

Christians in Zion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Recent reports that some Charedi Jews disrupted a Christian mass on Mount Zion really upset me. When insensitive bullies who dress as and proclaim their obedience to Judaism treat Christians disrespectfully, especially those wishing to worship, they themselves are proving how far they fall short of Jewish values.

[The Jerusalem Post reported](#) that “hundreds of Jewish protesters sought on Sunday to prevent a group of Greek Orthodox Christians from entering the complex housing the sites where Jewish tradition says lies the tomb of King David and Christian tradition holds is the site of Jesus’s last supper.” The site has been controlled by Christians for generations. Fortunately the police arrived and ushered the worshippers through the mob.

To make matters worse, an ancient church in the Galilee was vandalized. I am glad the Israeli leadership condemned the crime and many offers of help and repair rolled in from Jews. Had the perpetrators been Arabs, I have no doubt they would have been caught. But for some reason the police do not seem too bothered about Jewish vandalism.

I understand that there are still a lot of Jews whose experiences of several Christian denominations has been colored not just by centuries of abuse but specifically by their experiences during World War II (there were, of course, some notable and noble exceptions). Such depth of feeling is difficult to eradicate, and it often gets transmitted on to the next generation.

The Catholic Church in particular has changed dramatically in my lifetime, radically transforming itself to become the most sympathetic and warm to Jews of all the churches. And many, mainly evangelical, Protestants revere Jews as the Chosen People.

The churches in Israel have always had to walk a tightrope in protecting physical assets and their presence in the Holy Land. This has inevitably put them in a very difficult position in regard to the Israel-Arab conflict. Some of the churches in Israel have been guilty of stirring up hatred and anti-Semitism at home and abroad. On the Jewish side a handful of religious louts have always tended to behave despicably to passing peaceful pastors and nice neutral nuns, usually claiming that they have been guilty of missionary activity. I completely and unreservedly condemn such loutish behavior as a desecration of God and religion. We Jews ought to be doing our best to try to get along with others who wish us no harm, wherever we interact, and all the more so in what we too call the Holy Land.

Differences of theology are for theologians. Judaism has always taken the position that where other religions have a moral code, adhere to the principles of the Seven Noachide Laws, their faithful are regarded as pious and beloved of the Almighty. We do not believe that everyone must become

Jewish to fulfill themselves religiously. How others choose to worship and what they believe is their business.

In 1958 my father, with amazing foresight, packed me off to Jerusalem to get some Jewish inspiration. In the intimate Jerusalem of those days you would bump into the political and religious elite simply walking around Rehavia on a Shabbat morning. Amongst those I met, and who kindly offered hospitality, was Dr. Kahana, Director General of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. He loved to regale his Shabbat guests with how he would hike around the Galil discovering the graves of great rabbis of the past. And when he was challenged as to the authenticity of his identifications, he brushed aside any objections on the grounds that it was good for national heritage, not to mention the tourist industry.

One of his favorite projects was what he called Mount Zion, a modest hillock to the south of the Old City, which had been occupied by the Jordanian Legion since the Jewish population had suffered massacre or expulsion in 1948. A wall divided the city—this one built by Jordanians. What is called Mount Zion survived the war in Jewish possession. There once stood a Byzantine Church built in 5th century, after it was claimed to be the site of the Last Supper. It became one of the earliest gathering spots for early Christians. Its present building is an early 20th century monstrosity. And to its south were some nondescript buildings. The 12th century Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela had heard it said that King David was buried there, in a sarcophagus in one of the rooms of the church.

Since the real Mount Zion, the Temple, was in Arab hands, Kahana was anxious to find some substitute holy site on the Jewish side. So he decided to publicize this location as the burial place of King David even if King David's Jerusalem was down in Silwan and there was no indication that this had ever been a burial ground, certainly not a royal one, there were no bones left in the sarcophagus anyway. And so it was. Busloads of tourists would make the pilgrimage to this most ersatz of holy sites, suitably and artificially charred with candle smoke and grease to give this most unlikely of sites the patina of ancient holiness.

I was never a fan of relics or of pilgrimages to graves, and to me the whole project was a joke. After 1967, when the Old City was opened up to Jews and we could visit the genuine location of Mount Zion, Kahana's site lost its raison d'être. For a while he transformed into a Holocaust museum, but of course Yad Vashem left it in the shade. The buildings were handed over to the Diaspora Yeshiva, which made a name for itself as the first place ex-hippies could come to study Talmud and smoke hashish at the same time. No one bothers with it much nowadays.

Several times a year, Christian pilgrims come to the cenacle near the Dormition to say mass, in a deal agreed on high (government, of course). Credulous folk, they really do believe this was the location of the Last Supper. There is no end to the absurdity of what people of all faiths will believe, then or now. But why not leave them be? They are not harming anyone.

I can only explain the behavior of those ultra-Orthodox yahoos as a fit of

religious paranoia—unless of course it was drug induced. King David would have known how to deal with them![]