

Should Israel build the Third Temple?

Background

-Tish'a b'Av commemorates the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem

- The First Temple, destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE
- The Second Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE

Also, many other tragedies in Jewish history happened on that day, by accident or design.

-For 2000 years Jews have prayed for the rebuilding of the Temple (*Bet HaMikdash*).

-Rebuilding was not possible because the site was controlled by the Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Arabs, Seljuks, Crusaders, Mongols, Mamelukes, Turks, British, and Jordanians.

-But Jews control the site today, since 7 June 1967, for the first time since biblical days.

-Although most nations feel they have a say in what happens to Jerusalem.

-A group called "The Temple Mount Faithful" routinely tries to set up a foundation stone for the Third Temple on Tisha b'Av, and the Israeli police routinely stop them.

So, should we rebuild the Temple?

Yes:

- More and more Jews want it
- We long for it daily in traditional Jewish prayers
- It's our historical right
- It would be a focal point, a rallying point for world Jewry

No:

- Don't want to go back to sacrificial worship.
- Can only be on Temple Mount in Jerusalem (close to Western Wall). But that site is occupied by the Islamic Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque, third holiest site in Islam. Islamists would wage holy war.

Let us first review the function, history, and halacha of the Temple.

Function of Temple

- First, in the desert, we had the Tabernacle (Ark of the Covenant, *mishkan*), where the tablets of the law were kept.
- Then we built a permanent structure in Jerusalem, at Temple Mount, the place of the Binding of Isaac.
 - By tradition, it cannot be built elsewhere.
- Ark of the Covenant kept in Holy of Holies [*kodesh hakodashim*], which only the High Priest can enter, and only on Yom Kippur.
 - Ark lost in destruction of First Temple, so unavailable for Second Temple
 - Some believe it is hidden in a chamber under Temple Mount
- Priests offered sacrifices mandated by Torah only in Temple
 - Three daily offerings (*tamid*), plus special ones on Shabbat and holidays.
- Examples:
 - Burnt offering (*olah*, the original "holocaust"), completely burned to ashes.
 - Peace offering (*shlamim*), eaten mostly by the persons offering it, but also by the kohanim
 - Meal offering (*minchah*) partly burned and partly eaten by the kohanim.
 - Sin offering (*chatat*); guilt offering (*asham*); freewill offerings (*nedavah*); thanksgiving offerings (*todah*); vow offerings (*nedarim*); etc.
- Laws of kosher slaughter applied.
- Levites sang psalms, with musical instruments, during the offerings:
 - The Psalm of the Day, psalms for the new month, the Hallel during major holidays, and psalms for special sacrifices.
- The three daily offerings included prayers. These prayers are now the three daily prayers (*shacharit*, *mincha*, *maariv*) and replace sacrifices:
 - Part of *shacharit* surrounding Shema essentially unchanged today
 - Amidah replaces the daily offering; Musaf the additional offerings.

Prayers for Rebuilding of Temple

- Prayers for rebuilding the Temple are extensive in traditional services, deleted in non-traditional services. Example:
 - Amidah blessing 17 [Avodah]:** (Bracketed parts deleted in non-traditional service)
 - Retzeh HaShem elokenu be'amcha Yisrael [uvi-tfillatam ve-hashev et ha-'avodah lidvir betecha. Ve-ishei Yisrael] utfillatam be-ahavah tekabbel beratzon. Ut-hi leratzon tamid 'avodat Yisrael 'ammecha.*
 - Be favorable, O Lord our God, toward Your people Israel [and toward their prayer, and restore the service to the Holy of Holies of your Temple.] Accept [the fire offerings and] the prayer of Israel with love, and may the service of Your people Israel always be to Your favor.
- Ishei Yisrael* -- fires of Israel -- refers to sacrifices, but Talmud also uses that expression to refer to 'the righteous of Israel' [Menachot 110a].

Rabbi Soloveitchik: It refers to our martyrs, the human “self-sacrifices” we have been forced to make in history, *l'kiddush HaShem*.

-Another prayer: "*Le-shana habba-ah b'Yerushalayim habnuyah* -- Next year in Jerusalem rebuilt." (“Rebuilt” refers to Temple.)

-Custom of facing location of Temple during prayer.

History of Temple

-First Temple built in 957 BCE by King Solomon.

-Became sole place of Jewish sacrifice, replacing portable sanctuary (Ark of the Covenant) built by Moses in the Sinai Desert, as well as local sanctuaries, and altars in the hills.

