

Jewish Pilgrimage and Peace

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Preprint

Abstract

The biblical pilgrimage to Jerusalem is the Jewish paradigm; its objective is to rejoice in the Presence of God, and it promotes the ideal of peace first by stressing the unity of the Tribes of Israel, and then by welcoming strangers from all nations. Love of Zion, in its religious context, shares the objective of being in the Presence of God, emphasizing constant holiness in daily life. Praying at sepulchres of prophets and saints is, from a Jewish theological perspective, an more questionable activity; however, many of those who do this feel a heightened spirituality and a firmer identity, and derive inspiration from the role models provided. Various forms of secular 'pilgrimage' have arisen recently, and can offer opportunities for reconciliation between Jews and others and in that way create paths to peace. Moreover, many Jews are enthusiastic participants in marches, pilgrimages and other forms of collective activity that bring people of all faiths together in the pursuit of peace, justice, a sustainable environment and a better world.

Key Words

Judaism (Jewish); pilgrimage; peace; pilgrim festival; shrine

Jewish Pilgrimage and Peace

If you were to pick a Christian at random in the street and ask what he or she could say about pilgrimage you could reasonably expect a coherent reply, maybe with a reference to Rome or Jerusalem or Santiago; a Muslim similarly button-holed might mention Mecca, a Hindu Varanasi. If you were to stop a Jew and pose the same question you would more likely get a puzzled look, perhaps a remark on the Pilgrim Festivals in Ancient Israel, or even a statement to the effect that 'we don't do pilgrimages'. (I know. I have tried it.)

Is this a difference of substance or just a difference of vocabulary? Before we can be sure whether Jews 'do' anything akin to what Christians call pilgrimages we need to ask just what a pilgrimage *is*. What, for instance, distinguishes pilgrimage from mere tourism, or from an educational or business trip, all of which are routinely undertaken by Jews?

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* informs us that a pilgrimage is 'a journey undertaken for a religious motive. Although some pilgrims have wandered continuously with no fixed destination, pilgrims more commonly seek a specific place that has been sanctified by association with a divinity or other holy personage. The institution of pilgrimage is evident in all world religions and was also important in the pagan religions of ancient Greece and Rome'. If that is all that is meant then, as we shall see, pilgrimage is a common feature of many varieties of Judaism.

But pilgrimage, as commonly understood, is more than 'a journey undertaken for a religious motive'. Anthropologists, for instance, see it as a ritual process, all of whose parts have meaning, and function as open symbols rather than mere signs; they compare it in some respects to a rite of passage that marks changes of place, state, social position or age. A century ago, the German-born French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep analysed these rites into the three stages of separation, transition (the pilgrim stands on threshold, or limen) and incorporation. Van Gennep did not himself apply the analysis to pilgrimage, but more recently Victor Turner and others have taken this step.

However, there are obvious differences between a pilgrimage and a rite of passage. For instance a pilgrim, unlike someone who comes of age, does not usually accomplish a permanent change of state or social status; you can go on the same pilgrimage or other pilgrimages repeatedly, but you can only come of age once. Also, if you come of age, you leave the society you were in, that is, the society of children and, after a period on the 'threshold', you are incorporated into a 'new' society, the society of adults, never to return; if you go on a pilgrimage, on the other hand, you normally expect to be welcomed back into the society you left. Nevertheless, you *did* initially leave the

everyday world of home, in most cases abandoning your family group for a pilgrim group with whom you share the transitional and climactic stages, and only after that do you return home to a normal, if enhanced, life.

Pilgrimages frequently link sacred place with sacred time — for instance, the Passover was to take place at the Temple in Jerusalem on 14 Nisan. There may be ritual movements at the site, such as circumambulation of the altar at Tabernacles. Catholic, Orthodox Christian and Hindu sites often focus on some image or icon; Muslim and Jewish sites avoid iconic representations of divinity, but share the notion that a given place can provide privileged access to a divine or transcendent sphere, a notion succinctly expressed in the Sanskrit *tirtha* (literally ‘ford’), an intersection between two realms. The tradition that the Temple in Jerusalem was built on the very spot where Jacob dreamed of the ladder that ‘stood on the earth, and its top reached heaven’ (Genesis 28:12) conveys the idea that the Temple was the place where the two realms, heaven and earth, meet.

Victor Turner (pp. 17-20) set up a typology of pilgrimage comprising four categories. These are the archaic, characterized by syncretistic elements; the prototypical, inaugurated by an early leader of the religion; the mediaeval, culturally circumscribed, often emerging from a patriotic context; and the modern, focusing on the individual pilgrim and tending to the devotional or pietistic. The first two categories are clearly represented in Judaism, the third and fourth though present are conflated.

Bible: The Archaic and the Prototypical

Archaic Pilgrimage

Ancient Israel had many places of pilgrimage, traces of which can be detected in the Hebrew scriptures. Judges 11, for instance, makes mention (v. 40) of a four-day pilgrimage of virgins to mourn Jephthah’s daughter, and sets this in the context of her father’s rash vow; perhaps originally it was a fertility rite associated with the cult of Tammuz, but was later ‘adopted’ into Israelite religion in much the same way as pagan festivals were absorbed into Christianity by being assigned new meanings. To the ongoing consternation of the prophets of Israel, numerous shrines were to be found ‘beneath each leafy tree and atop each high hill’ (Jeremiah 2:20); these were likely local centres of pilgrimage, originally pagan shrines, which prior to implementation of the Deuteronomic reform may have served as loci for Israel’s three annual pilgrim festivals (Exodus 34:23).

