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## Faithful to the bitter end?

By Michael S. Arnold

(August 18) - Time and again throughout Jewish history, says Gershon Salomon, foreign powers have occupied Jerusalem and taken over the Temple Mount, desecrating the Jewish people's holiest site.

First the Babylonians occupied the city, destroying the First Temple and exiling the inhabitants of Judea. Some 400 years later the Greeks took control of the rebuilt Jewish temple, desecrating it with pigs and pagan idols, and sparking the Maccabean revolt that briefly reasserted Jewish sovereignty in the land.

A few hundred years after that, Roman legions overran Jerusalem, sacking the city and razing the Second Temple to the ground. Again, the destruction was a prelude to Jewish exile, this time lasting 2,000 years. In the interim, first Christians and then Moslems built places of worship above the Holy of Holies -, in Jewish tradition, the seat of God's presence on earth.

Even in his worst nightmares, Salomon, leader of the Temple Mount Faithful, never imagined that a sovereign Jewish leadership would contemplate turning over control of the holy plateau to foreign control.

Yet that is exactly what Prime Minister Ehud Barak and a small coterie of secular, left-wing aides proposed at Camp David, Salomon and other Temple Mount activists say, even if the initiative was disguised by convoluted proposals and sweetened with an insistence that any final agreement include the right of Jews to pray on the mount.

Quoting Scripture, Salomon says that God promised to protect the Jews so long as they upheld the sanctity of His holy mountain. The implication, of course, is that by relinquishing sovereignty over the Temple Mount Israel also would be forfeiting God's protection. The Palestinians know this, he claims, which is why they insist on controlling the mount.

By discussing arrangements for Palestinian control of the Temple Mount, Salomon asserts, Barak is inviting the third exile of the Jews - and Salomon and his followers are not about to let it happen.

"I don't believe that Jewish life can continue to exist without the Temple Mount," he says. "The moment such an agreement is signed, I am sure that tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Israelis and Jews from around the world will go to the Temple Mount. We will force our way in to pray, and we will refuse to move, we will stop the agreement with our bodies. If necessary, we will give our lives not to allow [the Temple Mount] to be given to foreigners, not to see this terrible moment."

AS NEGOTIATIONS with the Palestinian Authority approach their endgame, and as control of Jerusalem, and especially of the Temple Mount emerge as the final barriers to a comprehensive agreement, right-wing activists are stepping up their struggle to prevent concessions on the mount.

"Everything will stand or fall on this issue," says Moshe Feiglin, leader of Zo Artzenu and one of the driving forces behind the demonstrations held each afternoon outside the Old City's Lions' Gate. "If you give up the Temple Mount of your own free will you give up your identity - you commit spiritual suicide. There's a large majority behind us on this issue that doesn't want to disconnect from the dream of generations. Unfortunately, that majority is being overcome by a small minority that don't want to be Jews."

Seven activist groups - all but the Temple Mount Faithful, in fact - recently merged in an umbrella organization called The United Association of Movements for the Holy Temple, under the direction of Bar-Ilan University literature professor Hillel Weiss. Trying to reverse the traditional halachic prohibition on Jews going up to the Temple Mount - issued to prevent "unclean" Jews from accidentally stepping into the area of the Holy of Holies - Weiss and others are collecting signatures of prominent rabbis who say that Jewish prayer indeed is allowed, and should be encouraged, on most areas of the Temple Mount.

Activist Yisrael Medad, founder of El Har Hashem - To the Mountain of the Lord - hopes to organize marches around the walls of the Old City and prayer gatherings at the Old City's gates. Other groups, such as the Old City's Temple Institute, have been building replicas of temple utensils from specifications in the Bible, and publish a newsletter to alert Jews around the world to what they call the desecration of the Temple Mount by unsupervised Wakf construction.

According to reports from last month's Camp David summit, Barak either suggested or accepted American proposals that would offer the Palestinians unprecedented concessions in Jerusalem, including control over Arab neighborhoods of the city, unfettered access to al-Aksa Mosque, and the freedom to fly a Palestinian flag from the Dome of the Rock.

Other suggestions reportedly included a plan for shared control that would give the Palestinians sovereignty above ground - that is, for everything that happens on the Temple Mount - while preserving Israeli sovereignty below ground, where the ruins of the ancient temples ostensibly are located.

If such ideas are accepted, Weiss says, it will lead to a crisis of faith among right-wing and religious Jews.

"It will be like Judas Iscariot all over again," he says. In such a case, "I believe that many Jews, even hundreds of thousands, will return their identity cards to the state. I won't feel that I belong to this state anymore, psychologically and even legally."

Rabbi Chaim Richman, public-affairs director of the Temple Institute, says concessions on the Temple Mount are likely to lead to bloodshed.

