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Religious Zionism and the Temple Mount Dilemma

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Religious Zionism and the Temple Mount Dilemma—Key Trends

ABSTRACT

The article describes the internal debate within Religious Zionist circles over the question of Jews entering the Temple Mount and presents the internal religious dynamics that permitted Jews to enter. It presents the positions of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva, one of the most important halachic centers of modern-day religious Zionism, whose leaders reject the idea of Jews entering the Temple Mount in the current era. The article further describes the debate on the question of entering the Temple Mount within the Chief Rabbinate, whose plenum strongly negated such a possibility, although some leading members of the rabbinate permitted entry and prayer in an individual capacity. This is followed by a discussion of the decision by the Council of Yesha Rabbis (a group of Orthodox rabbis from the settlements in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip) permitting Jews to enter the Temple Mount, under certain Halachic restrictions, and of the debate their decision evoked among Religious Zionist rabbis. The article presents the clear phenomenon of the erosion and weakening of the prohibition against Jews entering the Temple Mount. It is difficult to ignore the growing support for this approach among ever wider circles.

THE TEMPLE MOUNT IS THE most sacred site of Judaism and the third most sacred site of Islam, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. The sacred nature of the site has made it one of the main foci of tension and friction in the context of the Israeli-Arab conflict.¹

The year 1996 marked an important milestone in the world of religious Zionism. The Council of Yesha Rabbis (CYR) ruled that Jews are permitted and even encouraged to enter the Temple Mount. The CYR imposed restrictions regarding specific areas where entry is permitted, and urged

visitors to undertake special ritual purification before doing so. Nevertheless, every rabbi was encouraged “to go up [to the Temple Mount] himself, and to guide his congregants on how to do so in accordance with all the constrictions of Halacha (Jewish religious law).”² Since 2003, when the Temple Mount was reopened to Jewish visitors after a three-year closure due to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, this ruling has been put into practice. Every day, dozens if not hundreds of Jews, mainly students from the nationalist yeshivas, visit the Temple Mount and engage in solitary prayer.³ According to Israel Police records, some 70,000 Jews visited the site between November 2003 and October 2004⁴—an average of 5,000 visitors a month.

The ruling by the CYR is contrary to long-standing religious edicts, to the position of the leaders of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva, to the position of the Chief Rabbinate, and to the opinion of the majority of ultra-Orthodox rabbis. All these authorities argue that it is a grave religious transgression for Jews to enter the Temple Mount. According to Halacha, all Jews are considered to be impure due to contact with the dead, since they have come into contact with deceased persons or with others who have at some point been in such contact. During the Temple Period (536 BCE–70 CE) Jews were cleansed from the impurity of the dead by virtue of the “sin water”—the ashes of the red heifer mixed in water. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, red heifers have not been available. Moreover, the precise dimensions of the Temple have been lost, including the location of the *Kodesh Kodashim*—the most sacred site—identified as the dwelling place of the *Shechina*, the Divine Presence. Entry into this section was absolutely prohibited, with the exception of the High Priest (who was cleansed with the “sin water” before performing his sacred duties) on the Day of Atonement. Since the location of the Temple is no longer known, and since red heifers are unavailable, it was ruled that Jews are prohibited from entering the entire Temple Mount area, even though this area is known to be bigger than that of the Temple itself. Accordingly, a person who enters the Temple Mount area incurs the (theoretical) penalty of *Karet* (the Divinely-imposed death penalty). This position that prohibits Jews from entering the Temple Mount has been supported in numerous Halachic rulings.⁵

In order to understand the dynamics of the transformation on this subject, it is worth examining in greater depth the common perceptions among religious Zionist circles relating to the question of entry into the Temple Mount and the reinstatement of religious worship on the site. But before discussing this issue, it is important to review the religious and the political changes that occurred after the occupation of the Temple Mount in June 1967.

Until the Six Day War, the question of Jews entering the Temple Mount was purely theoretical. Since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews had not, on the whole, entered the Temple Mount, both because of the rabbinical prohibition and because those controlling the site, and particularly the Muslim authorities, did not permit Jews to enter. In the nineteenth century, a number of Jews visited the Temple Mount, but the traditional Jewish community in Palestine sought to prevent such visits because of the religious prohibition. After Israel's War of Independence (1948) the Temple Mount was left under Jordanian control, until it was taken by the IDF in June 1967.

