

Letter to the Editor

The Way the Simon Weisenthal Center Understands Tolerance

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Following my essay on the the Mamilla Cemetery (“A Buried History” JQ 37: 104-109) the “Museum of Tolerance” has proceeded relentlessly. In November 2008, the Israeli Supreme Court authorized the building of the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem on top of Mamilla, the most important Muslim Historic Cemetery in Palestine, under the pretext that “ a parking lot had been built in the area more than forty years ago and there were no objections raised...”

This objectional logic might imply that Muslims do not have any genuine respect for their dead and it might also suggest that the decision reached by the court was due to their ignorance that the majority of Jerusalem Muslim citizens are and have been for hundreds of years, followers of the Hanafi School and not of the Talibaani School if there is any such thing at all. Jerusalem citizens do care for their dead. They do have respect for death as evidenced by the tradition narrated by il-Imaam in-Nawawi in his famous collection, *Riyaad is-Saaliheen* where he tells the following story:

“While the Prophet was sitting with some of his companions, a funeral procession passed by. The Prophet stood up in silence as a sign of respect. All his companions did the same. Later one of the Prophet’s companions asked, “O, Messenger of God, Why did you stand up? That was only a funeral of a Jew.” The Prophet replied, “and...isn’t a soul? I stood up in respect for Death...”

This is the tradition of Islam that Arab Jerusalemites have followed all their lives. They have always been concerned for the dead and respected death even if it is not of a Muslim.

What makes the Israeli High Court and their Weisenthal partners so sure that in 1967, when the parking lot was built on top of the Islamic cemetery, that there were no objections to their actions? Could it be because East Jerusalem was then placed under martial law during that time which was then followed by military occupation of the City, hence any demonstrations or protests were forbidden by martial law? For it is a known fact that even after the Israeli Knesset annexed the eastern part of the city and martial law was officially nullified, East Jerusalem Arab residents continued to be subject to the same Israeli repression and unjust practices as those which were enforced immediately after the 1967 occupation. The right to protest and demonstrate

have ever since been considered an illegal action and protesters have usually been arrested and detained and even severely beaten by the so called 'Border Police' which is a special military unit working under the authority of the Police Department.

Nevertheless it must be emphasized that in spite of those restrictions and regulations, Arab residents of the eastern part of the city continued to protest. They did protest in 1967 and afterwards. At one time in the eighties according to Anwar il Khateeb il- Tameemi, the last Jordanian governor of Jerusalem, the Waqf members called a press conference to which all consuls of foreign countries in East Jerusalem were invited to attest to the unethical, immoral practices of the Israeli authorities and their contractors who continued to desecrate the cemetery ground by permission of the so called Israeli Custodian of Properties of Absentee Landholders. At the press conference, according to the memoirs of il-Khateeb, published in 1989 the Waqf members exhibited human bones they had collected which they had found scattered on the cemetery's grounds and work sites of the Israeli contractors.

In conclusion, it seems that the Israeli officials keep gratifying themselves for having the upper hand in the Middle East and insist upon conqueror's terms, are under the illusion that even tolerance can be coerced. They do not understand that their methods will never promote the spirit of coexistence and /or tolerance especially in Jerusalem.

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