The Dormant Volcano: Social Media and the Temple Mount, Jerusalem

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Abstract
Social media have become primary venues for public conversations, but we know very little about how and where holy places are discussed in social media and who participates in these conversations. To address these questions, we look at the Temple Mount, one of the most significant places to the three ancient monotheistic religions, which is of great importance in political, national, and other contexts. The research question is twofold: In what contexts are discussions taking place in the Hebrew Facebook-sphere around the Temple Mount? And, what are the leading social media venues where the Temple Mount is discussed? Data collection took place in 2017, when Israel celebrated 50 years since capturing the mount, and experienced a major security event—the “metal detector crisis,” followed by major clashes between Jews and Palestinians. We found that the Temple Mount is portrayed prominently in three contexts: national, religious, and security and that “ordinary” social media interest in it is limited to groups of mostly nationalist and religious Jews who demand prayer rights on the mount and rarely cross to become an issue for the broader Israeli social media public until a major security development initiates an “extraordinary” discourse involving many more individuals and groups. In one sense, the discourse about the Temple Mount is reminiscent of a “dormant volcano” that does not erupt regularly, but when it does, no one knows how the eruption will end. Lessons for the representation of holy places in social media are discussed.

Keywords
media and religion, holy places, new media, social media

Introduction
The Temple Mount is sacred to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This was the site where the first and second Jewish Temples stood and is regarded as the most sacred site for Jews. It was also the place where Prophet Muhammad ascended—or, according to another tradition, dreamt he ascended—to Allah to receive the tenets of Islam. The Dome of the Rock is the site where Muslims believe Muhammad made his ascent, and the El-Aksa Mosque was built for worshippers on the mount’s southern extremity (Hirsch, 2006). The Temple Mount is of significance to Christians because it was the place where Jesus chastised the money changers, and later the site of the trial of Jesus (Ramon, 1997).

In the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (the so-called Six-Day War), the Temple Mount fell into Israeli hands from Jordan—the first time it was in Jewish/Israeli jurisdiction for 1,900 years. Nowadays, mainly Muslims have prayer access to the mount, but security matters are in Israeli hands. Jews have limited access to the mount given understandings between Israeli leaders and Muslim religious authorities after the 1967 war. In practice, the site became an area of worship for Muslims, and Jews were relegated to the nearby so-called Western Wall of the Temple Mount.

The mountain was not only a sacred place with religious significance throughout the years but also a place with national, security, political, and other meanings (Levin, 1995; Shragai, 1995), which makes it a fascinating case study to learn about the conversation of holy places in social media. The article analyzes the character of conversation of holy places in online social media among religious people and among the general public, where it takes place, and what are its characteristics. We also wanted to examine whether, as happens in the mainstream media and also in the social media, the discourse about holy places is focused on major events and crisis situations—or does its coverage have other characteristics?
Thus, based on theories of religion and media and framing, we use the Temple Mount as a case study to demonstrate how and where holy places are discussed in social media. Data collection for this study took place in 2017, when Israel celebrated 50 years since capturing the mount, but also experienced a major security event—the so-called “metal detector crisis”—which was followed by major clashes between Jews and Palestinians.

We found that the Temple Mount is discussed in the Hebrew Facebook-sphere prominently in three contexts: national, religious, and security. We also found that the “ordinary” social media discussion of the Temple Mount is limited to groups of mostly nationalist and religious Jews who demand prayer rights on the mount and rarely cross to become an issue for the broader Israeli social media public until there is a major security development that initiates an “extraordinary” social media discourse involving many more individuals and groups who portray the mountain as “the mountain of us all.” We conclude with implications of these findings for the discussion of holy places in social media.

The History of the Temple Mount

The history of the Temple Mount goes back to the days of the Creation and the Biblical period. Early Jewish tradition attested to the “foundation stone” of Creation (“even sheti-yah”) and to the binding of Isaac by the first Jewish patriarch, Abraham. Some traditions claim that the stone on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed came from the even she-tiah. But the site came into its own in nationalist, religious, and security statuses with the building by King Solomon of the first Jewish Temple in 1026 BCE. With its destruction, Jews were exiled to Babylon in 586 BCE. But within 70 years, after permission from King Cyrus of Persia for the Jews to return to their homeland, the Temple was rebuilt by the prophet Ezra and further extended by King Herod. The site was also the place where the Sanhedrin, the Jewish lawmaking body comprising 70 elders, sat (Bar, 2010; Mazar, 2002).

