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MOUNT ZION: JERUSALEM'S WILD & SACRED BACKYARD

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Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men pray during a protest against Pope Francis's 2014 visit. © Getty

by Eetta Prince-Gibson

Located just outside Jerusalem's old city walls, Mount Zion is home to King David's tomb, the room of the last supper and a former mosque. Today, a tangle of neglectful Israeli authorities has allowed the site to become a beacon for ultra-nationalist religious Jews.

A few minutes' walk from the Temple Mount, outside Jerusalem's Old City walls, stands a stone building sacred to all three monotheistic religions. A sarcophagus on its first floor marks where Jewish tradition says King David is buried. On the second floor is the Cenacle—the room where the Last Supper, at which Jesus celebrated the Passover meal and washed the feet of his disciples, is said to have taken place. To Muslims, the entire structure has been holy since the Ottomans added a minaret and converted it into a mosque honoring King David, whom they consider a prophet, in the 16th century.

Here, religious time and space often collide. This past March, Holy Thursday coincided with Purim, the raucous, festive holiday that celebrates the downfall of Haman, the vizier who plotted to annihilate the Jews in Persia. For some Jews, the holiday is an occasion to assert Jewish power. For Christians, Holy Thursday is a time of humble contemplation and ritual. This year, in accordance with custom, Franciscan Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Custos (custodian) of the Holy Land, the highest-ranking official of the Catholic Church in the Middle East, has come to the Cenacle to wash the feet of 12 young students from the Jerusalem parish.

The ceremony opens as the *kuwwas*, traditional guardians of Christian holiness, dressed in red Ottoman fezzes and gold-embroidered crimson vests, swords at their sides, pound their silver staffs on the stone floor to make way for the Custos through the crowd of parents, tourists and pilgrims. Earlier, a group of young Jewish men in their early 20s, with long, curly sidelocks and torn jeans, tried to steal up the stairs to the Cenacle. Heavily deployed, watchful Israeli police chased the men away. "We have to tear down this *shikutz*," one of the troublemakers said defiantly, using a particularly derogatory Yiddish term for "abomination." "God will help us, King David will help us," muttered another. "This whole mountain—this

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whole land!—belongs to the Jews. Merry Purim!"



A Jewish man prays at King David's tomb.

At the height of the ceremony, piercing wails shatter the solemnity. Jewish students have barricaded themselves in a dorm room nearby and are blasting recorded sounds of the shofar through loudspeakers. While the police locate the protesters, break into their hideout and shut off the loudspeakers, a group of men wrapped in prayer shawls, some wearing tefillin, dance and sing as loudly as they can in the courtyard. "*Utzu etza v'tufar...Take counsel and it will be foiled; speak a word and it will not succeed, for God is with us,*" they chant. A middle-aged woman in modest garb—who comes daily from the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim—takes a video, she explains, to document "Christian offenses." "They want to annihilate us, just like they always have, just like they wanted to on Purim," she says.

Police close the doors to the Cenacle so that the ceremony can conclude. When the worshippers file out, passing by the dancing men, some of them clap their hands in rhythm; a few even try to sing along. Noam Sagiv, a Jewish student who has come to observe the Christian ceremony, smiles apologetically at a nun in a dark habit. "We understand," the nun responds. "Lots of people get overwhelmed by their religion. Happy Purim."

Such disruptions are not uncommon in the King David's tomb-Cenacle complex, which is located in the heart of Mount Zion. Tensions may be mild compared to those between Muslims and Jews on the Temple Mount, but this 30-acre tract abutting the walls of the Old City to the west has troubles of its own. They do not involve sovereignty: Unlike the Old City, which was seized by the Jordanians in the 1948 war, the 2,500 foot-high hill is an uncontested part of West Jerusalem. The remains of Israeli defensive trenches from 1948, now overgrown with trees and grass, crisscross the rocky land. At its edge, with a panoramic view of West Jerusalem below, are the twisted iron remnants of the mechanism that operated the cable car used to transport wounded Israeli soldiers away to safety.