-30 years later, Sheshonk I, Pharaoh of Egypt, attacked Judah under Rehoboam, Solomon's son and successor, sacked the Temple and looted its treasures.

-Some partial reconstruction, but serious rebuilding only in 835 BCE (122 years later) by King Yehoash of Judah. Some lapses into idolatry there.

-Stripped again by Sennacherib, King of Assyria ~700 BCE (135 years later).

-Destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE (114 years later).

-Lasted 401 years.

-Second Temple, authorized by Persian king Cyrus the Great, began in 538 BCE (48 years after destruction of first), completed 23 years later. Less imposing than its predecessor.

-Narrowly avoided destruction in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great of Macedonia. (Judah surrendered.)

-The Greeks tried to stamp out Judaism by introducing idolatry in the Temple:

-Antiochus III introduced Greek gods into the Temple in 198 BCE. Jews rebelled, were crushed.

-Antiochus IV Epiphanes put statue of Zeus in Temple and Greek priests began to sacrifice pigs there. The Jews rebelled again. A Greek official asked a Jewish priest, Mattathias, to perform a Greek sacrifice. The priest killed him. The Jews rose up behind Mattathias and his five sons (the Maccabees) in 167 BCE, won, and re-dedicated the temple in 165 BCE (Hanukkah).

-In 63 BCE, the Roman Pompey entered Holy of Holies and desecrated it

-In 54 BCE, the Roman Crassus looted the Temple treasury.

-The Jews revolted again, were put down in 43 BCE.

-In 20 BCE, King Herod began to renovate the Temple. Finished in 60 CE, although worship continued during construction.

- In 70 CE (10 years later) the Romans destroyed the Temple.
- Lasted 608 years.

-Emperor Constantine made Christianity the only allowed religion in Roman Empire. But a successor, Julian (called “The Apostate”), reversed that and allowed all religions to flourish. In 363, he ordered the Temple rebuilt at his expense. After a good start, there was a big fire (arson or accidental) and an earthquake in Galilee. Julian was killed in war in Persia (2-year reign), and his successor, Jovian (8-month reign), re-established Christianity as the sole religion.

-The Temple was not rebuilt. The last Great Sanhedrin was forced to fold in 358 CE.

-In 691, the Muslims built an Islamic shrine at the site, considering it to be where Muhammad ascended to Heaven.

Temple Mount in Modern Times

-In 1967, Israel liberated Temple Mount during the Six-Day War.

-In 1980, Israel unified Jerusalem, putting Temple Mount in Israel proper.

-Muslims have administrative control (through Jordanian Waqf). Waqf allows tourists to visit but not worship or engage in archeological digs.

-Israel’s Department of Antiquities has south, southeast, and southwest areas for archaeological exploration.

-Jews may pray at the Western Wall (only remaining part of Second Temple) but not elsewhere on the site.

-More and more Jews try to pray on Temple Mount, but Israel enforces ban on Jewish worship there. Recent news item:

JERUSALEM (JTA) — June 19, 2013 11:18am:

“Four Jews detained at Temple Mount, accused of bowing in prayer”

Four Jewish Israelis were detained by police during a visit to the Temple Mount for praying at the site.

The four, identified as teenagers, were arrested Wednesday and taken for questioning. Police told the Times of Israel that the four prostrated themselves on the mount.

Yet, in 1967, the Knesset passed a law guaranteeing freedom of access and worship in “all” holy sites. “All” but not in Mount?

-Islamic preachers on the Mount deliver inflammatory speeches to encourage Arab hatred of Jews.

-Israeli rabbis uphold the ban on the grounds that Jews may not walk on the Temple Mount in a state of ritual impurity, risking to desecrate the Holy of Holies. A ban on Jewish entry is posted at the gate by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel:

Entrance to the area of the Temple Mount is forbidden to everyone by Jewish Law owing to the sacredness of the place.

---The Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

-The rabbis also declared: No exploration, excavation, or prayer on Temple Mount. Jews are even forbidden to fly over it. The ban will stay in effect until Messiah comes.

-Some rabbis disagree: You can't rebuild the Temple unless you walk on the site; so unclean persons may go there to rebuild the Temple.

-Some rabbis say only the Messiah can rebuild Temple (or the State of Israel for that matter)

-Israel's High Court of Justice has upheld the ban.

-Two yeshivot near Western Wall teach Temple rituals to 200 students.

-Only non-Jews who support rebuilding Temple are Evangelical Christians.

-Exact location of Temple is deemed uncertain: Some scholars say it's where the Dome of the Rock is, some say a little to the north of it, others a little to the east of it.