The Temple reflected a key characteristic of Judaism in which “place” is a central pillar. The land of Israel had an elevated holiness in contrast to outside of Israel, and inside Israel, Jerusalem was holier than outside parts. Holiness achieved a climax with the Temple itself. The Temple became a site of pilgrims for the pilgrimage festivals of Passover (Pesach), Pentecost (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkoth). When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, Jews throughout the centuries did not stop aspiring for a return to “rebuilt Zion” (Elior, 2007).

After the Muslims captured Jerusalem, Abdul-Malik ordered the Dome of the Rock to be constructed in order, according to one tradition, to draw Muslims away from Mecca, which was then under rebel control. Traditions subsequently evolved that Prophet Muhammad ascended from the Rock to Heaven where he received the basic tenets of Islam from Allah. Al-Aqsa Mosque was built 100 m south to the Dome of the Rock, on the site of an ancient church. This clearing of the Temple Mount was welcomed by contemporary Jews, who found the Muslims more relaxed rulers than the Byzantine emperors.

Although the life of Jesus was intimately connected with the Temple Mount too—including chastising the money-changers who charged Jewish pilgrims to the Temple exorbitant prices; foreseeing the destruction of the Second Temple; and being put on trial there—the Mount has never been as important to Christian believers as for Jews or Muslim believers. This is not surprising because mainstream Christianity emphasizes the heavenly rather than the earthly Jerusalem. Moreover, Christian hearts are turned toward the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, where Jesus was buried, a kilometer away from the Temple Mount, in the Christian Quarter of the Old City.

Between the 13th and 19th centuries, Christians and Jews were barred from ascending the Mount. At the end of the 19th century, individual “high-profile” non-Muslims (e.g., Sir Moses Montefiore) were allowed to visit the site. During the British Mandate of Palestine, administrative matters involving the site were placed in the hands of the Muslim religious authorities, and Jews and Christians were permitted to visit—but not to pray at the site. Between 1948 and 1967, when the Jordanians controlled the Temple Mount, Jews were not allowed to ascend the site and were even barred from entering the eastern section of the city.

After the Temple Mount was captured by Israel in 1967, a few prayer services were held on the Mount in the immediate aftermath of the war. The tradition of ascent to Jerusalem became complicated by rabbinical prohibitions of ascent in the absence of knowing precisely where the Temple building stood on the Temple Mount—which required an enhanced level of ritual purity. Consequently, the Chief Rabbinate imposed a ban on entering the entire Temple Mount precinct. Moreover, the fears from Muslim reaction to these services brought the Israeli government to ban Jewish prayer meetings at the site. In the years after the 1967 war, a modus vivendi was reached with the Israeli chief rabbinate and most rabbis prohibiting religious Jews from ascending the Temple Mount, let alone rebuilding the Temple (Cohen, 1999).

Still, in the past few decades, nationalist pro-Temple groups have turned to the courts in an effort to hold prayer meetings on the Mount. One of the earliest groups, the so-called Temple Mount Faithful, seeks to have an annual procession together with Israeli flags on the mount, but the police and Israeli courts ban it. While in a declaratory sense, Israeli law courts uphold the right of Jews to pray at the site; it also bows to the police regarding the danger of riots should such prayers be attempted.

Many Rabbis of the modern orthodox community in the years following 1967 echoed the ban of the Chief Rabbinate, but increasingly some have questioned the political sensitivity of this, and today encourage ascent disregarding the Chief Rabbinate stand. What began in the 1980s as extreme had become the norm after the turn of the century and the
second decade. In 2008, a group of 40 senior rabbis from the modern orthodox ascended the mount together. The unfilled vacuum let the Temple Mount to become for successive Israeli governments an issue for negotiation and eventual diplomatic compromise. Rabbis who favored ascent labeled it a “religious obligation” (or mitzvah). During 2019, 30,416 Jews ascended the Mount. In contrast, the ban on ascent is echoed by ultra-Orthodox Haredi Rabbis, but they do so because they believe Temple restoration requires to await divine intervention, and the Messiah. Indeed, they see steps like ascent on the Temple Mount as even delaying the process of the Redemption.

