

The Harlot's Grave

SOME WEEKS ago, Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who tried to kill Pope John Paul II in Rome, was released after serving 28 years in prison.

The motives for his act have never been clarified. But a Palestinian leader once told me his version: God appeared to Agca in a dream and told him: Go to the Holy City and kill that damn Pole. But the Turk misunderstood, so instead of going to Jerusalem and killing Menachem Begin, he went to Rome...

Which just goes to show that holy cities are a pain in the neck.

THE LATE Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an observant Jew and a resolute opponent of the religious establishment, used to praise a deed of the Wahhabis, the radical sect that arose more than 200 years ago to cleanse Islam of impurity. The first thing they did upon conquering Mecca was to destroy the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad. The sanctification of graves was, to their mind, a pagan abomination. Leibowitz lauded this act and poured his wrath on religious Jews who sanctify "holy" sites.

He was standing on solid ground. The last chapter of the Torah (Deuteronomy 34) states: "So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab...and he buried him...but no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day." Clearly, the authors of the Bible, too, believed that the adulation of graves was a despicable habit of idolaters.

In the course of generations, Jews, too, were infected with this ailment. Orthodox Jews worshipped at the grave of Rabbi Nachman in the Ukraine and of Rabbi Abu-Hatzira in Egypt. The mutation of Judaism, which has become a kind of state religion in Israel, has turned this idolatry into a holy cult.

During the first years of the state, an official of the Ministry of Religions (as it was then called), a certain Shmuel Zanwill Kahana, toured the country and discovered holy sites right and left. He found graves of Muslim sheikhs and announced that they were, actually, the tombs of our forefathers. They were declared holy places and taken over by his ministry.

That aggrandized the ministry and its budget, attracted tourists and "proved" that Jews had deep roots in the country. Secular Israelis smiled in derision, and some religious Jews, like Leibowitz, were furious.

But after the Six-day War and the beginning of the occupation, the worship of holy places assumed a much more sinister character. It became an instrument of the settlers.

USING HOLY sites to justify conquest and massacres is

by no means an Israeli, or Jewish, invention.

One of the most abominable examples is the First Crusade. Pope Urban II called upon the Christians of Europe to rise and liberate the Holy Sepulcher – not the country of Palestine, not the city of Jerusalem, but one specific site: the grave where, according to Christian tradition, the body of Jesus lay before his resurrection.

For this grave, many thousands of Christians crossed immense distances to Jerusalem, murdering masses of people (mostly Jews) on the way, and, after conquering the city, carrying out a horrendous massacre. According to Christian chroniclers, they waded up to their knees in blood. The victims were Muslims and Jews, men, women and children.

But there is no need to go back 911 years to find fanatical or cynical leaders using holy places to justify monstrous deeds. When Slobodan Milosevic carried out the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo – an act of genocide – his central claim was that the country was sacred to Serbs.

And indeed, in 1389 a historic battle took place there. The Christian Serbs were beaten by the Muslim Ottomans, who took over the country for the next 600 years. During that time, the local population voluntarily adopted Islam. But the Serbs sanctified the battlefield – a rare example of a people celebrating its defeat (as Jews do at Masada).

If Binyamin Netanyahu's favorite expression – "the Rock of our Existence" – existed in Serbian, Milosevic would surely have used it. He argued that Kosovo was the spiritual and religious center of the Serbian people, in spite of the fact that the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants are now Albanian Muslims. Until this very day, Serbia does not recognize the independent state of Kosova, because of the ancient Serbian churches and monasteries located there.

AND HERE? Since the beginning of the occupation, the "holy places" in the West Bank have served as weapons in the hands of the settlers. They go there, they say, to restore Jewish rule over Judaism's holy places, obeying God's commandment.

The stories of the Bible are set mostly in these territories. The settlers and the Israeli army call them "Judea and Samaria". Place names can be acts of annexation. They confirm the ownership of the Jewish people from ancient times. (In the 50s the British historian Steven Runciman, a leading expert on the crusades, drew my attention to the fact that the names have somehow been reversed: the Israelis are living in the land of the Philistines, from which the name Palestine is derived, while the Palestinians live in the land that was the ancient kingdom of Israel.)

The first settlement was established by a group of religious people who entered Hebron by deceit. Since the Israeli military governor forbade Jews to enter the city, they asked for permission to stay there for a few days in order to deliver their Passover prayers in the holy city.

