

Delirious Jerusalem: Decoding a Sacred Terrain

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Less than three weeks after the 2023 events of October 7th, on the 11th of Cheshvan¹—known for the annual celebration of Rachel the Matriarch²—thousands of Jews made a pilgrimage to the Turbat al-Qamaria grave near Mea Shearim³ neighborhood in Western Jerusalem. The tense days, which for security reasons prevented the traditional revelry at Rachel's Tomb (located at the northern entrance to the Palestinian city of Bethlehem) brought a crowd of followers to an unprecedented mass prayer at what was only recently identified as the burial site of Benjamin, Rachel's son. The ancient building, attributed to Jewish tradition but considered as a Muslim heritage site,⁴ was again declared a pilgrimage destination after decades of being locked and neglected.

At the initiative of the Benyamin Ben-Yaakov and Rachel Association and the Jews United Organization, and in coordination with the local authorities, the site was prepared for the occasion: a separate entrance was allocated for women on one side of the tomb, while its front served as the large plaza for men. Besides efforts to strengthen the complex as a Jewish sacred site, various channels and relevant parties worked to expedite renovations, permits and certification in preparation for opening its doors even on weekdays.

According to key activists involved,⁵ the tradition linking Benjamin to the place is not new. In recent years, ultra-Orthodox groups gathered in the garden established by the municipality near the grave, to mark the day of Benjamin's death. The initiative gained momentum this year, following the IDF's⁶ decision to reduce the revelry in Rachel's Tomb due to the war. According to the Torah Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, and tradition holds that Benjamin died on the date he was born, making their celebration date the same. Hence, the other graves in the structure are believed to be those of Benjamin's sons: Bela, Becher, and Hafim.⁷

This occurrence marks the latest in a long chain of harassments, struggles, interpretations, mythologies and conflicting narratives that shaped the place. The charged landscape of Rachel's Tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem reflects itself in another—the hill behind what is now known as 17 Strauss Street in Western Jerusalem, a site that encapsulates a centuries-old religious and cultural dispute, one of sanctification, dispossession, and appropriation.

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1 According to the Hebrew calendar, it occurs in the October 26th, 2024, in the Gregorian calendar.

2 Also known as the Jewish Mother's Day.

3 Mea Shearim (lit., "hundred gates") is one of the oldest Ashkenazi neighborhoods in Jerusalem outside of the Old City. It is populated by orthodox Ashkenazi and was built by members of the Old Yishuv.

4 By the Antiquities Authority and the Jerusalem Municipality.

5 Nir Hasson, "The doors were broken, the sign was hung up— and the tomb of the Al-Kimri family in Jerusalem became Benjamin's tomb," *Haaretz*, January 15, 2024. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/local/2024-01-15/ty-article-magazine/.premium/0000018c-eddc-df1e-a5ff-eddd02c20000>

6 The Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

7 Ibid.



Fig. 1: The holy shrine of the Prophets, Jerusalem, Palestine, c. 1918

The Hill: Introduction

For hundreds of years, immigrants and pilgrims to Jerusalem coming from the west side encountered a familiar sight: a high hill topped by a unique burial structure. (Fig. 1) Over the years, a mosque was added to the hill, and the compound was soon obscured by accelerated construction. Many stories have been told about the site, including a Jerusalem Kabbalistic tradition identifying the hill as Fatcha Dekarta—the entrance to the city that connects the Jerusalem Above and the Jerusalem Below. According to this tradition, this is where Messiah son of Joseph would appear, heralding the coming of Messiah son of David.⁸

8 Elazar Horovitz, *Mossad HaYesod: an extract from the history of the General Committee of the Knesset of Israel Jerusalem, which contains the main points of the settlement's history*, Jerusalem: The General Committee of the Knesset of Israel, 1958, 269-70.

According to traditional Jewish sources, the redemption will unfold in two distinct phases linked to two messiahs, *Mashiach ben Yosef* (the *Mashiach* the son of Yosef) and *Mashiach ben David* (the *Mashiach* the son of David). *Mashiach ben Yosef* will put in place the material conditions for the redemption, after which he will “die” and be replaced by *Mashiach ben David*, who will bring the process of redemption to fruition. The first Messiah will establish the practical - logistical stages, such as the establishment of national frameworks, army and industry, while the second, the spiritual-ideological Messiah, will bring the people to their spiritual perfection.

In the early twentieth century, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (HaRav Kook, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem 1919-1921, and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine 1921-1935) identified the secular Zionist movement with *Mashiach ben Yosef*. The goal of secular Zionism was to normalize the Jewish people by establishing and then protecting a sovereign Jewish nation like other nations. Just as King Shaul's role was to prepare the way for the coming of King David, secular Zionism would prepare the way for *Mashiach ben David*. HaRav Kook's understanding of the messianic process has become the standard view of mainstream Religious Zionism.

In the Arab tradition, however, the hill is attributed to nothing less than the burial place of the three prophets of the monotheistic religions—Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. This tradition influenced British Commissioner John Chancellor to name the nearby street “The Prophets” (*Rehov HaNevi'im*).

But from a secular point of view, the site has long been mythological for other reasons. Strategically situated along a topographical ridge on the country's watershed line, Strauss Street was considered the dividing line between the secular culture of Jaffa Road to the south, and the Haredi (Jewish Ultra-Orthodox) culture of Mea Shearim and Geula neighborhoods to the north. In the 1950s, it became the chosen site for the headquarters of the local socialist party, aiming to impede ultra-Orthodox expansion southward. The building stood as a secular anomaly in its surroundings, while by the end of the twentieth century, amid extensive demographic and political changes, it was modified and repurposed almost exclusively for ultra-Orthodox institutes.

These different perspectives indicate three key players: the secular-socialist Zionists, the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Muslim Palestinians. Over the years, tensions between them have given rise to evolving interpretations and narratives concerning the place and its rituals. Within this, holiness is expressed as a practice of routines but also through spatial definitions, territorial boundaries and points of interest as reflected in the various architectures built on the site over the years. Moreover, each of these architectures are viewed as emblematic of a relentless imperialist movement – imperialism in the sense of claiming ownership, defining political, social, ethnic and cultural sovereignty and setting up representations. As W.J.T. Mitchell suggests in his text “Imperial Landscapes”:

“Imperialism is clearly not a simple, single, or homogeneous phenomenon, but the name of a complex system of cultural, political, and economic expansion and domination that varies with the specificity of places, people, and historical moments. It is not a ‘one-way’ phenomenon but a complicated process of exchange, mutual transformation, and ambivalence. It is a process conducted simultaneously at concrete levels of violence, expropriation, collaboration, and coercion, and at a variety of symbolic or representational levels whose relation to the concrete is rarely mimetic or transparent.”⁹

Following these ideas, this paper explores the ongoing negotiations over the place, uncovering the local forces that have structured this contested hill. The chapters, named after the architectural typologies found on the site—turba, tent, mosque, headquarters, playground—serve as points of departure, offering different spatial readings and pronounced associations with the impact and manifestation of imperialist movement. Through the study of these built-up layers, we can identify the interlacement of factors and changing narratives that determined the site's evolution and understand *landscape* as a medium of exchange between space and the events that shape it.¹⁰

Moreover, we can observe a discourse that avoids being an “epic tale,” emerging instead from multiplication of voices and contributors, and reflecting the frictions that arise from the encounter of diverse architectural experiences.¹¹

9 W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 9.

10 Ibid., 5.

11 This notion was mentioned by Paolo Scrivano in his review of Jean-Louis Cohen's *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*, where he referred to “the question of the concatenation of diverse historical episodes (that) brings back the problem of chronology and the complication of composing a ‘tale’ with often diverging developments”. According to Scrivano “Cohen overtly borrows Fernand Braudel's concept of multiple temporalities — which the French historian applied to the study of the Mediterranean basin — to operate an analysis of buildings and projects based on the notion of ‘stylistic co-existence’.” In: Paolo Scrivano. “Narratives of Modern Architecture as One. A Review of *The Future of Architecture: Since 1889*.” *Architectural Histories*, 1, 1 (2013): 7. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/ah.ag>.