Since the 1967 war, Israeli governments have always sought to mitigate the tension raised by this subject, allowing the Muslim Waqf to maintain its control of the Temple Mount. However, since the occupation of the Temple Mount by IDF forces in the Six Day War, a number of groups within Israeli society have demanded a change in the passive approach of the Jewish religious establishment on the question of the site. These groups advocate action to end Muslim control of the site and to start a process that will lead into the establishment the Third Temple. Over the years, several attempts have been made by extremist activists to blow up the mosques on the Temple Mount as a first step toward religious Redemption. The leaders of the Jewish Underground (who were among the founding figures in the Gush Emunim movement) prepared operational plans to blow up the mosques, but their plans were foiled after they were apprehended in 1984. Another attempt was prevented that same year with the arrest of the "Lifta Underground", a group of newly religious Jews who were profoundly influenced by Kabbalistic traditions, and who sought to destroy the mosques in order to pave the way for Jewish redemption.⁶

The question of the Temple Mount is highly sensitive, with far-reaching political and strategic ramifications. Avi Dichter, former head of the Israeli General Security Service, has commented that the possibility of Jewish extremists launching an attack on the Temple Mount constitutes a key strategic threat to the State of Israel, and that it is right to be extremely concerned about such an eventuality.⁷

Accordingly, the decision by the CYR to permit Jews to enter the Temple Mount area represents a challenge to the passive religious narrative that has characterized rabbinical attitudes toward the site. The decision also has the potential to exacerbate the already sensitive relations between Jews and Arabs regarding the site.

It can be assumed that the process of increasing extremism reflected in this phenomenon did not occur without cause. Accordingly, I shall begin

by examining the circumstances that led to the change in the attitude of the religious authorities toward the question of Jews entering the Temple Mount.

I shall examine whether any connection can be identified between political developments relating to the Oslo process, which established the principle of “land for peace”, and the heightened affinity of Jews to the Temple Mount. This, in turn, raises the question as to whether the political changes that led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority also fueled fundamentalist motivation by way of a counter-reaction. This question can be answered through an examination of the correlation between the growing strength of radical religious movements against the paradox that the actual situation on the ground has grown worse from their perspective. Accordingly, it is important to examine the relevance of the psychological model of cognitive dissonance in the context of the behavior of Messianic movements, and to ascertain whether it is appropriate in this specific case. Another question relates to the implementations of this trend. Does it represent acute danger to the mosques on the site?

In this article, I shall review the key trends among Religious Zionist rabbis toward the Temple Mount: I will discuss the approach of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva, the Israel Chief Rabbinate, and the decision of the CYR.

RABBI AVRAHAM YITZHAK HACOHEN KOOK AND MERKAZ HARAV YESHIVA

The activist messianic approach of religious Zionism—which was fired by the vision of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HacoHEN Kook (1865–1935)—mandated the goal of the re-establishment of the Temple as a key Zionist objective. Secular reality was perceived as temporary and transient—an external shell that would later be replaced by a messianic future, whose overt purpose was the reinstatement of the religious ritual on Mount Moriah.⁸ This dialectic was also manifested in the positions of Rabbi Kook on entering the Temple Mount in the present period and on the construction of the Third Temple.

According to Rabbi Kook, the process of national revival of the Jewish people was perceived as a Revealed End and was ultimately due to lead to the full redemption of Israel, namely: the establishment of the religious kingdom and the renewal of the rites on the Temple Mount. To this end, he established the Torat Cohanim yeshiva in 1921. This institute of religious higher learning was planned, as its declared intentions stated, to study “the

Talmudic order of *Kodshim*, the regulation of worship in the Temple, the commandments that relate to the Land of Israel and the religious laws relating to the state.”⁹ The yeshiva was founded on the expectation that the national revival movement led by Zionism, which was characterized by a disconnection from religion, would rapidly return to the fold of sanctity, the completion of ultimate redemption, and the building of the Temple. As is clear from his pamphlet *Sefatei Cohen* (Lips of a Priest) in which he described the goals of the new yeshiva, Kook believed that the revival of the Hebrew nation, despite the fact that it was constituted primarily as a secular initiative by Jews who rejected religious authority, was nevertheless intended to secure a sublime spiritual purpose. It would ultimately emerge that the final purpose of this revival was to bring the religious redemption of the Jewish people, the zenith of which is the building of the Temple: “The anticipation of seeing the priests at their worship and the Levites on their stand and Israel in their presence—this is the foundation that bears this entire revival.”¹⁰

According to Rabbi Kook, this day was steadily emerging and therefore preparations must be made. *Torat Cohanim* yeshiva was thus intended to attend to the practical preparation of priests and Levites for their worship in the Temple, based on the acute messianic expectation that the Temple would indeed be built “speedily and in our days”.¹¹

Rabbi Kook taught the tractate of *Kodshim* in the context of this hope that the sacrifices would be reinstated, and this seems to have formed the background for the establishment of *Torat Cohanim* yeshiva.