**Temple Mount References of a Religious and Nationalist Character**

The first Jewish Temple symbolized the political and religious independence of the Jewish People. During the Solomonic period, there was a close link between the Temple, the King’s palace, and the royal infrastructure. The so-called “Ophel” was the site of government quarters, physically close to the Temple Mount. It reflected the proximity between the power of religious law and the administrative role of the king and government.

In one sense, just like the Temple symbolized the might and independence of the Jewish people, so its destruction symbolized the end of the national independence. Since the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 CE, many armies have warred in an effort to control Jerusalem. Jewish yearning for the Temple during some 2,000 years got expression through religious symbolism, but it also got expression at the nationalistic level, through the theme of the rebuilding of Jerusalem—in particular the Temple—as was expressed in adage: “Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem.” The capture of the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1967 War and the raising of an Israeli flag on the Temple Mount (though the flag was later ordered down by the defense minister) symbolized more than anything Israel’s victory over three Arab armies.

Yet the urge for the Temple Mount is not unqualified. Notwithstanding the central place Jerusalem enjoys in the Israeli Jewish consciousness, only 15% had ever ascended the Temple Mount and a further 4% had ascended once, but did not plan to again. Thirty-seven percent had not so far—but intended to in the future. Yet, 45% had no intent to—according to a Makor Rishon poll in 2014(Makor Rishon, 2014). Most Israeli Jews favor the right to pray on the mount; a 2012 survey found that 52% of the Israeli Jewish population favored it, whereas 37% opposed it (Makor Rishon, 2012).

**Temple Mount References of a Security Character**

The Temple Mount is one of the most complex points of conflict between Israel and its Arab neighboring states. At the diplomatic level, in accord with the 1994 peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, Jordan was given custodian status of the Islamic holy places on the Temple Mount (or “Haram al-Shari“) and was promised that in a future peace agreement the Jordanians would receive a consultative status regarding any final diplomatic settlement. However, the Palestinian Authority (PA) sees Jerusalem—or el-Kuds—as the capital of a future Palestinian state. A rivalry between the PA and the Jordanians came to expression, for example, in an incident in the late 1980s when the Jordanian-appointed Mufti was thrown out of his office on the mount and a Palestinian-appointed Mufti put in his place.

Since the 1920s, the Temple Mount has been a symbol of the political differences between Israel and the Palestinians. Bloody riots broke out in Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem on 2 November 1921 when five Jewish residents and three of their Arab attackers were killed. These were the first significant riots in Palestine/Israel since the rise of Zionism and increased immigration of Jews to the territory.

Other incidents followed. For example, in August 1969 Michael Rohan, an Australian belonging to a Christian sect, set fire to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He saw himself as bringing about the Second Coming of Jesus. The fire caused considerable damage to the mosque; indeed, suspicions that the Israeli authorities themselves were involved caused the Wakf to delay Israeli fire engines from dealing with the flames. In 1982, Alan Goodman, an American, went on a shooting rampage near Al-Aqsa in which one Muslim was killed and others injured. In October 1990, during the Sukkoth (“Tabernacles“) religious holiday, Jews who gathered at the Western Wall were attacked by Arabs throwing stones from the adjacent Temple Mount compound. In the ensuing battle with Israeli Police, 17 Muslims were killed; the incident produced Arab diplomatic criticism.

The 2000 Camp David talks between Clinton, Barak, and Arafat, to reach a solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict, fell apart over the key question of sovereignty over the Temple Mount, with Arafat arguing that he had no mandate from the Arab world to negotiate the question of sovereignty of the site (Hirsch, 2006). Shortly after, Knesset member Ariel Sharon’s ascent to the Temple Mount in 2000 led to widespread rioting, under “the Al-Aqsa Intifada.”

In 2017, when data for this study were collected, two Israeli policemen were killed on the barricade in the entrance to the mount by Palestinians, who smuggled guns onto the mount. Following the incident, the Israeli authorities introduced metal detectors at the entrances of the mount, an act which led to widespread demonstrations as well as diplomatic criticism on Israel by Arab governments. This event was known as the “metal detector crisis.”

