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Under the Volcano - Book Review on Inbari's Book

Motti Inbari, Brandeis University
Under the volcano

Nearly 2,000 years have passed since the Romans set fire to it, but for those who would see the Temple walls rise again, the embers of the ancient sanctuary still glow red-hot

By Nadav Shragai

Fundamentalism yehudi vehar habayit (Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount), by Motti Inbari. Magnes Press (Hebrew), 248 pages, NIS 84

Aryeh Levin, who was rabbi to the Jewish underground fighters imprisoned by the British in the pre-state years, once defined the Temple as "the living dead." "If we still have it in us to weep for it," he claimed, "if we have tears to shed, it is a sign that what we weep for is alive, not dead."

The subject of Motti Inbari's book is not tears, but embers: Nearly 2,000 years have passed since the fire that the Romans set to the Temple walls died down, and still the embers are glowing. A tiny spark is enough to ignite them. Inbari's research focuses on those who would like to blow on the embers and make them burn again; those to whom the Temple is not just a word mentioned in Jewish prayers, but a reality toward which one must strive.

Over the course of three years, the author took part in Torah classes, demonstrations, visits to the Temple Mount, ceremonies of kiddush hahodesh ("sanctification of the new month") held at the gates to the Temple Mount, work meetings of the Committee of Judea and Samaria Rabbis, marches around the gates of the Mount and annual Temple "feasts" of the various Jewish organizations involved with the subject. He also studied diverse sources, the most interesting of them being Yibaneh hamikdash, the newsletter of the Movement for the Establishment of the Holy Temple.

The result is a precise, illuminating map of the various movements whose activities focus on the Temple Mount and on the Temple itself.

Some of the research in the book has been published before,
particularly in media accounts, but Inbari, a researcher at Brandeis University, explores it nonetheless, shedding light on obscure corners and pointing to the sources from which each group gains its uniqueness. He draws distinctions between Haredi and national-religious believers, between those who demand "Temple Now" and those who would settle for being able to fulfill the right to pray on the Temple Mount or just to knock on its gates. He also elaborates on the link between fundamentalist Christians and certain of the Temple and Temple Mount activists.

Inbari does all this as a remote, uninvolved observer, and also as a guide to the perplexed. This is an advantage, especially to readers who are scholars or academics (but a disadvantage for those looking to be swept away by an engrossing read about one of the most explosive issues of our public and religious life since 1967).

The author surveys the dialogue that exists between the different movements: When Pinchas Gil, a member of the Kahanist Yeshiva of the Jewish Idea, writes in the movement's newsletter that the religious war should be fought not only with the Arabs, but with "a country that crowns itself with the name Israel, which may be the biggest obstacle standing today between the Jewish people and revival," David Shafir, one of the founders of the Movement for the Establishment of the Holy Temple, offers the following answer: "The 'gangs' ruling the country - it was not from your hands that they took the reins. They simply got there first and entered that vacuum that you and the likes of you neglected, so how can you complain about them?"

The most fascinating part of the study involves the history of the ultra-Orthodox Movement for the Establishment of the Holy Temple, founded by Belz Hassid Yosef Elboim, and its influence on the halakhic (legal) rulings of rabbis belonging to the religious-Zionist stream. Within the Haredi world, the traditional Jewish interdiction against entering the Temple Mount remains in place, and the halakhic taboo is near-complete.

Elboim has for years been organizing regular visits to the Temple Mount (in coordination with the police), and in so doing, he and his people defy the position of the entire Haredi public and its leaders, sometimes at great personal cost. Elboim has been forbidden entry to a minyan [quorum of Jewish prayer]; he has been subject to a herem [religious ban]; signs denouncing him have been posted around Jerusalem. Inbari notes the typically restrained style of Elboim and his friends, who avoid physical and verbal violence, abusive language and heated rhetoric.
Elboim is also careful to separate himself from the Temple Mount Faithful, led by Gershon Salomon, who seeks publicity for almost any activity that his movement organizes.

"There are two paths to the mountain," Inbari quotes Elboim as saying: "Path A, quiet, tough and penetrating; and Path B, easy, loud and crashing." For Elboim, physical Jewish presence on the mountain, out of a sense of religious duty, is infinitely more important than public rallies and protests. The book defines the Temple Mount Faithful as a movement that is now "on the margins of the activity promoting Jewish presence on the Temple Mount."

