

We Will Win the War for Har Hazeisim

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In a well-publicized visit to Har Hazeisim on August 9, the Knesset Interior Committee, headed by MK Dudi Amsalem (Likud), senior ministers of the Netanyahu government, and police officials proclaimed that they would do their utmost to protect Har Hazeisim from Arab vandalism. It was a very poignant demonstration of Jewish sovereignty over the 3000-year-old cemetery. There were several announcements of increased security on the mountain, including additional cameras and police reinforcements.

Three days later, on Wednesday, some 50 to 70 hooded Arab youths hurled boulders and Molotov cocktails at a bus carrying passengers enroute to the *kever* of Rav Dovid Cohen (popularly known as the Nazir), and eventually they took on the garrison of Border Police stationed on Har Hazeisim as part of new security measures in the holy cemetery.

While several of the bus's windows were shattered in the attack, none of the passengers were wounded, police said. Minutes later, a Border Police officer stationed at the cemetery sustained a light head wound after being struck by a rock in another attack. Border Police officers responded to both incidents immediately and dispersed the assailants with stun grenades. No arrests were made, police said. From all indications, these attacks were in retaliation for the Sunday visit by government officials.

This development is not a surprise for members of the International Committee for the Preservation of Har Hazeisim (ICPHH) which, since May 2010, has managed to bring many security improvements to Har Hazeisim (e.g., surveillance cameras and a police sub-station). While some semblance of order has been restored, it is far from absolute. The rock throwing at the bus is not an isolated incident nor is the desecration of graves, as was the case in the Afghanistan sector several months ago when 70 graves were viciously burned.

Ironically, the rock throwing came just a few weeks after the government passed a tough law at the behest of Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked imposing long jail sentences against rock throwers. But in the case of the recent disturbances, the police opted for crowd disbursement rather than arrests. And despite the tough law, there is no prosecution against minors, who commit most of the rock throwing, unlike in most U.S. states where tough laws against minors exist.

In 2014, police received 344 complaints but opened only an average



Members of the ICPHH view a shattered *matzeivah* on Har Hazeisim.

of 37 files monthly, which included a meager 14 arrests and six indictments. In 2015, police opened an average of 17 files a month and made 11 arrests, but most were released because they were minors.

Much of the blame for the lack of absolute security was directed at the police during the visit by the MKs and ministers. Standing on Har Hazeisim, MK Amsalem said: "If I was the commander here, I wouldn't sleep at night. This is the honor of the Jewish nation that we are talking about. I am sick and tired of hearing that there are no budgets. I am embarrassed as a Jew and I will not rest until the situation is changed."

The sharpest comments of the visit came from MK Uri Maklev (UTJ). "You asked for cameras and you got it, you asked for technology and you got it, you asked for more budgets and you got it. There are six or seven ministries involved in the security of Har Hazeisim and after all that, Har Hazeisim is still not secure. A *chassan* on the day of his wedding who came to *daven* here was injured. *Yesomim* begged that their parents should not be buried here. As long as people are afraid to come to Har Hazeisim, all this is for naught!"

The Arabs Jostle for Sovereignty

It is pretty clear that the violence on Har Hazeisim is more than just random outbursts of rock throwing and grave desecrations, largely due to the incitement of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The 2.2 square kilometers of Har Hazeisim that includes the burial sites of 150,000

Jews and so many of our luminaries is a thorn in the side of the Arabs and an impediment to their design of an east Yerushalayim that is *Judenrein*.

Malcolm Hoenlein, vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and a prominent member of the ICPHH, described the Arab actions as an "attempt to deny us our past." Indeed, Palestinian maps refer to the area as the Ras al-Amud neighborhood and do not even acknowledge the existence of the cemetery. They have even said that there are no Jewish graves beneath the tombstones!

In some respects, the Arab behavior is not new. Harassment of Jews seeking to visit or bury on Har Hazeisim goes back to the days of the Turks, when access was restricted. There was even a period when there was a tax just to visit Har Hazeisim. The Jordanians, under the Hashemite Kingdom, perpetrated one of the worst desecrations ever committed in a Jewish cemetery. Nearly 60,000 graves were destroyed during the Jordanian occupation (1948-1967) to build Arab houses and the famous Intercontinental Hotel, now called the Seven Arches Hotel. Tombstones were used to build roads and even latrines.

When Israel's War of Independence ended in 1948, the Jordanians agreed in the Armistice Agreement to allow Jews access to Har Hazeisim. Not only did they not adhere to the agreement, but they destroyed more graves than even the Nazis in their march across Europe.

When Israel liberated east

Yerushalayim in 1967, it obviously included Har Hazeisim. Jews who had not been able to visit Har Hazeisim for 19 years were able to return. *Chevrah kaddishas* that operated on Har Hazeisim prior to 1948 resumed burials there, despite the horrors they discovered in some parts of the huge *beis hachaim*.

But within a few years, Arabs who live in the Yerushalayim area began to expand, building nearly 50,000 illegal homes from Ramallah to the area surrounding Har Hazeisim. This illegal expansion, without any attempt by the Israeli government to stop the construction, encircled Har Hazeisim, in some cases building on top of or near graves. But just as this expansionism seemed to be out of control, the massive effort of the ICPHH and the Israeli government took hold in 2010. Ironically, it is the 150,000 Jews buried there (including some 25,000 graves that still remain destroyed) that are preventing the Arabs from a contiguous presence from Ramallah right up to west Yerushalayim. It is no wonder that they are now bent on instilling fear and hoping to force the Jews from continuing to secure and develop Har Hazeisim.

It is almost certain that were it not for the ICPHH, the Arabs would not only have destroyed many hundreds more graves, but would have continued to build housing on Har Hazeisim. We are now, for all practical purposes, in a war to control Har Hazeisim; given the actions of the Israeli government of late, there is hope that we will win this war. Plans for new security and even development, including a new transportation hub, a Visitor's Center and shul, a new promenade and other projects are planned to once and for all secure Har Hazeisim. Huge events, including a concert by Cantor Yitzchok Meir Helfgot, have brought thousands to Har Hazeisim. Nearly 200,000 people a year visit the gravesite of the saintly Ohr Hachaim, a quarter of whom go on his *yahrtzeit*.

The key will be if people overcome their fear and come in large numbers to visit the most historic site in Judaism, for here someone can literally walk through Jewish history, from the *Nevi'im* to some of the giants of our previous and current generations. This war can be won so long as every Jew realizes, as the Rambam says, that the *kedushah* of Har Hazeisim is as paramount as that of the Har Habayis.

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