Turba

Muslim landscape

Turbat al-Qameria was part of a prominent chain of buildings that surrounded ancient Jerusalem on all sides. "Everyone who came to Jerusalem from the west on the route from Lifta or the Roman road saw it, and this is what heralded the proximity to Jerusalem."¹²

According to Tawfik Deadala, a researcher with the Antiquities Authority, the turba is associated with the Ayyubid period of the late 12th century AD and is considered the most magnificent tomb structure outside the city walls from that era.¹³ Muslim tradition attributes its construction to honor two warriors from the Al-Qamaria family who accompanied Saladin's army during the conquest of Jerusalem from the Crusaders between 1251 and 1266.¹⁴ Subsequent burials over the following centuries have resulted in a total of five tombstones within the structure, leading to its designation as the "Tomb of the Martyrs."¹⁵ (Fig. 2)

The Arabic word "turba" means "tomb, tombstone," and specifically refers to Muslim shrines located in Jerusalem.¹⁶ While this turba is among the earliest in its surroundings, the typology became common during the Mamluk period. From the 13th century AD onwards, as the landscape and population of Palestine became predominantly Muslim, a process of identifying and venerating sacred tombs by local communities took place.¹⁷

Professor Doron Bar, specializing in the development of popular and national holy places, highlights Palestine's uniqueness as a cradle of three monotheistic religions: "Throughout its history, local Jews, Christians, Muslims, Druze and pagans... together with many pilgrims who came from far, created dozens of holy sites that were spread around most of the region,"¹⁸ he explains. Alongside established institutionalized holy sites that were developed over the years from "above" by the different rulers, high clergy, and outside agents, "many holy sites were developed from 'below' by the inhabitants of the region, a result of a perceived need to frequent a holy site that was both accessible and available, free from official mediators."¹⁹

The proliferation of local, small-scale holy sites stemmed from the desire among worshippers for more accessible spiritual experiences, free from official mediators. Bar notes that while Jerusalem, Mecca and Rome were too far and detached, everyday worshippers sought out altars, caves, springs, rocks, trees, hills and mountains and especially tombs, as venues for religious practice. These outdoors sites, often communal and unclaimed, fulfilled a genuine social need for direct engagement with the divine. Most of them were attributed to the burial place of biblical figures (such as the sons of Jacob) or Muslim heroes (such as companions of Prophet Muhammad) who played pivotal roles in the region's history.²⁰

12 Professor Richab (Boni) Rubin, director of the Yad Yitzhak Ben Zvi Research Institute, in: Hasson, "Benjamin's tomb."

13 Nir Hasson, "The mosque that was attacked: the door between the Jerusalem that is Above and the Jerusalem that is Below," *Haaretz*, December 15, 2011. <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/2011-12-15/ty-article/0000017f-eeef-d0f7-a9ff-eeefdc1230000>.

14 Tehila Libman, "Jerusalem: Nebi Akasha (final report)," *Archaeology News: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 130, January 7, 2018, https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail.aspx?id=25379&mag_id=126

15 Ibid.

16 Boris Fenus, "Muslim Shrines in Israel, Guide," last modified January 26, 2013, <https://borisfenus.blogspot.com/2013/01/1-turbas-in-jerusalem.html>

17 Doron Bar, "Mapping Muslim Sacred Tombs in Palestine During the Mandate Period," *Levant* 4, no.1 (April 2013): 97.

18 Ibid., 99.

19 Ibid.

20 Bar, "Mapping Muslim Sacred Tombs," 99-100.



Fig. 2: Tomb of the Martyrs near a Jewish quarter of Jerusalem, August 1929

Typology of pilgrimage

In contrast to cities or large villages, where tombs tended to occur in accessible locations, most rural tombs were built on high spots, separate from settlements, requiring a journey or a walk. This relates to issues of visibility and effort that are essential to the religious experience.²¹ Most of these sites were built very simply—one or two square rooms with a small dome. Though variations existed, these buildings generally used local stones, with thick un-plastered walls supporting the dome, with no additional decoration.²²

According to Bar, not much is known about the history of the tombs or the motivations behind their construction, as few have been thoroughly researched or excavated. Some tombs are more elaborate and decorated than others, suggesting the involvement of external powers. During the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, there is evidence of sultans' contribution to the development of local holy sites. Thus, in most cases the simple structure hints to local forces who gradually built the site.²³

Holy tombs were an important and conspicuous part of the landscape of Palestine. They appeared next to many villages and sometimes, in the most barren locations, serving as infrequent pilgrimage sites. Often these tombs were situated amidst groves of ancient trees like olives, carobs, and oaks that were preserved due to the tombs' sanctity. It seems that these trees were planted after the site's sanctification and became sacred themselves.²⁴

In the case of Turbat al-Qameria, the tomb and the two olive trees about 800-years-old next to it were charted on the map of Jerusalem published in Jean Zuallart's book *Il devotissimo viaggio di Gerusalemme* [Most Devout Voyage to Jerusalem], 1587. The map outlines the author's journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, showing the main sights along the route to the old city and its walls—an assemblage of tombs and trees in a hilly landscape. (Fig. 3)

21 Ibid., 102.

22 Ibid., 105.

23 Ibid., 106.

24 Ibid.

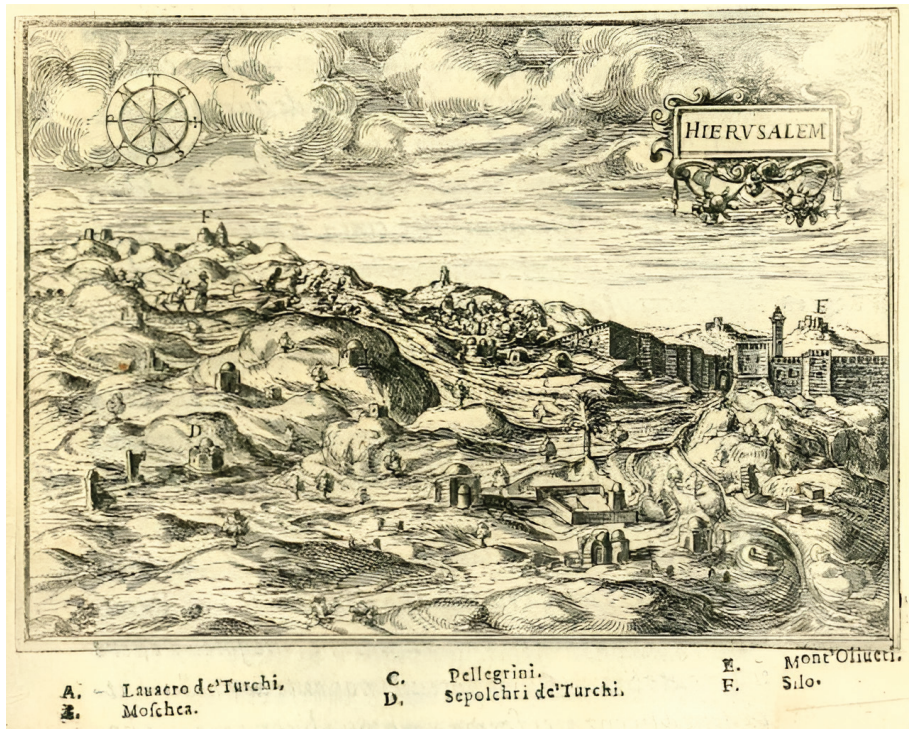


Fig. 3: View of Jerusalem, map, 1587. Map outlining the author's journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and showing the main sights of the route

The literary traditions and conventions of pilgrim's maps for describing the landscape—measuring monuments, collecting inscriptions, suggesting etymologies, producing city views, noting local customs—were shared by all educated European pilgrims, regardless of their confessional affiliation. Jean Zuallart (1541–1634), who traveled to the Holy Land in 1586, authored one of the most influential pilgrim accounts written in the sixteenth century, which later appeared in several expanded editions and translations. His descriptions of Jerusalem and other sacred sites are expansive and detailed, proving very popular among later authors who used them freely in their own pilgrimage accounts.²⁵

In this context, the turba structures were not only places of worship but also guard points from which the roads were monitored and landmarks for travelers, located in the most prominent places.