A correspondent from the London newspaper *The Christian* visited the yeshiva, which was situated in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem. He informed his readers that Rabbi Kook had established the yeshiva due to his sense of extreme urgency regarding the establishment of the Temple. The Zionist executive in London demanded explanations following this report, and Rabbi Kook replied that the requirement to study the Temple worship was now more pressing than ever:

Our faith is firm that days are coming when all the nations shall recognize that this place, which the Lord has chosen for all eternity as the site of our Temple, must return to its true owners, and the great and holy House must be built thereon . . . An official British committee some time ago asked for my opinion regarding the location of the Temple according to our estimation. I told them that just as you see that we have the right to the entire Land [following the Balfour Declaration of 1917], even though the entire world was distant from this . . . so days shall come when all the nations shall recognize our rights to the site of the Temple.¹²

This position reflects the characteristic dynamics of Rabbi Kook's work. His messianic activism, which led him to prepare priests and Levites for their worship, stopped at the gates of the Temple Mount. He argued that the building of the Temple was conditioned on the recognition by the Gentiles of the Jewish people's right to the Temple Mount. The preparation of the priests was intended to take place outside the area of the Temple Mount, and the establishment of the yeshiva did not imply that he actually intended to enter the site with his students, let alone commence the ritual of the sacrifices.

In support of my argument, I would note an additional source from the period, found in a rabbinical responsum published by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook in his book *Mishpat Cohen*. In the responsum, Rabbi Kook issues a strong warning against entering the Temple Mount area.¹³ It seems that this responsum was issued in reaction to the proposal by Rabbi Chaim Hirschenson, mentioned in the book *Malki Bakodesh*, to construct a house of prayer on the Temple Mount.¹⁴ In his responsum, Rabbi Kook gives the explanation of *mora hamikdash* (Awe of the Temple) according to which, given the sanctity with which this holy place is to be treated (and since its holiness has not been lost¹⁵) the public must stay away from the Temple Mount and refrain from entering the area. The dialectical explanation he offered for this was that distancing oneself from the site of the Temple would lead to a deeper spirituality and hence to a profound sense of attachment: "The power of the memory of honor and the awe of sanctity is all the greater when it comes through denying proximity and through distancing." The rabbi ended his responsum with the following comments:

And when, through God's infinite mercy, a fragment of the light of the emergence of salvation has begun to shine, the Rock of Israel will, with God's help, add the light of his mercy and truth, and will reveal to us the light of his full redemption, and bring us speedily our true redeemer, the redeemer of justice, our just Messiah, and will speedily fulfill all the words of his servants the Prophets, and will build the Temple, speedily in our days . . . And, until then, all Israel shall as friends associate in a single union to steer their hearts toward their Father in heaven, without bursting out and without departure, **without any demolition of the fence and without any hint of transgressing against the prohibition of profanity and impurity of the Temple and its holinesses.**¹⁶ (Emphasis—M.I.)

The Six Day War (June 1967) created a new reality in the Middle East. In the course of the war, Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip,

the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula. The Israeli victory in the war created fervent hope among the younger generation of religious Zionists. The dominant school within this population, the graduates of Mercaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook, propagated the perception that the Israeli victory in this war reflected God's will to redeem His people. The post-war era therefore represented a higher stage in the process of redemption. The Gush Emunim mass settlement movement, established in 1974 and led by the graduates of the yeshiva, aimed to settle the territories occupied by the IDF in order to establish facts on the ground and to settle the Biblical Land of Israel with Jews. They saw settlement as a manifestation of God's will to redeem His people.

On the issue of the Temple Mount, however, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook did not diverge from his father. Although Zvi Yehudah is considered the spiritual guide of the Gush Emunim movement, which acted out of a strong sense of messianic urgency, he continued to view the Temple Mount as out of bounds. Zvi Yehudah signed the declaration issued by the Chief Rabbinate immediately after the occupation of the site, prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount.

Indeed, Zvi Yehudah sharply criticized Shlomo Goren, the Chief Rabbi of the IDF, and later a Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, who advocated Jewish prayer on the Mount, as discussed in the following section. Zvi Yehudah felt compelled to oppose in the fiercest possible terms the idea of Jews entering the Temple Mount area in order to pray.¹⁷ Indeed, Kook—father and son alike—Avraham Yitzhak and Zvi Yehudah—ruled that the sanctity of the Temple Mount was so great that it was prohibited even to place one's fingers inside the cracks in the Western Wall. Zvi Yehudah fiercely opposed the demand to undertake archeological excavations on the Temple Mount, since it "is surrounded by a wall. We do not pass this wall and we have no need for [the site] to be studied."¹⁸

It should be emphasized that the principled position of Zvi Yehudah against Jews entering the Temple Mount was not intended to weaken the demand for Israel to demonstrate its sovereignty on the site. He argued that the Jewish people enjoyed "property ownership" of the area of the Temple Mount. However, he explained that the State of Israel has not yet attained a spiritual level permitting Jews to enter the area of Mt. Moriah. Only after the state has been built in the spirit of the Torah, in both the practical and spiritual realms, would it be possible to enter the holy site.

THE CHIEF RABBINATE AND THE TEMPLE MOUNT ISSUE

After the Six Day War in June 1967, and the occupation of the Temple Mount under Israeli sovereignty, the Chief Rabbinate decided to continue the passive tradition on the question of the Temple Mount; in other words—Jews were to confine themselves to the reintroduction of prayers at the Western Wall.

Just a few hours after the Temple Mount came under the control of the Israeli forces on June 8, Israel Radio issued the warning by the Chief Rabbinate not to enter the site. At the first convention of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate after the war, Chief Rabbis Nissim and Unterman continued to argue that Jews must not be permitted to enter the site.