Halacha of Rebuilding the Temple

-It's a commandment in Torah:

Ve'asu li mikdash, ve-shachanti b'tocham

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. [Exodus 25:8]

-Rambam's Commandment 20 of 613: Build and maintain Temple in Jerusalem.

-Out of 613 commandments in the Torah, 202 (~1/3) require the Temple to be fulfilled.

-Some interpret Talmud as saying Temple will be rebuilt only when Messiah comes:

The [third] Holy Temple will be rebuilt before the establishment of the Kingdom of David. [Y Ma'aser Sheni 29]

-Maimonides agrees in halachic writing

The Messiah... will build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel... All the laws of the Torah will be reinstated as before; the sacrifices will be offered, the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee instituted as outlined in the Torah. [Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings 11-12]

-...but seems to disagree in non-halachic writings!

-Those who convince themselves that [they cannot perform all commandments] until the... Messiah arrives, and then they will all go to Jerusalem, are not only

fooling themselves, but they are causing others to sin as well, because there is no fixed set time for the... Messiah to arrive. The obligation of ... the commandments is not dependant on the arrival of the... Messiah. Rather, it is our duty to be occupied with Torah and commandments, doing our best to fulfill them. After we have seen to our obligations, if God finds us worthy to see the Messiah, well and good. But if not, we have lost nothing, and we have fulfilled our obligation. [Letter on Religious Persecution -- Iggeret Hashmad]

-The custom in those days among all men...consisted in sacrificing animals. God did not command us to give up these services; for this would have been contrary to the nature of man, who generally cleaves to that to which he is used. Sacrifices [however] are not the primary object [of the commandments about sacrifice], prayers are. [To wit,] we were not commanded to sacrifice in every place, and in every time, or to build a Temple in every place, or to allow anybody to become a priest and sacrifice. Only one Temple has been appointed, and only] "in the place which the Lord shall choose" (Deut. 12:26). In no other place are we allowed to sacrifice: "Be careful not to give your burnt-offerings in every place that you see" (Deut. 12:13); and only the members of a particular family were allowed to officiate as priests. All these restrictions served to limit this kind of worship. But prayer and supplication can be offered everywhere and by every person. Because of this, the Prophets rebuke people for being over-zealous in bringing sacrifices. [Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed), 3:32]

-Midrash: In the messianic age, all sacrifices (except for the thanksgiving offering) will be discontinued. [Vayikra Rabbah 9:7]

Final thoughts

-If enough Jews want it, Temple will be rebuilt.

-Recent surveys show that between one and two-thirds of Israeli Jews want it. *Im tirtzu en zo aggadah* – If you will it, it is no dream.

-But *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of lives, takes priority over most commandments

-Should we rebuild if it means that too many people will die as a result?

-Temple could serve a universal function, emphasizing prayer for all:

Ki veti bet tefillah yikare lechol ha'amim

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. [Isaiah 56:7]

Indeed, in Temple days, Gentiles could also offer sacrifices there. The practice was very popular.

-It will not necessarily include sacrifices -- at least not at first.

-It could be near, but not at, old location.
-On the other side of the Western Wall?

-Are we ready to avoid the conditions that caused the destruction of the first two Temples? Talmud:

Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because the three cardinal sins were rampant in society: Idolatry, sexual immorality and murder... And why then was the second Temple destroyed, given that at that time the people were involved in Torah, commandments and acts of kindness? Because senseless hatred (*sin'at chinam*) prevailed. This teaches that senseless hatred is as serious as the three cardinal sins. [Yoma 9b]

So we need to be both observant and nice to one another to deserve the Temple.

-One tradition, championed by Chassidic rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, is that the Third Temple has already been built in heaven and will descend on earth fully assembled once we prove ourselves worthy. It will mysteriously fit every Jew's unique personal spiritual needs, according to his own relationship with God.

The Shabbat before Tish'a b'Av is called Shabbat Chazon, the Shabbat of the Vision, because on this Shabbat, once and only once every year, God grants every Jew a vision of the Third Temple. If you haven't seen it, your soul saw it. [Based on Megillah 3a: "...though they themselves did not see, their souls saw."]

-In Midrash, God tells Ezekiel:

Learning in the Torah about the description of My House is as great as building it. Go and tell the Jewish people to occupy themselves in learning about the Temple, and in that merit I will consider it as if they are actually involved in building it. [Midrash Tanchuma, Tzav 14; Yalkut Shemoni on Ezekiel 43:10-11 (382).]