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MENECHEM KLEIN
Bar Ilan University, Israel
e-mail: kleinm1@mail.biu.ac.il
ORCID: 0000-0003-2677-0954
DOI: 10.34813/ptr2.2023.1

From shared Muslim–Jewish holy sites and feasts to exclusivity claims, the case of Jerusalem

Abstract. Below I discuss two models of Jerusalem's holy sites and religious costumes: joint Jewish-Muslim shrines and the divided one. The joint model emerged in the late 19th century in direct relation to endorsing modernization and developing local patriotism. The escalating Zionist – Palestinian conflict since the late 1920s produced the separated holy sites model. Jerusalem is the arena where the two models expressed forcefully due to its high religious status and national centrality.

Keywords: model, holy sites, religious customs, Jews, Muslims, Jerusalem.

Below I discuss two models of Jerusalem's Jewish–Muslim holy sites and religious costumes: the joint and the divided. I do not argue that Jerusalem is an exceptional case. Generations long, Jews and Muslims throughout the Middle East shared holy sites. They functioned as centers where residents of near-by towns and villages met physically and symbolically. Jews and Muslims shared those places that in most cases were local saint's graves (Driessen, 2012; Boum, 2012; Carpenter-Latiri, 2012; Ben-Ari & Bilu, 1987; Bilu, 2000, 2005.) Either model or both exist also in other Palestine areas, for instance in Meron (Reiner ND). However, Jerusalem is the arena where the two models expressed most forcefully due to its high religious status and national centrality.

This study deals with Jewish–Muslim holy sites and religious festivals but not with Christian ones. There was no joint Jewish–Christian holy place or religious festival

in Palestine in general and in Jerusalem in particular. Moreover, theologically and historically, Jews were closer to Muslims than to Christians.

Based on primary sources, this article follows relational history method. In the late 20th and early 21st century, historians move from political history and history of elites to every-day life encounters between Jews and Arab in Palestine mixed cities. They, including me, shade new light on the period between the late 19th century and 1948 war. Jews and Arabs, they argue, imagined and practiced their togetherness in everyday life: joint neighborhoods and residential compounds, common marketplace, modern schools and coffee shops, as well as in their dress, the language they spoke and joint religious festivals (Klein, 2014b; Jacobson, 2003, 2011a, 2011b; Levi & Lital, 2008; Tamari, 2009, 2013; Lemir, 2017).

The joint model[1]

The joint model emerged in the late 19th century, prior to the establishment of Arab national movement or Zionism, and existed along the first half of the 20th century. In contrast to the hierarchical relation that defined classical Islamic relations between Jewish subjects and their Muslim ruler, Ottoman modernization reforms lowered the religious barriers between Jews, Muslims and Christians. During this period, Muslims and Jews shared holy sites, religious beliefs and feasts. Their encounter went much beyond pre-modern practices of cohabitation, to the extent of developing joint local patriotism. The joint model ascended in this context of emerging modern identities and costumes whereas medieval Golden Age of Jewish – Muslim cohabitation was part of religiously based order. Rather than a religious identity that subsumes distant regions and various patterns of life under the category of "Jew" or "Muslim", Palestinian Arab Jew, the joint model in Palestine was a local phenomenon that brought the two together. The Jews' inferior status as defined by official Islam did not predetermine the pattern of ongoing relations between Jews and Arabs, nor did it create a firm barrier between the two communities. True, the Ottoman central administration was still committed to the official position, placing a special tax on the Jews and discriminating against them by law. Yet the reality of everyday life was different. The following fact is noteworthy: testimonies about the close relationships between Jews and Muslims in Palestine emanate from the party that should have been the inferior and discriminated one had the principles of the official religion been applied to everyday life. Most are testimonies submitted by the Ottoman Empire Jews rather than by privileged European born Jews who enjoyed the protection of their consulates. Relations were certainly not idyllic and religious differences surfaced at moments of national tension and conflicts. Yet these were moments within the many hours of familiarity and shared life experiences. This expressed also in Arabic terms and Palestinian collective memory. Palestinians publishing in late 19th and early 20th century or reflecting back on these early times, write on *al-yahud al-'arab* (Arab Jews), *yahud awlad 'arab* (native Arab Jews), *al-yahud al muwalidun*

