



Sharing and Exclusion: The Case of Rachel's Tomb¹

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In the opening decades of the last century, in the latter days of Ottoman rule over Greater Syria as well as in the early days of the British Mandate for Palestine, inter-communal sharing of shrines was still a relatively common phenomenon. In the summer of 1903, Lewis Paton accompanied Professors Samuel Curtiss and Stuart Crawford on “an extended trip ... through the rural districts of Syria and Palestine”² during which they encountered multiple sites at which combinations of the dominant religions of the region (for the most part “Christians, Mohammadans and Druses,”³ but also on occasion “Metāwilehs”⁴ – Shi‘a) shared reverence of the same sites. Thus at Bāniyās, in the Galilee,

there is an ancient holy oak sacred to Sheikh Ibrāhīm. It is covered with bits of cloth hung upon it by pilgrims as calling cards to remind the saint of their requests. It is visited by members

Image from glass negative of Rachel's Tomb. Note antechamber to the fore of the photograph. Source: *Property of the author, date and photographer unknown.*

of all the sects. Those who have fevers or other diseases come to the tree and say, “We are sick, wilt thou heal us?”⁵

He goes on to mention shrines to *Nebī Yehūdah* (“visited by both Christians and Muhammedans”), *Nebī Yūsha* (“to this all the sects come, except the Druses”), and *Nebī eḏ-Ḍāḥī* on *Jebel Ḍāḥī* near Nazareth (where “Muslims and Christians alike come to make and pay vows”).⁶ He writes of a number of other shrines, in modern day Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, which are multiply revered, but more interesting is the fact that more than half of the “high places” and “holy trees” he mentions are effectively mixed shrines. Chester McCown noted in the early 1920s that in Muslim countries of the Mediterranean, saint worship “is at work today, despite the opposition of theological sophistication . . . [and that it is] a real religion that practically meets the needs of a large proportion of the Muslim population of Palestine, and not a small part of the Christian.”⁷ While McCown was primarily involved in an ethnographic study of Muslim practice, he notes examples of sharing between Christians and Muslims, both at *Nebī Samwīl* and at the mosque of *el-Ḥalīl* outside of Ramallah. Taufik Canaan, writing in 1927, peppers his text on “Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries” with phrases such as “honoured by Christians and Mohammedans,” “honoured by Mohammedans and Christians,” and “honoured by all denominations,” and lists a large range of practices, rituals, beliefs, and lore shared by Muslims and Christians.⁸ Intriguingly, as one gets nearer to sites of institutional centrality, shared sites become “differentiated” despite being single sites; thus, on the Mount of Olives the tomb shrine Muslims revere as *es-sayidī er-Rāb ‘ah* (which is “owned” by the nearby Mosque of *el-Maṣad*, or the Mosque of the Ascension) is known to Christians as the tomb of Pelagia and to Jews as that of the prophetess Hulda.⁹

Although many of the sites listed above are Muslim sites, either because of the relative demographic weighting of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish populations or because the primary interest of the authors who mention them is with Muslims, there are nonetheless a number of Christian shrines which host Muslim visitors, particularly those associated with the Virgin Mary, St. George, or the Prophet Elijah. At certain times of the year Muslims and Christians would gather at *mawāsim* (singular *mōsam*: a term Canaan defines generically as “season, mart, fair, or time of assembly of pilgrims,” but specifically as “season of visiting a sanctuary”).¹⁰ Adele Goodrich-Freer provides a graphic description of the annual gathering around the Virgin’s Tomb in Jerusalem’s Kidron Valley:

At the Feast of the Assumption, in August, the slope of the Mount of Olives and the upper part of the Kedron Valley become the background, for some eight days or more, of a curious scene. Hundreds of tents are set up, and hundreds of families, Muslim as well as Christian, are encamped there in order to visit, at frequent intervals, the Tomb of the Virgin, close by the Garden of Gethsemane, to which they bring children and sick persons for physical as well as spiritual advantage. The Muhammedans, as well as every branch of the Oriental Church, have their special praying places within the chapel, which, like so many in Palestine, is a grotto or cave, lighted at

such times, by hundreds of lamps, silver and gold, some of great beauty and value.¹¹

The Virgin's Tomb had, as Goodrich-Freer points out, "praying places" for the Moslems, in particular a *mihrab* in the wall directly to the south of the tomb edifice itself (this exists today although it is unclear whether it continues to be used).¹² Canaan too notes that

... some Christian churches are respected and visited by the Mohammedans. Churches dedicated to St. George – especially in the village of *el-Hader* near Bethlehem – frequently enjoy this privilege. *Sittî Maryam* comes next. The Chapel of the Ascension, the Church of the Nativity, the Milk Grotto and *Mâr Elyâs* come after. The last two enjoy only the respect of the neighbouring Mohammedan villages.¹³

The Church of St. George in al-Khadr, the Church of the Nativity, the Milk Grotto, and *Mâr Elyâs* are all in the sub-district of Bethlehem, a region which at that time had a significantly higher proportion of Christians to Muslims than that of most other regions of Palestine. In 1922, forty-one percent of the population of the sub-district of Bethlehem was Christian, although much of that figure was made up of urban residents of Bethlehem itself where eighty-eight percent of the population was Christian. Rural populations were ninety-one percent Muslim and nine percent Christian. While the demographic factor may have had something to do with the number of Christian sites shared with Muslims (as Christian majority towns would be likely to have nominally Christian local shrines), it is more likely that the Bethlehem region – one deeply inscribed with both an Old Testament and a New Testament history – had more places traditionally associated with moments in and figures from Christian mythography than any region in Palestine other than Jerusalem.