Since then, the "Cave of Machpelah" in Hebron has become a holy battlefield. Near it, the most extreme Jewish settlers have established themselves. They are rabid Arab-haters and aim to drive out the 160 thousand Arabs, whose families have been living there for many generations. The most notorious mass murderer from among the settlers, the physician Baruch Goldstein, massacred Muslim worshippers in order to cleanse the holy place.

Holy places serve now as justification for the robbing expedition called settlement. Pieces of land are stolen all over the occupied territories because of their sanctity. The most extreme leaders of the settlers, all of them "rabbis", fight for the liberation of holy graves. One of them is leading a crusade (or, rather, star-of-davidade) in order to take possession of the "tomb of Joseph" in the center of Nablus, which would turn the city into a second Hebron. The Israeli army chauffeurs the settlers there in armored vehicles, so they can "pray" there.)

But not only "fathers of the nation" deserve holy graves, on which blood can be spilt. Every secondary figure in the Bible can get one and become a target for the settlers. Now a battle is raging around the "tomb of Othniel", bearing the name of Othniel the son of Kenaz, an obscure Biblical personality. The Muslim inhabitants of Hebron believe that it is the grave of the founder of their city.

Some days ago, settlers invaded an ancient synagogue in Jericho, which has been preserved by Muslims for generations. Jews had no problem visiting the place peacefully – the Jericho municipality, a part of the Palestinian Authority, has enabled all Jews to pray there. But the settlers did not go there to pray. They came to conquer.

Which reminds me of another prophecy by Yeshayahu Leibowitz on Jericho. The settlers, he said, would sanctify the tomb of Rahab the Harlot in Jericho. This heroine of the Bible (Joshua 2), the whore who betrayed her city and helped the invaders to conquer it and murder all the other inhabitants, is in good company with the settlers.

NO NEED to point out that the worship of these holy places is manifestly absurd. There is not a single grave in the country that can be seriously identified with any Biblical figure, real or imagined. Most holy graves are those of local Arab Sheikhs, who, because of their righteousness, were believed to be able to intercede with Allah. The location of most holy sites, including the Christian Holy Sepulcher, is much in doubt, to say the least.

That is also true for the two sites where bloody riots have lately broken out: the Tomb of Rachel in Bethlehem and the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron.

This is not the place to ask whether "Our Mother Rachel", one of the most attractive figures in the Bible, belongs to the realm of legend or of history. But even according to legend, she is not buried at the spot that now bears her name. Many Bible experts (of those who believe that she really existed) think that she was buried North, not South, of Jerusalem. It is Muslim tradition that located her grave in the isolated, modest building that appears on the postage stamps of Palestine during the British Mandate. Many generations of Muslim, Jewish and Christian women have prayed there, asking Rachel to bless them with offspring. This building cannot be seen anymore: the army has surrounded it with fortified walls and gates, so that the site now looks menacing, an ugly copy of a Crusader fortress.

The building in Hebron known as the "Cave of Machpelah" – actually no cave at all – has also been preserved by Muslim tradition, which sanctified it as "Ibrahim's Mosque". Many Bible experts who do not think that the story of Abraham is a legend believe that the Cave is located at another place altogether. But on this spot, much blood has been spilt.

This week's riots took place at both holy sites. They were caused by a decision by Netanyahu to include them in a list of Jewish "Heritage Sites" to be renovated by the Israeli government. Since both are holy to Muslims, Jews and Christians, this unilateral act is nothing but an expropriation and a blatant provocation. If there were really a desire for the improvement of the sites, it could have been done by a joint committee of the representatives of the two peoples and the three religions.

Years ago, I was invited by the late lamented mayor of Florence, Giorgio La Pira, to take part in a joint prayer session with a Catholic priest, a Muslim Sheikh and a Jewish rabbi at the Cave of Machpelah. In spite of being a devout atheist, I went along. At the time, it crossed my mind that such a site could well serve as a symbol of fraternity for both peoples of the country.

Joint love for the country, including all its periods and sites, holy and unholy, could serve as a spiritual basis for peace and reconciliation. Even now I hope for the day when schoolchildren in both states, Israel and Palestine, will learn the annals of this country in all its periods, and not just Jewish history here and Muslim history there. The wonderful richness of this country's history, from the time of the Canaanites to this day, could create a strong bond.

However, the intentions of Netanyahu and his settlers are quite the opposite: to misuse history as an instrument of occupation, and to build settlements around the harlot's grave.