[1] This section based on Klein 2018.

fi Filastin (Palestine-born Jews), *al-yahud al-'asliin* (original Jews) and *abna al-balad* (local Jews) (Jacobson & Naor, 2016, p. 8; Klein, 2014b, p. 21).

Interestingly, the foreign British Mandate authorities used religious categories to classify their subjects (Teller, 2022, p. 15–40). Acknowledging in 1931 that nationalism is taking over, they start using 'Arabs' instead of 'Muslims' and 'Christians'. However, following Balfour Declaration of 1917 that the League of Nations included in the Mandate it gave to Britain in 1922, the latter continued using the title 'Jews' as a synonym to 'Zionists' (Robson, 2011, p. 106–109).

Jerusalem Christians, indeed, were integral part of the new local identity as Jews and Muslims were. However, holy sites were shared by Jews and Muslim but not by Christians, for instance *Nabi Samuel*. Yet, Christians attended Muslim feasts such as *Nabi Musa* welcome reception in Jerusalem or the Jewish feast of *Shim'on HaTzadik*. In these occasions, the feast became local inclusive event and local-patriotic, Palestinian, celebration.

Joint holy sites

Nebi Samuel, a site north to Jerusalem identified since the 12th century by Jews and Muslims as the tomb of the prophet Samuel, was one of those joint places (Meri, 2003). The belief that the prophet could assure the arrival of the rains was held by all the region's inhabitants. At the beginning of the rainy season and later as well, if the year was a dry one, Jews and Muslims would go to the tomb and pray side by side for the prophet's intercession. Jews also visited the tomb on the 28th of their month of *Iyar* [=May], the traditional day of the Prophet Samuel's death. The Ottoman authorities allowed them to spend the entire night and day praying there.

A similar role was played by the Jewish *Shimon HaTzadiq* [Simon the Pious] site in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem. *Shimo'n Bar Yohai* [Simon the son of Yohai] festival on *Lag BeOmer* [a day in May] in the Galilee village Meron near Safed attracts annually a big crowd. Jerusalem Jews compete with the northern celebration by establishing their local Simon festival at the very same day. Documents show that everyone in the nearby neighborhoods, Jews and Muslims of all classes, including black slaves, attended the pilgrimage in 1892 (Tamari & Nassar, 2003, p. 74). During the Mandate period, according to another source, "masses of Arabs" celebrated "the pilgrimage, just like the Jews, with food and sweets." (Sasson, 1981, pp. 200–201). Another festival of Simon the Just was held in the fall, on the traditional date of his death. The custom then was to pray for his intercession in bringing rain during the coming winter (Shiryon, 1943, p. 397; Lev-Tov, 2010; Tamari & Nassar, 2003, p. 74).

Sharing performs, believes and festivals

As a boy, *Wasif Jawhariyyeh* took part in the jovial Purim celebrations held in his Jewish neighborhood, dressing up in a costume just as they did. With the arrival

of spring, the young people of all religions would go out for a picnic on the lawn at the edge of *al-Haram al-Sharif* (Tamari, 2009, pp. 82–92). Arabs would often make a point of reciting the appropriate Jewish blessing when they were served a cup of water or a piece of cake. "They were well-versed in the Jewish holidays and took part in their neighbors' celebrations," writes *Ya'akov Elazar* who was born and raised in Jerusalem Old City (Elazar, 1980, p. 129). Both Jews and Muslims believed that rabbis could work wonders, and that demons and spirits residing around or in their common courtyards could hurt them. In this context, the members of both faiths, of all ages, shared their fears and their ways of coping with them. When Arab youths wanted to persuade their Arab-Jewish neighbors of their sincerity, another Jerusalem Old City native, Ya'akov Yehoshua, wrote, they did so "by swearing in the name of Moses and the holiness of the Ten Commandments, and we were convinced" (Yehoshua, 1977, p. 136). When Muslims returned from their pilgrimages to Mecca, their Jewish neighbors congratulated them and the Muslims shared with them dates from the holy city.