The appropriation of Muslim tombs

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and more intensively after the Six-Day War in 1967,²⁶ Muslim tombs became another element in the confrontation between Jews and Arabs. In recent years, several such tombs have been converted into Jewish holy sites, altering

25 Sundar Henny and Zur Shalev, "Jerusalem Reformed: Rethinking Early Modern Pilgrimage," in *Renaissance Quarterly* 75, issue 3 (1 November 2022): 796–848. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/renaissance-quarterly/article/jerusalem-reformed-rethinking-early-modern-pilgrimage/82A6E45A5BEE070E17FE86BEA4828B3>.

26 Known also as the Third Arab-Israeli War, in which Israel's decisive victory included the conquest of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Old City of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. The status of these territories subsequently became a central point of contention in the Arab-Israeli conflict.



Fig. 4: Turbat al-Qamera: The tomb complex after it was breached, in November 2024

their Muslim origins. This phenomenon has become increasingly common yet controversial,²⁷ with only the case of Binyamin ben Ya'akov attributed to two other Muslim graves outside Jerusalem: one near Kfar Saba, traditionally associated with a sage named Nabi Yamin, and another in the Beit Nakofa valley in the Galilee.²⁸

Until 1948, Jews and Muslims often shared holiness in the same place, with Jews frequently being guests in Muslim-owned shrines. After 1948, Jews began appropriating Muslim holy places, a process initially encouraged by the authorities until the 1970s. In recent decades, this appropriation has become more spontaneous: "people who need a holy place near the house simply take a Muslim building and sanctify it."²⁹

Turbat al-Qamriya was long known as a Muslim burial place, although occasionally was the target of Jewish vandalism. Recently, despite the Jerusalem Municipality's stance on preserving the tomb and its heritage, its status has shifted. Since the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2021), and even more so due to the closure of Rachel's tomb for security reasons (2024), significant changes have occurred: the doors have been replaced with new ones painted blue (a color associated with Kabbalah), the graves were covered with nylon sheets, and plastic chairs, partitions, and cabinets with holy books have been placed inside.³⁰ The Muslim shrine completed its transformation into a Jewish righteous tomb. (Fig. 4)

What supports the promoters of the new tomb, apart from supposedly passed-down traditions? Another significant, albeit invisible, actor in this scene could provide insights.

27 The location of Benjamin's tomb in Jerusalem is the one that has gained less popularity over the years, as it is based on traditions passed down from word of mouth and an obscure quote from 'Sefer Hasher' - a medieval book of Midrashim, whose anonymous author was probably a Jew from Italy. The book was first printed in Venice in 1625, and in it alludes to the burial place of the sons of Jacob in Jerusalem.

28 David Assaf, Here is Patcha Dekarta: where Benjamin is buried?, November 24, 2023, https://onegshabat.blogspot.com/2023/11/blog-post_24.html

29 Ibid.

30 Yosef Greenboim, "For the first time in decades, thousands made a pilgrimage to the tomb of Binyamin ben Yaakov," *Haredi10*, October 29, 2024, <https://ch10.co.il/news/855837/>

Tent

Rings of Holiness

Haim Beer (1945–), an Israeli novelist born in Jerusalem to an Orthodox Jewish family, captures in his essay “A Journey in an Unreached City” what he terms “The wonder in the Jerusalem myths”:

“There, in the neglected field, with a mixed smell of moss, water rising green and dog excrement rising from it - were the first Pharisees in Jerusalem, the students of the Gaon from Vilna, tending a large tent—the tent of Moshiach ben Yosef—and holding vigils of Kabbalists to study the Zohar and the Torah of Ari, and on Shabbat evenings and holidays they conduct... prayers for the coming of the Messiah.”³¹

The historical affinity of Jews to the site began to develop many years ago. Jewish mystical tradition around the hill began to strengthen with the settlement of Jews in the area, when the first Pharisees in Jerusalem, the students of the Gra (commonly referred to in Hebrew as *ha-Gaon mi-Vilna*, “the genius from Vilnius”) gathered in the compound to study together. These students believed the “karta” (lit. city) of knowledge is none other than Jerusalem. In the way of Kabbalah, they explained that Jerusalem is surrounded by “rings of holiness”.³² Although spatial, their meaning is spiritual-mystical: “Ears of Jerusalem” (Temple Mount), “Heart of Jerusalem” (roughly the Muslim Quarter), “Walls of Jerusalem”, “Gates of Jerusalem” and “Perzot Jerusalem” (the Land of Israel as a whole). The boundary of the “Walls of Jerusalem” area, according to this belief, passes right through the estate of Nebi Akasha’s tomb, as the site was then known.³³

The sole source for this explanation is the book *Mossad Hayesod* by Elazar Horvitz, which draws upon the teachings of Shlomo Zalman Rivlin:³⁴

“In his Kabbalistic hymn ‘At the gates of Jerusalem’, Rivlin described the holiness of the city as being made of rings, all surrounding the drinking stone. The city itself, the ‘area of the walls’... is in the eparchy of Messiah ben-David, son of Leah. Whereas the areas beyond the gates and outside are under the rule of Mashiach ben-Yosef, Rachel’s son; And Ben-Yosef’s place of residence is on the intermediate line between the domains, in Fatcha Dekarta, also known as ‘the top of the hill’, a place to which the sanctity of the top of the biblical hill on which Moses stood during the war with Amalek was transferred.”³⁵

The place of Fatcha Dekarta is described by the Sages as the seat of Messiah,³⁶ or more precisely, that of *Messiah son of Joseph* who will establish the material conditions for redemption. It was the Messiah who was later identified by HaRav Kook, one of the prominent Jewish religious leaders of the early 20th century, with the secular Zionist movement that began to lay the foundations for a Jewish nation.³⁷

Since the beginning of the Ashkenazi settlement in Jerusalem by the students of the Gra (1812), the heads of the denominations endeavored to redeem the identified site from its Arab owners. Only in 1889 did they manage to reach an agreement and gain possession on the “top of the

31 Haim Beer, “A Journey in an Unreached City,” in: *This is the place: People, Places and Stories of Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2017), 444.

32 Beer, “A Journey in an Unreached City,” 444.

33 Another tomb after which the site was named in the 19th century and will be discussed in the next chapter.

34 Rivlin is the son of the prominent community leader Yosef Rivlin and authored several books on the history of the Pharisee settlement in Jerusalem and their messianic teachings. He credits his writings to his ancestors, the Jerusalem Rivlin family.