The Rabbinate's announcement was drafted by Rabbi Bezalel Jolti, who was invited to the meeting although he was not a member of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate. He wrote: "Since the sanctity of the site has never ended, it is forbidden to enter the Temple Mount until the Temple is built."¹⁹

The minority position in the meeting was represented by Rabbi Chaim David Halevy, then rabbi of Rishon Lezion, who proposed that the question of entering the Temple Mount be left to the local rabbis, who would issue their edict to those following their authority. Shaul Israeli (a prominent teacher at Mercaz Harav yeshiva) sought to prepare a map identifying the permitted areas on the Temple Mount. Despite the minority position, the Council of the Chief Rabbinate ruled that the entire Temple Mount area was out of bounds. Yitzhak Abuhatzzeira, rabbi of Ramle, was the first rabbi to demand that warning signs be placed at the entrance to the site forbidding Jews to enter.²⁰

Despite the firm ruling of the assembly of the Chief Rabbinate prohibiting entry to the Temple Mount, there have been chief rabbis who, in a personal capacity, have permitted Jews to enter: Shlomo Goren and Mordechai Eliyahu. The opposition of Avraham Shapira, another former chief rabbi, to entering the site has also weakened in recent years.

Shlomo Goren was the Chief Rabbi of the IDF at the time of the Six Day War. This biographical fact constitutes a key point in the development of his personal approach and his vigorous campaign to open the Temple Mount. After the war, he initiated the mapping of the site by soldiers from the Engineering Corps in order to identify areas prohibited to Jews, since the Temple Mount site of today is considerably and indisputably larger than the original dimensions of the First and Second Temples. When he realized

that his initial expectation that the Islamic presence would be removed would not materialize, and that the mosques were to remain, Goren sent a confidential memorandum to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol demanding that entry to the Temple Mount be closed to both Jews and Gentiles, but this was rejected. After the war, Goren established his office on the Temple Mount. On Tisha B'Av (the day of mourning to commemorate the destruction of the first and second Temples) the rabbi and a group of his supporters brought a Torah scroll, ark, and prayer benches to the Temple Mount, where they prayed Mincha (the afternoon service). After the prayer, Goren announced that he would also hold Yom Kippur prayers on the site. His plans were thwarted by the intervention of Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan and Chief-of-Staff Yitzhak Rabin.²¹

In 1972, Goren was appointed the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel. In this capacity, he attempted to change the position of the Chief Rabbinate on the subject of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount. He initiated a discussion in the plenum of the Rabbinate and at two sessions in March 1976 lectured at length on his research. Despite his vigorous demand, the Council refrained from making any changes to its original decision, while nonetheless urging Goren to publish his studies. They later added that when his recommendations were presented in writing, it would be possible to convene a broader forum than that of the Council of the Chief Rabbinate. This served as a pretext for removing the issue from the agenda.²² At the same time, Goren's efforts in the political arena to persuade Prime Minister Menachem Begin to ease the government position regarding Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount also failed.²³

In the absence of political and rabbinical support, Goren was unable to issue an official and public permit allowing entry to the Temple Mount. Moreover, the question of the entry of women was one of the aspects that deterred him from issuing an independent declaration opening the Temple Mount to all Jews. Goren believed that women must not be permitted to enter the Temple Mount area due to the question of ritual impurity, and was afraid that a sweeping permit for Jews to enter would also result in women entering the site.²⁴

Goren found a faithful supporter in Mordechai Eliyahu, Israel's Sephardi Chief Rabbi during 1983–1993. Eliyahu adopted an innovative and creative Halachic approach when he proposed that a synagogue be built on the Temple Mount, within the permitted areas. The wall facing the Mount would be constructed of glass, so that the worshippers would look through the clear wall toward the square occupied by the Dome of the Rock. He proposed that entry into the synagogue would be directly from the entrance

to the Temple Mount, and that the building would not have an exit point on to the Mount, thus avoiding any danger of Jews entering forbidden areas. Eliyahu proposed that the synagogue should be higher than the Al-Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques, in order to manifest its superiority over the Muslim houses of worship, whose presence he saw as a reminder of the destruction. This idea also failed to materialize.²⁵

Among other proposals, Eliyahu advocated the formation of a subcommittee within the Council of the Chief Rabbinate to define the permitted areas on the Mount. He initiated a discussion in the Council and permitted Gershon Solomon, the leader of the Temple Mount Faithful movement, to speak at the session. Ultimately, however, the Council of the Chief Rabbinate decided not to alter the existing prohibition against entering the Temple Mount that it had determined in 1967. Eliyahu's colleague, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, was opposed at that time to permitting Jews to enter the Temple Mount, following the approach of Avraham Yitzhak Kook. After the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty (1994) which granted Jordan preferential status in the future management of the Temple Mount, Shapiro softened his opposition to entering the site, as noted above, commenting that "those who wish to rely on Rabbi Goren should do so."²⁶

Although the position of the Chief Rabbinate continues to prohibit entry to the Temple Mount, the first cracks in this position have begun to emerge among several leading figures. It should be noted, however, that while they were in office, Rabbis Goren and Eliyahu did not publicly express their position permitting Jews to enter the Temple Mount in the current era. They seem to have taken pains to avoid expressing this opinion out of deference to their official status as chief rabbis, although their opinions were well known among the general public.

