

## Long-Running Jerusalem Dispute Heats Up Again

A transcript from PRI's The World  
October 22, 2012 · 11:50 AM CDT  
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Jews believe the Temple Mount is the place where King Solomon's Temple was built. Today, the area is bordered on one side by the Western Wall, where Jews have been praying for some 2,000 years.

Muslims call the area the Noble Sanctuary, or al-Haram al-Sharif, and they believe this is where Mohammed ascended into heaven. It is also the location of the holy Al-Aqsa mosque and the golden Dome of the Rock mosque.

Jews and Muslims revere this holy place. But non-Muslims are not allowed to worship there. Islamic authorities forbid it. And the Israeli police enforce the rule. Those restrictions have been in place for nearly half a century. But times are changing. Some Jewish Israelis are calling for freer access to visit the Temple Mount and they want to be allowed to pray there.

It might be the most-contested piece of real estate in human history. But the Temple Mount — Noble Sanctuary is still open to tourists. On most mornings of the week, dozens of them line up to ascend to Jerusalem's holiest spot.

On a recent morning, I accompanied Rabbi Chaim Richman, who is with a group called The Temple Institute. He has been going up to the Temple Mount for 25 years and said he still tries to do so about once a week. Most Jews would not set foot on the Mount. For starters, Israel's leading rabbis forbid it. A big sign at the entrance to the holy site

states in Hebrew and English: "According to Torah Law, entering the Temple is strictly forbidden due to the holiness of the site."

Richman rejects the blanket prohibition on visiting the Mount. "The concept really for me," he explained during an interview in his Jerusalem office, "is to want to be as close as possible to the holiest place on earth."

As we stood in line, waiting to go through an Israeli police security check to enter the Temple Mount, Richman mentioned another obstacle to Jewish prayer at the site, and that is the Israeli government. It fears that Jews visiting the Mount could spark riots.

"Every government feels the same way," he said. "'It's a powder keg.' They're so concerned, [of] the specter of extremist Muslim unrest, they're so sensitive to this that they're insensitive to Jewish sensitivity."

Among the crowd of tourists, Richman and the few Jewish men he was with stood out, with their yarmulkes and beards. And as they entered the plaza next to the Al-Aqsa mosque, they were confronted by a young Palestinian man. He appeared to take issue with the presence of Jews.

An Israeli police officer quickly stepped in and calmed things down. And Richman's small impromptu group continued on

their holy walking tour. Following close by were an Israeli cop and one or two officials with the Islamic waqf. They are the Islamic religious authorities who have some autonomy over the Noble Sanctuary and its mosques. Non-Muslims are not allowed to pray or display religious symbols here. And that is the main thing Richman says he would like to see changed.

"The question is, how does it hurt them? You know, am I causing World War Three? [Iranian president] Ahmedinejad is threatening our destruction three times a day for five years," Richman said as he stood in the shade of an evergreen tree near the Dome of the Rock. "I'm not even talking now about building the holy temple. I'm talking about the ability of a human being, you know, to be in a holy place and to be able to pray."

Richman's views used to be way outside the mainstream. That appears to be changing though. During recent Jewish holidays, Israeli police arrested about a dozen Jewish activists suspected of praying on the Temple Mount. One was a member of parliament. In the last year or so, more and more Israeli politicians, rabbis and activists say that Jews should be allowed to pray on the Mount.

Michael Freund is a columnist with the Jerusalem Post who recently visited the Temple Mount for the first time in years, and he told me

that he found it both profoundly moving and frustrating. He said the ban on Jews praying at the site needs to be lifted. In his latest column, Freund went even further, saying Israel's government should consider building a synagogue on the Temple Mount. The issue is about Israeli sovereignty, Freund told me.

"We waited two-thousand years to reclaim the Temple Mount," he said. "Now that it is under Israeli control, we cannot allow it to slip through our fingers. I think it's time for Israel to reassert control over the area and to insure free access to people of all religions."

Israeli lawmakers have floated legislation that would compel Israel's police force to protect the rights of Jews to pray on the Temple Mount. It is election season in Israel right now, and the issue of Jewish prayer at Jerusalem's holiest site just might come up as an election issue ahead of the January 22nd vote.

Mohamed Hussein is the mufti of Jerusalem and the senior-most Islamic leader in the Palestinian Authority. Hussein told me the Noble Sanctuary or al-Haram al-Sharif is a Muslim holy site, not a Jewish one. And Jews should not be allowed to pray there.

"It's a problem," he said.

"A tourist comes and visits and does not have any intentions other than tourism. But the Jewish groups that go to the Sanctuary have a hidden agenda. They want to kick out the Muslim worshippers and destroy our holy

site, so they can build their temple. We will not accept this."

Another controversial proposal being talked about by Temple Mount activists is to divide Jerusalem's holiest site between Jewish and Muslim control. This is the "Hebron model," where the Israeli military enforces separate prayer times for Jews and Muslims at the (Jewish) Tomb of the Patriarchs and (Muslim) Ibrahim Mosque.

Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi says imposing such a system on the Noble Sanctuary would be a disaster for the whole region.

"I think this is extremely insidious and extremely dangerous," she told me. "Ultimately, whatever happens with the al-Haram al-Sharif it's a signal that that's the end of any type of peace or any type of peace or any type of coexistence. Not just with the Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, but also with the Arab and Islamic worlds."

The question of Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount is not an issue of freedom of worship, said Israeli lawyer Daniel Seidemann. There has been a delicate status quo in place for the Temple Mount-Noble Sanctuary, he said, and that system has been maintained by every Israeli prime minister since 1967. Changing that status quo, Seidemann told me, would amount to pyromania.

"It's not an accident that this policy that is being proposed has been rejected by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert,

who are not exactly members of the ACLU," Seidemann said.

At the end of our Temple Mount tour, Rabbi Richman turned to walk backwards, away from the mosques and back into the stone alleyways of Jerusalem's Old City. That was to show reverence for the "holy of holies," the place Jews believe held the Ark of Covenant during the First Temple period.

Richman's insistence on visiting and praying on the Mount is not supported by the majority in Israel. But as a crowd of Jewish schoolboys ran past us, he seemed to take heart from the fact that more and more Jews are coming around to his way of thinking.