Travellers less frequently commented on sites shared by Christians or Muslims with Jews, and these were fairly exceptional, existing for the most part only in or around major urban settlements along the Jerusalem–Bethlehem–Hebron axis. Paton makes no mention of Jews in his *itinerarium* of rural shrines. There are places he might have encountered Jewish worshippers at mixed shrines such as Rachel's Tomb outside of Bethlehem but he does not cite such places. One reason for the absence of Jews at the sites he mentions is the fact that the Jewish population of Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century was largely urban. The 1922 British census notes, for all of Palestine, a population of 752,048 of whom 589,177 were Moslem, 83,790 were Jews, and 71,464 were Christian.¹⁴ Of these only 15,172 of the Jews (eighteen percent) and 17,981 of Christians (twenty-five percent) lived in rural districts while 451,816 or seventy-seven percent of the rural population was Muslim.¹⁵ It should also be noted that the 1922 census followed both the First and Second Aliyahs (1881–1903 and 1904–1914, respectively) and took place during the Third Aliyah (1919–1923). These Zionist migrations, which were for the most part made up of European Jews ideologically committed to work in rural communes, introduced up to 100,000 persons to the country, although many of them subsequently re-emigrated

or moved to the cities. The *Survey of Palestine* notes that “the fundamental character of the Jewish community remains ... that of an urban population.”¹⁶ This population, both because of a lack of familiarity with – and modernist antipathy to – local customs and an ideological commitment to separation of populations, was very unlikely to visit local shrines or *maqamat* except, perhaps, as ethnographic curiosities; the *Survey of Palestine* notes that “the fundamental character of the Jewish community remains ... that of an urban population.”¹⁷

Clermont Ganneau, who argued that the contemporary Palestinian peasantry could be treated as a source of information about the cultural practices of an ancient past, closes “The Arabs in Palestine” (1881) with the lament that that community is vulnerable to

the progress of civilisation which everywhere, sooner or later, sweeps away the ruins of the past to make room for the future. Palestine, so long spared, is already undergoing the common lot. A strong current of immigration from central Europe has for some time set in upon it, and a few years will do what centuries have not been able to effect.¹⁸

Ganneau could anticipate one aspect of the modernization to come – he foresaw the moment when “on the spot where the cry of Rachel mourning for her children still lingers, we hear in mocking echo the shrill scream of the railway whistle”¹⁹ – but he could not foresee the violence which would eventually devolve from the “strong current of immigration from central Europe” which, already in 1882, was beginning to stamp its impress on the landscape. A survey of the development of Rachel’s Tomb – a site until recently shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims – into a fortified Jewish shrine walled off from the localities which had provided its worshippers offers a perspective on that violence.

Rachel’s Tomb as Shared Shrine

The site known as Rachel’s Tomb, located on the outskirts of Bethlehem to the west of what had been (until the Wall’s construction) the main road linking that city to Jerusalem, has a long textual genealogy stretching from Eusebius’s fourth-century C.E. *Onomasticon* through eleventh-century Jewish and Muslim texts to the controversies of the present day. While Eusebius noted simply that “Rachel is buried at the fourth milestone from Jerusalem in the place called the Hippodrome [and that] the monument is pointed out even now,”²⁰ by the late seventh or early eighth century a memorial liturgy carried out at Rachel’s Tomb was part of a sequence of Christian calendrical festivals focussed on Bethlehem.²¹ By the eleventh century, when the pilgrim Jachintus noted the Christian cemetery around Rachel’s Tomb, Muslim travellers, such as ‘Ali ibn Abi Bakr al-Harawi (Abu al-Hasan), were noting the tomb’s presence²² and Jewish pilgrims were beginning to site Rachel’s Tomb on their real or imagined itineraries. Isaac ben Joseph ibn Chelo, a Jewish immigrant from Italy to Jerusalem, allegedly wrote in 1334 of the Jewish community of Jerusalem resorting to Rachel’s Tomb for Yom Kippur prayers,²³ although this

text is now regarded as a nineteenth-century forgery.²⁴

Association of a site with a revered religious figure, especially one recognized by the three monotheistic faiths which sanctify and variously interpret the Hebrew Bible, not only makes it a place of visitation for pilgrims but also gives it salience for local populations. Rachel's association, in all three traditions, with resurrection and fertility gave her tomb particular importance. Jachintus's mention of a Christian cemetery surrounding the tomb suggests that for Bethlehemites – exclusively Christian up until the late eighteenth century – the biblical site on the outskirts of the city was blessed by the presence of a nurturing saint likely to help those buried in her vicinity to achieve salvation.²⁵ By the fifteenth century, according to the pilgrim Johannes Poloner, Muslims, most likely from surrounding Muslim villages, were being buried on the southern side of the shrine.²⁶ Increasingly the cemetery surrounding the tomb became Muslim. In 1839, Mary Damer described bedouin burying a shaykh in the graveyard,²⁷ while in 1853 James Finn wrote of witnessing Bethlehem Muslims “burying one of their dead near the spot.”²⁸ Philip Baldensperger, a resident of nearby Artas between 1856 and 1892, wrote of Rachel's Tomb in his *Immovable East* that “a number of Bedawin, men and women, were assembled there for a funeral service, for the Bedawin of the desert of Judah all bury their dead near Rachel's sanctuary as their forefathers the Israelites of old did around their sanctuaries.”²⁹ Christian burial in the Tomb's vicinity had dropped off by the mid-nineteenth century, most likely because – in the wake of the resettlement in the Harat al-Fawaghreh quarter of Bethlehem of Muslim villagers from the village of Faghur – the cemetery had become predominantly Muslim and the Christians had taken to burying their dead on the slopes beneath the Church of the Nativity.