THE COUNCIL OF YESHA RABBIS

After the disclosure of the Oslo process (1993)—which was based on an attempt to secure a compromise between Israel and the Palestinians regarding the territories of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza within the framework of a political process, and which was expected to culminate in a further compromise on the Temple Mount—positions and attitudes among the messianic school of religious Zionism were profoundly shaken. While the followers of the approach of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva believe wholeheartedly in a determinism that is leading the Jewish people and the State of Israel toward complete redemption, the emerging reality showed precisely

the opposite position –Israel seemed, in some respects at least, to be growing more secular, and its governments were leading a political process founded on painful concessions of parts of the Land of Israel in return for a partial peace agreement. The establishment of the Palestinian Authority and Israel’s recognition of this body inevitably challenged the vision of the Greater Land of Israel. In the background, there was also concern that the Temple Mount would be lost and handed over to Palestinian control. Thus the zenith of messianic expectation—the anticipated establishment of the Temple as the peak of the messianic process—now faced a grave danger due to the gradual surrender of sovereign territory.

This alarming situation led some of the rabbis most concerned about the issue of the Temple Mount into a dissonant paradox, whereby their concern for the possible failure of messianic faith led to a strengthening of religious practice and intensified messianic expectation. The risk that the vision of redemption might collapse led some members of the CYR to believe that they were facing the ultimate test, in which they were required to demonstrate supreme spiritual elevation.

I shall briefly mention some of the reactions to the challenge of faith faced in the wake of the Oslo accords. Rabbis such as Shlomo Aviner and Eliezer Melamed felt that the way to withstand this test was to advocate the intensification of the settlement enterprise, to foil implementation of the accords.²⁷ A further way to cope with this tension was to issue Halachic rulings prohibiting relinquishing sections of the Land of Israel and prohibiting the removal of settlements and of IDF bases.²⁸ In 1995, Shaul Yisraeli, head of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva, went further still, urging people to stop reciting the prayer for the welfare of the state, which includes a blessing for “its leaders, ministers and counsels”.²⁹

In this situation, an increasing number of religious authorities, including leading elements of the settlement movement, began to express positions that interpreted the Israeli withdrawal from territories in Judea and Samaria as divine punishment for the lack of Jewish attention to the Temple Mount, due to the rabbinical prohibition against entering the site. For example, Dov Lior, rabbi of Kiryat Arba and one of the leading spiritual leaders of contemporary religious Zionism, stated:

We, who believe in reward and punishment and in Divine providence, must know that one of the main reasons why we are suffering torment is the profound apathy among large sections of our people concerning the Temple Mount in general and the construction of the Temple, in particular.³⁰

The fear of further concessions led to practical measures designed to thwart any such developments. In 1996, during the high point of the opposition to the Oslo process among the settlers, the CYR issued a bold ruling urging all rabbis who held the position that it was permissible to enter the Temple Mount to “ascend the Mount themselves, and to guide their congregants in ascending the Mount within all the limitations of the Halacha.” Effectively, the CYR thus adopted the original minority position as presented by Rabbi Chaim David Halevy at the meeting of the Chief Rabbinate Council in 1967. The ruling of the CYR stated that their position had been adopted in response to “the facts that are being established on the ground by the Arabs”. The argument behind the ruling was that the lack of a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount, due to the Halachic prohibition against entering the site, had led the Israeli governments to see the site as one that could easily be relinquished. Accordingly, if masses of Jews began to enter the Mount in order to pray, it would be harder for the Israeli government to transfer sovereignty over the site to the Palestinian Authority.³¹ This decision also constituted an expression of defiance *vis-à-vis* the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, challenging its repeated rulings. It should be noted that the change of opinion was preceded by an unsuccessful request to the Chief Rabbinate to change its position on the matter.³² The decision of the CYR also challenged the traditional position of the Mercaz Harav yeshiva, which prohibits Jews from entering the Temple Mount “for the present time”, despite the fact that most of the members of the CYR are graduates of this institution.

