

# The Temple Mount: Lessons from History

*Yerushalayim. Eretz Yisroel.* Words that have evoked profound yearning in Jewish hearts for millennia, now grip at our hearts with fear and apprehension.

As violence in Eretz Yisroel continues, it would be helpful for us to remember the responses of Gedolei Yisroel to comparable events in the past.

Rabbi Boruch Kaplan, principal of Bais Yaakov in Brooklyn, was a student at the Chevron Yeshiva in 1929, at the time of the Chevron Massacre. According to him, the Arabs had always been very friendly with the Jews:

To take just one example of how peaceful it was, I used to have the habit of walking a mile or two out of town all by myself to visit a tree that was believed to be the tree where Avraham Avinu greeted the malachim... Along the way I would talk to the Arabs, though it was mostly using our hands because I didn't speak any Arabic. No one in yeshiva ever told me it was dangerous to go out of town by myself among the Arabs. Such a thought never occurred to anyone – that's how friendly we were with the Arabs.

Trouble first started when leading Zionists began pushing for a change in the status quo at the Western Wall. In Rabbi Kaplan's words:

The Zionists had a slogan arguing that the Western Wall was a Jewish national symbol. Of course, the Arabs disagreed with this idea, considering that they had control of the location for over 1,100 years. What can you do? We are in golus. Because of our sins we were exiled from our land. But the Zionist movement arose, and these hot-shots came and said, "The Wall is ours!"... This led to danger to lives, and Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld begged, "Stop! It's enough that the Arabs do us a kindness and allow us to come and pray at the Wall... It's not our place. It's their place until the coming of moshiach."

But they refused to heed his call. They called a large rally, supposedly attended by ten thousand people, to proclaim that it belonged to the Jews. One of the speakers was the chief rabbi (Rav Kook), who proclaimed, "Hear O Israel, the Wall is our Wall, the Wall is One!"... And the fire heated up and blazed between the Zionists and the Arabs, may G-d have mercy.

To glean deeper insight into those times, following are excerpts from the book "Vayeilchu Shneihem Yachdav" by Benny Cohen, a student at Chevron Yeshiva who

survived the massacre.

A strong friendship existed among all residents of the city. The friendship found expression in the fact that we used to attend Arab weddings and wish them mazel tov... The Arabs, even their sheikhs, used to attend Jewish weddings as a sign of friendship.

The events leading up to the pogrom began at the Western Wall on Yom Kippur, 1928. Until that time, Jews had prayed at the Wall in an unofficial way... On that Yom Kippur they set up a partition, brought benches for the elderly, and installed lighting. The Arabs, under the leadership of Mufti Haj Amin al-Husseini, saw this as an encroachment on their territory, and they threatened to attack the Jews if nothing was done to stop them...

The Zionists seized on the conflict over the Wall as an opportunity to start a dispute with the Arabs and the British authorities... On Tisha B'av of that year [1929], which fell on Thursday, the Zionist Jews held a massive demonstration, which culminated in a march to the Wall, accompanied by the cry, "The Wall is our Wall!"

These cries, which were heard clearly in the houses of the Muslim Quarter, spurred the Arabs to prove that the Wall was theirs... Following the demonstration, the Mufti's agents spread rumors that the Jews were trying to conquer the Temple Mount. The next day, Friday, the Arabs held their own demonstration, during which they struck many of the Jews praying at the Wall, broke tables and burned prayerbooks.

After the Mufti's speech in the Al Aqsa mosque that same day, an Arab mob armed with knives marched out of the Damascus Gate toward the Jewish neighborhoods. Over the following week, nineteen Jews were killed in Jerusalem... and on the following Shabbos, 67 Jews were massacred in Hebron.

After the rioting and violence, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld published a touching appeal to the Arab population to live in peace with the Jewish community. The following are excerpts from that letter:

The Western Wall, the place from which the Divine Presence has not departed, even in its ruination, has been a place of refuge for all the inhabitants of the Holy

Land to pour out their hearts.

The inhabitants of the land who are not the Children of Israel looked favorably upon the blossoming of the settlement... Our esteemed neighbors honored the Jews, and the Jews respected the other inhabitants of the land. On many occasions one group was helped by the other, as is fitting proper for tranquil neighbors, who together desire the success of their community...

But behold now, woe unto us that such a thing has arisen in our days... Hatred and slander is taking root, causing the spilling of innocent blood and the destruction of holy settlements. The soil of the Holy Land is saturated with the blood of pure, innocent souls, and the voice of the blood of brothers cries out to us from the ground....

The Jews do not want, in any way, to take that which isn't theirs. And they certainly don't want to contest the rights of the other inhabitants to the places held by them which they regard with honor and consider holy. And in particular there is no foundation to the rumor that the Jews want to acquire the Temple Mount. On the contrary, from the time that, because of our sins, we were exiled from our land, and our Holy Temple was destroyed, and we have been lacking the purity required by the Torah, it is forbidden for any man of Israel to set foot upon the grounds of the Temple Mount, until the coming of the righteous moshiach...

Times have changed, yet history repeats itself in so many ways.

Today again, there is a status quo agreement: Jews pray at the Kosel (although some Gedolei Yisroel, notably the Satmar Rebbe, discouraged the practice after 1967), but not on Har Habayis. Again, certain groups of Jews are pushing to change that status quo. Again, Muslim clerics, like the Mufti in 1929, seize on these activities to spread rumors that Jews want to take over Har Habayis, and preach fiery sermons to incite violence. Again, terrorism strikes and Jews are afraid to walk the streets.

What must be our response? Like Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld *zt"l*, we must assure the world that we are a peaceful people. We must make it clear that those who make provocative visits to the Temple Mount are not acting in our name. And like Rabbi Boruch Kaplan and Benny Cohen, we have to reach inward as well and teach our fellow Jews that no good can come of heated rhetoric and demonstrations that "it's ours." We know from Tanach that the Makom Hamikdash is our holiest site; we don't need to prove it to the world. We need to focus on strengthening our own *avodas Hashem*, so that we may be *zocheh* to the *geulah* and the building of the Beis Hamikdash, *bimheirah beyameinu*.



718-841-7053