By the early to mid-nineteenth century European travellers to the region were not only commenting of Rachel's Tomb that “the Jews . . . pay it great veneration,”³⁰ but also that “this spot is regarded with veneration by all classes of people and it is esteemed a great honor to be buried near the dust of the patriarch's wife. Hence all around we see Jewish and Mohammedan graves.”³¹ Although later visitors, such as Conder and Kitchener, continued to assert that “there are Jewish graves near it,”³² it is unlikely that Jewish burials at Rachel's Tomb were frequent, if they occurred at all. It was not that there was any hostility from the Ottoman authorities towards Jewish use of the shrine: in 1756, Elijah Samnun of the Jerusalem Jewish community paid a local official for permission to carry out substantial repairs to a damaged wall within the shrine;³³ in 1830 and 1831, *firman*s were sent from the governor of Damascus and the Sublime Porte insisting on Jewish rights to visit the tomb;³⁴ and in 1841, after the earthquake of 1837, Moses Montefiore was allowed to restore the damaged shrine and distribute its keys to Jewish caretakers.³⁵ More to the point, for the Palestinian Jews resident in Jerusalem and to a lesser extent Hebron, Rachel's Tomb was a site of liturgical celebration and pilgrim visitation rather than an appropriate site for burial; Jerusalem's Jews were traditionally buried in the vast necropolis on the Mount of Olives and the Hebronites above the Cave of Machpelah.

Nonetheless nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century visitors, many of whom were English caught up in evangelical philosemitism, were enthusiastic about the swelling “return” of Western Jews to the Promised Land and keen to see their “reinsertion” into

the social and physical landscape of Palestine. Guidebooks of the period celebrated the “shared” character of Rachel’s Tomb. Thus Josias Porter, in *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine* (1858), asserted that “it is one of the few shrines which Muslims, Jews and Christians agree in honoring, and concerning which their traditions are identical,”³⁶ while Baedeker’s *Jerusalem and Its Surroundings: Handbook for Travellers* (1876) claimed that “the tomb is revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews.”³⁷ In 1927, the British Mandate authorities introduced a series of pictorial postage stamps and banknotes featuring Rachel’s Tomb which continued to be produced until 1945.³⁸ Strickert, followed by Aghazarian, Merli, Russo, and Tiemann, sees this as the government’s promulgation of the shrine as a “model of a shared site.”³⁹

Despite the hyperbole, and even if Jewish tombs in the vicinity of that of the legendary matriarch might have been figments of that fervor, Jews sharing the space of the shrine with local “Arabs” was not. There may have been supplemental extra-religious incentives for that sharing: Finn, in the entry cited above, comments that the “Bethlehem Moslems” who buried their dead around the Tomb and protected visiting Jews from bedouin thieves “were in the habit of bringing the Jews water to drink on these occasions [the last day of the month, when Jews would go to Rachel’s Tomb for prayers] in return for *baksheesh*.”⁴⁰ Yet it was mutual reverence for Rachel that variously focussed the interests of Jews, Muslims, and Christians on the site.

While it is clearly attested that Jews as pilgrims visited for calendrical and personal reverencing of the Tomb and that Muslims attended to pray and bury their dead in the blessed penumbra of the shrine, there are understated indications Jews, Muslims, and Christians (particularly women) alike came for the consolation the Old Testament original of the *Mater Dolorosa* could offer the sick, the grieving, and the barren. Women’s ritual practices, around shrines as elsewhere, tend to be relatively “unmarked” unless there is something of the spectacular, or the ideologically recuperable, around them. Batches of black garbed Jews periodically working their ways to Rachel’s Tomb along the tracks from Jerusalem and Hebron, like noisy funerals attended by mobs of “wild and starved looking Arabs ... [with] wild, ferocious expression[s] of countenance,”⁴¹ catch the attention of foreign commentators, as do isolated monuments surrounded by substantial graveyards – to whomever the latter may be attributed. What is less worthy of commentary, unless said commentary serves an explicit purpose, are individual or small groups of worshippers carrying out relatively undistinguished acts of reverence or devotion. Nonetheless, as evidence from as early as the fifteenth century shows, Rachel’s Tomb has been frequented by women concerned with fertility. Bernard von Breydenbach, who travelled in the Holy Land between 1483 and 1484, commented in his *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* (1486) on pregnant women who collected stones from the Tomb’s surrounds in the expectation that these would ensure them unproblematic deliveries. Later evidence is less marked, but Susan Sered has noted that “through the mid-1930s Rachel’s Tomb was a minor Jewish, Christian, and Muslim shrine, not associated with any special concerns or sought out by any particular population”⁴² and that “Rachel’s Tomb was visited occasionally by Muslim women in the 19th century and between 1948 and 1967, but does not seem to have been a particularly active Muslim shrine.”⁴³