35 Beer, “A Journey in an Unreached City,” 445.

36 Also named Mashiach or Moshiach. In: Sanhedrin, 98a.

37 See footnote no. 8.

hill” with an annual rent and the erection of a large tent—the “Mashiach ben Yosef tent.” Some sources suggest the exact location was a little further south, where the International Evangelical Church stands today, and only after its construction (1908) was the tent relocated. This tent stood for over seventy years, serving as a venue for Kabbalistic studies and Shabbat prayers, including the renowned ‘Oud Yosef Chai’ prayer, focused on the imminent redemption.³⁸

The Jewish religious presence at the site, recorded since the early 19th century, continued over the years in the form of provisional prayer positions of Kabbalists mainly in times of crisis. Most remembered are the days during the siege of Jerusalem in 1948 and the Gulf War in 1991.³⁹ Whether a legend or a true story, the tent signifies an opposing narrative within the Muslim landscape.

Tent in Judaism - Dynamic Space

The English words “tabernacle” and “tent of meeting” obscure the multiplicity of interpretations that can be found in Hebrew, like Mishkan (lit. residence, dwelling) and Ohel Mo-ed. The Tent of Meeting is described⁴⁰ at great length in the Torah as a sacred tent located at the center of the Israelite encampment, which travelled through the wilderness for forty years. This portable tent allowed God to dwell among people wherever they were, embodying a real place filled with holiness. However, some passages⁴¹ describe the Tent of Meeting differently, as a simple structure outside the Israelite camp. Whether central or marginal, the tent represents a dynamic space-time Jewish approach in terms of function, form, and symbolism.

In his book *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (1970), Thorleif Boman highlights the differences between Hebrew and Greek thinking using linguistic approach. He argues that “Israelite thinking is ... dynamic, vigorous, passionate, explosive,” whereas Greek thinking is “static, peaceful, moderate and harmonious.”⁴² Boman notes that in Hebrew, even spatial states are expressed dynamically. This is illustrated by the significance of the Mishkan not through its appearance but through its construction process, viewing it as a dynamic and living accomplishment.⁴³

Similarly, Bruno Zevi argues that Jews “place growth and ‘becoming’ ahead of ‘being’, formation ahead of form as a completed entity.”⁴⁴ Unlike the Greek conception of space as fixed, the Hebraic focus is instead on the “object-as-used,” an “organic architecture... adapted to the needs of those who dwell within, capable of growth and development.”⁴⁵ These values associated with the tabernacle in the desert are fundamental to Stanley Tigerman in his book *The Architecture of Exile*: “Tents, wagons—indeed all the accoutrements of travel—played a large part in the organization of the first site of what was by now a written text. Ritual objects had to be able to travel, perhaps on a moment’s notice.”⁴⁶

Sarah O’Leary, who studies the Hebraic space-time approach, suggests that if Jews find it challenging to define sacred space but are comfortable engaging with sacred time, this has implications for the spaces created for congregations.⁴⁷ She advocates for temporary structures and changeable spaces, such as the Sukkah and the tent, as representing the most glorious

38 Elazar Horowitz, *Mossad HaYesod* (Jerusalem: the General Committee of the Knesset of Israel Press), 269-70.

39 David Assaf, “Here is Patcha Dekarta.”

40 Exodus 29:22.

41 Exodus 33:7.

42 Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: Norton, 1970), 27.

43 Ibid., 76.

44 Bruno Zevi, “Hebraism and the Concept of Space-Time in Art,” in *Bruno Zevi on Modern Architecture*, ed. Andrea Oppenheimer Dean (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 156.

45 Ibid., 165.

46 Stanley Tigerman, *The Architecture of Exile* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 39.

47 Sarah O’Leary, “It’s about time: Uncovering Jewish Approach to Space Making,” Sarah O’Leary, *The Reconstructionist* (Fall 2004): 21.



Fig. 5: Minaret of the Awkashi mosque. Attendant Sheik in foreground [Jerusalem], August 1929



Fig. 6: The 1929 riots, August 23 to 31. Desecrated graves in the Awkashi shrine. Demolished by Jews [Jerusalem], August 1929

and meaningful manifestations of “time brought in intimate relation with space.” By building expandable and flexible spaces, we can choreograph space around movement, transform space through procession, and allow for continuous change.⁴⁸

Following these ideas, the presence of the tent along the history of the place — be it myth or concrete — is both symbolic and political. It marks the territorial and ritual possession of Judaism over the site and reflects its dynamic nature. The tent embodies the mystical Kabbalistic narrative, testifying to the past traditions of the place and highlighting the inherent potential of its future.

Mosque

Haram: from hill to compound

A hundred feet from Turbat al-Qameria lies the Nebi Akasha Mosque,⁴⁹ a Maqām⁵⁰ of significant historical and cultural importance. This mosque, now locked and no longer functioning, was built in the 19th century atop a 13th century Mamluk tomb. The tomb is associated with Akasha ibn al-Mihsan, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad and one of the first fighters for Islam⁵¹ who settled in Jerusalem following its siege in 637-638 CE. Although Akasha's burial place was known outside of Jerusalem, legend asserts that he appeared to someone praying at this spot, instructing them to erect a shrine in his honor.⁵² Confirmation for this appears in an ashlar stone, engraved with two funerary inscriptions, that was affixed to the monument and found during its excavations.⁵³

48 Ibid., 26.

49 Also, Okasha mosque or Ukasha mosque.

50 A Maqām (Arabic: مقام) is a Muslim shrine constructed at a site linked to a religious figure or saint, commonly found in the Levant, which comprises the present-day countries of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Israel. It is usually a funeral construction, cubic-shaped and topped with a dome.

51 According to the Islamic tradition, Akasha was the man who, when his sword broke, gave Muhammad a branch of a tree in his hand that was used as a sword for everything. (Hasson, 2011)

52 Taufik Canaan, *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine* (London: Luzac & Co., Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society, 1927), 298.

53 Tawfik De'adle, “Jerusalem, Nebi ‘Akasha (preliminary report),” *Archaeology News: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 121, December 21, 2009, https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=1292

The first inscription was written in three lines: “This is the tomb of Sheikh ‘Abd al-Rahman Sa‘ad Kamal, a gift for his soul the fatha will be read 1310 AH (1892 CE).” The second was added to the first and was written at an angle to it: “The tomb of ‘Akasha, friend of the Prophet.”

The mosque's construction, though not officially documented, likely coincided with changes in territorial state-of-affair that undermined the Muslim identity of the site. By the late 19th century, an almost entirely Jewish neighborhood known as Ukasha in the Ottoman census records emerged around the tomb, together with Jewish housing estates like Sha'arey Moshe, Even Yehoshua, and Kotel Varsha founded between 1891 and 1897.⁵⁴ During the Mandate period (1917-1948), Jerusalem's urban landscape underwent further transformations. Empty spaces were developed, new buildings arose in annexed areas, and the city expanded along major transport arteries like Jaffa Road and parallel streets. Over time, neighborhoods merged and the once-dividing lines between them blurred.⁵⁵

By the 1920s, Nebi Akasha stood as an enclave amidst growing Jewish neighborhoods around it—Zichron Moshe, Beti Varsha and Geula. Along this period, a minaret, typically associated with mosques, was added to the tomb as an act of defiance to maintain a Muslim foothold in the area. (Fig. 5) Despite these efforts, the few Arab residents in the area left or sold their homes, leaving only the imam and his family residing in the compound.

