

{SEPTEMBER 18 2004}

THE TEMPLE MOUNT BOMBERS

The Security Service is haunted by a terrible fear: that another Israeli Prime Minister will be assassinated. The extreme right-wing, which does not hide its admiration for Yigal Amir and his deed, harbors some who dream of a similar action. After all, if Amir succeeded in murdering the Oslo process, why shouldn't another Amir succeed in murdering the process of dismantling the settlements in the Gaza Strip?

But the Security Service also entertains an even greater fear: that a Jewish terror group will bomb the mosques on the Temple Mount.

Years ago, a Jewish underground organization was preparing to do exactly that. It was uncovered before it could carry out its plans. Now similar plots are afoot.

The Security Service believes that this action is intended to put an end to Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan. Bombing the al-Aqsa Mosque and/or the Dome of the Rock would inflame the whole Arab and Muslim world. It would cause profound upheavals, bring down Arab regimes, perhaps ignite a fundamentalist revolution throughout the region. In such a situation, who would think about evacuating settlements?

All this is true, but it does not touch the roots of the conspiracy. The bombing of the Haram al-Sharif mosques is an enterprise that goes well beyond topical issues – it is a revolutionary act that would change the Jewish religion itself. From the point of view of the potential bombers, that is the main thing.

In Israel, Jewish history is divided into three “houses”, meaning three temples:

The First Temple was supposedly built by King Solomon in the tenth century BC and destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in the year 586 BC. The people of Judea were taken as captives to Babylon and about 50 years passed before they were allowed to return to Jerusalem and build the temple again.

The building of the Second Temple was finished in 516 BC. It was renovated and expanded by King Herod around 20 BC and destroyed by the Roman general Titus in 70 AC.

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The Third Temple does not exist, but the new Jewish community that started to establish itself in Palestine in 1882 often calls itself the “Third House”. (When Moshe Dayan became hysterical at the beginning of the Yom Kippur war, he started lamenting the “Destruction of the Third House”). But this is only a symbolic term – not one of the Zionist movement’s Founding Fathers nor any of the founders of the State of Israel, dreamed of building a new temple.

The reason for this is rooted in the events of 1934 years ago. When the Romans besieged Jerusalem, before the town fell and was destroyed, a leading rabbi, Yokhanan Ben-Zakkai, was smuggled out in a coffin. He approached the Roman commander and succeeded in getting permission from him to establish a Jewish religious center in Yavneh, between Jaffa and Asdod.

That was the beginning of a revolution in the Jewish religion.

“The First House” was a rather insignificant edifice. Contrary to the Bible, there is no historical evidence whatsoever that the empire of David and Solomon ever existed. Jerusalem was a mere hamlet, Judea a negligible entity. The Jewish religion as we know it came into being only in the Babylonian exile, and since then two thirds of the Jews (as they have been called since then) lived outside of Palestine.

The “Second House”, too, began as a rather insignificant affair, as attested by a contemporary prophet, but it spread in the course of time. King Herod, a great builder, tried to win the hearts of his detractors by converting the Temple into a magnificent structure.

Even before that, a priestly aristocracy had sprung up around the Temple and established its position in the Jewish community of Judea. Its political expression was the Sadducee party. Against it an opposition party, the Pharisees, was formed. They allowed for a much wider interpretation of the holy scriptures and believed in another world. At the time of this struggle, Jewish religious creativity flourished and the Bible was written. Since the priestly establishment was in power, the Temple plays a central role in the Bible. The ritual sacrifice of animals accompanied other practices connected with the Temple, the symbolic habitation of the Almighty.

Jesus, a Jewish revolutionary, rebelled against the commercialization of the Temple, as did many of the Pharisees. The Hasmonean dynasty, which was based on the priestly aristocracy, considered the Pharisees its enemies and executed many of them.

All this changed when the Temple was destroyed. The structure disappeared, together with the cult of sacrifices. The Jerusalemite aristocracy was eliminated, the priests lost everything. The Jewish religion changed course.

From then on, the rabbis, successors of the Pharisees, were dominant in the Jewish community and its religion. Long before the destruction of the Second Temple, the

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great majority of Jews lived outside Palestine. After the destruction (and the futile Bar-Kokhba rebellion of 135 AC), the Jewish community in Palestine dwindled. Jerusalem became a dream, and all significant events in the development of the Jewish religion occurred far away from there.

After the destruction of the temple, the Jewish religion became a matter of laws and commandments unconnected with any particular territory. The Land of Israel and Jerusalem became more symbols than a territorial reality. Judaism did not even demand that its believers make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as Islam requires its believers to travel to Mecca at least once in their life.

Until the advent of modern Zionism, Jews never once tried to return en masse to Palestine – indeed, this was explicitly forbidden by their religion. When half a million Jews were expelled from Catholic Spain in 1492, they dispersed throughout the Muslim Ottoman Empire, but only a few went to Palestine which, too, was an Ottoman province. Napoleon's call to the Jews to set up a Jewish State in Palestine fell on deaf ears. The first proponents of the modern Zionist idea, long before the appearance of Theodor Herzl, were Englishmen and Americans motivated by Christian religious impulses.

During the last few centuries, European-American Judaism became more and more a religion imbued with a universal moral message. Jewish thinkers believed that it was the “mission” of the Jews to bring universal ethics to the nations of the world, seeing that as the real substance of Judaism.

Zionism came into being as a part of the nationalist revolution in Europe and as a reaction to its generally anti-Semitic character. It originated the theory that the Jews are a nation like other European nations, and that this nation must set up its own state in the country now called Palestine. Not by accident did the teachings of Herzl arouse the violent and vocal opposition of almost all the great rabbis of his time, whether Hassidim or their opponents the Mitnagdim, whether orthodox or reformist.

But when the Zionist community in Palestine established a state, something happened to Judaism there. The connection with the territory, the soil, changed the face of the religion, as it did to all other parts of national life. It is no exaggeration to claim that the Jewish religion in Israel underwent a mutation, which has become more and more extreme in recent years.

A religion with a universal message became a tribal cult. A religion of ethics became a religion of holy places. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, a Jew of the old kind, defined the religion of the settlers as a pagan, idolatory cult.

The new cult of the temple is the climax of this process. The practical preparations for the destruction of the mosques and the restoration of the temple, together with

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animal sacrifices and other temple cults, constitute a break with the last two thousand years of Jewish religion. It is a religious revolution of historic dimensions.

If this tendency becomes dominant in the State of Israel, it will not, I believe, lead to the building of the Third Temple but to the destruction of the "Third House". The Second Temple, together with the Jewish people in this country, came to a violent end because a small minority of fanatical Zealots, who were very similar to today's extremist settlers, came to power in the Jewish community and dragged it into a mad, hopeless war. That can happen again.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, something to think about.