Her commenting on the presence of Muslim women at the shrine, a site usually connected by travel writers with male attendees, signals a function responding particularly to their concerns. It also resonates with the situation of the shrine of al-Shaykh Sultan Badr, which, before the destruction of the encompassing village of Dayr al-Shaykh in 1948,⁴⁴ served to augment the fertility of local and visiting Muslim women. Meron Benvenisti, commenting on a reference to that shrine in the anonymous *Mysticism of the Holy Land* (a guidebook to Jewish sites where cures for afflictions such as barrenness can be sought), notes that the same site now (after the expulsion of the Muslims) serves Jewish women seeking saintly intervention: “this need, which attracted the Muslim worshipper to the grave of Sheikh Badir, also motivates the Jewish women who visit the same site to request the same assistance and mediation.”⁴⁵ It is highly likely that Rachel’s Tomb, like many minor holy sites throughout the region, was “grounded in beliefs, traditions, and typical ‘native’ folklore more local than Muslim [or Jewish]”⁴⁶ and that, when accessible, it served women of all three communities. Samuel Dresner notes generically of the Mandate Period that “Arabs too honoured the grave and prayed there,”⁴⁷ and draws quotations from the *Day Books* kept by Solomon, an Ashkenazi caretaker, indicating that the shrine was visited by Arabs as well as Jews. For example: “5.3.45 Four Egyptian Arabs and one woman measured the grave with string for an omen. One recited psalms and other prayers in Arabic.”⁴⁸ Certainly, in visits made between 1983 and 1985, I saw individual Palestinian women invoking the assistance of Rachel via practices which were indistinguishable from those of the Jewish women who thronged the site.

The Tomb Becomes a Fortress

Today Rachel’s Tomb is commonly, and accurately, referred to as a fortress. The website of “The Committee for Rachel’s Tomb,” an Israeli site linked to the *Yeshivat Kever Rachel Emainu* (Yeshiva of Rachel’s Tomb) which was founded on the grounds of Rachel’s Tomb in 1995, writes that in the wake of the second intifada (2000)

... the situation required that [the Tomb] be transformed into a fortress. The new Rachel’s Tomb building is built to withstand the ravages of war, both to protect the tomb as well as those within should hostilities break out. Besides the guard towers there are many small windows that are designed to enable our soldiers to shoot out in the event of a siege. These windows allow a myriad of our soldiers to actively defend the tomb while being safely protected by the walls.⁴⁹

The enclosing of Rachel’s Tomb inside a fortified wall, which took place soon after the establishment of the *yeshiva*, along with the presence therein not only of Israeli soldiers but also of armed settlers linked to the Gush Etzion movement, made it impossible for local Palestinians to access the Tomb, which was cut off from the surrounding cemetery. Between 1995 and 2007 (Rachel’s Tomb was annexed to Jerusalem in 2002), when



Rachel's Tomb inside the Separation Barrier. Source: Photo by author, 15 April 2007.

the Israeli-built “separation barrier” was extended into Bethlehem to encompass the Tomb and seal it off from the West Bank, access for Israeli Jews and tourists was also severely restricted when not rendered impossible because of site closure. Before the 2007 completion of the “separation barrier,” which allowed private cars from the Israeli side of the barrier to be driven up to the Tomb, one could only get to Rachel’s Tomb directly from West Jerusalem via either “private bullet-proof buses”⁵⁰ provided by groups such as the *Mosdos Kever Rachel* (Rachel’s Tomb Institute) or by public bullet-proof buses run by *Eged*.

Since the Wall’s completion, visitors, having cleared several checkpoints and passed the armed soldiers at the external doorway, walk into a low, artificially lit passageway that eventually brings them to the two pillars which had previously marked the entryway to the Tomb from the once busy Hebron Road.⁵¹ These now signal the interior entrance to the men’s prayer room while the next opening, into the now conjoined vestibule and prayer room added to the Tomb by Montefiore in 1841, provides women access to their side of the Tomb. The internal spaces are crowded with gender-segregated Hassidic Jews; on the men’s side these read from the Torah, praying alone or in groups, while on their side the women talk quietly, holding babies, and touching and speaking to the tomb. During my most recent visit in April 2007, the feel of the site with its windowless walls and artificial light was claustrophobic, and this discomfort was amplified by the forty minutes

I was required to remain inside before being able to leave to catch the next bus. There was little sense of the place I remembered from earlier visits or from the iconography of Rachel's Tomb. When I asked one of the men who had come in with me on the *Eged* bus whether he remembered the way the Tomb had been before its enclosure within both its fortifications and the six-meter-high wall that surrounds it, he replied, "yes, it was very beautiful then, but it is even more beautiful now." The only beauty I could imagine was that alterity had been banished.

What I here investigate is not the immediate precedents to the militarization and enclavement of Rachel's Tomb, but the extended, and less pronounced, history of separation and exclusion that turned a "shared shrine" integrated into local communities into a focal point for antagonism between them. Certainly in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords, Rachel's Tomb, sited in the midst of a burgeoning commercial neighborhood of Palestinian Bethlehem as well as in the hearts and minds of Jews celebrating their "return" to a legendary homeland, became a scene of frequent confrontation between nationalists of both communities. And the disputes within Israeli political circles which followed Oslo's siting of the Tomb in "Area C" (under temporary Israeli security and civil control but meant to be handed over to Palestinian National Authority jurisdiction within eighteen months) made the Tomb a focus of settler mobilization and incitement. These confrontations, and the subsequent walling off of the Tomb, developed out of actions carried out a century and a half earlier – actions which changed the choreography of sharing the site and sowed the seeds of exclusivity.

