

The Western Wall in Jerusalem and Donald Trump

by Michael Curtis



Don't send in the clowns. No one from rocket scientist to barely educated person is likely to deny that China has a connection to the Great Wall of China, or that Egypt has a connection with the Pyramids. Yet UNESCO is funny that way. On October 12, 2016, by a vote of 24 to 6 with 26 abstentions, a resolution of that organization accusing Israel of denying Muslim access to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem referred to the site only by its Arabic name Haram al-Sharif, and failed to mention, implicitly denying, any link between Judaism and its holy sites in Jerusalem.

On May 3, 2017 Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury indirectly indicated the bias of UNESCO. Together with the head of the British Jewish Community, the Archbishop prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Later in the day, he visited

Yad Vashem, the official Holocaust memorial, and spoke of antisemitism as the root of all European racism. He spoke strongly of the centuries of terrible hatreds against the one people that had contributed so much to "our culture...and was hated more specifically, more violently, more determinedly, and more systemically, than any other group."

No one can accuse the unnamed "senior member " of the US delegation accompanying President Donald Trump in his Israel trip or the US State Department of harboring these extreme feelings of hatred. Nevertheless, it was unwise and indiscrete for that senior person to advise the President that it was inappropriate for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accompany Trump to the Western Wall because the President's visit was private and non- official, and Israel had no jurisdiction over the area.

The fundamental fallacy of members of the US State Department and "Intelligence Community" in refusing to acknowledge the jurisdiction over the site is based on their opinion that Jerusalem in its present form and without a final status agreement on the Israel-Palestinian dispute cannot be considered as the capital of the Jewish State. Therefore, they argue, the US, in spite of Congress law calling for it, should not move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. It would, they believe, harm the peace process because it would imply recognition of the Israeli annexation of east Jerusalem.

It is true that other members of the Trump administration were more diplomatic. The US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, declared "I believe that the Western Wall is part of Israel." Spokesperson Sean Spicer, more bland, told us the Wall is obviously one of the holiest sites in the Jewish faith and that it was clearly in Jerusalem. In general US policy is that the final status of Jerusalem is not yet resolved.

A brief history might be helpful. The Western Wall is part of the retaining walls of the old Temple compound, the closest

point of prayer for Jews to the site of the Temple and therefore holy. It was King Solomon who in the 10th century B.C. made Jerusalem the capital of the kingdom of Judea by building a temple. That temple was destroyed by Babylon in 586 B.C. and most Jews were exiled from the area.

When Jews returned to the Holy Land, King Herod around 19 B.C. began building a Second Temple on the same area as the first one. That Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D., but one wall, the Western Wall was left standing. The site was the place for Jewish prayers for centuries.

The Western Wall was once called the "Wailing Wall," because of mourning for the lost Temple. The Arab ruler Suleiman the Magnificent in 1560 granted official recognition of the right of Jews to pray by the Wall, though this was prevented from time to time by future Arab leaders ruling Egypt.

The Muslim connection with the area began after the death of Mohammed, the Prophet in 632, six years before the Jewish population of Jerusalem surrendered to the Muslim invasion. The Temple Mount, renamed, became a site to entice Muslims from Mecca and Medina. The Wall however remained the central religious focus for Jews, internationally.

During the British Mandate for Palestine, riots led by the Mufti of Jerusalem occurred in Jerusalem, and then in Hebron, in 1929. As a result, the British government, with approval of the League of Nations set up an international Commission on the "Wailing Wall." The Jewish delegation argued that the Wall belonged not to any nation, but to God. The Commission, mistaking the nature of the argument of the delegation, concluded, in December 1930, that the Jews do not claim any proprietorship to the Wall, but that should have free access to the Wall. However, to the Muslims belong the sole proprietorship and the sole proprietary right in the Western Wall. In effect, the religious site had become a political, nationalist issue.

This was demonstrated in the 1948 war caused by the Arab invasion by five armies of the newly established State of Israel. As a result of the 1948 war, the Old City was controlled by Jordan which captured the Jewish quarter. In it, synagogues were destroyed, no Jews were allowed to visit the Wall, and Jews were expelled from the Old City including the Jewish Quarter where Jews were banned for 19 years. In the Six Day War, on June 10, 1967 Israeli paratroopers reached the stones of the Western Wall. Israel had regained access to the Jewish quarter of the Old City and to the Wall (Kotel).

Uncertainty about the disposition of the disputed areas remain. One can understand disagreement on the action of Israeli police on February 2, 2017 in carrying out a High Court order to evict an unauthorized mini settlement at Amona. The response of the Knesset was to pass a controversial Regulation Law that provides for the Israeli government retroactively to allow residents of 4,000 housing units built, accidentally or otherwise, on private Palestinian land to stay on their homes.

But if there are strong differences on these issues, and on the unauthorized outposts of settlers in the West Bank, there is no disagreement on the connection of the Western Wall to the State of Israel. President Trump and the Trump administration should act on the basis of that connection and the significance of the site to the Jewish people.