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When a Jerusalem Cemetery Is Desecrated Yet Again, Jews, Muslims and Christians Team Up to Clean It

The often-vandalized Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem's Old City is neglected by the authorities

Shakked Auerbach | Dec 22, 2017 1:53 PM

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The cleanup operation at the Muslim cemetery on Jerusalem's Mount Zion. Credit: Yossi Zamir

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White fragments from smashed headstones were interspersed with the yellowed autumn leaves spread over the Muslim cemetery on Mount Zion in [Jerusalem](#). The graves of the Dajanis, the Palestinian family entrusted by the waqf (Muslim religious trust) with caring for

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“The Dajani family, according to their tradition, and written testimonies, protected David’s Tomb for nearly 600 years,” says Dr. Gadi Gvoryahu, chairman of [Tag Meir](#), a coalition of Jewish groups that seek to counteract hate crimes. “Unfortunately, the headstones are frequently desecrated. It happened a few weeks ago, but it’s a recurring phenomenon.”

Following the most recent act of destruction, all the groups that have a presence on Mount Zion – Jews, Muslims and Christians – banded together to denounce the vandalism and issue a statement, which called on all the relevant authorities to take responsibility for the cemetery. “Many Jerusalem dignitaries are buried in the cemetery,” the letter stated. “We, religious and civilian institutions and tenants on Mount Zion, are shocked and grieved at the desecration of the honor of the dead and at the violent act We call on the authorities to restore the headstones and the cemetery forthwith.”

Tag Meir also declared a joint cleanup day, on Friday, December 8, and launched a campaign to raise funds for the renovation of the site. According to Gvoryahu, the Muslim cemetery, in addition to being a target of nationalist attacks, does not receive the same kind of publicly funded care that other Old City religious sites do.



The cleanup operation at the Muslim cemetery on Jerusalem’s Mount Zion. Credit: Yossi Zamir

“Because of its location, this place is very neglected and dirty, like a backyard, or a public garbage can. So we decided to go there,” says Gvoryahu. It’s not the first time that voluntary groups have undertaken to clean up the cemetery, but it requires regular maintenance.

“We hope that all the authorities will mobilize to deal with the cemetery,” says Merav Horovitz-Stein, coordinator of the “Window to Mount Zion” project run by the Jerusalem Intercultural Center, which aims to heighten public interest in and activity on behalf of the site. “There are graves there of a family that safeguarded David’s Tomb. This story is part of the history of Jerusalem.”

The recent cleanup campaign was testimony to the cooperation that has existed for years between several institutions on the mount that have been attacked by nationalists and religious extremists.

Gvoryahu: “A large number of volunteers from the Dormition Abbey came, as well as Franciscan clerics and also representatives from the church at Tabgha [the Church of the Multiplication, on Lake Kinneret]. There is much symbolism in the fact that representatives from Tabgha and from the Dormition came. The

One of the volunteers in the campaign, Katharina Bloebaum, 33, from Germany, was delighted to discover her coworkers speaking Arabic, German, English and Hebrew.

“It was a good feeling to meet with so many people from different countries and to clean the cemetery together. I think it is a sign of solidarity,” said Bloebaum, who arrived in Israel a year ago to work on behalf of Jerusalem’s Church of the Redeemer, a Lutheran institution. “This way we will understand the way of life and thinking of each person. And that is very valuable.”

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A spokesman for the Jerusalem Municipality stated that the owner of the Mount Zion cemetery is the Israel Land Authority, which is also responsible for its maintenance. The spokesman added that the municipality had no knowledge of any desecration of the cemetery.

The lands authority stated: “The ILA and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority are working to clean up the cemetery and improve the situation there, including dealing with the damage done recently to the headstones there. It is our hope that we will already be able to see results in the near future.”

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