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish youth are surrounded by Israeli police as they heckle Catholics exiting the Cenacle after the Pentecost prayer in 2015. © Getty

The problem boils down to coexistence. Unlike the Old City, which is divided into separate quarters for Jews, Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians and Armenian Christians, Mount Zion is a jumble of dozens of



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sites, structures and partially excavated archaeological ruins, each imbued with religious, historic and nationalistic meaning. Any Muslim residents are long gone; only the minaret, the Ottoman architecture and a cemetery remain to indicate that Muslims controlled Mount Zion for centuries. But the Christian presence is strong, and monks and nuns of all denominations are part of daily life, as are their places of worship. The German Benedictines have their Dormition Abbey; the Italian Franciscans have the Terra Sancta Monastery; the French Assumptionists have the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu; and the Armenians have the St. Saviour church. This last site is believed to be the house of Caiaphas, where Jesus was taken after being arrested, and nearby is a rock cave where Jesus may have been imprisoned. Then there are the dead, laid to rest in Protestant, Greek Orthodox and Armenian cemeteries, the last of which includes a large monument to the victims of the Armenian genocide. Buried in the Catholic cemetery is Oskar Schindler, the German industrialist who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. The Jews have Sambuski Cemetery, a Jewish potter's field on a steep hill to the northeast where some now come to recite the Mourner's Kaddish on the traditional date of the death of Moses.

Today, devout Jews and Christians mingle with tourists and pilgrims as they enter and exit the Old City through the Zion Gate. Some of the newcomers stay on the mountain, joining an ever-evolving cast of eccentrics. Recently, a small group of mostly middle-aged British and American Jewish men began gathering in a low stone building of unknown provenance, self-appointed to study the laws of the Sanhedrin—the ancient biblical court of the Land of Israel—in preparation for the imminent coming of the Messiah, the Son of David. Mount Zion, one of them explains, is the place where they believe the Messiah is most likely to return.

Why Mount Zion was left outside the walls erected by Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th century remains a mystery. It could have been because of the presence of the cemeteries, the relative unimportance of its landmarks in the eyes of the builders, the expense, or any number of other reasons. Legend has it that Suleiman was so angered by its exclusion that he had the hands of his two chief engineers cut off; in another telling, he had the men executed. Whatever the reason, the decision created a sort of no-man's-land beyond the massive gate that shares its name.

"This is the backyard of Jerusalem," says Ami Meitav, a Jerusalem official who headed a municipal committee tasked with conducting a survey of the buildings and residents on Mount Zion about a decade ago. But it's a backyard "without clear ownership," he adds, one that "no one cares enough about to take control."

Into that power vacuum have stepped ultra-nationalist religious Jews who are transforming it into a microcosm of all that is both fearsome and hopeful in Israel, as well as a small group of Jewish activists who believe they can bring peace to Mount Zion, and perhaps through it, to all of Jerusalem.



Left: Benedictine Father Nikodemus Schnabel points to graffiti. Right: Benedictine Father Gregory Collins prays in the Dormition Abbey. © AFP; Weihnachtsaktion

No one really knows where biblical figures such as King David are buried. But during the early days of Christianity, legend singled out Mount Zion as the place where Mary, the mother of Jesus, fell asleep and died—not far from the room of the Last Supper. In the 5th century, a Byzantine bishop erected the Hagia Sion Church, which was destroyed in a siege in 614. By the 12th century, the first floor of a new church, built on or near its ruins, had come to be considered the room of the Last Supper.

It was around this time that Jewish tradition came to associate Mount Zion with King David's burial place. The first historical Jewish reference to this comes from Jewish chronicler Benjamin of Tudela, who, writing around 1163, recounts a story about two Jews employed to dig a tunnel who came across David's palace. "They proceeded until they reached a large hall, supported by pillars of marble, encrusted with gold and silver, and before which stood a table, with a golden scepter and crown," the inveterate traveler wrote.

"This was the sepulcher of David, King of Israel..."