I should add that this position on the part of the CYR has been a source of controversy within Gush Emunim. Those opposing this approach are led by Rabbis Shlomo Aviner and Zvi Tau, among the leading figures of the Mercaz Harav school. Their principal thesis is that the current generation is not yet ready for the reconstruction of the Temple. They argue that the nation must first be further prepared. The Temple is perceived as the tip of a pyramid, while the people are currently merely constructing its first foundations. Moreover, the Third Temple cannot be a temporary and imperfect structure along the lines of the First and Second Temples, which were destroyed as the consequence of their imperfection. The Third Temple should be built only after the spiritual foundations have been established in the form of the ideal Kingdom of Israel acting in accordance with the laws of the Torah. The Temple must stand for eternity, and accordingly must be built on flawless foundations. Thus, until that time it is prohibited to enter the mount.³³

THE OPENING OF THE TEMPLE MOUNT—
SEPTEMBER 2003

The three-year period following the outbreak of the second Intifada (2001) when the Temple Mount was closed to Jews provoked public and rabbinic discussion in religious Zionist circles. Just before the Temple Mount reopened to Jewish visitors, in September 2003, this intense awakening was challenged in a fierce written debate that appeared over a period of more than a month in the weekend supplements of *Hatzofé*, the journal of the National Religious Party and the representative of religious Zionist interests in the Knesset. Various articles appeared examining the question of the Temple Mount. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner provided the focus of the discussion, presenting the traditional position prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount. In the first of three articles, he noted that he had received numerous requests from young people informing him of their intention to enter the Temple Mount area in order to pray. Aviner responded that his reply to those who asked him was that, on this matter, they should follow the ruling of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, which had weighed the issue and prohibited Jews unequivocally from entering the site.³⁴ He emphasized that most of the leading rabbis had signed the statement by the Chief Rabbinate, as had Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, who even claimed that the mere discussion of the issue reflected a grave weakness in observing the commandment to “hold the Temple in awe.”³⁵ He added that it was his belief that Maimonides did not enter the Temple Mount and pray on the site during his sojourn in the Holy Land.³⁶

Each of Aviner’s columns was answered by two articles opposing his position. Haggai Huberman, a leading correspondent for the newspaper, replied that Shlomo Goren had prayed on the Temple Mount as part of a religious quorum, as he had himself.³⁷ Yisrael Meidad claimed that the Chief Rabbinate’s position was of a political, rather than a religious character. Meidad urged rabbis to issue a new ruling on the question, given the changes that had occurred in the status of the Temple Mount and the destruction of ancient remains on the site by the Waqf.³⁸ Rabbi Israel Rosen forcefully and rhetorically wondered why the obligation to obey the rabbinate was “wedged like a sword” into the foot of the Temple Mount. Rabbi Daniel Shilo, spokesperson for the CYR, wrote that, were Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacoheh Kook alive today, he would surely permit Jews to enter the Temple Mount. On the question of “awe for the Temple”, Shilo reposted that Shlomo Goren was surely not among those who did not share this sentiment.³⁹

The stand taken by Rabbi Shlomo Aviner may be seen as a rearguard battle. As soon as the Temple Mount reopened, dramatic changes could be observed regarding visits to the site. During the first three months after the site reopened for Jewish visitors, some 4,000 Jews entered the site.⁴⁰ This trend has continued, and almost every day Jewish religious communities, sometimes numbering hundreds of people, come to pray on the Mount. As of October 2004, some 70,000 people had visited the site.⁴¹ This outburst of enthusiasm has been led by important religious and political leaders from within the religious Zionist camp, and not necessarily from its more extreme wings. Thus, for example, those visiting the site have included not only such highly nationalistic rabbis as Dov Lior, Nachum Rabinowitz, Zefaniya Drori, Yisrael Rosen, Shabtai Rappoport, but also more moderate figures such as Rabbis Yuval Sherlo⁴² and Shlomo Riskin.

The demand to enter the Temple Mount, which has been led by students from the national-religious yeshivot, now seems to have swept along the more moderate leadership, even those opposed to entering the site. Thus, for example, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner himself participated in the "Drawing Near to the Sacrifices" convention in July 2004, whose title speaks for itself, and even attended the "Circling of the Gates" that took place afterwards, when the participants circled the walls of the Temple Mount, reciting dirges mourning the destruction of the Temple. Aviner conditioned his participation in the conference on the publication of his reservations regarding entry to the Temple Mount.⁴³ My assessment is that Aviner was pressured to participate in activities he did not support, and which in the past he would have avoided, because of the dynamics created on the Temple Mount issue. The fact that the conference and the march around the gates took place outside the Temple Mount itself allowed him to participate in the events, responding to public pressure. Activities held apart from the Temple Mount pose a dilemma for the moderate religious leadership of the settlers. As Orthodox Jews, they cannot negate or deny the anticipation of the reinstatement of the sacrifices, and, accordingly, they cannot oppose the substance of such informational activities, as long as these do not take place on the Mount itself.

CONCLUSION

The general rabbinical approach to the question of entering the Temple Mount may be divided into four main schools.

The first rejects such a possibility, which is left to Messianic times. This position is shared by the majority of members of the plenum of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate.

The second seeks to prepare actively for Redemption, but within legitimate religious frameworks, through theoretical study of the laws relating to the sacrificial worship. This approach does not include actual entry into the Temple Mount site and remains within the accepted framework of Torah study. The approach of Avraham Yitzhak Hacoen Kook reflects this position.