**Holy Places in the Media**

While the paper so far focused on the Divide and Earthly Jerusalem, let us now move to online social media conversations about Jerusalem.
The relationship between new media and religion has been explored in different contexts, for example, religions and religiosity in cyberspace (MacWilliams, 2004); religious identity and authority online (Hojsbaard & Warburg, 2005); on-line communities of believers (Campbell, 2005); new media in specific faiths traditions—in the Russian Orthodox Church (Suslov, 2016); Christianity (Hutchings, 2017); Judaism (Campbell, 2015; Lev-On & Neriya-Ben Shahar, 2011; Neriya-Ben Shahar & Lev-On, 2011); and the mono-theistic faiths (Campbell, 2010; Evolio, 2019).

Holy places around the world have received considerable research (Nordeide & Brink, 2013; Wynn, 2009). This certainly is true in the case of the holy places in Israel, in particular in Jerusalem. In addition to research on the history of the city such as archeological aspects (Abu & El-Haj, 2001; Mayer & Mourad, 2008; Mazar, 2002, 2011), the political contest over the city’s status has necessarily generated considerable research attention (see Berkovits, 2000; Dumper, 2014; Hirsch & Housen-Courriel, 1994; Klein, 2001; Najem et al., 2017; Reiter, 2001).

According to the literature, the mainstream media tends to concentrate on current events, and issues related to religion and religious practices do not tend to occupy a central place in it (Hoover, 1998). Moreover, little attention has been given to the question of media coverage of sacred places. This may seem surprising given the central role of sacred places in religious belief. From the scant existing literature it appears that holy places do not occupy a main place in the daily coverage of the media. The study shows that holy places do make headlines in two main contexts: first, when religious events such as festivals are held; and second, when conflicts arise about them, and even more so when acts of violence take place (de Vries et al., 2017). In both cases, the framing of the holy places tends to be mostly episodic, that is, mainly focus on the acts of violence themselves and the people involved in them, and much less thematic (i.e., including references to the history of the place, the background of the conflict, the positions of the different players, etc.) (Cohen, 2023; de Vries et al., 2017).

The few studies that have examined the coverage of holy places in Israel, and specifically in Jerusalem, have found a similar phenomenon whereby the holy places are mentioned mainly when a religious event takes place in them or in the context of an existing dispute. Given that, news media focus on the present, and controversy, history, and roots are necessarily not their main focus there too (Gazit, 2004).

There is little literature on representations of holy places in new and social media, for example, examining the role and usage of apps and Internet messaging in religious mass events; Narbonna and Arasa (2016) do so by focusing on the 2014 beautification of a Catholic bishop. They argue that with communication, a key element to the success of a religious event, the Internet and diffusion of the smartphone facilitate a channel that was unimaginable in the past, as a tool of communication with attendees. Bunt (2009), examining the role of the Internet on Islam, describes different Islamic rituals—including shahada (the proclamation of conversion to Islam) and salata (prayer), as well as more generally retrieving information about Islam including preparing for the hajj. Stanton (2020) focuses on how the Saudi authorities use apps to manage the hajj itself.

The question of digital media and holy places and pilgrimages has been addressed by, for example, De Ascanils et al. (2018) who examine the role of communication technology at religious sites. Research methods on new media and pilgrimages have been done by De Ascanils and Cantoni (2016). Specific pilgrimage case studies and new media include the Hajj (Bunt, 2009; Schlosser, 2013; Stanton, 2020); South Korea (Han, 2021); Croagh Patrick, Ireland (MacWilliams, 2004); and Arabain, Iraq (Rahimi & Amin, 2020). See also Patrick (in press), Hill-Smith (2011), and Coudry (2007). In Israel, the Jerusalem question on the digital media was addressed by de Vries et al. (2017) who discuss how East Jerusalem Palestinians use social media platforms to mobilize religious practices and political activism in the Al-Aqsa mosque. Dumper (2014, Chapter 4) examined the place of Jerusalem and its place in the digital media in an attempt to understand the international interest in the city. In a table of the largest presence on the Web of cities, Jerusalem came in only 10th place, but when compared with other holy cities Jerusalem was in third place after Rome and Lourdes, and when compared with other divided cities Jerusalem was in second place after Berlin.