Yisca Harani, an expert in early Christianity at Jerusalem's Ben-Zvi Institute, insists that this and all the religious stories associated with Mount Zion should be taken with a grain of salt. "If King David were to come back to Jerusalem, he would not come to Mount Zion," she says with a laugh. "Jesus wouldn't, either. This was not their turf." She adds: "Traditions surrounding the mountain probably have little to do with historical reality. But religious beliefs listen to the beating hearts of believers, not to the learned discussions of archaeologists and historians."

Once the tomb assumed sacred status, religions began to compete for control of it. The Crusaders put in the Gothic cenotaph that marks the site and rebuilt the present-day Cenacle. Entrusted by the Pope as guardians of Christian shrines in the Holy Land, the Franciscans established a monastery, but quickly came into conflict with the Greek Orthodox Church and other Christian sects. Their skirmishes, as well as disputes over visitation rights between Christians and Jews, led Ottoman Sultan Suleiman (the same Suleiman who built the Old City walls) to take control of Mount Zion in the 16th century. He turned the entire building into a mosque and designated Sheikh Ahmad al Dajani—who was believed to be descended from the Prophet Mohammed's grandson—and his heirs as the custodians of King David's tomb.



Rabbi Abraham Goldstein is head of the Diaspora Yeshiva.

The Dajanis—who added the appellation Daoudi (David) to their name—were tolerant custodians. Under their watchful eye, and for a fee, Christians were given the right to pray as individuals in the Cenacle. Muslims, who considered the entire structure a mosque, also prayed in the Cenacle—although separated from Christians by an iron fence. Downstairs, Jews, too, paid and prayed, especially on the holiday of Shavuot, which relates the story of Ruth the convert, who gave birth to the forefathers of King David. These policies continued for more than four centuries; in 1831, the Franciscans were even allowed to hold public prayer in the Cenacle twice a year, on Easter and on Pentecost.

The Dajani Daoudi family flourished, building homes for themselves on Mount Zion. Even from 1918 to 1948, they continued to fulfill their custodial role under the stern eyes of the British, who in 1928 cancelled the Franciscans' right to conduct public prayer after an Italian heir to the throne allegedly tried to take control of the Cenacle.

For Jews, King David's tomb remained overshadowed in importance by the Western Wall of the Temple Mount and other sacred places within the Old City walls. But that changed in 1948, when, following Israel's War of Independence, the Jordanians took control of the Old City and forbade Israeli Jews from visiting Jewish holy sites. Suddenly, only Mount Zion remained in Jewish hands. Now it was the Jews who controlled religious and political realities. Israeli authorities expelled the Dajani Daoudis, who fled to East Jerusalem, and took over the now-abandoned Arab properties. In the main complex, the minaret was closed and Muslim services were no longer offered in the tomb chamber. Instead, full Jewish public worship was instituted. Christians still had the right to pray on the second-floor Cenacle as individuals but needed permission to conduct public worship services from the Mount Zion Committee, which fell under the jurisdiction of Israel's Ministry of Religion. (Later, Israeli authorities approved five days of worship for the various Christian denominations, including Holy Thursday, Easter and Pentecost.)

Israeli officialdom was in conflict over how to respond to the new situation on Mount Zion, says Amnon Ramon, a prominent scholar of Christianity and a researcher at the Ben-Zvi Institute. On the one hand, the municipality of Jerusalem, along with the Ministry of Tourism, wanted Israeli policy to be welcoming and encouraging. "The city wanted Christian tourists to come to Mount Zion, since most of the other Christian sites were in Jordanian hands," he says. "And the Foreign Ministry wanted Israel to make a great show of how liberal the State of Israel was."

But the Ministry of Religion saw things differently and, as so often happens in Israel, ultimately had the upper hand. In 1949, Shlomo Zalman Kahana, the ministry's director-general, decided to dedicate his life to turning Mount Zion into the religious heart of the Jewish state. He largely succeeded. Kahana invited institutions and individuals to take up residence on Mount Zion—including sculptor David Palombo (who designed the gates to the Knesset), whose widow continues to reside there; the artist-sculptor Perli Pelzig, whose son still lives there; and the owners of Jewish banquet halls that he established—giving them all

buildings and land rights. Kahana personally reinstated and refashioned old religious ceremonies and designed new ones related to King David.