Nebi Musa

Even though *Nebi Musa* lay in the desert about twelve miles from Jerusalem, its pilgrimage festival was very much a Jerusalem celebration and institutionalized Jerusalem's centrality (Asali, 1990, pp. 10, 87–89; Aubin-Boltanski, 2003). The *Nebi Musa* pilgrimage was not assigned a date on the Muslim calendar, nor was it associated with an agricultural season. It was held in accordance with the Orthodox Christian church's calendar, to coincide with Easter. The Muslim festival began precisely a week before the Orthodox Easter and ended on the eve of Good Friday. Before descending the road to *Nebi Musa*, and when they came back, the pilgrims ascended to the *al-Aqsa mosque*. From *al-Aqsa*, they moved to taking the festival's green flag from the Husayni family home, and Prophet Moses's standard and palanquin. These two were placed before those of Abraham that the pilgrims from Hebron brought. Similar ceremony and route took place when they return (Asali, 1990, pp. 101–132; Yazbak, 2010, 2011; Halabi, 2006, 2023).

The participants came from as far away as Hebron in the south and Nablus in the north and since the 1920's also Haifa, Ramleh, Jaffa and Gaza residents. The event brought together different social classes: elite members, urban middle classes and blue collars, rural peasants and Bedouins. The festival, then, was a platform in maintaining national cohesion and mobilizing political support. The fact that members of *Hussayni* family filled the post of *Mufti* of Jerusalem who led the celebration and served in the city administration further enhanced the importance of the festival and Jerusalem's position as a focal point for all of Palestine. The national movement leadership and the British administration used *Nabi Musa* celebrations to gain legitimacy whereas the opponents expressed their protest (Halabi, 2002, 2009, 2023).

Jews did not follow *Nebi Musa* festival participants to the place. However, like many of Jerusalem's inhabitants, they watched the procession as it passed through

the city's streets on its way to *Nebi Musa* and back. Moreover, they did not watch to celebrators as external observes but took a sympathetic view of the festival and its Arab participants. According to *Ya'akov Yehoshua*, Jews displayed a combination of indulgence, arrogance, and understanding for the Muslim tradition that this was the site of Moses's burial. According to the *Torah*, Moses never crossed the Jordan and his burial site is unknown. The Jews nevertheless found a place for the Muslim tradition in their own lives, and to a large extent identified with it, making it part of their common experience with their Muslim neighbors. Jerusalem's Jews felt a special tie to the pilgrims from Hebron. "We imagined," *Yehoshua* wrote, "that the inhabitants of Hebron and its surrounding villages, who, according to [a Jewish] legend, were the descendants of the Jews who had remained in the Holy Land after the destruction of the Second Temple, were making their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem." (Yehoshua, 1977, p. 24). Jews feared walking by the Tomb of the Holy Sepulcher in the Easter season, dreading Easter Christian pilgrims would attack them, but at the *Nebi Musa* festival, "a warm and happy atmosphere prevailed among us. We knew that they were honoring the memory of a prophet and man of God whom we also accepted." (Yehoshua, 1979, pp. 66-67).

