

Why is Al Aqsa so vitally important to the Palestinians? The Palestinians are Moslems who proclaim Al Aqsa to be the third holiest site in all Islam after Mecca and Medina, Mecca being the birthplace of Mohammed and Medina being the nearby town to which he fled in 622 AD (an event known as the "Hegira" and provides Year One in the Islamic calendar).

How could Al Aqsa possibly be close in sacredness to these two holy Moslem cities?

Sura (chapter) 17 of the Koran, entitled "The Night Journey," relates that in a dream or a vision Mohammed was carried by night "from the sacred temple to the furthestmost point, whose precinct we have blessed, that we might show him our signs." A subsequent legend arose, not told in the Koran, that Mohammed's mystic night journey was in the company of the Archangel Gabriel, and they rode on a winged steed called El Burak (Lightning), which had the face of a woman and the tail of a peacock.

When they reached the "furthestmost point," they encountered Abraham, Jesus and other prophets, whom Mohammed led in prayers. Gabriel then led Mohammed to a ladder of golden light, upon which Mohammed ascended through the seven heavens into the presence of Allah, from whom he received instructions for himself and his followers. Following his divine meeting, Mohammed was flown back to Mecca by Gabriel and the winged horse, arriving there before dawn.

Mohammed died in 632 AD. Six years later, Caliph Umar I captured Jerusalem from the Persians. Seeing the magnificent Church of the Holy Sepulchre built by Constantine in 335 A.D. and well aware of how sacred the city was to both the Christians and the Jews, Umar declared that the city was sacred to the Moslems as well. Needing a rationale, he searched the Koran and zeroed in on Sura 17. The "Furthermost Point" of Sura 17, where Mohammed ascended to heaven, was, Umar decreed, none other than the Jews' holiest of holies, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

After David established the kingdom of Israel and Judah with his capital at Jerusalem in 957 BC, his son Solomon built the First Temple on the mountaintop rock in the city's center where the Jews believed Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac. Destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the Second Temple was built in 515 BC and rebuilt by Herod, 37-4 BC. Destroyed again by the Romans in 70 AD, the ruins were chosen by Umar to be a "mashhad," a Moslem pilgrimage shrine. Umar's successor's built the shrine known as the Dome of the Rock, "Qubbat As-Sakrah," and adjacent to it, the Al Aqsa Mosque.

Today, Moslems give a formal name to the entire Temple Mount as the Noble Sanctuary, "Al Haram ash-Sharif," but commonly refer to the whole complex as Al Aqsa.

The point to focus on in all of this is that the name "Jerusalem" (or "Al Quds," as Arabs refer to it) is never mentioned in the Koran – not in Sura 17 or anywhere else.

The "sacred temple" from which Mohammed dreamed he departed in his night journey is clearly Mecca, where he was living. But the "furthermost point whose precinct we [meaning Allah] have blessed" has no reality attached to it at all. Umar simply issued an edict, saying in effect, "Well, if Jerusalem is sacred to the Jews and the Christians, then it must be sacred to Moslems too – so I have decided that the "furthermost point" of Mohammed's sacred dream is the Jewish people's holiest site, and that it is ours now, not the Jews'."

So, here's a thought experiment. In Deuteronomy 34:6 of the Old Testament, Moses dies and is buried in a valley in the land of Moab, described as north of Jericho, but that "no man knoweth of his grave site to this day." So let's say that an ancient set of parchments are discovered by archaeologists like the Dead Sea Scrolls. They are found in a cave near Mecca and were written by the Jews of Kheibar, descendants of two of the 10 "Lost Tribes," those of Reuven and Gad, who escaped from Assyrian exile in 721 B.C. and settled in Arabia.

The parchments tell a story: that the Kheibar Jews found the sepulchre of Moses and rescued its contents from the Assyrians, who were going to desecrate it. They took Moses' remains with them to Arabia and interred them where Jehovah instructed, at a site where a "sacred stone from beyond the earth" lay. There they built a shrine which in time became revered by all local inhabitants.

The archaeologists pronounce as genuine the parchments, which reveal the burial site of Moses to be Mecca and the "sacred stone" to be a meteorite worshipped by ancient Arabians,. Thus the "Kaaba," the holiest temple in all Islam at the center of Mecca and which was built at the meteorite site, actually sits on the grave of the founder of the Jewish religion.

Suppose this really happened. (The 12th century Spanish traveler Benjamin of Tudela met the Jews of Kheibar while traveling through Arabia. And the Koran tells of a successful Jewish community in Mecca in Mohammed's time.) What would be the response of the Islamic world if millions of Jews began claiming that Mecca was sacred to them now just as it is sacred to the Moslems, and demanded that they had the right to build a Dome of Moses next to the Kaaba as a pilgrimage shrine honoring the Founding Patriarch of the Jewish People?

Obviously it would be a nuclear explosion of outrage and rejection. What this thought experiment demonstrates is that the negotiating tactic of the anti-Israel Arabs is the same used by the Soviets: "What's mine is mine and what's yours should be mine too."

Mecca and Medina belong entirely and completely to the Moslems. Why must they have Jerusalem on top of them? Moslems have no genuine historical or Koranic claim on the Temple Mount. The Jews' claim is obviously grounded in thousands of years of history. The world needs to let the Jews have something sacred of their own. It is time to recognize the validity of history, the false claim of Islamic holiness to Jerusalem, and the rightfulness of letting Moslems keep their Kaaba and Jews their Temple Mount.