Top left: David's tomb complex during the Ottoman era. Top right: The Dajani Daoudi family on Mount Zion in 1936. Bottom left: The iron gate that separated Christians and Muslims who prayed in the Cenacle until 1948. Bottom Right: Until 1948, King David's tomb was covered by a cloth embroidered with verses from the Quran. © Wiki; Getty images

Under Kahana's energetic ministry, Jews ascended to Mount Zion by the thousands, exposed to the crosshairs of watchful Jordanian snipers only a few yards away. They climbed to the roof of the mosque to peer out over the Old City and the Mount of Olives. This was the best vantage point in West Jerusalem from which to see the Old City. In a room near the minaret designated as the "President's Room," successive Israeli presidents held official ceremonies and greeted foreign dignitaries, pointing to the Temple Mount—only a short distance away, but inaccessible.

Although his authority to do so was unclear, in 1966 Kahana invited Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein, originally from Queens, New York, who was looking for a home for his new yeshiva in Israel, to establish the Diaspora Yeshiva on Mount Zion. Kahana even signed legally binding agreements that handed over ownership of abandoned properties, almost all of them originally belonging to the Dajani Daoudi family, to the yeshiva.

Just as Jews remember clambering to the rooftop of the mosque to mourn their lost Western Wall during this period, members of the Dajani Daoudi family recall ascending minarets in the Old City to view their lost properties, says Mohammed Dajani Daoudi, who to this day is in possession of the ceremonial keys to King David's tomb. His home office in East Jerusalem is lined with photographs of his extended family, many of them taken on Mount Zion, in the properties the family no longer owns. Only the family cemetery remains under the family's control. "It is too painful, even now, for me to come up to Mount Zion," says Dajani Daoudi, a former professor at al-Quds University in East Jerusalem and a forceful and rare Palestinian public voice for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. "The memories are too strong."



Jews gather on the roof of King David's tomb after 1948 to view the Old City below. © Getty

With the 1967 Six-Day War and Israel's capture of the Old City, Jews once again could return to the Western Wall. Sidelined, Mount Zion was left to the devices of its residents and, in particular, the Diaspora Yeshiva, which would play a key role in fulfilling Kahana's dream of a monolithic Jewish presence. In the heady 1960s, the moment was right for Goldstein to create a coed yeshiva dedicated to young, primarily American, Jews seeking spiritual meaning. Goldstein brought a neo-Hasidic approach to the cavernous buildings on Mount Zion, taking in just about any young Jew without demanding that they forgo their long hair, torn jeans and bohemian skirts. He encouraged the students to turn their musical talents to Judaism, and from 1975 to 1983, the Diaspora Yeshiva band offered free Saturday night concerts that attracted hundreds to hear their klezmer-twanged mix of acid rock, bluegrass and folk music.

As more students arrived, the yeshiva—with the approval of the Ministry of Religion—took over buildings surrounding the tomb for classrooms, study halls, prayer rooms and dormitories. As students met and married, Goldstein renovated, opening schools that served hundreds of children born on Mount Zion. But gradually, that era passed. Today, says Abraham Goldstein, Mordechai Goldstein's son and successor, the yeshiva is a "regular, staid, Orthodox yeshiva," although many students, American and Israeli, are marginalized or at-risk youths.

Over the past few years, the yeshiva has also been home to hundreds of Israeli Jewish nationalists known as "hilltop youth"—young, fanatical settlers, many of whom have been banished from the West Bank with restraining orders issued by Israeli security forces. These youths have adopted a virulently anti-Arab and increasingly anti-Christian credo. Although there have been few arrests, they are largely assumed by police to be responsible for dozens of hate crimes on Mount Zion, repeatedly defacing and even attempting to torch Christian sites, desecrating Christian cemeteries and spray-painting offensive graffiti to obliterate Arabic signs. In 2013, there were 22 attacks on Christian property alone, up from 11 in 2011, according to the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre, a joint project of the churches in Jerusalem, the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. Some young Jews have also renewed the dubious practice once observed by some religious Jews in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe of spitting at Christian clergy.



