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Is Israel Preserving the Mosques?

By Meron Benvenisti

It would be unworthy to question the sincerity of the motives of those who objected to the cabinet decision to destroy the synagogues in Gush Katif. Some ministers who voted against the decision had supported the disengagement and even offered to hand over the houses of Gush Katif to the Palestinians in one piece. Others had sharply objected to the disengagement, and see leaving the synagogues intact as an opening to the Jews' return to Gaza.

Alongside halakhic arguments that forbid the destruction of holy places, it is argued that demolishing synagogues would give legitimization to anti-Semites plotting to destroy inactive synagogues in defunct Jewish centers.

But in addition to wishing to preserve the synagogues, the practicable-utilitarian consideration comes into strong play. This consideration is also better from the public relations' aspect. If the synagogues are doomed to be destroyed, let the Palestinians do it rather than the Israelis, to make them look bad in the eyes of the world.

The proponents of this position, which holds the Palestinians responsible for the fate of the holy structures, accompany their argument with detailed listing of the Palestinians' disgraceful behavior in looking after Jewish holy sites - from the desecration of the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives in Jordan's era, to burning Joseph's Tomb at the beginning of the intifada. The objectors to the demolition also half-heartedly cite "more encouraging precedents," to avoid being accused of hypocrisy. For if it is indeed certain that the Palestinians would destroy the synagogues, what would be the point of asking them to assume responsibility?

This whole issue is debated among the Israelis, as usual, without considering the Palestinians, whom the debaters want to be responsible for the synagogues or to be held to blame. The High Court of Justice does not make do with the Palestinians' categorical refusal to take responsibility for keeping the synagogues, and instructed the prime minister on Tuesday to consider asking them "officially to look after the synagogues." But this does not end the unilateral move: the history of the struggle on the holy sites is not about the war of the Jewish sons of light against the Palestinian sons of darkness, but the story of a war in which both sides have committed barbaric acts to the other's holy sites.

The Palestinians may wonder whether the principle that one must not harm holy sites applies only to synagogues, or to abandoned mosques and churches as well. Does the demand that the Palestinians - or an international body - take responsibility for the synagogues apply also to the Israeli government vis-a-vis the abandoned mosques in Israel? And if we are in such a hurry to expose the Palestinians' shame to the world, are we ready to expose Israel's shameful behavior vis-a-vis the Moslem holy sites as well?

Out of some 140 village mosques that were abandoned due to the war in 1948, some 100 were totally torn down. The rest, about 40, are in advanced stages of collapse and neglect, or are used by the Jewish residents for other purposes. In a

moshav in the Carmel mountains there is a mosque whose remnants still display its past grandeur. It is in a sad state of disrepair, its walls are crumbling and it is surrounded by barbed wire fences. The requests of "present-absent" refugees (Palestinian who live in Israel but are classified by the state under the oxymoron 'Present Absentees' to prevent them from claiming ownership of their property) to repair the mosque have been refused by the authorities. A large mosque in the heart of a moshav in the Judean mountains serves as a warehouse and body shop for farming machines. There are 20 additional similar structures on the verge of collapse.

In 1997, when the residents of a community in the Western Galilee wanted to build an extension, they rammed the remnants of the village's abandoned mosque with a bulldozer and demolished it completely. Not far from there the authorities refuse to allow Palestinians to pray in the ancient mosque of another abandoned village, using the excuse that such prayer is "political organizing, almost a settlement and would set a precedent for agreeing to let the Palestinians return." Several mosques serve as housing, and others are used for commercial and cultural purposes. The mosque of an abandoned village on the Iron Valley serves a kibbutz carpentry. A mosque in an artists' community in the Carmel serves partly as a restaurant and bar. Other mosques serve as museums and galleries. The large synagogue in a township near Rehovot is located inside the abandoned village's mosque, whose minaret was destroyed and the symbolic half crescent atop its dome has been replaced by a menorah.

And we haven't even mentioned yet the tombs of sheikhs that have become graves of holy Jewish figures - the "Dan tomb" that replaced the tomb of Sheikh Gharib, a local holy man, or the tomb of Sit Sakina in Tiberias, which became the tomb of Rachel, Rabbi Akiva's wife. Less than 40 Moslem cemeteries remained out of more than 150 that existed in abandoned villages. They too are run down and in constant danger of having their tombs smashed and of being violated and expropriated.

The Israeli government knows why it does not want to demand that the Palestinians protect synagogues. What if the Palestinians pose a counter demand - to compel Israel to look after the dilapidated mosques in its territory? And all the good-hearted people, whose heart aches to see the destruction of a synagogue - would they raise a hue and cry to save the mosques of Ijzim, Lajjun and Ghabbasiyah? At least they should acknowledge that the feelings aroused by the destruction of abandoned synagogues are also shared by hundreds of thousands of Israeli Moslems at the sight of their disappearing holy sights. Perhaps, when everyone recognizes that the pain over destruction is universal, the war over the holy places will end.

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