

## Photography

## A glimpse into the 'navel of the world'

MULA ESHET



Israeli model Aviva Banai in a Gottex fashion shoot in 1976

The Mount exhibition explores the heart of Jerusalem

By Mikki Shanna

**JERUSALEM IS** probably the only city in the world where the story of the past dictates the future, and where history is an inseparable part of the everyday events of the present.

Historical Jerusalem represents the ancient geographical space where some of the most central events of human history unfolded. Long ago it became a synonym for sanctity and sublime beauty, for spirituality and purity – but also for rigid fanaticism. Jerusalem has but one center of gravity, known as *axis mundi* or “the navel of the world.” This place is called “the Temple Mount” – with the definite article.

The Temple Mount, or as it is referred to in Arabic, *al-Haram al-Sharif*, is a most striking and visible symbol on the Jerusalem Old City skyline, with the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque at its center. The rectangular complex is one-sixth of the area of Jerusalem’s Old City, about 150,000 square meters. For more than 3,000 years the Mount has been holy to hundreds of millions of people all over the world, stirring strong religious, political and moral feelings and spurring research in the fields of history, archaeology and culture.

Visitors to Jerusalem and residents of the city have the same shared view when looking at the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif: a wide flat plaza with the striking golden Dome of the Rock in the center. To the south of it stands the ancient Al-Aqsa Mosque with its smaller less conspicuous grey dome. But although this may be the same view, the sentiments that it arouses, the collective memories that it awakens, represent the full range of emotions with regards to this unique site. For some visiting, it will be viewed simply as an important tourist site and they will marvel at the shining gold and the blues of the ceramic tiles while enjoying the aesthetics and architecture of the site. Others will look at the mosque and Dome of the Rock with pride

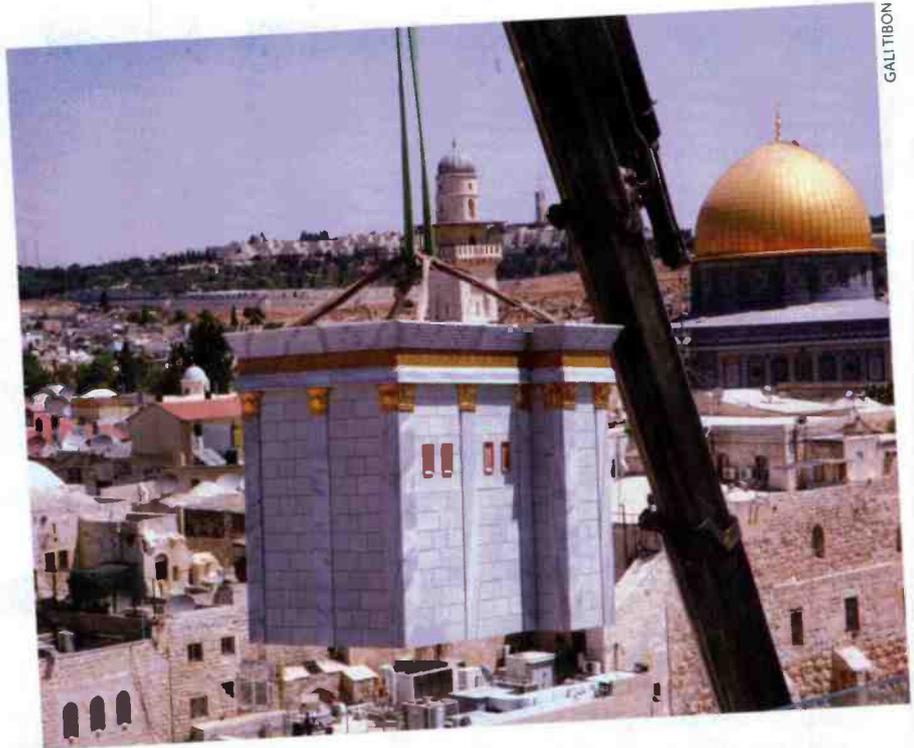
A model of the Temple is lowered by crane onto the roof of the Aish HaTorah Yeshiva in the Jewish Quarter in 2009

and religious fervor as these are the holiest sites in Jerusalem connecting them to the Prophet Muhammed. Others will look to beyond the stones that stand today, remembering the buildings that once stood for all to see: first the Temple of Solomon and then the Second Temple built during the days of Ezra and Nechemia and later renovated and expanded by King Herod some two thousand years ago.

Ancient Jewish traditions hold that this is the mountain of the binding of Isaac; the holy place where the First Temple of Solomon stood; the site of the Second Temple erected by exiles returning from Babylon, renovated during the times of the Hasmonean dynasty and King Herod, and destroyed in 70 CE. Ever since, it has been a focus for Jews yearning and longing to rebuild the Temple when Redemption comes.