The third school argues that the construction of the Temple is indeed a public commandment, but before this takes place, spiritual elevation is needed, through settlement across the entire Holy Land and the dissemination of the light of faith, which constitute the foundation on which the Temple may be constructed. Thus, until that time it is prohibited to enter the mount. This approach is the most common among the Mercaz Harav yeshiva school.

The fourth and most activist school permits Jews to enter the Temple Mount, with certain restrictions. To this end, much effort is devoted to identifying the borders of the Temple area in order to avoid problems of ritual impurity that arise in entering the prohibited areas. This fourth school is becoming more dominant among the religious Zionist leadership, both political and rabbinical.

The study also discusses the clear phenomenon of the erosion and weakening of the prohibition against Jews entering the Temple Mount. It is difficult to ignore the growing support for this approach among ever wider circles. The research also discusses the manner in which a political process—the Oslo Accords—led to a series of counter-reactions, influencing religious approaches that had previously been considered immutable. We see that strict Orthodox circles have changed their religious behavior as the result of changing times. The fear that the Temple Mount will be lost and transferred to Arab control legitimized far-reaching changes in a long-standing religious ruling.

The yearning of the religious population for the Temple Mount and for the ideal of re-establishing the Temple grew stronger due to the threat to Israeli sovereignty over the site. As long as Israel controlled the site and the idea of handing the Mount over to Palestinian sovereignty as part of a

peace agreement was not raised, even activist circles among the religious Zionist community did not, for the most part, seek to change the reality on the Temple Mount. Although the desire to build the Temple is a central theme among these circles, it was postponed until a later stage of the process of redemption, as they see it. By contrast, since the emergence of the Oslo accords and discussion of the division of sovereignty in the “Holy Basin” (the Western Wall and the Temple Mount) there has been an increasingly strong counter-reaction demanding that Jews enter the site and create facts on the ground. The proof of this is the large number of people who have entered the Mount during the year after the Mount was reopened (September 2003) despite the Halachic prohibition. It is reasonable to suggest that it will be difficult to continue to ignore this growing support for action on this question among ever-widening circles.

It is still too early to determine what will become of these trends. It is also possible that further developments would be a result of the changing political reality. It may be, on one hand, that the question of Jews entering the Temple Mount will become routine. On the other hand, if the crisis and violent situation continues, there could be found those who would desire to attack the mosques on the site in order to promote the messianic process. If such would appear, then the warning of Avi Dichter, recently the head of the Israeli General Security Service, might be fulfilled.

NOTES

1. This was illustrated dramatically in the outbreak of the second Intifada, which erupted after the visit by Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in September 2000, although the demonstrations were probably planned at an earlier stage.

2. *Decision of the CYR*, 7 February 1996 [Hebrew].

3. The status quo on the Temple Mount dictates that the Mount itself is a Muslim place of worship, whereas the Western Wall is a Jewish place of worship. Accordingly, Jewish prayer is forbidden on the Temple Mount. The only Jewish ritual activity possible on the Temple Mount is silent, solitary prayer. See Shmuel Berkovitz, *The Temple Mount and the Western Wall in Israeli Law* (Jerusalem, 2001) [Hebrew].

4. This figure is mentioned in a letter from Minister Tzahi Hanegbi published in *Yibaneh Hamikdash*, 20617 (2005) 9 [Hebrew]. It may be assumed that most of those who visit the Temple Mount do so for religious motives, since there has not been any dramatic resurgence of Jewish tourism to the site.

5. For further discussion of the prohibition of *Karet*, see: *The Talmudic Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem, 1972) 7, 14:553 [Hebrew]. On the Halachic debate concerning entering the Temple Mount, see *The Oral Law*, 10 (1967) [Hebrew]; Shaul Sheffer, *The Temple Mount—Crown of Our Glory* (Jerusalem, 1968) 61–68 [Hebrew]. A list of 30 Halachic rulings prohibiting Jews from entering the Temple Mount was collected by scholars at Ateret Cohanim yeshiva and collated in the booklet *Ateret Cohanim*, 16 (1985) [Hebrew]. The list includes the ruling issued by the Chief Rabbinate in 1967. In a groundbreaking step, the leaders of the ultra-Orthodox public at the time added their names to this ruling, as did Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Hacohen Kook.

6. Gershon Gorenberg, *The End of Days; Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (New York, 2000); Nadav Shragai, *Mount of Dispute* (Jerusalem, 1995) 159–82 [Hebrew].

7. Avi Dichter, paper presented at Herzliya IDC College, 16 December 2003.

8. See Dov Schwartz, *Faith at the Crossroads—A Theological Profile of Religious Zionism* (Leiden, Boston, & Koln, 2002) 156–192.

9. The pamphlet Lips of a Priest (24 October 1920) appears in: Shlomo Zalman Shragai, “Rabbi Avraham Hacohen Kook, Zatsa”l, on the Restitution of the Place of Our Temple to the People of Israel,” *Sinai*, 85, (1978) 193–198 [Hebrew].

10. *Ibid.*, 194.