Montefiore and the Expropriation of Rachel's Tomb

On 14 June 1839, Judith Montefiore, travelling with her husband Moses, stopped at Rachel's Tomb while the couple were on their way to Hebron from Jerusalem. She had visited the site over a decade earlier (19 October 1827) but in the interim the earthquake of 1 January 1837 had inflicted serious damage on both the region and the building. Having prayed and "inscribed [her] name, amid many thousands of others, on the sacred monument,"⁵² Montefiore perceived that its wall was "fast crumbling into ruins" and subsequently noted in her diary that "we directed inquiries to be made as to the sum required for its repair."⁵³ Within two years, in conjunction with an extensive program of restoring sites of Jewish worship throughout the Holy Land negotiated with Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, Moses Montefiore arranged for substantial repairs and improvements to be carried out on Rachel's Tomb. Although documentation of the arrangements made for the shrine is scant,⁵⁴ it is clear that in 1841 the Tomb was renovated, its cupola repaired, and a prayer room (linked to the Tomb by a vestibule) including a *mihrab* (a niche indicating the direction of Mecca for Muslim prayers) added on the Eastern side of the original single-roomed site. Further, the key to the room enclosing the tomb, which had been held by a Bethlehem Muslim caretaker named Osman Ibrahim al-Atayat,⁵⁵ was copied and the two keys turned over to the care of two Jewish guardians, one Sephardic (Joshua Burla) and the other Ashkenazi (Jacob Freiman). Visitors to the Tomb subsequently had to be

accompanied by one of the caretakers, either by prior arrangement or on the occasion of liturgical events, and this curtailed visits by local people and foreign pilgrims. As early as 24 March 1843 John Wilson, visiting the shrine, found the Tomb room locked.⁵⁶ On a second visit, most likely on 21 May, he “found the door of the diminutive mosk [sic] over Rachel’s Tomb, which is generally shut, off its hinges; and we, consequently, entered the sanctum. The erection over the grave is in the form of a Muhammadan bier.”⁵⁷ Wilson’s comments indicate not only that there was some resistance to the locking of the shrine but also that Montefiore, while radically changing the demography of those who could (licitly) access the Tomb, had not changed its internal appearance, leaving it “in the form of the common Muhammadan tombs.”⁵⁸

The idea that Moses Montefiore bought the site of Rachel’s Tomb in 1841 is widely disseminated but ill conceived. The notion is variously promoted by religious nationalists associated with the current occupation of the site, but has spread more widely and appears in texts as diverse as Denys Pringle’s *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (“the tomb was acquired”),⁵⁹ Davidson and Gitlitz’s *Pilgrimage from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia* (Montefiore “bought the site”),⁶⁰ and *Wikipedia* (Montefiore “purchased the site”).⁶¹ Nadav Shragai, a journalist on the religious right, has written an influential book in Hebrew on Rachel’s Tomb,⁶² which he has drawn upon in numerous articles, nearly all radical defenses of Jewish rights to the tomb in the face of Palestinian threats. In his work he has claimed that Montefiore’s permission to carry out repairs on the site in 1841 confirmed that “the Turkish [sic] authorities . . . recognized the place as the holy property of the Jews.”⁶³ Meron Benvenisti, a left-leaning politician and writer whose *Sacred Landscape* (2000) is a landmark study of the erasure and expropriation of Palestinian heritage, also sees Rachel’s Tomb as Jewish property, going even further than Shragai in his autobiographical *Son of the Cypresses*, where he claims that Rachel’s Tomb “is one of the few sites in Eretz Israel that have always remained exclusively in Jewish hands.”⁶⁴

Rachel’s Tomb, however, is not only a *waqf* (Islamic endowment, plural *awqāf*) but more specifically a *waqf khayri*, a public *waqf* functioning to generate revenue “for the benefit of institutions and the poor of the community.”⁶⁵ As a recognized holy place, it was such since well before the region came under the control of the Ottoman Empire in 1516. The Franciscan Bernardino Amico, who was resident in the Holy Land between 1593 and 1597 and provided line drawings of the floor plans of Rachel’s Tomb in his 1610 *Trattato delle Piante & Immagini de Sacri Edifizi di Terra Santa* (Plans and Images of the Sacred Edifices of the Holy Land), noted Muslim control on his visit to the Tomb: “the place is held in much veneration [by the Muslims], and they do not wish that Christians put a foot inside.”⁶⁶ Somewhere between 1605 and 1626, Muhammad ibn Farukh, governor of Jerusalem, renovated the shrine, walling up the arches so that the tomb was enclosed within a room.⁶⁷ Some claim this enclosing was carried out in order to make Rachel’s Tomb an exclusively Jewish site,⁶⁸ while Shragai asserts that the walling was done, with the governor’s permission, by the Jews themselves.⁶⁹ However, Richard Pockocke, travelling between 1737 and 1738, argued the opposite, describing Rachel’s Tomb as “a dome, supported by arches, which have lately been filled up to hinder the Jews from

going into it; the Turks are fond of being buried near it.”⁷⁰ Neither, one ascertains from reading Heyd’s collection of contemporary imperial *firmans* (mandates or decrees), is likely to be the case. Seventeenth-century rural Palestine was a relatively lawless place, and the important revenue collected from foreign and local pilgrims (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian) was at risk from bedouin raids along the roads and at the sites. Rachel’s Tomb was most likely restored, walled, and appointed a caretaker so as to render the site secure and sufficiently attractive to pilgrims, from whose tolls the site, and the state, profited.⁷¹ For a government which saw its main functions as the “defence of the country, the maintenance of public order, and the collection of taxes,”⁷² and which had considerably increased the number of *awqāf* and their dependencies since the conquest, a *waqf* that could not generate revenues – either because access was ungoverned and untaxed or because visitors who could be taxed were scared off by hostile bedouin – was anathema.⁷³