The less well-known aspect of Salomon and his movement, which Inbari describes, is their strong ties with fundamentalist Christians, and Salomon's view of the future Temple as a site of prayer for all religions. "In his encounters with a Christian audience," Inbari recounts, "Salomon expresses an immediate connection to the divine and contents that are not acceptable to the Israeli public." Thus, for example, Salomon tells his Christian readers of an encounter he had with an angel of God just after the Temple Mount was conquered. He claims that while he was present on the Mount on the day of its capture, a mysterious figure came up to the group he was leading, showed them the location of the altar and explained the function of each part of the holy site. The entire group - so the newsletter reported - was certain that the mysterious figure was an angel sent by God to tell the people of Israel that he expected them to rebuild the Temple immediately, to revive Israel's biblical past and to open the door for the arrival of the Messiah.

The book rightly identifies February 1996 as a pivotal moment for religious Zionism with regard to the Temple Mount. It was then that the Committee of Judea, Samaria and Gaza Rabbis changed a centuries-old ruling, thus allowing and even encouraging Jews to enter the Temple Mount. The three years during which the mountain was closed off, due to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, only heightened the significance of this halakhic reversal, and after the site was reopened, between November 2003 and October 2004 alone, some 70,000 Jews visited it.

Inbari describes in detail the known halakhic reasons why Jews have traditionally been forbidden to enter the Temple Mount. His claims suggest that some rabbis did permit entry, but were not willing to do so publicly. However, he does not ask with sufficient sharpness how many of the rabbis who forbade Jews from entering the Mount did so for distinct reasons of religious law - our status as tainted by the dead and ignorance about the precise location of the Temple and...
the Holy of Holies - and how many did so for reasons having to do with politics, security and diplomacy. It was for these latter reasons that Israel's political leadership over the generations has chosen to forbid Jews to pray on the Mount, out of fear that a religious war would break out, that the local security situation would deteriorate, that Jews elsewhere in the world would be put in danger, and so on.

Other chapters in the book examine the philosophy of additional figures and bodies, such as the Temple Institute, which manufactures ritual vessels for use in a reconstructed Temple and searches for the "red heifer"; the ideas of Yehuda Etzion, the Jewish Underground activist who came up with a plan to blow up the Dome of the Rock; the philosophy of Etzion's own spiritual mentor, Shabtai Ben Dov, who fought in the pre-state Jewish militia Lehi and was a member of the 1950s right-wing underground group Malkhut Israel; or the place that the opinions of Rabbi Yitzhak Ginzburg and the people of the Od Yosef Chai yeshiva, in Nablus, occupy among the Temple Mount movements.

Undermining the state

On the subject of Ginzburg, Inbari has a clear conclusion: "A systematic study of the platform offered by Ginzburg and his close followers reveals a method that seeks to undermine the foundations of rule in Israel, and which is even sympathetic to actions that might be considered terrorist acts in violation of religious law, committed in outbursts of religious zealotry."

Still, Inbari hardly discusses the question of just how prevalent the idea of blowing up the Muslim shrines on the Mount remains among these movements and figures, or whether they have realized by now that causing harm to the site will only push it further away from them.

Nor does the author elaborate on the nature of the status quo that Moshe Dayan created on the Temple Mount in 1967 - by which Muslim authorities have religious autonomy, Israel has responsibility for security on the mount's perimeter, and Jews can visit but not pray at the site - and on how that arrangement has contributed to shaping the character and chosen methods of the figures and movements Inbari has so thoroughly studied.

Motti Inbari chooses to end the book (an English version of which is scheduled to be published by SUNY Press next year) with the prophecy of historian Jacob Katz, who claimed that the Zionist movement's pseudo-messianic rhetoric encouraged viewing Zionist activity as synonymous with the process of redemption, which in turn provided the energy necessary for
establishing the State of Israel. Katz also stressed, however, that the messianic tradition did not provide a blueprint for actually running a country. Inbari, like Katz, believes that the future of Israel now hinges on precisely this insight.