11. Rabbi Kook may well have found a precedent for this approach, which demanded that priests and Levites be prepared for the Temple worship on the basis of the expectation that redemption was near, in the spiritual heritage of Israel Meir Hacohen (1838–1933) the author of *Hechafetz Chaim*, who was considered one of the architects of the Orthodox viewpoint. His position on the issue was articulated in *Anticipation of Redemption* (Bnei Brak, 1988) [Hebrew].

12. Shragai, “Rabbi Avraham Hacohen Kook,” 197.

13. Avraham Yitzhak Kook, *Mishpat Cohen* (Jerusalem, 1921, 1984) 183. Citations are to the 1984 edition [Hebrew].

14. Chaim Hirschenson, *Malki Bakodesh A* (St. Louis, MO, 1918) 10–13, 41–89 [Hebrew]. CF: Zalman Koren, “Memorandum concerning the Position of the Chief Rabbinate through the Generations on the Question of the Temple Mount,” *Iturei Kohanim*, 201 (2000) 27–32 [Hebrew].

15. Rabbi Kook differs from the position of Rabbi Avraham Ben David, who argued that, since the destruction of the Temple, the physical site where the Temple stood has lost its sanctity. According to Ben David’s approach, the site can only regain its sanctity when the Temple is reconstructed; accordingly, the prohibition of *Karet* does not apply to those entering the Temple Mount area in this era. Kook rejected this approach, preferring that of Maimonides, who argued that the sanctity of the Temple Mount site is eternal, due to the primeval sanctification of the site by God as the dwelling place of the Divine Presence. See Kook, *Mishpat Cohen*, 182–227.

16. *Ibid.*, 203.
17. Koren, "Memorandum," 29–30.
18. Shlomo Aviner, *Lemikdashcha Tov* (Jerusalem, 1999) 12–13 [Hebrew].
19. For his detailed reasoning, see: Bezalel Jolti, "The Prohibition on Entering the Temple Mount in These Times," *The Oral Law*, 10 (1967) 39–45 [Hebrew].
20. A summary of the meeting held on June 11 1967 can be found in: Yoel Cohen, "The Chief Rabbinate and the Temple Mount Question," in: Itamar Warheftig (ed), *The Israel Chief Rabbinate—Seventy Years since its Foundation B* (Jerusalem, 2001) 769 [Hebrew].
21. Nadav Shragai, *Mount of Dispute* 29–35.
22. Cohen, "The Chief Rabbinate," 772–773.
23. The correspondence between Goren and Begin is quoted in: Shlomo Goren, *The Temple Mount* (Tel-Aviv, 1991) 32–33 [Hebrew].
24. *Ibid.*, 460–502.
25. *Tehumin C* (Alon Shevut, 1991) 432 [Hebrew].
26. Cohen, "The Chief Rabbinate," 775–776.
27. See: *Announcement of the CYR* (1991) [Hebrew].
28. "Halachic Ruling of the Union of Rabbis for the People of Israel and the Land of Israel," *Organ of the CYR*, 25 (1994) 1 [Hebrew].
29. *Organ of the CYR*, 26 (1994) 1 [Hebrew].
30. *Yibaneh Hamikdash*, 111–112 (1996) 4 1 [Hebrew].
31. *Decision of the CYR*, 16 February 2006 [Hebrew].
32. *Organ of the CYR*, December 1994. The request was not signed by Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a member of the Secretariat. Rabbi Eliezer Melamed from the settlement Har Beracha signed the request, although in the same issue of the organ he wrote that the time had not yet come to militate to build the Temple and reinstate the sacrifices. In national terms, however, he argued that it should be demanded that Israel control the site.
33. Aviner, *Lemikdashcha Tov*.
34. *Hatzofeh*, September 12, 2003.
35. *Hatzofeh*, September 19, 2003.
36. *Hatzofeh*, October 10, 2003.
37. *Hatzofeh*, September 19, 2003.
38. *Hatzofeh*, September 19, 2003.
39. *Hatzofeh*, October 10, 2003.
40. *Hatzofeh*, February 2, 2004. This figure is based on information from the Police.
41. See Note 3.
42. Yuval Sherlo, the head of the Hesder yeshiva in Petach Tikva and one of the leading younger rabbis of the religious Zionist movement, advocated social reform in the spirit of the Prophets before Jews began to ascend the Temple Mount: "For it is mercy I have desired, not sacrifice." However, Sherlo seems to have been unable to withstand popular pressure to enter the Temple Mount, and now claims

that both processes must be simultaneous: “The entire structure of faith must be constructed in light of the hope, intention and willingness to act to restore the light of the Divine Presence to its Place”—in Yehudah Shaviv and Israel Rosen (eds), *Come, Let Us Ascend—A Collection of Articles and Calls regarding the Temple Mount in Our Time* (Alon Shevut, 2002) 311–312 [Hebrew].

43. Shlomo Aviner, in a notice in *A Little of the Light*, 251 (2000) 3 [Hebrew].