Until 1918, Rachel’s Tomb was a religious *waqf* maintained by the state as both a property of God and a source of revenue. According to Ottoman law, the holy places of the “People of the Book” (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) fall under the remit of *shari‘a* law which considers them *awqāf*, “inalienable religious endowment[s], not *mulk*, private property”.⁷⁴

The Arabic *waqf* means literally prevention or restraint. Hence its technical meaning in Islamic law as the protection of property made the object of a pious foundation from being alienated, and safeguarding in perpetuity of the use of its usufruct (*manfa‘ah*) for the purposes pleasing to God – for the benefit of mosques, schools, hospitals, the maintenance of scholars, and assistance to the poor.⁷⁵

Waqf properties could be said to belong to God and, although the sovereign had custody of them and could thus grant rights of usage to the sites as well as retract such rights and bequeath them to other users, “Moslem law did not allow, and in the words of Sir Anton Bertram, ‘viewed with horror,’ the alienation of any property devoted to religious purposes.”⁷⁶ Thus, for instance, “the Jewish Quarter within the walls [of Jerusalem’s Old City] was almost totally *waqf* property (Muslim endowments); the houses were only rented by their Jewish occupants.”⁷⁷ Likewise, the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives was “part of the *waqf* endowed for the upkeep of the college (*madrassa*) named after *Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī* ... all of this area was leased (*‘ijāra ṣaḥīḥa*) to Jews to be used for burying their dead.”⁷⁸ Not only could no one purchase a *waqf*, and especially not a *waqf* with direct Abrahamic associations such as Rachel’s Tomb, but, as James Finn’s *Stirring Times* suggests, no one who was either foreign or non-Muslim – and Montefiore was both – could purchase any property within the Ottoman domains as early as 1841 – the date Montefiore allegedly bought Rachel’s Tomb. Finn, appointed the British consul for Jerusalem and Palestine in 1846, expressed pleased amazement in 1855 on witnessing Montefiore’s purchase of *mulk* (private land) to be used for *Mishkenot Sha’ananim*, commenting that “this sale of land to a foreigner and a non-Moslem [was yet] another of the remarkable events in the history of Jerusalem.”⁷⁹ The exceptionality of this is attested

to by Tibawi who asserts that “until 1867 foreign nationals were debarred from holding real estate anywhere in the Ottoman Empire, especially in the holy cities.”⁸⁰

I would propose that Montefiore, rather than “purchasing” Rachel’s Tomb, acquired the key to the enclosed sanctum and transferred the role of protecting that room from its local Muslim caretaker to the representatives of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi residents in Jerusalem. Heyd’s texts show that the Ottoman authorities were concerned about the maintenance of sites held to be sanctified as well as about the reliability of their doorkeepers.⁸¹ They were particularly concerned that potentially lucrative pilgrimage sites were restored so as to ensure their profitability.⁸² Rachel’s Tomb was a powerful attraction for the expanding Jewish populations of Jerusalem and Hebron, and Halper notes that “fees” were charged “for permission to pray at Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem.”⁸³ Thus, not only was there a pecuniary logic to putting the shrine in the care of those who would organize the Sephardic and Ashkenazi pilgrimages to the Tomb, but there was reason as well to allow the “restoration” of the shrine to a condition which would facilitate expanded Jewish use of the site and hence increased revenue for the *waqf*.

In the case of Rachel’s Tomb something exceptional occurred, however, and this was the addition to the single-roomed shrine of a vestibule connecting with a prayer room including a *mihrab*. Ottoman law is adamant on the rule that Christian and Jewish buildings can only be “restored” to the ground plan they occupied when Saladin conquered Jerusalem in 1187:

... the Islamic law of the Ottoman State safeguards the Christian and Jewish places of worship that existed at the time of the Muslim conquest and were not then converted into mosques. No new churches and synagogues may, however, be built. If repairs to the old ones are carried out, no additions are permitted.⁸⁴

The substantial addition to the building (approximately 10 meters by 7.35 meters added to the original 7.35 meters square building) effected by the renovation could only have been carried out if the building was recognized by the authorities as a Muslim site.

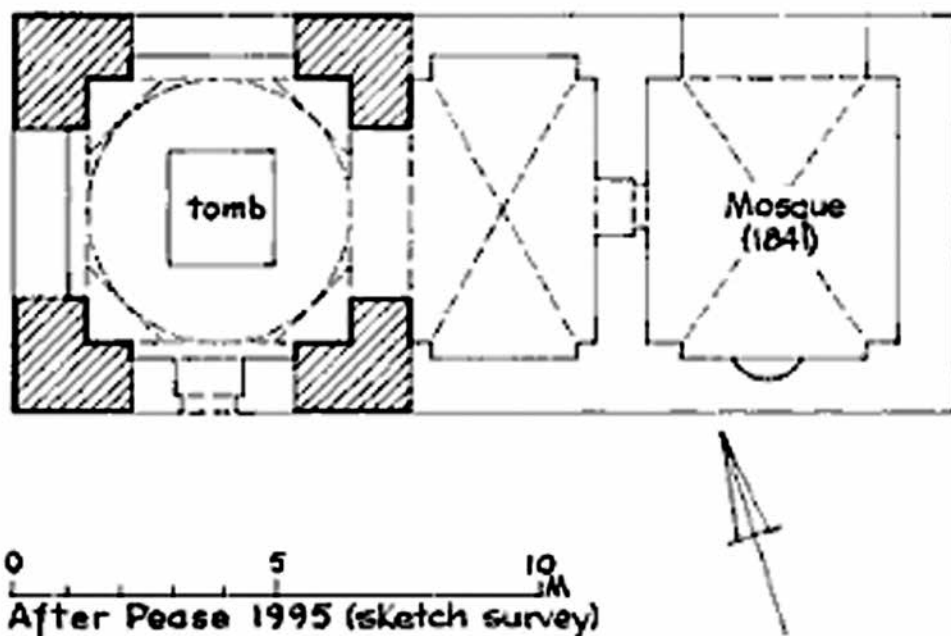
Even so, the addition of the prayer room and vestibule was likely a response to Jewish worshippers’ dissatisfaction with the multi-functional character of the original tomb structure. Although there is little contemporary evidence of complaints by Jewish visitors to the shrine about the presence of Muslim users at the time of Montefiore’s changes (Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews were unlikely to register complaints about Muslim practices so long as they were allowed access to the site), it is likely that as Ashkenazi immigration expanded (and with it Ashkenazi pilgrimage to Rachel’s Tomb) so too did discomfort with the Muslim presence at the shrine, particularly in the tomb room. This was not likely to have been discomfort with the Muslim (and perhaps Christian) women who came to pray for fertility at Rachel’s sepulchre, and who were in their practices nearly indistinguishable from Jewish women, but rather with Muslims gathered on the occasion of burying their dead in the surrounding cemetery. “Arabs,” particularly when their passions were aroused, made Europeans uncomfortable, and a strong degree of