Left: Interior of the Cenacle on the second floor. Right: The interior courtyard with archways leading to King David's tomb.

Goldstein says that the yeshiva is doing all it can to distance itself from these youths. "We do not encourage violence of this kind in any way," says the rabbi, who sent a letter to the Franciscans apologizing for the disruption of the Holy Thursday ceremony. But, he adds, "We are a large yeshiva, with a lot of open space, and we cannot be held responsible for everyone who tries to join our ranks."

Goldstein and the Diaspora Yeshiva have played a part in fomenting anti-Christian attitudes—in particular fears that the State of Israel intends to sign an agreement with the Vatican to give the Pope control over the David's tomb-Cenacle complex. These fears stem from Papal visits to Mount Zion in 2000, 2009 and 2014, which led the Franciscans to renew demands that Israel allow them to hold full Eucharist services in the Cenacle, including the consumption of the holy wafer and wine. According to the current status quo, the wafer and wine, which Catholics believe to be the body and blood of Christ, are not permitted in the building because they would desecrate the Jewish worship space in the tomb chamber on the first floor.

The Franciscans also asked for the right to celebrate Mass in the morning a few times a week before the site is open to visitors. "We don't want to transform the Upper Room into a church, we don't want the property, we don't want sovereignty," Father Pizzaballa said in statements published in the press around the time of Pope Francis's 2014 visit. "We want the right to pray there." The requests were part of longtime negotiations between the Vatican and Israeli officials regarding formalization of all aspects of their diplomatic relationship. The Israeli government, however, has publicly declared that it has no intention of changing the status quo, and none of the Popes, including Pope Francis, performed the Eucharist in the Cenacle.

Goldstein acknowledges that nothing has happened to substantiate his fears of Vatican control, but he says he is still worried. He has signed numerous petitions denouncing the purported intention to "give away" Jewish holy sites and has helped organize several demonstrations. And while he denounces the violence, he also says that he understands it. "Of course I believe that no Jew would hand sovereignty over such a holy place to a non-Jew," he says. "But there are people who, out of greed or maybe because they believe that giving in to the goyim is in the best interest of the State of Israel, might allow Christian worship."

And that, he continues, "would be intolerable. Jewish law forbids us to have a synagogue in a building used for idol worship. And Catholic services are idol worship."

Only a few yards from the main offices of the yeshiva and from David's tomb is the massive stone structure of the Dormition Abbey, whose high-domed bell tower dominates the horizon. Father Gregory Collins, the current head of the abbey, wears the hooded, rough-hewn robe and large silver cross of the Benedictines. Originally from Belfast, Father Gregory took up his position here a few years ago, and his Irish-lilted English echoes musically through the vast halls.

The church opens to the public several times a year, and crowds of Israeli Jews enjoy attending the annual Christmas Eve services. Father Gregory notes with amusement that he "may be the only clergyman who is called to preach on Christmas Eve to a church full of Jews." He understands the complexity of the situation: "I come from Northern Ireland," he says. "I know the pain of the decades of conflict, religious and political. We must recognize each other's humanity, whatever our faiths or beliefs. We Christians have not always upheld this, but it is what we must seek."

But Father Nikodemus Schnabel, a young, energetic man with a kindly manner, says sadly that "a day doesn't go by that someone doesn't spit on me. Sometimes, I prefer not to wear my robes outside of the Abbey, in order to avoid unpleasant interactions, especially if I have to walk down 'Spit Alley,'" referring to the narrow walkway between the walls of the Abbey and the walls of the Greek Orthodox cemetery that leads from the Diaspora Yeshiva to David's tomb.

"I am also hopeful and thankful to the many Jews and Muslims who came up to express their solidarity, have helped us rebuild our cemeteries, and volunteer to help us keep law and order," Father Nikodemus continues. And while he notes that the municipality did, in fact, erase the graffiti "quickly and efficiently, it angers me that the authorities do not do more to put a stop to this behavior."

