

Letter from Jerusalem

Lost in Jerusalem

The Nabi 'Ukkasha Mosque and Tomb

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Abstract

An exploration of the deserted Nabi 'Ukkasha mosque and tomb in western Jerusalem that only one hundred years ago welcomed worshippers to the shrine of a companion of Prophet Muhammad. The significance of the site, its history, including its desecration in 1929, and its current lack of protection are highlighted. The essay is part of the authors' ongoing book project of lost or forgotten memorials, monuments, and places in historic Palestine.

Keywords

Jerusalem; mosque; shrine; Buraq/Wailing Wall; religious protection.

At last, we spy a minaret rising over an empty parking lot. We were looking for the Nabi 'Ukkasha mosque, built in late Ottoman times in the nineteenth century on the site of the tomb of Nabi 'Ukkasha. 'Ukkasha bin Muhsin was a companion of Muhammad who came to Jerusalem during the Islamic conquest in the seventh century and is said to have been buried here. In the thirteenth century, the Mamluks, rulers of Jerusalem after Salah al-Din defeated the Crusaders, erected a mausoleum over 'Ukkasha's tomb, indicating it as a shrine (*maqam*) for a holy man or prophet (*nabi*).

On our quest, we had left the familiar streets of eastern Jerusalem over an hour before and had been wandering through the narrow alleys of Mea She'arim, a neighborhood of Haredi and Hasidic Jews in western Jerusalem that still retains a feel of Eastern Europe. It was a sunny Saturday in late winter and

we were partly enjoying the absence of cars and seeing families strolling on Shabbat toward prayer or play until we became unnerved by the signs warning visitors not to enter certain streets. One sign asked visitors not to enter “because it disturbs the residents here.” Penny decided to cover her hair with the hood of her coat, but quickly felt uncomfortable in the bright sun and wondered if the wigs the Orthodox women wore had the same effect. She pulled off her hood.

Our sense of crossing a border into a place where we did not belong was then compounded by our inability to find the main artery, Strauss Street, in this part of a still divided city. Was it this way, we wondered, spying a sign that said Strauss – but not noticing immediately that it was to Strauss Square. And who was Strauss anyway?

Out of place, we hesitated to ask anyone in the vicinity about a mosque and tomb honoring an Islamic holy figure. Like many Palestinian sites in western Jerusalem – whether homes, businesses, or religious sites – the mosque adjacent to the tomb had been abandoned in 1948 when its shaykh, the sole remaining guardian of the mosque, was forced to flee. A busy ultra-Orthodox neighborhood seemed an alien place to find this lonely site. Several years ago, we had stumbled on the shuttered mosque during a long walk, but we were beginning to feel Nabi ‘Ukkasha with its melancholy history was now lost forever.

But then, we see an Ottoman domed tower with a characteristic peak – the minaret. It dominates the otherwise undistinguished rectangular mosque building. We walk through the empty parking lot – no one was driving on the Jewish Sabbath – and into a bustling playground. The late afternoon sun was shining through the pines lighting the limestone mosque. The playground, with olive trees on the side, was packed with children. Young boys, all Hassidim, ultra-Orthodox Jews, ran joyfully around. One of the boys on the swing swung so fiercely his shoe flew off. Fathers in heavy coats and broad-brimmed felt hats sat in the sun.

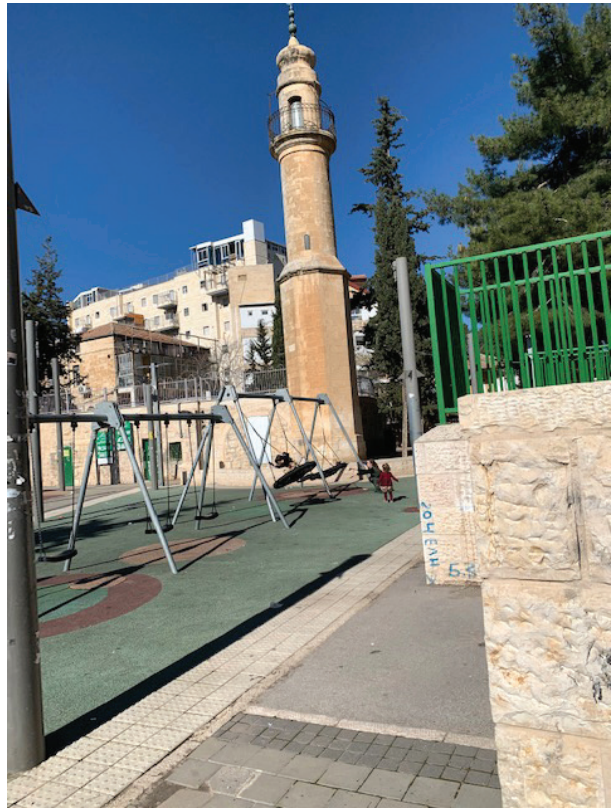


Figure 1. Nabi ‘Ukkasha minaret. Photo by authors, 2022.