excitement was certainly manifest when local Muslims gathered in or around the Tomb to lament the dead prior to burial in the surrounding cemetery. Hence Mary Dawson Damer notes of a visit to Rachel's Tomb in 1839 that

[a]n Arab funeral was taking place close to it, attended by about fifty wild and starved-looking Arabs.... There was a wild, ferocious expression of countenance prevailing among these Arabs, that we had never before been so much struck by; the very whiteness of their teeth and shape of their mouths gave them a false and savage appearance. One would most unwillingly have met them on a less frequented path.⁸⁵

Although there is little indication of the character of local bedouin Muslim funereal practices at the shrine prior to the twentieth century,⁸⁶ it seems likely from later commentary that "Arabs" would have gathered in and around the shrine to grieve; Freiman, writing in the aforementioned *Day Books* in 1945, noted that "from six in the morning until five in the evening several hundred Arabs mourned the death of their sheikh, whose body was placed in the outer court for several hours where the lamentation was fearful."⁸⁷ One can well imagine that European Jews, such as Moses Montefiore, might have found such "disturbance" inappropriate to a site revered by the Jews and visited both for individual prayer and for collective prayers on Fridays, the new moon, and Passover. The issue of corpse pollution,⁸⁸ though not raised in any of the documentation I have accessed, may also have played a role in Montefiore's decision to add a room which allowed for the separation of Muslim and Jewish usages of the site.

As is evident from a sketch of the layout of the Tomb after Montefiore's modifications (see below), the "restoration" provided a vestibule through which to approach the tomb that was separated from the "outer court" or "mosque" by a locked door. Effectively, with access to the shrine only available when one of the Jerusalem-resident caretakers was present,⁸⁹ a radical disjuncture was effected between the use of the site by Jews and that by Muslims. Although, as the quote from Freiman cited above indicates, this did not seriously disrupt Muslim funereal practices around the shrine – the "outer court" served as well as the tomb for lamentation and gathering – it interfered substantially with Muslim women's use of the site. Jewish and Muslim women in pursuit of blessings to augment fertility were likely to have approached the tomb of the venerable "mother" quietly and in similar ways, as Freiman's 1945 note in the *Day Books* about the Egyptian woman "measur[ing] the grave with string for an omen"⁹⁰ implies, and consequently Muslim women's presence would not have disrupted Jewish worship. After 1841, however, Muslim women would only have been able to access the Tomb when it was unlocked. Although the consequent co-presence of Muslim and Jewish women worshippers is likely to have influenced Muslims to even more closely accord their practices of prayer with those of the Jews, it is also likely to have begun a process of weaning them away from the shrine.



Layout of the Tomb after Montefiore’s modifications. *Source: Denys Pringle, The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem; A Corpus, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 177.*

Logics and Conditions of Exclusion

Although the changes affecting Rachel’s Tomb in the one hundred and sixty years which separate Montefiore’s attempt to divide Jewish worship and Muslim funereal practices from the establishment of the Tomb as a mono-religious “fortress” cannot be seen as directly consequent on Montefiore’s initiative, Montefiore’s work not only accelerated the process of the Tomb’s “encystation,”⁹¹ but had its origin in the same exclusivist logic. Ashkenazi Jews, who in 1836 made up twenty-five percent of the Jewish population of Jerusalem’s Old City, had increased, largely through immigration, to equal the numbers of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews by 1870 (in the same period the city’s Jewish population had expanded from 2,250 to 11,000, i.e., from thirty percent of the Old City’s total population to fifty percent, a percentage maintained into the Mandate Period). Sephardic and Mizrahi populations had for centuries coexisted with Palestinian Christians and Muslims by working out choreographies of sharing which – while not always non-conflictual – enabled the communities to negotiate differences and advance common interests.⁹² Ashkenazi immigrants, however, found local practices to be alien, primitive, and polluting. They shared no networks with the local Muslim communities and thus felt little or no incentive to work out a *modus operandi* with those whose interests in “shared” places they read as effectively antagonistic.