During the 1929 Palestine riots, a response to attacks and murders in Jewish neighborhoods north of the Old City, Jewish extremists planned to blow up the mosque. Despite the containment efforts of the city's defense commander, Yosef Hecht, the riots were unstoppable. On August 26, 1929, a group of Jews attacked the mosque, causing significant damage. Tombs were desecrated, the Holy Scriptures (copies of the holy Quran) and a green cloth scroll were set on fire, and the imam's house was ransacked.⁵⁶ (Fig. 6)

These events were well-documented in the Shaw Report of 1930,⁵⁷ yet remained contentious. Some accounts⁵⁸ suggested the site was designated as a Haram (from Arabic: forbidden, which refers to sacred place)—a tomb with adjacent structures including the imam's residence and a warehouse. In response to the 1929 events, the Supreme Muslim Council claimed that Jews desecrated a mosque and hurriedly erected a minaret, rumored to have been dismantled from a mosque in Abu Dis damaged in the 1927 earthquake. The British Commission of Inquiry for the events was not convinced, considering the minaret's addition a manipulation by the Jerusalem Mufti. This version has never been verified.

Following the riots, warning notices on behalf of the Hebrew Community Committee in Jerusalem were posted, asserting: "We will know how to respect holy places!"—typically issued after desecration incidents. Until the 1948 war, an Arab family lived nearby, maintaining the tomb and the mosque. However, during the war the mosque was abandoned, and the municipality repurposed its lower part into a tool shed. From then on, the site fell into neglect, amidst concerns of further desecration by Jewish groups.

Space of struggle

The 1929 Jewish attack on the Nebi Akasha Mosque was neither the first nor last instance of violence directed at the site. The desecration of the place and subsequent Muslim complaints began with the establishment of the old Beit Ha'am Club in 1907, located adjacent to the mosque. But only in recent decades has the mosque become repeatedly the target of vandalism, in what have become known as "price tag" attacks.

54 Adar Arnon, "The Quarters of Jerusalem in the Ottoman Period," *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no.1 (January 1992): 1–65.

55 Ruth Kark and Michal Oren-Nordheim, *Jerusalem and Its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages, 1800-1948* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2011), 150.

56 *Shaw Commission Report*, or in its full name: *Report on the Commission on the Palestine Disturbances of August 1929*, presented by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Parliament by Command of His Majesty, March 1930: 65.

57 Ibid.

58 Al HaMakon (from Hebrew, On the Place], last modified March 17, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/alhamakom>.



Fig. 7: Graffiti inscription on Turbat al-Qameria noting “Here is Fatch Dekarta”, November 2024

The “price tag attack policy,” also sometimes referred to as “mutual responsibility,”⁵⁹ is the name originally⁶⁰ given to the acts of vandalism and violence committed primarily in the occupied West Bank by extremist Israeli settler youths against Palestinian Arabs, and to a lesser extent, against left-wing Israeli Jews, Israeli Arabs, Christians, and Israeli security forces. The official claim is that these acts are committed “to exact a price from local Palestinians or from the Israeli security forces for any action taken against their settlement enterprise.”⁶¹ Since the rise of the “price tag” movement during the 2005 demolition of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli far-right has sought to establish a “balance of terror,” in which every state action aimed at them—from demolishing a caravan in an outpost to restricting the movements of those suspected of harassing Palestinian olive harvesters—generates an immediate violent reaction.⁶²

The Nebi Akasha Mosque is one of the sites targeted in these attacks. During the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000, hateful inscriptions were sprayed on the walls of the mosque.⁶³ In December 2011, the mosque survived a failed arson attack when the inscription “A good Arab is a dead Arab” was written on the ancient structure along with other anti-Muslim inscriptions such as “Muhammad is dead.” This incident, along with others in the West Bank, occurred at night

59 Amos N. Guiora, *Tolerating Intolerance: The Price of Protecting Extremism* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 107.

60 Nir Hasson/Associated Press, “Monastery near Jerusalem defaced in suspected ‘price tag’ attack,” at *Haaretz* 21 August 2013.

61 Uri Friedman, “The ‘Price Tag’ Menace: Vigilante Israeli Settler Attacks Spread,” *The Atlantic Wire*, October 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/price-tag-menace-vigilante-israeli-settler-attacks-spread/337218/>.

62 Amos Harel, “The Extreme Right Has Sought to Establish a ‘Balance of Terror,’” *Haaretz*, November 3, 2008, <https://www.haaretz.com/2008-11-03/ty-article/analysis-the-extreme-right-has-sought-to-establish-a-balance-of-terror/0000017f-f0dd-d8a1-a5ff-f0df7310000>.

63 Hasson, “The mosque that was attacked.”

following the riots by right-wing activists against the evacuation of the illegal outpost of Ramat Gilead in Samaria.⁶⁴ Following the events of October 2023, additional inscriptions appeared, such as “Here is Fatcha Dekarta” and “This is the tomb of Binyamin ben-Ya’akov.” (Fig. 7)

According to Tovi Fester, one of the latest visual representations of the religious–secular tensions in Jerusalem is the emergence of graffiti addressing these issues. These graffiti typically appear in the areas known as the symbolic boundaries between religious and secular spaces in Jerusalem, in protest against the increasing dominance of religious influence in public spaces, particularly by ultra-Orthodox communities.⁶⁵ In the case of Nebi Akasha, they reveal a new participant who, though supported by a religious ideology, employs protest methods typically associated with secular groups.

Yet, recent violations at the site extend beyond wall inscriptions. Consequently, the “Emek Shaveh” archaeologists’ organization expressed outrage at the alterations made to the site:

“If only they wanted, the Antiquities Authority and the municipality could block the building immediately, as they did in the past,” says the organization. “On the contrary, they allowed an extreme ultra-Orthodox group to turn the rich story of Jerusalem into a one-dimensional and invented story and continue to leave it neglected and damaged. The graffiti written on the building and inside it and the signs hanging on it pretending to be signs of the National Center for the Development of the Holy Places, show that they also do not intend giving the Muslim building its appropriate respect as part of the city’s history.”⁶⁶

In these occurrences, the mosque emerges as a significant agent—a site of religious identity that asserts itself through violence, force and retaliatory actions. Its function as a religious entity was apparently short-lived (unlike the tomb that preceded it), and its establishment, primarily intended to claim a Muslim possession within the new Jewish city, marked it from the beginning as a symbol of protest. Thus, its history of violence, from the events of 1929 to the present day, engraves the place in the collective memory as a space of struggle.

Headquarters

Secular anomaly

The 1950s marked the arrival of a new actor in the scene: the Histadrut house on 17 Strauss Street, the largest and most dominant structure in the compound. The seven-story building, inaugurated in 1958, served as a cultural center and the headquarters of the Jerusalem Workers’ Council. (Fig. 8)

Histadrut (originally: HaHistadrut HaKlalit shel HaOvdim B’Eretz Yisrael), or the General Organization of Workers in Israel, is Israel’s national trade union center representing the majority of the country’s trade unionists. Established in 1920 in Mandatory Palestine, it soon became a powerful institution in the Yishuv (Jewish community in pre-state Israel) and later in the state of Israel. Aligned with the Labor Zionist movement, the Histadrut not only functioned as a trade union but also played a pivotal role in state-building, owning numerous businesses and factories. It aimed to oversee all aspects of workers’ lives, including settlement, defense, education, housing, health, banking, cooperatives, welfare, and cultural activities. Until Israel shifted away from a socialist economy, the Histadrut was the country’s second largest employer, after the government, and through its cooperative enterprises, it exerted significant influence over sectors such as public transport, agriculture, and insurance.