In1920, the Palestinian anger on the Brits and its Zionist client for preferring Jewish national rights to those of the Palestinians, then 90 percent of the population, co-opted *Nebi Musa* celebrations. About 70,000 people participated in the reception for the pilgrims returning from *Nebi Musa*. Incendiary political speeches invoked anti-Jewish motifs from Islamic tradition. *'Arif al-'Arif*, then a local newspaper editor, declared: "Palestine is our land, the Jews are our dogs!" (Segev, 1999, p. 128; al –Sakakini, 1990, pp. 125–126, 137). The demagogic speeches fired up the mob. It took the British three days and a series of firm political moves to halt the cycle of mutual bloodshed and violence that left five Jews and four Arabs dead, and 216 Jews and 23 Arabs wounded (Pappe, 2002, pp. 171–172, 219–226; Segev, 1999, pp. 109–110, 117). In 1920, Jews "remembered the old times," *Ezra HaMenachem* related, when "youths and old men reported in the early morning to the gate in the wall to receive the celebrants with cheers. Their procession, displaying many flags, passed through the Jewish alleys to the sound of drums and cymbals. The Jews cheered as they came and sprinkled rose water on them… Just a few days went by," he wrote, after spirits had been fired and violence broke out, "and life got back on track. Jews and Arabs again met with each other, and both apologized for the spilt blood." (Hamenachem, 1988, pp. 49, 51).

The divided

The escalating Zionist–Palestinian conflict produced the separation model. Religious festivals and holy sites were instrumental in building common national imagination in India (Telikicherla, 2009, p. 108–109; Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2009, pp. 34–35), and in East and Central Europe (Obstat, 1998). In Palestine, each of the two national

movements used and still employ religious sites as political tool to base on legitimacy and sovereignty claims.

The Temple Mount compound where Muslims pray in the upper plaza and Jews below it next to the Western Wall, clearly expresses this model. Based on theological arguments and political reality, the origins of this separation are more than 2000 years old. The sanctity of the plaza, Jewish law determines, remains intact even though the Temple is in ruins. Unable practically to implement the preconditioned ritual purification and not knowing the Temple boundaries in the larger plaza, Jewish law forbid ascending the Temple Mount. In addition, different Roman, Cristian and Muslim rulers prevented Jews from entering the site. In exchange, Jews imagined the Western Wall being the destroyed Temple wall not its peripheral one and prayed next to it sporadically during the late antiquity and the mediaeval. In the 16th century, the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent institutionalized the Wall as a Jewish pray site under Muslim land ownership. For their part, Muslims pointed it as the place where the prophet Mohammad tied his winged horse after his night journey from Mecca to enter the *Haram al-Sharif* (Noble Sanctity) on his way to Heaven. Thus, although Jewish and Muslim sanctity claims overlap, actually they divide the site (Goren, 2019; Tzoreff, 2023).

As the Zionist–Palestinian conflict developed in early 20th century, each national movement used Jerusalem holy sites as a symbolic profit to base on its exclusive claim of belonging and self-rule. In addition, the Zionist tried to buy Muslim properties next to the Wall and challenged the restrictions on Jewish prayer management that the Ottomans introduced, and the British authorities regulated. The Palestinians saw these as expansion attempt towards the Temple Mount. Local conflicts next to the Western Wall since September 1928, spread in August 1929 throughout the country ending with 133 Jews and 113 Palestinians killed, and 339 Jews and 232 Palestinians injured (Goren, 2019, p. 215). When 1929 riots ended, Jewish–Muslim relations in Jerusalem restored (Klein, 2014b). This is not to say that the riots did not affect Jews' mind, in particular that of hardcore Zionists.

In 1967, Israel occupied and unilaterally annexed Jordanian Jerusalem including the Temple Mount. Under its overall sovereignty and in coordination with Jordan, Israel restored the separation model providing local Muslim authorities religious autonomy in managing the Temple Mount and allowing Jews to pray only in the Western Wall plaza. In the 21st century, however, Israel gradually changed this model. Encouraged by rabbis from mainstream Orthodoxy claim knowing which areas in the current plaza had remained out of the Temple walls and right wing politicians, national – religious associations operate breaking almost 1400 years of exclusive Muslim worship and management. Orthodox Jews visiting and praying privately on the Temple Mount, once a rare phenomenon, became common during the second decade of the 21st century. A few of them go further calling imposing Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs model where Israel forced upon the Muslim to divide the space for Jewish prayer. In early 2021, Jewish prayer quorum (i.e., ten or more adult mails needed for a collective prayer) regularly pray on the site uninterrupted by the Israeli police. The visitors' agenda and discourse varied from praying, including in