Figure 2. Nabi 'Ukkasha mausoleum. Photo by authors, 2022.

We did not remember the playground from an earlier visit in a cold autumn; perhaps it had been still under construction or was empty. At that time, we had picked our way over the stony ground to the mosque where a guard told us the mosque was closed.

But now there was no guard. In front of the mosque and on the edge of the playground, there was a raised stone grave (but not a mausoleum) protected by iron grating. We think, perhaps this is a grave of one of the officers in Salah al-Din's army who were buried in the mosque compound; without a marker, his name is erased from history. But where is Nabi 'Ukkasha's tomb?



Figure 3. Nabi 'Ukkasha mausoleum in August 1929. Photo courtesy of Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

We walk around the mosque, on the eastern edge of the playground, trying to find a way to look inside. The mosque has high walls, but otherwise is not particularly impressive in a city that boasts the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. All of the windows are completely blocked by metal; one charred wall shows evidence of fire. We almost felt we should be thankful to find the graceful minaret still standing. A boy had clambered up one of the mosque's walls to the roof and stood glorying in his achievement.

But the worn building itself seemed steeped in the desolation of desertion and its own highly troubled history. In 1929, during the Buraq/Wailing Wall clashes, a Jewish mob – perhaps more aptly called raging vandals than directed militants – attacked and partially destroyed it, desecrating sacred books, stripping a silver nameplate inscribed “Ukkasha” that had been made in Istanbul, and stealing a sum of money and a store of cheese from

the home of the mosque's imam, as he detailed a week later in an appeal to Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the head of the Supreme Muslim Council. He asked the council to help rebuild the tomb and to provide four or five rooms for Muslim pilgrims. He also appealed for them to build a wall to protect him and his family.

When the imam wrote his appeal in 1929, he and his family were the only Arabs left in what at the turn of the century had been a mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhood. Substantial numbers of Jewish immigrants began moving in during the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly the Orthodox, due to the fact that the hill on which the mosque compound stands is associated in Jewish religious tradition with Benjamin, the youngest son of Jacob and Rachel. The shaykh must have sought the security of a spiritual community by requesting rooms for visitors, as well as consolidation of his physical location.

We wander back behind the mosque and investigate another iron grating on a concrete hut. The lone window is shuttered, and we wonder if the squat building might contain the grave. Perhaps whoever is in charge from the municipality or the government had covered the grave in gray cement to prevent its desecration – after all,



Figure 4. Nabi 'Ukkasha mausoleum in August 1929. Photo courtesy of Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

religious right-wing Israelis last attacked the mosque in winter 2011. The graffiti echo what are all too familiar from current settler attacks on mosques in the West Bank: “Muhammad is dead.” “Muhammad is a pig.” “The only good Arab is a dead Arab.” Here, the desecration has another older echo as if the events of 1929 had come alive again. History indeed haunts this compound.



Figures 5 and 6. Damages during the riots of August 1929. Photos courtesy of Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

But surely Nabi ‘Ukkasha could not also have been swept out of history, we say out loud, as we leave the playing children for more familiar territory in eastern Jerusalem. It is only later, when we look at photographs, that we discover a domed turbeh – the mausoleum! One of the photos of the turbeh or tomb (Arabic, *turba*; Turkish, *türbe*) is fairly recent. Could we have missed this impressive structure or had the domed building vanished like so much else?

Humbled, we return several weeks later. Perhaps on our earlier visit we were dazed by the twists of history, known and forgotten, by our many detours, or even by the rising playground noise. We did not turn around and walk through the playground to what should have been obvious to us – a domed structure opposite the mosque, an impressive turbeh, the oldest and most important building on the site – the mausoleum of Nabi ‘Ukkasha. Indeed, a lesson in what can be missed when one looks away – whether at physical structures or historical events.