64 Yair Altman and Omri Ephraim, Arson in a mosque in Jerusalem, inscriptions “Muhammad is dead”, *Ynet*, December 14, 2011, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-4161332,00.html>

65 Tovi Festner, “Visual and Sound Representations of the Religious–Secular Right to the City in Jerusalem,” in *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice*, ed. Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group), 77.

66 *Ibid.*

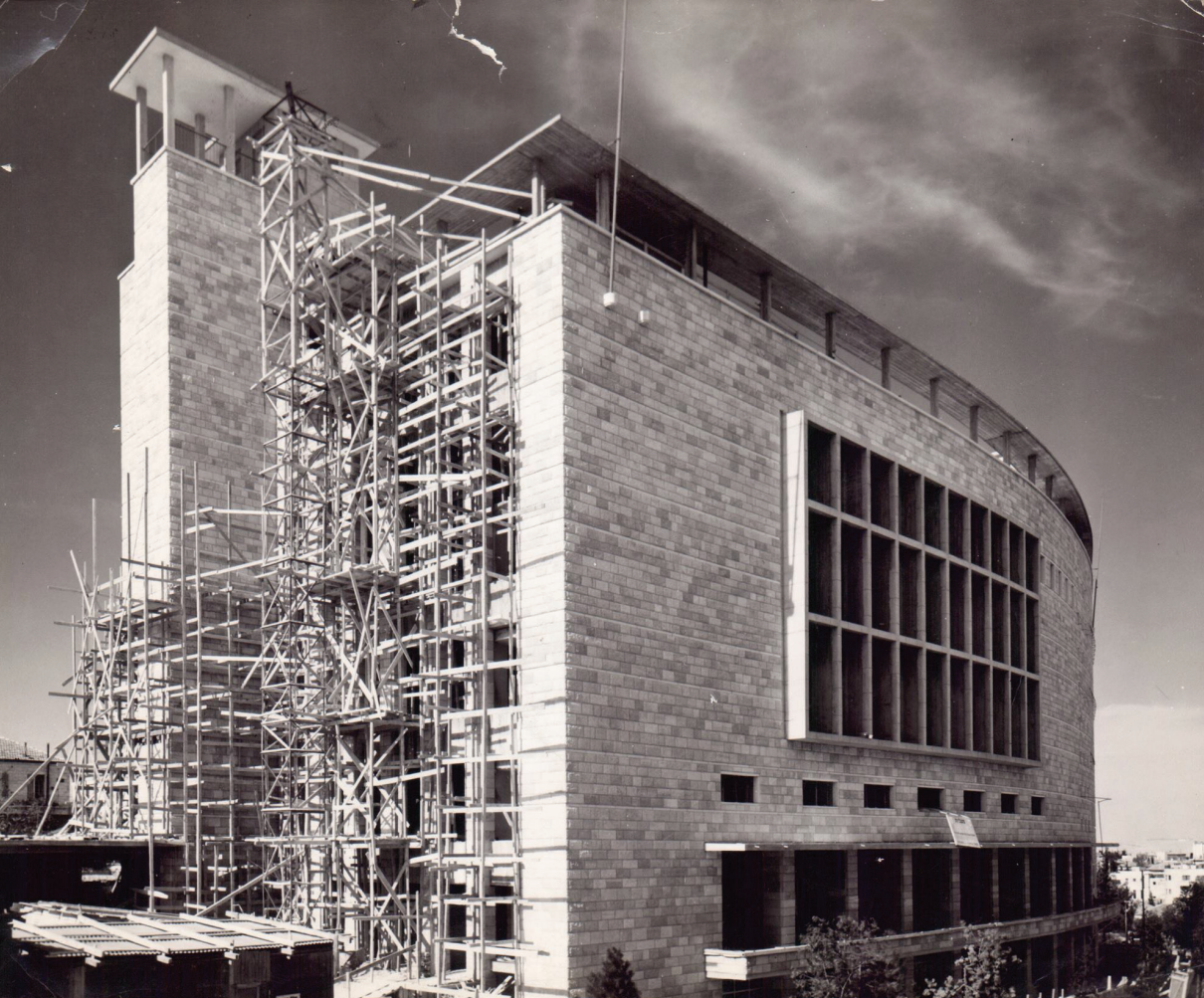


Fig. 8. Beit HaHistadrut [Histadrut building] during its construction, 1953

The original location of the Histadrut house in Jerusalem was on Histadrut Street, situated in the new city center known as the Jerusalem Triangle since the British Mandate. The British, less attached to the Old City area, decided to officially move the Jerusalem's business center westward. For this purpose, the government utilized several tens of dunams of fields and vineyards purchased from the Orthodox Greeks. British experts worked on designing a large "triangle" of streets that became a center of attraction for business owners and shoppers, and by the mid-20th century the area had established itself as a major urban center. At that time, the capital's central station operated on Jaffa Street, and the Knesset⁶⁷ was housed in the Froumin House near its western end. Several other enterprises affiliated with the Jerusalem Workers' Council were also located in the area, including a cooperative restaurant, an outdoor basketball hall of the Hapoel Union, offices, and a cinema.⁶⁸

In the early 1950s, after the establishment of the state of Israel, there was a growing need to build a prominent center for the Histadrut in Jerusalem. The selection of Strauss Street as the site was clearly strategic. According to the former Knesset member Uzi Baram, the building was

67 The Knesset is the unicameral legislature of Israel.

68 David Kroyanker, "The Histadrut house and Tel-Or cinema," *The Jerusalem Triangle: An Urban Biography* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israeli Studies, 2011), 150. The "Tel-Or" cinema, which operated in the old Histadrut house, was part of the cluster of cinemas operating in or near the Jerusalem Triangle until the mid-20th century.



Fig. 9. Children are climbing to watch a basketball game, 1964 (above, left)



Fig. 10. President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and his wife Rachel Yanait in their visit at the Histadrut building, Strauss Street, Jerusalem, January 4, 1955 (above, right)

erected based on the political decision of his father Moshe Baram, who served as the secretary of the Jerusalem Workers' Council at the time. Situated precisely on the border of ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, the chosen site aimed to prevent a clear division of the city into ultra-Orthodox and secular areas.

"They were very worried at that time that Jaffa Street would be a border between the two parts of Jerusalem, that the northern part would be the religious part and the southern part would be secular. Therefore, even then," says Baram, "he thought it was right to build the Histadrut in Strauss Street, to demonstrate that Jerusalem is unified."⁶⁹

Culture of Congestion

"The new 7-story building, built entirely of stones cut from the rock of Jerusalem, accommodates 68 rooms, nine large and small halls, and its construction lasted one year. [...] The previous house was used for 25 years by the public affairs of the workers and for a long period was a center for 'Hagana'. The new building... will contain a theater with 1200 seats as well as a spacious gymnasium of 'Hapoel'. The house will serve the affairs of the 33,000 members of the Histadrut, who together with their families make up approximately half of the capital's citizens."⁷⁰

Like other Histadrut buildings across the country, this imposing structure symbolized the power and influence of the Mapai left-wing political party during its era. Designed by architects Judit Segal Stolzer and Eugen Stolzer under the influence of the international style, it stood as a secular icon characterized by clean lines, minimal decoration and ornamentation, and a rooftop pergola, albeit clad in Jerusalem stone to comply with the municipal regulations.