"Giving sovereignty of the holiest place in the Jewish world to the expressed enemies of the Jewish people, I imagine there would be a lot of people who wouldn't be able to live with themselves," he says - though he personally opposes violence, as the prophets said the Third Temple would come about by peaceful means. "To see the Palestinian flag flying there would probably lead to violence in Jewish circles."

Many activists are not bothered by the prospect that their opposition could scuttle an agreement, possibly leading Israel into another war.

Some, indeed, seem to welcome the possibility, believing that from the ensuing chaos will emerge a new Israeli leadership not afraid to take bold steps to assert Jewish control over the Temple Mount - and, perhaps, even build the prophesied Third Temple, the construction of which is expected in some circles to usher in the Messianic Age.

Not everyone accepts the activists' apocalyptic vision. In addition to many left-wing and secular Israelis who couldn't care less about dividing Jerusalem or giving up the Temple Mount, there is the steadfast opposition of the Palestinians.

The Temple Mount - or Haram a-Sharif, as the area is known to Moslems - is "a closed file," Wakf spokesman Adnan Husseini says. "The issue has been settled by God, and there will be no negotiations.

"Moslems can't discuss it and can't make any compromise. This is the stance that every Palestinian and Arab and Moslem will adopt, forever.

"If [the Jews] want to dream of something that was here 3,000 years ago, then we will dream about the situation before 1948, when there was no State of Israel."

Citing the Maccabean revolt against the Greeks, however, Salomon says that the prospect of war is little reason for this generation of Jews to shirk its divine duty.

"In the moment of crisis, the great revolution will begin," he says in a telephone interview from Canada, where he is on a speaking tour. "We are very close to destruction. The dark clouds of war are coming close.

"Especially if we bring [the Palestinians] into Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, we shall be attacked, and this time from within the very heart of our land."

At issue, perhaps, is the very purpose of the Zionist enterprise: whether the State of Israel exists so that Jews can live in safety and prosperity like any other nation, or whether it is a vehicle for accomplishing the Jews' biblical destiny of spreading God's message to the world and hastening the coming of the Messiah.

"I don't believe that the great redemptional step the God of Israel started 52 years ago was intended to be just a short episode in history," Salomon says. "It is the fulfillment of prophecy, part of the great dream of the God of Israel Himself, to see His nation redeemed."

THE ROOTS of the current standoff, it would appear, lie in decisions made by defense minister Moshe Dayan immediately after the Six Day War. A few days after the message "the Temple Mount is in our hands" crackled through his earpiece, Dayan met with Moslem leaders at al-Aksa and promised, to the astonishment of the defeated Arabs, not to interfere in their administration of the site.

Dayan's motives appear to have been twofold: to demonstrate the Jews' respect for freedom of religion, and to avoid provoking the immense Moslem world, thereby immortalizing a conflict that many Jews believed would end shortly after Israel's decisive victory on the battlefield.

Yet Dayan set two conditions. Rabble-rousing sermons against the Jews would be forbidden, he wrote in his autobiography, or "we would of course take appropriate action."

In addition, Dayan wrote, "the one thing we would introduce was freedom of Jewish access without limitation or payment. This compound, as my hosts well knew, was our Temple Mount. Here stood our Temple during ancient times, and it would be inconceivable for Jews not to be able freely to visit this holy place now that Jerusalem was under our rule."

Both of these conditions were quickly abandoned by Israeli authorities.

Later that summer, after IDF chaplain Rabbi Shlomo Goren led prayers on the mount during Tisha Be'av, authorities backtracked and reinstated the previous ban on Jewish worship on the mount.

"It was evident that if we did not prevent Jews from praying in what was now a mosque compound, matters would get out of hand and lead to a religious clash," Dayan wrote.

What ensued was a tenuous modus vivendi that lasted for most of the next three decades. The Wakf was allowed to continue running affairs on top of the Temple Mount in coordination, to one extent or another, with Israeli police, while Jews prayed only at the Western Wall at the mount's base. Jews were allowed to enter the mount like any other tourists, but "suspicious" individuals - known activists or anyone who looked like an Orthodox Jew - could enter only under Wakf and police guard, and were

evicted if they appeared to be moving their lips in prayer.

That arrangement began to unravel with the Palestinian Authority's quiet takeover of the Wakf from Jordan after the 1994 Oslo Agreements, and especially after the riots that followed the opening of a new exit to a Western Wall tourist tunnel in September 1996.

The deterioration has accelerated in the past year, as the Wakf, aided by Israeli Arab activists from the Islamic Movement, has flouted Israel's antiquities law and removed tons of artifact-laden dirt while building a third, subterranean mosque on the mount. Recent newspaper reports have cited plans to build a fourth, above-ground, mosque as well.