Yet none of these studies have explored the character of conversation of holy places in online social media among religious people and among the general public, where it takes place, and what are its characteristics. De Vries et al. (2017), in discussing how East Jerusalem Palestinians use social media, base their research on three specific groups, whereas this article draws upon the broad Israeli Hebrew-speaking population and the characteristics of the discourse. Despite Jerusalem’s dominant place in digital media, this is the first study to examine the character of its digital media coverage. Specifically we were interested in examining the contexts in which Jerusalem is covered on social media—as a case study of coverage of holy places in digital media. We wanted to examine whether, as happens in the mainstream media and also in the social media, the discourse about holy places is focused on major events and crisis situations—or does its coverage have other characteristics?

**Method**

The study examines where, and in which contexts, holy places are discussed in social media, using the conversations about the Temple Mount in the Hebrew-speaking Facebook-sphere as a case study.

Data for this study were collected in 2017, a year in which Israel celebrated 50 years since obtaining control over the mount. This was marked in a series of events throughout the
year and especially during “Jerusalem day” which was celebrated in May. Another important milestone in 2017 was a major security event—“the metal detector crisis” (as stated above, two Israeli policemen were killed on the barricade in the entrance to the mount by Palestinians, who smuggled guns onto the mount. Following the incident, the Israeli authorities introduced metal detectors at the entrances of the mount, an act which led to widespread demonstrations and diplomatic criticism on Israel by Arab governments). For these reasons, 2017 was a good choice for studying the social media discussion of the Temple Mount as a case study for the conversations of holy places in social media. The social media platform used for analysis was Facebook—at the time the most popular platform in Israel by far (Mann & Lev-On, 2016).

Our research drew upon the database of IFAT, an Israeli data company that specializes in media analysis and monitors the media published in Israel. We received all the posts \( N = 16,100 \) from open groups on Facebook in Hebrew, between the dates 1 January 2017 and 31 December 2017, which include the phrase “Temple Mount.” Let us note again that we did not look at specific profiles or groups, but received the open data from all the Hebrew-speaking groups. From the population of \( N = 16,100 \), we created a sample of 501 posts from throughout the year. To do so, we chose each 32nd post from the sample.

The posts were analyzed using thematic content analysis. After reading the posts a few times by the researchers and three research assistants, and after a preliminary and in-depth examination, eight major recurring themes were identified in the texts. These categories became binary variables and the encoders were asked to indicate whether the theme in question existed in the unit of analysis or not. A post might conceivably appear appropriate to more than one relevant theme. As is customary in content analysis studies, a reliability test was performed between the encoders, and in addition two more people passed all the encodings. After two rounds of coding in which 50 items were categorized (10% of the total sample), the reliability reached over 90% in all categories between all coders.

**Findings**

The findings demonstrate that three main themes—national, religious, and security—received the most mentions in the sample, over and above the number of mentions received by other themes (historical, diplomatic, and more). Hence, the discussion below focuses on these three themes. The three main themes found in the corpus of texts are as follows:

- The National theme was found in 202 posts. In these posts, the Temple Mount is presented in the context of nationality, for example, expression of national feelings and opinions regarding sovereignty over the mount.
- The Religious theme was found in 151 posts. In these posts, the Temple Mount is presented, for example, in the context of religious ceremonies and the spiritual symbolism of the mount.
- The Security theme was found in 135 posts. In these posts, the Temple Mount is presented in the context of security practices and events that occurred on or around the mount.

The next two prominent themes were Historical (25 posts), in which the Temple Mount was discussed in the context of its history and the events that happened on it over the years, and diplomatic (14 posts), in which the Temple Mount was mentioned in the context of Israel’s foreign relations.

Table 1 presents the distribution of posts throughout the year (2017). The four lines represent the total number of posts included in the corpus per month, posts that included the Security theme, the National and the religious theme.

