt to “Judaize” the Mosque of Bilal bin-Rabah. Pupils who have studied the present schoolbook since 2002 have not experienced confusion and awkwardness as they were not forced to ‘confront’ the experimental edition or cope with a possible Jewish past associated with a holy Muslim place.

The debate over Jerusalem pours more oil on this fire. The first edition of ‘National Education’ for grade 3 (2002) mentioned the Jewish Quarter along with the other three Quarters of the Old City (Muslim, Christian and Armenian). However, this sole reference to the Jewish Quarter in all PA schoolbooks was omitted three years later, in the reprinted edition used to this day. The same fate befell the term “synagogue,” which appeared in the 2004 edition of ‘Our Beautiful Language’ for grade 4 alongside the terms “mosque” and “church,” but was replaced in 2009 with another term denoting a mosque (*jame’*). These two examples are in line with the ‘zero tolerance’ exhibited by Palestinian religious and political leaders regarding the renovation of the ‘Hurva’ synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.

The timing and sensitivity of the Israeli decision regarding heritage sites in Jerusalem and elsewhere can be questioned – and the assertion that other ways could have been found to renovate legacy sites is correct. However, it is clear that those who decided to remove the texts on the Jewish connection to the sites contributed more to stoking the fires of rage.

Introducing politics into religion in an already emotionally-charged conflict can only result in additional days of violence and rage. Ignoring and rewriting history will yield the same results. A different future can be imagined only when revisionism is replaced by shared heritage.

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