We learned that the domed building might also contain the grave of Husam al-Din al-Qaymari, a commanding officer in Salah al-Din’s army, and perhaps someone else from his family. Indeed, the mausoleum is sometimes named al-Qubba al-Qaymariyya. But whether Nabi ‘Ukkasha lies there is, like for many of the maqams around Palestine, a belief, rather than a certainty. In this ancient land, there are multiple sites claiming to be the burial places of holy figures, prophets, saints, and sinners. Indeed the pioneering Mandate-era ethnographer and physician Dr. Taufiq Canaan wrote that a number of holy figures that are worshipped in maqams in Palestine were buried elsewhere. And he suspected Nabi ‘Ukkasha did not die in Jerusalem, but that, “it is said” (a very useful phrase) that the ghostly nabi appeared to a person praying at the

spot and ordered him to construct a maqam. Over time, claims were made at various times that Moses, Jesus, and Prophet Muhammad were buried in the (crowded!) Nabi ‘Ukkasha compound, leading a British high commissioner to name a nearby avenue the Street of the Prophets (*share‘ al-anbiya’*). That is still the street name, evoking a more companionate version of the three monotheistic religions, although the worshippers at the Nabi ‘Ukkasha are lost to memory.

After arriving at the tomb, we hesitated before approaching the door. An elderly ultra-Orthodox rabbi and his attendant were peering at two notices in Hebrew. We wait for them to leave and walk around the tomb. In the back, a large depression is filled with years of garbage. Two kippa-wearing boys have climbed over the wire fence and are happily crushing cans with their feet, enjoying the pop and crackle of metal. Desecration of a holy site, boys’ pleasure? We cannot really say.

When the rabbi and his companion drive off in a cheery golf-cart, we return to the main door, with its large lock, notices in Hebrew, and two faded inscriptions carved in stone on the walls beside the large iron door. One in Arabic reads: “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger. This is the shrine of our master ‘Ukkasha, the companion of the Messenger of Allah.”

At home, Google translate produces completely incomprehensible texts from the two Hebrew-language paper notices pasted on the tomb’s door. We turned to an Orthodox friend for assistance. He did his best to help us understand but, as he explained, it is not easy to comprehend these texts without all the associations, biblical and legendary – and indeed he was right. Both texts concern Benjamin, Rachel and Jacob’s youngest son, whose tribe is associated with Jerusalem. The eldest son of Jacob, by the way, was Reuven or Rubin, whose putative tomb near Jaffa was a site of one of the largest annual Muslim festivals until 1948, drawing Christian and Jewish revelers as well. Prophets feted rather than desecrated, a memory to hold on to.

At home we scrutinize our friend’s valiant efforts to translate and explain the Hebrew flyers. The first offers a plea to the Almighty to enable the devotee to love everyone as Benjamin did and concludes by asking: “I and all my friends and the whole house of Israel will be privileged to see the coming of our righteous Messiah and the building of the Temple, may it be soon in our days, quickly as the blinking of an eye.” The second is mainly a collection of sources showing the greatness of Benjamin.

But what to make of these flimsy Hebrew flyers stuck on



Figure 7. Hebrew language flyer affixed to the tomb’s door. Photo by authors, 2022.

an Islamic holy site? Building the temple sounds a trigger warning for Palestinians, given campaigns by extremist Jews to destroy al-Aqsa and erect the Temple on that compound – and the “blinking of an eye” is not reassuring. But our Orthodox friend is of the opinion that “the text was not written by a nationalist temple fanatic,” but reflects the traditional Orthodox view that “it is for God to rebuild the Temple.” Still, the site itself brings worry. It is on the “hill” of the mosque and tomb where Orthodox Jews believe Benjamin will prepare the ground for the coming of the Messiah. Troubled ground indeed.

Like the boys crushing cans on ground that once was holy, the flyers could have simply been pasted on a convenient surface as religious messages for all those observant Jews strolling in the playground. But the recent attacks on the mosque and tomb – whether in 1929 or 2011 – give no comfort. A few weeks later, travelling north, we visit the Mazor Mausoleum National Park by the side of a bustling highway where a *maqam* stands amid older Roman-era ruins. The Israeli Nature and Parks Authority has erected a sign in English, Arabic, and Hebrew that explains “The building became a holy place for Muslims, known as Makam [sic] Nebi Yihiya and remained intact due to its sanctity.” Someone has crossed out the word “sanctity” in all three languages.

In 2004, Adalah, the Legal Center for Minority Rights in Israel, petitioned the Israeli High Court, on behalf of Islamic religious leaders, to issue an order to compel the relevant Israeli authorities to enact regulations for the protection of Muslim holy sites in Israel, as had already been regulated by law for approximately 135 Jewish holy sites. The petition was rejected in March 2009 after five years of litigation with the court ruling that the designation of Muslim holy sites was a “sensitive issue.”

It is hard not to worry that, without any protection, Nabi ‘Ukkasha may yet witness another siege.

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