As part of its transition from the city center, the building faced the programmatic challenge of consolidating a diverse range of activities. This architecture endeavor was a symbolic act, aiming to encapsulate a microcosm of the vibrant city triangle into a single building. Alongside offices, it housed a library with 40,000 volumes and classrooms. The second floor hosted the Mitchell cinema, renowned for showcasing quality European and artistic films, and served as a concert hall. The basement featured a gymnasium considered as the first indoor basketball hall in Israel, which served as the home court of the Hapoel Jerusalem until 1985. More than 500 fans filled

69 Neta Sela, Jerusalem: the Haredim "captured" the Histadrut stronghold, *Ynet*, January 15, 2007, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3352675,00.html>

70 Editorial, "The Histadrut house in Jerusalem was inaugurated," *Lamerchav*, 1 July 1958.

the place every Friday night for home games. (Fig. 9) Erected at the highest point of the street, its rooftop held a commanding view of Mount Scopus and the Mount of Olives. (Fig. 10) During the Six-Day War, it functioned as the Jerusalem regimental headquarters for fighters tasked with occupying the Old City.⁷¹

Other than being a strategic landmark, the significance of the Histadrut house was by containing a vast array of secular occurrences challenging the surrounding sacred narratives—Muslim and Jewish. In many ways, it exemplified the role of a modernist agent, akin to what Rem Koolhaas referred to as “Culture of Congestion”:

“The Culture of Congestion proposes the conquest of each block by a single structure. Each building will become a ‘house’—a private realm inflated to admit houseguests but not to the point of pretending universality in the spectrum of its offering. Each ‘house’ will represent a different lifestyle and different ideology. In each floor, the Culture of Congestion will arrange new and exhilarating human activities in unprecedented combinations. Through Fantastic Technology it will be possible to reproduce all ‘situations’—from the most natural to the most artificial—wherever and whenever desired.”⁷²

The triumph of the holy

Tensions between Haredi Jews and the growing secular movement, particularly the workers’ parties, trace back to the British Mandate. A significant point of contention was Shabbat violation by Jews driving their vehicles through the Haredi neighborhoods. The situation intensified post-1948, when the area became a critical military supply route linking the two parts of divided Jerusalem, intersecting at Kikar HaShabbat (Shabbat Square), where Strauss Street and Mea Shearim Road meet. Rallies and demonstrations often held at this spot filled the street with people, forcing vehicles to navigate slowly through the crowd. The summer of 1950 saw these events increased, mainly at the initiative of Neturei Karta⁷³ members who opposed Zionism and rejected the authority of the secularist state.⁷⁴ In this context, the new Histadrut house emerged as a secular stronghold, where ceremonies such as revelries, prayers and weddings alternated with May Day parades, cultural gatherings and sports events. By the 1960s, the building itself became a point of friction, with frequent religious protests held in front of it.

Over the years, the area took on an increasingly ultra-Orthodox character, along with the decline in the status of the Histadrut in everyday life. By the late 20th century, the Histadrut building stood out as a secular anomaly amidst the predominantly Haredi occupancy of Strauss Street, when eventually it yielded to the trend. In the 1990s, the basement, vacant since 1985, was repurposed to house Lomda—a Haredi institute for professional training. This was followed in 2003 by the establishment of a Haredi fitness and martial arts center next to it. In 2007, the parts which housed the Mitchell cinema and remained deserted for years were rented to the ultra-Orthodox girls’ seminary Mishkan-Sarah, while in 2008 a Haredi wedding hall opened on another floor.

71 Until the Six-Day War, the residents of the Western City used to go up to the roof of the building to look out towards the Old City. During the war, parts of the headquarters of the Jerusalem Brigade and IDF forces were located in the building, and on its roof was placed the observation post of a battery of cannons that took part in the battles for the occupation of the Eastern City, including the battle on the nearby Ammunition Hill. Rabbi Shlomo Goren left the headquarters in the building on his way to the Western Wall, immediately after its occupation.

72 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1978), 125.

73 Neturei Karta (lit. “Guardians of the City”) is a fringe religious group of Haredi Jews that was founded in Jerusalem in 1938. It is an active opponent of Zionism and advocates a “peaceful dismantling” of the State of Israel under the belief that the Jewish people are strictly forbidden from re-establishing sovereignty in the Land of Israel until the arrival of the Messiah.

74 Menachem Friedman, “Neturei Karta and the Shabbat Demonstrations in Jerusalem, 1948–1950,” in “Divided Jerusalem, 1948–1967,” ed. Avi Bareli (Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi Press, 1994), 224–40.

Today, the building hosts two major ultra-Orthodox institutions: the 3-story area of the Mitchell cinema and the upper floor were converted into the Orayta Yeshiva with a learning center, a synagogue and a seminary. The former basketball court is partly used as the women's section of Strauss Campus—the ultra-Orthodox branch of the Hadassah Academic College (HAC), while the men's campus operates in a building across the road. Additionally, the Torah Hall Or-Chaim operates in the southern corner of the building adjacent to its main entrance. Consequently, the Histadrut was pushed to the northern part of the building, occupying only 38% of it. Once again, the public practice in the place shifted, this time to religious activities, such as the introduction of a Torah scroll into the study hall at Orayta Yeshiva and chuppah ceremonies in the rear parking lot.

"In the perspective of years," admits Baram, "my father's attempt was not ultimately successful. The move delayed the trend for perhaps 50 years, but no longer."⁷⁵ The Holy was always there, and the secular battle to preserve it within the Old City walls has faltered. The programmatic disintegration of the spatial transformations of the Histadrut House reflects broader shifts in Jerusalem. Once an aspirational cultural icon marking the new era and differentiating between secular and ultra-Orthodox domains, it is now assimilated into its surroundings, drawing back focus to its religious dimensions—now exclusive.

Playground

Not only do the buildings in the holy compound bear witness to the forces shaping it, but also the open space connecting them—now known as Gan Akasha (from Hebrew: Akasha Garden), formerly part of the Muslim Haram. Following the events of 1948, the mosque's northern extension which served as a gathering place, remained vacant as part of the mosque's preservation efforts. However, the southern extension was destroyed, replaced by a small courtyard garden—a designated "open public space" outlined in the urban building scheme submitted in April 1956 to the Israel Planning Administration (IPA) Jerusalem for approval. (Fig. 11) It is one of the earliest legal references to the site as a statutory entity: the public building alongside its accompanying garden. With no indication of its religious past in the blueprint, this once-sacred landscape, now painted green, is muted and remains present in stories and traditions only.

Over the years, the mythical garden fell into neglect, attracting dubious passers-by. As the surrounding neighborhoods grew, a need to expand the garden emerged, to interface with the entrance to the mosque. Ultimately, rehabilitation efforts were undertaken by the Jerusalem Community Management, led by the Eden Company for Economic Development in Jerusalem and overseen by the deputy mayor and the head of the Haredi Ma'ar (the ultra-Orthodox main business center), Yossi Deitch. This initiative formed part of a broader plan to enhance all neighborhoods in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox center, including public gardens.

In October 2016, prior to its reconstruction, salvage excavations were conducted at the Nebi Akasha compound, undertaken on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and financed by the Eden Company. The excavations uncovered Ottoman-era archaeological remains such as drainage canals, a cistern, and a quarry—all of which served as communal meeting points for various populations and met daily needs.⁷⁶

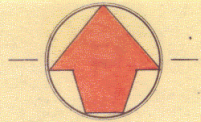
As part of the complex's restoration, the sacred Haram underwent transformation. The Ottoman cistern was sealed, and the land was covered with asphalt, synthetic grass, and rubber surfaces, converting it into a conventional playground for Haredi children. (Fig. 12) However, this transformation does not mark the final chapter for a site in constant flux, as recent objections have arisen calling for the immediate closure of the playground due to its perceived desecration of the emerging holy site—Benjamin's Tomb.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Neta Sela, "Jerusalem: the Haredim 'captured' the Histadrut stronghold."