Fearing a confrontation, the government has refused to stop the earthworks, but Temple Mount activists see the development as the logical consequence of decades of timid Israeli policy.

"The Moslems see that they're able to strike at what is supposed to be the holiest site to us and we don't react," Richman says. "It's like we put a sign saying 'Shoot Me' on our foreheads. If we show that we have no self-respect, what do we expect from them?"

IT WAS precisely that loss of "self-respect" that led Salomon and a group of 15 friends to form the Temple Mount Faithful at the same time as Dayan was making his historic concessions.

"At that very moment, we felt our nation starting the march back to exile," Salomon says. "We were living in a moment of redemption but our leadership missed the opportunities, one after another. Since the Six Day War, Israel has been led by leadership that is too small to understand the importance of the times we are living in."

Such rhetoric is commonplace among Temple Mount activists, and offers clues as to their worldview. Leaders like Barak have misunderstood the true import of the struggle for the Temple Mount by approaching it from the standpoint of realpolitik, Feiglin says.

In fact, he says, it is a religious struggle between Islam - aided by Christianity, which for years has called for the Old City to be internationalized and lately has called for sovereignty on the Temple Mount to be left "to God," that is to say, undecided - and Judaism.

And what of al-Aksa mosque, the third-holiest site in Islam, that currently occupies the mount? Most Temple Mount activists ridicule the notion that a rebuilt temple will miraculously descend from the sky in a ball of fire. Yet they accept the equally fatalistic idea that Christian and Moslem leaders - either recognizing the Jews' astonishing spiritual purity or their unbendable will - will beg the Jews to build a Third Temple and put the mount to its intended use.

Salomon, in fact, says that after the coming cataclysm a revitalized Israeli leadership will dismantle al-Aksa and the Dome of the Rock and rebuild them brick by brick "in their rightful place" - Mecca - and

that the Moslem world will accept this. The rebuilt Temple, in this view, will be accepted by the entire world, fulfilling biblical prophecies that it will be a place of worship not just for the Jews but for all mankind.

In the meantime, many activists say they will accept a small synagogue on the periphery of the mount, an idea raised earlier this month by Haifa Chief Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen. The nation's top Rabbinical Council postponed discussion of the proposal last week.

Richman sees the idea of a small synagogue as something of an insult.

"It's the old ghetto mentality: Give us this little corner and we won't get in your way, thank you very much," he says. "There's no way-station on the road to building the Temple. Even a 50 percent desecration of God's name is still a desecration of God's name."

Though they question his motives, many activists compliment Barak for insisting on Jewish access to the Temple Mount in a final peace agreement. Others, however, say it is cold comfort, like having someone steal your wife and then allowing you to visit her from time to time, in Feiglin's words.

Medad does not believe that Arafat will sign an agreement that allows Jews to pray on the Temple Mount - or, citing the behavior of the Jordanians when they controlled the Jewish Quarter between 1948 and 1967, that Arafat would honor such clauses even if he did agree.

Still, he says, accepting the synagogue idea is a smart tactical move - because the expected Palestinian opposition would show the world that Islam, unlike Judaism, is opposed to sharing holy sites.

"Even [a small synagogue] would be problematic for the Arabs," Medad says. "But I want to make a statement that we're not out to destroy [Moslem holy sites]; we want to share. By showing that they're not willing to do even that, we can show their true face and the nature of their partnership. It would make my job as a Temple Mount activist easier to gain more empathy and support."

BEFORE gaining international support, however, Temple Mount activists will have to shore up their base inside Israel. Even though Arafat rejected Barak's suggested compromises - Richman compares it to the biblical story of God hardening Pharaoh's heart - many analysts here have noted that the government's willingness to discuss a practical division of Jerusalem sparked little domestic unrest.

Medad, who advocates stressing the national, as opposed to the religious, import of the site, doesn't find this surprising.

"There has been no mainstream Temple Mount activist group that has succeeded in talking to the majority of the people, because they have refused to adopt legitimate messages that could be understood by the majority of the population," he says. "When they hear people talking about mikva'ot [ritual baths] and ritual purity, it sounds like mumbo-jumbo."

Already, Richman says, there has been a dramatic rise in consciousness about the significance of the Temple Mount over the last decade, especially since the Wakf's destruction of archaeological remains over the last year. And Feiglin says the pressure for a final peace agreement, which may result in a second summit next month, will also help force the Temple Mount issue onto the national agenda.

Salomon, too, doesn't think that raising support in the hour of need will be a problem. Though the majority's silence over the Camp David proposals is a mark of the low spiritual state to which the nation has sunk, he says, Jews have a tradition of rising to the occasion.

"This nation at least has one wonderful characteristic," he says. "When it feels that the knife is lying on its throat, then it awakes."

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