Montefiore’s project of “restoring” the shrine of Rachel’s Tomb was an obvious response to the seeming incommensurability of Muslim and Ashkenazi Jewish modes of reverencing the site. By providing separate spaces for the distinct communities to carry



Rachel's Tomb or *Bilal bin Rabah* mosque, insulated from the Muslim cemetery by the separation barrier.
Source: Photo by author, 4 May 2011.

out their different practices, he concretized the divide, bifurcating a site for encounter and negotiation into separate and largely exclusive properties. Whilst the provision of a separate “mosque” and the locking of the shrine itself prevented Muslim funereal gatherings from spilling over into the site of Jewish prayer and ritual, it also increasingly excluded Muslim women from engaging in prayers at the tomb of Rachel, prayers which made manifest a sharing of local reverence for the protective figure of the saint. The division of the shrine into two exclusive domains also made it easier for the “meanings” each community attributed to the place to drift apart, particularly under the impact of events taking place outside the local setting which differentially impacted upon the two communities. In the 1930s and 1940s,

Rachel’s Tomb became explicitly identified [by Jews] with the return to Zion, Jewish statehood, and Allied victory.... In the 1940s, with independent statehood so close, that promise must have seemed tantalizingly real. In addition, Rachel overcame infertility – conquered death. With the increase in the number of Jewish women living in Israel, and the deep need to bear children both to settle the Land and to make up for those destroyed by the Nazis, Rachel’s expertise in fertility and motherhood must have been a powerful drawing card. The combination of these themes made Rachel and her Tomb into a crucial metaphor for the times.⁹³

The inability of Jews to access the site during the 1948–1967 period of Jordanian occupation amplified the importance of the shrine as an icon of Jewish independence to the extent that, after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, its religio-nationalist centrality was institutionalized by placing it under the control of Jerusalem’s chief rabbinate.⁹⁴

Just as the site became an icon of Jewish aspiration and sovereignty, so too it became, for the Palestinians, an emblem of expropriation and occupation of national rather than local significance. The post-1967 expropriation of the site as a whole, culminating in March 2010 with the Israeli state’s announcement that *Kever Rakhel* was an “Israeli National Heritage Site,” is paralleled, at least terminologically, by the Palestinian Authority’s synecdochal extension of the name given to Montefiore’s antechamber – the *Bilal bin Rabah* mosque – to the whole of the shrine. Lost in the war of religio-national symbols is any possibility of sharing. The few Muslim women I saw praying to Rachel at the shrine in the early 1980s were already atavistic, and last year a local Orthodox priest told me that “Rachel should be important to both Christians and Muslims, but neither of them go there now.”

Given the massive nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish immigration into the area, the fact that the Jews who attended Rachel’s Tomb were not engaged in proximate relations with the Muslims (and Christians) who revered it, and the subsequent empowerment of the Jewish State (and correspondent disempowerment of the Palestinians), it is far from surprising that Rachel’s Tomb did not continue as a “mixed” or “shared” shrine. As a “limit” case, however, it makes evident the sorts of forces and circumstances which have worked against inter-communal cooperation around other shrines in Israel/Palestine as

well as further afield. These can be summarized as a combination of some, if not all, of the following:

- 1) the rupturing of networks of interaction and mutual benefit;
- 2) the divergence of the lifeways of the peoples previously involved in shrine worship, leading to divergent interpretations of the significance of the site; and
- 3) the engagement of authorities with sole allegiance to one of the groups engaged around the shrine, effecting changes in spatial layout and/or access which exclude members of other groups.

In the case of Rachel's Tomb, the rupturing and divergence were the more or less simultaneous effects of the increasing involvement of foreign Ashkenazi groups in the shrine and its management insofar as for a substantial and influential proportion of those attending the shrine there were no networks, no sense of mutual benefit, and no shared lifeways with the non-Jewish attendees. Montefiore's division of the shrine's space, whatever its initial intention, in time concretized that discontinuity, excluding not only Muslims engaged in funerary rites but also Muslim and Christian women praying to Rachel. Increasingly there was no reason to negotiate with "the other" to develop a choreography of sharing, and "property rights" transformed tolerance into intolerance.⁹⁵

In other cases, well exemplified by those of the neighbouring Christian monastery of Mar Elyas and the shrine of Bir es-Sayyedeh in nearby Beit Sahour, which I have studied over the past thirty years,⁹⁶ the increased shift of populations away from agricultural and pastoral production and into more urban-based modes of employment has led not only to the decline of a sense of a unitary, yet multi-confessional, community grounded in shared locality, but also to a questioning of, if not indifference to, religious sites and festivals associated with spiritual protectors of a landscape and agricultural calendar. This scepticism has, of course, been accentuated by education which, if it allows any space at all for "peasant" shrine practices, does so under the rubric of "tradition" or "folklore." Those shrines which are maintained are increasingly under the authority of one or another religious authority which works to impose religious homogeneity on the site while officials of the other religion which had shared the site withdraw recognition of it. In the case of West Bank Palestine, as elsewhere throughout the occupied territories, fragmentation of previously continuous territories by checkpoints and "security barriers" bar those persons who still want to attend a shared site from access to it.⁹⁷

There are still sites throughout Palestine and Israel where some degree of sharing takes place: in 2011, I observed a substantial Muslim participation in the saint's feast day at the Church of St. George in al-Khadr near Bethlehem, while in Beit Sahour Muslim and Latin Christian students worrying about their exams, as well as women praying for fertility and the health of their children, still went to Bir es-Sayyedeh despite its undeniable usurpation by the Orthodox Church. This presence, like that of Palestinians praying in the 1980s at the Tomb of Rachel before it disappeared behind walls, may, however, be atavistic, like the spirit of inter-sectarian community it manifests.

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Endnotes

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