⁷⁶ Tehila Libman, "Jerusalem: Nebi Akasha."

⁷⁷ Conversations with the author, June 24, 2024.

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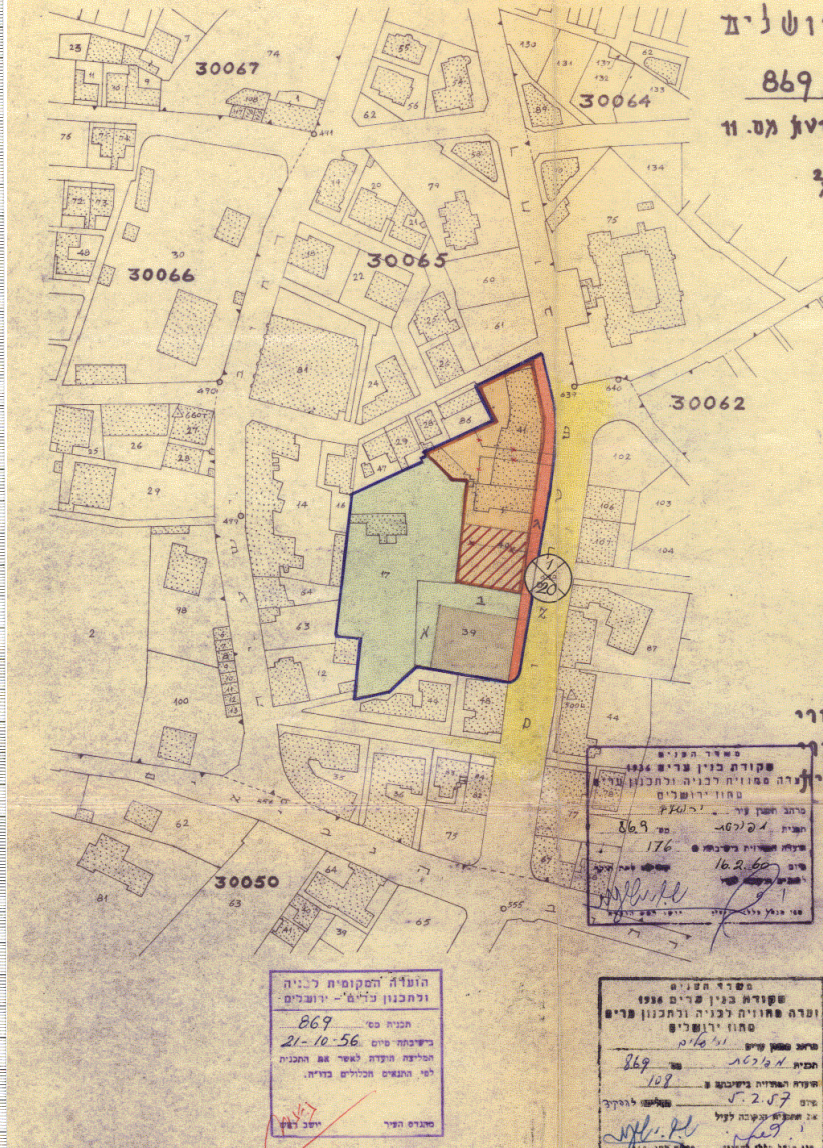
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Fig. 11: Detailed urban building scheme no. 869, Jerusalem. Handed to The Israel Planning Administration (IPA) Jerusalem on April 5, 1956
Fig. 12: Gan Akasha (Akasha Garden) (facing page)

In response, The Jerusalem Municipality clarified: "The Jerusalem Municipality addressed construction violations and attempted to restore order. Concurrently, efforts were made to revert the site to its original state while ensuring public accessibility. Importantly, the Municipality did not sanction a change in designation from a site of Muslim graves."⁷⁸

Nevertheless, to this day, the place serves both as an active Jewish pilgrimage site and a bustling playground.

⁷⁸ Nir Hasson, "Benjamin's tomb."



Epilogue

"Like imperialism itself, landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbounded "prospect" of endless appropriation and conquest.

[...] The Holy Land has been the center of imperial struggle throughout its long history; its landscape is a palimpsest of scar tissue, a paradise that has been "despoiled" by conquering empires more often than any other region on earth."⁷⁹

W.J.T. Mitchell

Holy sites have been iconic demarcations of devotion and awe for centuries, nonetheless they have also been places of conflict over sacredness and the mythologies surrounding saints.⁸⁰ Sacred is a "contested category" as it represents "hierarchical power relations of domination and subordination, inclusion and exclusion, appropriation and dis-possession."⁸¹ A sacred place is constructed by appropriation of a property, through the politics of exclusion, by maintaining boundaries, and by distancing the inside from the outside.⁸²

In the sacred terrain of Gan Akasha / Nebi Akasha / 17 Strauss Street—comprising two tombs, a mosque, an office building, and a playground—a highly political landscape emerges, defining clear outlines between narratives, agents, and users. While the site reflects ideological disputes and constant competition between groups, these actions can be perceived as part of the ongoing religious reclaiming of the city, rooted in its historical sacredness. However, there is a contemporary dimension to religious conflicts that must be distinguished from its predecessors. The negotiation over holy places among Jews, Muslims and Christians has expanded to include the influence of a new actor—the extreme right-wing messianic agenda⁸³—now asserting itself within the agencies of the State of Israel and Jerusalem, gaining support and legitimacy. This contestation is manifest in spatial declarations and diverse representations that reflect the evolving motivations on the site, akin to what Mitchell termed "Imperial Landscapes".

In his forward to *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas notes: "The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence. Manhattan's problem is the opposite: it is a mountain range of evidence without manifesto."⁸⁴ Drawing an analogy, albeit controversial, the Strauss complex can be likened to a mountain of evidence laden with conflicting and borrowed manifestos. Though Jerusalem is not New York, and the Nebi Akasha compound is far from being a block in Manhattan, this sacred site is examined as a territory "covered with several layers of phantom architecture in the form of past occupations, aborted projects and popular fantasies".

The cityscape is perceived as a collection of archetypes "whose proximity and juxtaposition reinforce their separate meanings."⁸⁵ Each archetype is an agent linked to a different "empire." "Each provides an alternative image of the *Jerusalem* (originally: New York) that exists."⁸⁶

79 Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," 20.

80 Nurit Stadler, "Iconic Places in Motion: Rachel's Tomb as Territorial Borderland," in *In Statu Quo: Structures of Negotiation*, eds. Ifat Finkelman et al. (Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag GmbH, 2018): 255-256.

81 David Chidester and Eduard T. Linenthal, "Introduction," in *American Sacred Space*, eds. D. Chidester and E. T. Linenthal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 17.

82 Lily Kong, "Geography and Religion: Trends and Prospects," in *Progress in Human Geography* 14 (1990), 355-71.

83 Michael Dumper, *Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History and the Future of the Holy City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 7.

84 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, 9.

85 Ibid., 11.

86 Ibid., 9.

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Fig. 1. Photo: unknown, Australian War Memorial collection.

Fig. 2, 5, 6. The G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

Fig. 3. *Il Devotissimo Viaggio Di Gerusalemme*. Fatto, & descritto in sei libri dal Sigr. Giovanni Zuallardo, Cavaliere del Santiss Sepolcro di N.S. l'anno 1586. Aggiunti i disegni di varii luoghi di Terra Santa & altri paesi intagliati da Natale Bonifacio Dalmata. Roma: F. Zanetti e Gia Ruffinelli, 1587.

Fig. 4, 7. Photo: Baruch Gian.

Fig. 8. Photographer unknown, The Central Zionist Archives.

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