

Abstract

This research, conducted according to the principles of the Historical Geography Method, shows that the renewed Jewish settlement process in Eretz-Israel (1840-1948) laid the foundation for obtaining a Jewish foothold in the holy places of the four sacred cities (Jerusalem, Hebron, Zfat, and Tiberias) and in their modern day rural surroundings. Throughout that period, the Jewish communities of the four sacred cities focused on maintaining a presence in the nearby holy places through: possessing, renovating, and developing them and by providing access to them. When the holy sites were owned by non-Jews, the Jews initiated programs for purchasing them – sometimes for the purpose of settling nearby. This geographical-historical-cultural phenomenon that developed during the Late Ottoman Period (1840-1918), continued into the period of the British Mandate (1918-1948), and after the establishment of the State of Israel.

A number of factors during the Late Ottoman Period led to the beginning of this activity. The primary motivations were that the local Arab population that lived in these areas caused physical damage to the Jewish holy places, and prevented Jews from worshipping there, by demanding “protection money” from the Jewish communities, sometimes by violent means. At the same time, far-reaching reforms initiated by the Ottoman Empire, introduced to the region freedom of religion, equal rights for minorities, and agrarian legislation that allowed non-Muslim Ottoman citizens and foreigners to purchase homes and land in Eretz-Israel. This legislation resulted in fierce competition among local Jewish communities in Eretz-Israel, foreign political powers, and Christian religious and research institutions, for the purchase of property of religious, historical, and political significance. In addition, the beginning of scientific research of the Holy Land, especially archeological research, gave rise to concern and

resentment among the Jews of Eretz-Israel and the Diaspora because it brought along with it the desecration of ancient burial sites and the destruction of antiquities, many of which had been pilgrimage sites from time immemorial.

The four sacred cities also developed significantly during those years, substantially impacting the size and distribution of their Jewish populations. As a part of this growth process, the Jews made efforts to maintain a presence in the holy places – both in the cities and in their outlying regions. However, they faced a variety of obstacles that hindered their progress, for example: the need to obtain licenses and permits from the authorities under the Ottoman Rule and later from the British Government for the purchase of land and building construction, renovation of holy sites, pilgrimages and tourist visits; availability of property for purchase; property prices with historical worth often surpassing their actual value; sparse economic resources; tension with their Arab neighbors; a lack of transportation infrastructure and security on the roads; and the remote locations of holy places from centers of existing or planned Jewish settlement.

All of these difficulties were overshadowed by a social crisis within the Jewish settlement in Eretz-Israel that threatened its stability and unity. This struggle was rooted in the tension between The Old Yishuv and The New Yishuv. In addition, fragmentation of The Old Yishuv into different Jewish ethnic groups, and the ensuing struggles for recognition and prestige among its leaders, brought about additional internal conflict within that community. In contrast, the destruction of holy places and the prevention of Jewish access to them by local Arabs unified the different Jewish factions and resulted in cooperation among them. In order to strengthen the Jewish presence in the holy places and to resolve the housing shortage, members of the lower socio-economic class generally settled near these sites. Since these settlers had little means of survival, and

did not receive sufficient support either from community institutions or from the entities that established the settlements, most of these areas became impoverished neighborhoods. During the British Mandate Period, they were eventually abandoned in the wake of security riots and due to economic difficulties. Consequently, the leadership of the local Jewish community and later the National Zionist Institutions faced sharp criticism at home and abroad for their failure to defend the holy places, that at best resulted in the neglect of these sites, and at worst in the loss of their Jewish ownership.

The research findings do not demonstrate any evidence for the existence of an organized Jewish plan to obtain a foothold in the holy places in the four sacred cities during the renewed Jewish settlement process in Eretz-Israel (1840-1948). In other words, a comprehensive Jewish strategy for reclaiming the holy places during this period was not identified within the scope of this research. In most cases, initiatives sponsored by public entities or private individuals arose due to particular circumstances, and frequently suffered from a lack of coordination among them. The primary activity in this area was that of the various groups of Jews and institutions from within The Old Yishuv. After they witnessed the distress of their Jewish brethren during visits to Eretz-Israel, philanthropists from the Diaspora joined the efforts of reclaiming the holy places and renovating them for the local Jewish community, pilgrims, and Jewish tourists. Alongside these endeavors, private initiatives were also undertaken by organizations, rabbis, and famous people in the Diaspora, but they received only partial information from secondary sources about the holy places. The latter were not at all aware of the legal avenues for the purchase of property, and they worked indirectly through brokers and straw men. Later on, groups from the New Yishuv joined the effort, among them Hovevei Zion, which was supported by the Odessa Committee and representatives of

the Zionist establishment in Eretz-Israel. However, they suffered from a perpetual lack of funds for investing in the holy places.

During the Mandate Period, the British Government imposed the Ottoman status-quo on holy places, and established the Government Department of Antiquities that worked to preserve and repair these sites. This policy actually limited the purchase and renovation of sites of religious and historical significance that were held by Jews. It allowed them no choice but to either conduct archaeological excavations or to take steps to register them as endowments. During this time, the nationalistic differences between Jews and Muslims came to a head, and the places that were holy to both religions were used as a tool for inflaming the conflict and garnering political gains. In that way, a large number of holy places remained under Muslim ownership and control, in private hands, as endowments in trust to Muslim families, and under the administration and supervision of the Muslim Wakf and the Supreme Muslim Council.

An analysis of the historical facts presented in the research shows that since its establishment, the Zionist Organization only appeared to make efforts for acquiring a foothold in the holy places, and did not invest the majority of its time and energy in the four sacred cities. Nevertheless, the Zionist leadership did recognize the importance of property with religious and historical value, and insisted on transferring it to the ownership of the Jewish nation. Yet in actuality, the Zionist establishment chose to focus only on historical sites of a national character that symbolized the revival of the Jewish people in its homeland. In most cases in which the Zionist establishment was involved, the work of purchasing and developing the holy places was done by private individuals or with donations and special funds established for this purpose, and without the support of the national wealth. This did not, however, prevent the National Zionist Institutions from using this activity for publicity and for fundraising from Diaspora

Jewry in support of the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel. An exception to this was the work of the Vaad Leumi and the Chief Rabbinate of Palestine-Eretz-Israel that recognized the importance of the holy places and sites of symbolic significance for the people of Israel. They worked tirelessly to establish Jewish ownership and control through the use of religious law, civil law, settlements, and economic and political means.