Although data for this study were collected from all the open Hebrew-speaking Facebook groups, the references to the mount throughout the year appear mainly in designated groups with unmistakably Right-wing or the Nationalist flavor such as “Temple Mount News” and “Temple Organization Headquarters.” The media outlets that tend to cover news developments concerning the mount on an ongoing basis during the year are identified with the political Right or the Nationalist cause (0404; Rotter; Channel 7; Kidar HaShabbat; Srugim). Other media outlets generally cover only breaking news events on the mount. The politicians who deal with the issue during the “ordinary” course of the year are few.

Analysis of the posts included in the corpus which were published up to 13 July 2017 (the day before the riots which followed the introduction of the metal detectors) show that out of 198 posts, 87 were published on Facebook pages or groups with an unmistakably Right-wing flavor, most of which deal specifically with the Temple Mount. Forty-nine posts were published on the “Temple Mount News” page, and 21 posts were published on a page called “Temple Organization Headquarters.” In addition, posts also appeared on sites such as “Women for the Temple,” “Temple Organization Headquarters,” “I also ascended the Temple Mount,” “Jews for the Holiness of the Temple Mount and Jerusalem—the League for the Protection of Jews in the Holy Land,” “ Students for the Temple Mount,” “Temple Mount Guides Movement,” “Temple Mount and Temple Movement,” and more.

The following paragraphs illustrate the content of the posts in the three main themes, nationalistic, religious, and security.

**Temple Mount References of a Nationalistic Character**

In all, 202 posts cited the Temple Mount as a focus of national pride and an expression of sovereignty. The very act of
ascending the mount expresses this sovereignty. For example,

The real reason that both the Arab Wakf and the Israeli Police count each and every Jew who ascends the mount is that each Jew by doing so is reasserting his sovereignty. So it is incumbent upon us each day to ascend—because if we don’t, the Temple Mount will not be in our hands. Each and every Jew has the power to determine whether there will be Jewish or Muslim sovereignty there.

The findings also show the lack of interest by the Jews toward the connection that Muslims have with the mount—despite the de facto Muslim administration of the Islamic holy places on the mount. In a number of posts, they angrily discuss the archeological excavations by the Palestinian Wakf (trust) that are taking place on the mount—with no supervision or control by the Israeli government.

**Temple Mount References of a Religious Character**

Some 151 posts, comprising 30% of the total sample, relate to the religious theme. It reflects the long history of the site for both Jews and Muslims. As one post put it,

The ascent to the mount is not a private matter but done in the name of all Israel . . . Unfortunately we are prevented from actually prostrating ourselves in the holy place today.

Discussion of the Temple Mount in the religious context is characterized by a sense of Jewish legal complexity, as detailed earlier. The split between the Rabbis’ positions has helped to foster an activist wing that is relatively small, but determined that it is doing the right thing. All they want is to spread their teachings and adhere to the laws associated with ascending the mount, emphasizing the religious-halakhic (religious law)-rabbinical reference by virtue of which they ascend the mount:

In an article, Rabbi Yitzchak Brand accuses journalists of preventing the greatest Rabbis from giving their opinion on whether it is permitted to ascend the Temple Mount.

Ascending the Temple Mount by women raises complications in Jewish religious law (halakhah). This concerns that a Jewess is ritually unclean during her menstrual cycle and requires immersion in a ritual bath. The matter is yet more complicated for single women who do not frequent the baths. From the data emerge a discourse that develops and demands to promote women equally to the forefront of the stage of those who visit the mount. Seventeen posts emphasize that women ascend the mount. Ten of them were written in a group behind an activity in the field called “Women for the Temple Mount,” which focuses on raising awareness among women mainly, but also among the public, about the possibility of women going up the mount. Because of the “public relations” and the halakhic complexity, the posts are consistently accompanied by the word “in purity” which takes care to emphasize that the ascent is done in a halakhic, conservative, and “kosher” context. For example,

In two days time, there will be the mass ascent by women and children all in a state of “taharah” (ritual purity), finally after the mount was closed for Ramadan. We shall ascend!