In the Christian tradition the site is tied to the life and acts of Jesus of Nazareth and the establishment of Christianity in Jerusalem.

With the establishment of the disciples of Mohammed, the original direction of prayer of Moslems was towards Jerusalem and al-Aqsa became known as the "first *qibla*." Moslem tradition names the original al-Aqsa Mosque as the "farthest mosque," the second mosque that was built on earth and the mosque from which Mohammed ascended to heaven on his wondrous horse. Because of this, the place became holy in the Moslem tradition as the third holiest spot after Mecca and Medina. From then until today, with the exception of Crusader rule (1099-1187 CE), the complex has been an important Moslem center. In Arabic the Mount is called al-Haram al-Sharif or al-Aqsa, indicating the entire complex. Judaism and Islam commonly accept the designation of the foundation stone at the center of the Mount as the "navel" of the world – the place from which the entire world was created.



GALITIBON

Today, the complex holds some of the most architecturally beautiful buildings in the world – the Dome of the Rock which was built around the Foundation Stone, and the al-Aqsa Mosque in the southern section. Daily, one can see throngs gathering to pray; groups of tourists from around the world who listen attentively to the explanations of their guides; and even children from the Muslim Quarter playing soccer in the courtyards of the holy complex. But behind these day-to-day appearances stands a meaningful symbol and the most important, central holy space in the Middle East, both religiously and politically. The Foundation Stone, which is thought to be the foundation of the world, is also called the "Stone of Division." The entire mountain complex can be likened to a volcano, which erupts from time to time in extreme, fanatical, and violent disputes that sometimes result in loss of life. On one side stand the "Temple Mount Faithful," a group of Jews who wish for the day when the Mosque will be wiped from the skyline of Jerusalem. On the other side stands a growing number of religious and political Muslims who deny the very existence of the Jewish Temple on this site, in stark contrast to scientific studies and accepted historical truth. The mood of the holy precinct and its history is one that combines ancient myths and strong beliefs,

religious sensitivities and messianic fervor, which translate into an insoluble political dispute of nationalism and religion.

It is with this background that the Tower of David Museum has opened a new exhibition simply called *The Mount*, a photographic exhibition, presenting the story of the mountain within the history of the modern city of Jerusalem: from the perspective of monumental architecture to the "tinderbox" of the Middle East, the place that is the central stage of the national-religious debate in the Land of Israel. It offers a discerning look at the Temple Mount complex/al-Haram al-Sharif through the lens of the camera from the beginning of photography until our time. The exhibition presents hundreds of photographs including iconic photographs that are now ingrained in the collective memory together with photographs that have been rarely viewed and many that have been released especially for the exhibition.

"This has been by far the most difficult exhibition that I have ever curated due to the sensitiveness and the explosive nature of the subject we are exploring," says the curator of the exhibition Dr. Shimon Lev. "The biggest challenge has been to try and tell a balanced story. We've taken painstaking efforts in choosing the correct photographs to show the whole story of the



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MOSHE MILNER / GPO

A view of the Temple Mount from the air

Jews gather at the Western Wall on the eve of a holiday in 1971

Mount and tremendous care in writing the texts for this exhibition. On one level it is a place of worship with daily and weekly routines; on the other hand, it is of global importance and international political significance. For both locals and tourists alike, this exhibition offers a deeper understanding of the “heart” of Jerusalem. The Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif keeps on making headline news. The exhibition digs into the history of the sacred compound allowing the visitor a better understanding of current events and the conflict”

There are two virtual reality experiences that allow visitors to the exhibition to explore parts of the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif that are normally “off limits” to anyone who is not Muslim. Since the year 2000, Jews and Christians alike have not been able to enter the Dome of the Rock nor go onto Temple Mount during *Ramadan* prayers. In the first headset, the visitor can experience the prayers of *Laylat Al Qader* at the end of *Ramadan*, when Muslims mark the night the first verses of the Koran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. With the second headset the visitor can “step inside and explore” the Dome of the Rock. The Museum has also scheduled two guided tours a week of the exhibition in English as well as an app that can be downloaded to give the visitor a guided tour through the exhibition narrated by Lev.

Eilat Lieber, director and chief curator of the Museum, explains, “The exhibition zooms in through the camera lens and captures “snapshots” of the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif’s story from a wide variety of historical, religious, and political



KHALIL RAAD / BUKI BOAZ COLLECTION

One of the first color photographs showing Muslim worshippers outside the Dome of the Rock a century ago

viewpoints. This exhibition is also an opportunity for encounter and dialogue. It enables us to deepen our knowledge of the site and the many traditions surrounding it. Perhaps this encounter contains the kernel of hope for a different future, one of peace and wholeness, as promised in the name of the city itself”

The exhibition closes in October 2019. ■



AMERICAN COLONY

Wilhelm II of Germany at the Dome of the Rock during a state visit