a synagogue to be established there, to take over the management of the site from the Muslim religious authorities, to forbid Muslim prayer, to build the third Jewish Temple. The Palestinian protests often led to violent clashes between them and the Israeli police. International intervention resulted in short-lived restored separation (Klein, 2023).

When Israel conquered *Nebi Samul* in 1967, religious Jews saw this as a sign from heaven, an invitation to return to the tomb, reestablish it as a Jewish site, and push the Muslim presence to its margins. In 1995, Israel converted a large area around the tomb, one that included Palestinian homes, into a national park, imposing considerable restrictions on the daily lives of the residents. The separation fence built by Israel during the early 2000s circles around *Nebi Samuel*, placing it on the Israeli side of the structure even though the site was never formally annexed by Israel. The Muslim site was thus cut off from its surroundings and local Palestinians do not have free access to it.

After the 1948 war, *Nebi Musa* lost its Palestinian national status and became a small festival. Neither the Jordanians, that ruled the place between the 1948 and 1967 wars, nor the Israelis that occupy it since Judne 1967, interested in helping the Palestinians to base their national movement on *Nebi Musa*. Although after the 1967 occupation Israel did not formally forbid *Nebi Musa* feast, Israel de facto made it impossible by including it in a large security zone reserved for military exercise. On the other hand, the PLO in its formative years based its national claim on secular nationalism and armed struggle. Oslo agreements of 1993–1994 transferred *Nebi Musa* from Israel to the Palestinian Authority. Following, in 1997 the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Religious Affairs revived the pilgrimage aiming to co-opt the religious feast to gain legitimacy. However, contrary to the past the pilgrimage attracted less people, Israel limited the celebration to a narrow area adjacent to the sanctuary and did not allow it to start and end in Jerusalem (Aubin-Boltanski, 2003. Cohen & Amnon 2006).

Similarly, after 1967 *Shimon HaTzadiq* site in *Sheikh Jarrah* lost its integrative function and became an exclusive Jewish Site. Moreover, the surrounding neighborhood, turn into Jewish–Palestinian frontier. In the 21st century, Jewish settlers entered *Shieh Jarrah* to impose Jewish domination over the Palestinian neighborhood. Israeli law provides former Jewish owner or those who represent them (the settlers) the ownership over buildings that they possessed prior to 1948 war or inherited. Nevertheless, Palestinian refugee, including those who live in *Sheikh Jarrah* that face evacuation, are legally prevented claim ownership of their pre-1948 war property in West Jerusalem. Sheikh Jarrah struggle is unique in combining a holy place, settlements building in 1967 occupied areas with the 1948 war refugee problem.

Conclusion

Holy sites are social constructions and operates within given socio-political context. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the joint model existed in a reality of highly

mixed population. Religious differences between Jews and Muslims still existed but with limited divisive power than earlier due to rapid modernization. Thus, it is wrong to conclude that religion supports only exclusive national identity, or that Jerusalem was fully polarized along ethno-national lines.

The escalating Zionists–Palestinian conflict in 1929 and the 1936–39 gradually eroded the joint model until its end in 1948 War. Palestine changed the holy places from platforms for inclusive local identity to place of exclusion, conflict, and domination.

In the context of the existing power relations between Israel and the Palestinians, the separation model rules over Jewish minds and acts. Joint holy sites and religious festivals are part of the past not the present. Yet this past contains a clear lesson. It shows that the popular deterministic perception on religion as the main force behind the Israel–Palestinian struggle is wrong. Religion did not create the conflict. National movements, however, dragged holy places into the escalating confrontation.

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