The key events associated with the Temple Mount take place during certain religious festivals, including the
so-called three pilgrimage festivals—of Passover (Pesach), Pentecost (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkoth); 10% of the postings deal with the festivals. It seems that these are landmarks that make it possible to connect people to ascending the mount and also to launch awareness around the issue. One post wrote,

In the six days after the holiday, the mitzvah (religious command) of aliyah (ascending the mount) will be observed on the occasion of the residents of the rest of the country and the residents of Jerusalem who did not manage to ascend during the holiday

**Temple Mount References of a Security Character**

Postings with the security character jumped suddenly in July 2017 with the crisis over whether or not to place electronic surveillance devices—a decision which followed the murder of two Israeli policemen on the mount. Of the 160 security postings, 80% related to the security incident and its consequences. As one post put it,

What a pity that two policemen had to die in order to effect the governmental decision back in 2014 to place surveillance devices at the entrance of the mount.

The postings necessarily relate to the specific incident. But other earlier posts discussed more generally police limitations on Jews ascent:

Yair Kohati, one of the heads of the group “Returning to the Mount,” was informed in a police hearing of the decision to distance him and not allow him to enter the mount for six months.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The study examines the contexts in which the Temple Mount is mentioned on social media in Hebrew, as a demonstration of how holy places are discussed in social media, using data drawn from the Facebook groups that represent a broad range of the Israeli Jewish population. The study is based on an analysis of 501 Facebook posts which were sampled from 16,100 posts that included the phrase “Temple Mount” in 2017 in the Hebrew-speaking open Facebook-sphere. The study was undertaken during a year in which Israel celebrated 50 years since capturing the mount.

The mount is not only a sacred place with religious significance throughout the years but also a place with political, security, national, and other meanings. The combination of the religious importance with the national-political significance gives the Temple Mount its “explosive” character. As a result, events that take place on the mount generate reactions around the Middle East. Thus, the “metal detector crisis”—which occurred in 2017, during the data collection for this study—began when Palestinian gunmen shot two Israeli policemen and continued after the Israeli government’s decision to place metal detectors at the entrance to the mount, leading to a storm that erupted on the mount and across the country and in many social media arenas as well.

The findings demonstrate that the mountain is portrayed prominently in three contexts: national, religious, and security. We also found that the discourse on Temple Mount in social media is divided into two distinct types: an “ordinary discourse” and an “extraordinary discourse.”

The “ordinary discourse” seems to involve a small circle of writers and followers—mainly nationalist, Right-wing activists. It concentrates on fringe groups like “Temple Mount News” and combines in-depth religious issues, like ascending the mount in purity. While such posts seem like the way of activists to advance their causes, they do not pre-occupy mainstream Israeli press and politicians, or even mainstream Facebook groups.

In contrast, the “extraordinary discourse” arises after an unusual event of an emergency type such as a security event that takes place on or around the mount. Here, the Temple Mount becomes “the mountain of us all”—of a virtual circle of people that expands way beyond the small circle of usual suspects—and the event is reported extensively in the mainstream media. Politicians and members of the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset), from all corners of the political map (and not just from the Right), jump on the bandwagon. Consequently, the event is discussed on online social media by many groups and individuals who typically do not take part in the “ordinary discourse” over the mount. In one sense the discourse about the Temple Mount is reminiscent of a “dormant volcano” that does not erupt regularly, but when it does, no one knows how the eruption will end.

The findings show that the conversation on social media about the Temple Mount—as a case study for a conversation about holy places in general—is similar in its characteristics to the coverage of holy places in the mainstream media. Holy places are covered around major events that are related to them, while for most of the year they are absent from the major news. The new media fails to bring the holy places to the forefront of media coverage, but it does allow for their ongoing coverage throughout the year—in the case of the Temple Mount, while focusing on national, religious, and security characteristics.

Do such social media conversations reframe the discourse on the Temple Mount? Do they contribute to the conflict? Are they polarizing users? How do these reflect and impact the social-religious-political atmosphere in Israel, and elsewhere? The data which we gathered and analyzed do not enable us to answer such questions. While we extensively analyzed the content of conversations in the Hebrew-speaking Facebook-sphere, we have not examined the influence of such content upon users’ perceptions or behaviors. Nor have we compared the content in Facebook with the content in the printed media. Indeed, future studies may research users’ perceptions, the influence upon them of
content, and compare Temple Mount content between the printed media and social media. Further research may also examine the scope and character of conversation on social media about additional holy places, and about other issues related to religion, in dedicated arenas and in social media spaces and on the Internet in general.

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