The damage to Benedictine property is light compared to the destruction that has occurred at the King David's tomb-Cenacle complex. Historically, each religion has appropriated space from the religion that came before it, attempting to erase the memory of its presence. The building is now a layer cake of religious architecture. The classic vaulted ceilings of the Cenacle bear testimony to the Crusader-era church, while in the tomb, a mihrab—a semicircular niche in the wall that points toward Mecca—is only partially hidden by a large, recently installed Formica bookcase filled with Jewish religious texts. Verses from the Quran decorate intricate stained glass windows, and in the southwest corner, next to the exit, is an Islamic-style cupola.

But more recently, extremists have tried to physically eradicate the remainders of Christian and Muslim inhabitation. Until 2012, the Ben-Zvi Institute's Ramon says, the interior walls of the tomb chamber were covered with tiles hand-painted with leaves, flowers and geometrical shapes in shades of green and turquoise. Since the establishment of the state, right-wing Jews have seen these tiles as an affront to Jewish sovereignty, and in 1950, the renowned poet Uri Zvi Greenberg symbolically smashed a few of them in an attempt to assert Jewish dominance on the Mount.

In the early morning of December 20, 2012, policemen found two men in ultra-Orthodox garb attempting to destroy the tiles. The men were dismissed as deranged, especially when one explained that he had to break the tiles because their glaze was preventing him from getting a *shidduch* (an arranged marriage). The tomb remained unguarded and two weeks later, others—also suspected to be religious Jews—destroyed almost every tile.

The Israel Antiquities Authority appointed a committee of experts that concluded the tiles could and should be replicated and replaced, and there were even negotiations to bring in artisans from Turkey. But then the Authority reversed its decision, stating that the destruction had inadvertently improved the site by exposing the original ancient rock walls. "A serious act of vandalism, a string of coincidences and a decision by the Israel Antiquities Authority have combined to change the character of King David's tomb on Mount Zion, holy to Judaism, Islam and Christianity," says Ramon. "For the first time since the 16th century, someone tried to erase every last trace of the building's Muslim character."

Ramon says that lack of governmental oversight has handed David's tomb over to the ultra-Orthodox. Just a few years ago, the tomb was open to all, with no separation between men and women. But when an Orthodox Jewish philanthropist made a large contribution, dividers were set up to create men's and women's sections, and a wooden ark with Torah scrolls was brought in. The donation—made under the auspices of the National Center for the Development of the Holy Sites, which belongs to the Ministry of Religion—turned David's tomb into an Orthodox synagogue that is administered by the Diaspora Yeshiva.

"The state has abdicated its responsibility and left Mount Zion in chaos," says Ramon. "It has been taken over by extremists enthralled with Jewish power who want to Judaize the mountain and remove all traces of its non-Jewish history."



Window to Mount Zion's Eran Tzidkiyahu.

Several years ago, The Jerusalem Foundation, the city's largest philanthropic organization—which is dedicated to promoting pluralism and was founded by legendary Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek—invited the Jerusalem Intercultural Center (JICC) to move onto Mount Zion into a large, abandoned building near David's Tomb. The JICC's mission is to increase civic involvement of all of Jerusalem's diverse communities in determining the management and future of the city.

As the JICC took up residence, its leaders were struck by the chaos. They connected with another NGO, the Washington, DC-based Search for Common Ground that also maintains offices in Jerusalem, to establish Window to Mount Zion, which has tried to focus on creating a more peaceful reality on the mountain. Eran Tzidkiyahu, co-project coordinator from SCF, and Merav Horovitz, co-project coordinator from JICC, regularly organize tours for the public and maintain a dedicated group of volunteers to keep an eye out for trouble and help the police to maintain law and order.

On one of these tours, Tzidkiyahu points to a sign at the entrance to the Cenacle. "A sign like this could only be invented in Jerusalem and only on Mount Zion," he quips. Written in Hebrew, English and Arabic is a list of "instructions for behavior at the Room of the Last Supper." One of them states that it is also forbidden to bring in "food and drink"—a pointed reference, Tzidkiyahu explains, to the wafer and wine Christians need in order to hold a Eucharist service. He points to another part of the sign. "This informs visitors that this is a holy site," he says. "But actually, under Israeli law, the Cenacle is not a holy site. Despite its holiness, it has no particular legal standing."

Window to Mount Zion is not alone in decrying the tangle of contradictory responsibilities spread among numerous institutions. Right-wing Jerusalem city councilman Aryeh King calls it "an absurdly chaotic situation, with an unknown number of different authorities with unclear responsibilities." No one, he says, "not the government ministries, not the municipality, not anybody, supervises or is even aware of

what is going on there.”

According to King, “no one is really sure exactly who is responsible for what on Mount Zion,” thanks to a combination of ancient agreements, Kahana’s machinations, and the activities of the Israeli Custodian of Abandoned (Arab) Property, the Jewish National Fund, the Authority for the Development of East Jerusalem and multiple other city authorities. The rabbi of the Western Wall is also involved, due to the location of Jewish holy sites on the Mount. Even Amidar, a state-owned company responsible for public housing, is part of the mix. “At some point—who knows when—Amidar was given control of the President’s Room,” says Ramon, barely concealing his smile as he considers just how ridiculous this is.

David Solomon, employed by the Ministry of Religion as site director for the David’s tomb area, agrees. He watches as a young man in ultra-Orthodox garb invites tourists to light candles and receive a blessing—all for the modest sum of NIS 10 (\$2.50). Solomon angrily chases him away. “There are so many charlatans like this man roaming around here, making a small fortune, and there is no one to protect the unsuspecting tourists,” he says. “There is no one to take responsibility here.”

Ami Meitav, the municipal official who describes Mount Zion as Jerusalem’s backyard, adds that the lack of responsibility and accountability extends to the churches, too, including the Greek Orthodox Church, one of Jerusalem’s largest landowners. “The Greek Orthodox Church is responsible for the large field commonly called the Greek Garden, but has left it uncared for,” he says. “Yet they refuse to allow the municipality to build a sports field there—even though it would serve their students, too.”

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an official at the Foreign Ministry says that ministry officials are aware of the chaos on Mount Zion, but that in the absence of a dedicated foreign minister, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (who, due to coalition considerations, also holds the position of foreign minister) just doesn’t have the time or inclination to attempt to bring order to this religiously, politically and diplomatically delicate situation. Or perhaps, adds the official, not caring is a way of promoting a nationalistic political agenda without taking responsibility for it.

After a series of incidents last January, during which extremists spray-painted graffiti on the Dormition Abbey, Window to Mount Zion successfully pushed for police presence to be increased. The group also convened a “tenants’ meeting” for all of the individuals, groups and institutions that make their home on Mount Zion. Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Catholic monks of various sects, Protestant pastors and Ashkenazi and Sephardic rabbis filed into a room at the JICC building along with uniformed policemen and volunteers. “It was probably the first time in 1,500 years of interreligious strife,” says Hagai Agmon-Snir, director of JICC, “that all of the people on the mountain actually sat down together.”

The meeting, he says, addressed prosaic aspects of life—garbage removal, parking spaces, future zoning. “That’s part of being neighbors, too,” he says, “even for sacred and historical institutions.” The meeting also addressed the graffiti, and all the residents signed a statement harshly condemning the acts and calling for the maintenance of “the delicate fabric of coexistence.” It was the first of many such meetings that Tzidkiyahu hopes will allow Mount Zion’s disparate inhabitants to begin to create a new vision together.

Meanwhile, Tzidkiyahu has a suggestion of his own. Although the city government is currently promoting a plan to turn Dung Gate into an official tourist entrance to the Old City, he would like to see Mount Zion become the access point. “An entrance through Zion Gate would create a narrative of tolerance and coexistence, a spiritual entrance that would invite us all to imagine a different world,” he says.

Tzidkiyahu believes that Mount Zion offers the State of Israel an opportunity to change history. “For millennia, religions have fought over this holy site,” he says. “Now, in the 21st century, we have an opportunity to create a different model of coexistence, based on inclusivity and trust.”

Additional reporting by Peggy Cidor.

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