Deuteronomy, however, banned all pilgrimages other than to 'the chosen place', viz. Jerusalem (more on this later). Nobody knows when and how thoroughly the Deuteronomic reform was implemented. The Bible praises king Josiah for attempting to carry it out (2 Kings 23), but Jeremiah, well after Josiah's time, still found it necessary to condemn not only the multiplicity of shrines but their association with idolatrous worship. On the other hand Jerusalem was already an established pilgrimage site centuries before his time, which is why Jeroboam, when he broke with Judah to create the kingdom of Israel in the north, set up rival shrines at Dan and Bethel to wean the people away from pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-29).

Prototype — The Pilgrim Festivals

If shrines such as those at Shiloh, Bethel and the site where the maidens chanted dirges for Jephthah's daughter represent the archaic stage of Israelite pilgrimage, the prototype for mature Israelite religion is the institution of the three *regalim* (foot[-festivals]), when all male Israelites were expected to present themselves 'before the Lord' bearing gifts.

This is first detailed in Exodus: 'None shall appear before Me empty-handed ... Three times year all your males shall appear before the Sovereign Lord, the God of Israel ... The choice fruits of your soil shall you bring to the house of the Lord your God' (Exodus 34:20, 23, 26). The three occasions are specified as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Ingathering.

Lists including additional festivals are found in Leviticus 23 and Numbers 28, both of which are concerned with priestly rites, but the original three-festival list is repeated in Deuteronomy with the major innovation that a single location is specified, though not named: 'in the place where the Lord will choose to establish His name' (Deuteronomy 16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16 with slight variations). This innovation — the so-called 'Deuteronomic reform' — carried both religious and political consequences. From the religious perspective, it was a blow against the idolatry and religious syncretism for which the multitude of earlier shrines, often associated with foreign cults, provided fertile ground; politically, it transformed the pilgrimage into an occasion for the reinforcement of national unity under the Davidic monarchy.

The Pilgrim Festivals and Peace

To what extent did pilgrimage, as portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures, serve the interests of peace? If we think of peace as a political virtue the picture is mixed. The Deuteronomic reform, by identifying the One God of Israel as the sole object of worship and by abolishing multiple shrines,

drew the political corollary of a united people and at peace with one another; the dark side of this was that as soon as Jeroboam set up rival shrines in the north the shrines themselves became the focus of national rivalry and military conflict between Israel and Judah.

So far as other nations were concerned, the Jerusalem Temple was open to all; in the words of King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple: 'The stranger also, who is not of your people, but comes from a distant land for your name's sake ... and prays toward this house ... Hear him in heaven, your dwelling-place, and do whatever he asks of you, that all nations of the earth might know your name and hold you in awe like your people Israel, and that they may know that your name is called on this house which I have built' (1 Kings 8:41-43); clearly, the aspiration of the author of those words was that the Temple should be a centre for pilgrimage and peace for all humankind. The same aspiration is mirrored in the words of the Psalm (122:6), 'Seek the well-being of Jerusalem; may all that love [her] be at peace'. It is strikingly confirmed in Zechariah's (14:16) vision: 'It shall come to pass, that everyone that is left of all the nations that came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the feast of Tabernacles'; this is unambiguous testimony to the pilgrimage as an occasion to buttress peace between Israel and its erstwhile enemies.

Yet the political vision is not an end in itself but a vehicle for the ultimate aim of all humankind rejoicing in the Presence of God, the wealthy farmer who brings his offerings of animals and produce together with orphan, the widow, the Levite, the stranger and all who are in need.

Philo: End of the Biblical Period

Early in the first century Philo of Alexandria, interpreting Judaism within a Hellenistic culture which embraced frequent and often exuberant temple-centred celebrations, advertised the superiority of the Jerusalem festivals over the excesses of the pagans in a vivid, possibly first-hand, description:

Countless multitudes from countless cities come, some over land, other over sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast. They take the temple for their port as a general haven and safe refuge from the bustle and turmoil of life and there they seek to find calm weather and, released from the cares whose yoke has been heavy upon them from their earliest years, to enjoy a brief breathing-space in scenes of genial cheerfulness (Philo *Special Laws* 1:69 ff. H. Coulson's translation, in the Loeb edition).

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, but in the hope of its imminent restoration, the rabbis continued to present the three Pilgrim Festivals (Pesach, Shavu'ot, Sukkot) as sharing the theme of joy in God's Presence: 'And you shall rejoice on your festivals' (Deuteronomy 16:14); you should present yourself in the 'chosen place' (Jerusalem) bearing your 'gift' for God (Deuteronomy 16:16).

They did not confine festive joy to the Temple or to actual pilgrimage but extended it to the celebration of the festivals even in exile; they decreed that it should be expressed in feasting with meat and drink and with the purchase of new garments for the women. It is a joy that is only complete when allied with concern for the needy; as the verse continues, 'with the aliens, orphans and widows among you'. Still today the festivals are times when hospitality and almsgiving are accentuated.

The Silence of the Talmud : Sacred Shrines

There is no evidence of competing shrines in Israel in the Second Temple period other than the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim; the Temple of Onias in Alexandria perhaps functioned as a centre for worship for Egyptian Jews, but never rivalled nor was intended to displace Jerusalem as the ultimate centre for pilgrimage.

But if there was no serious alternative to the Jerusalem Temple as the place of sacrifice, were there lesser shrines? 'The Lord said to me, "Even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede with Me, I would not be won over to that people"' (Jeremiah 15:1). Is this simply a poetic conceit, or was Jeremiah proclaiming the futility of a current practice of visiting graves or memorials, perhaps of praying to holy figures of the past to intercede?

Heroes' tombs, such as the Tomb of Hercules near Cadiz, as well as other monuments, were common centres for pagan pilgrimage throughout the Hellenistic world, and archaeological evidence suggests that by late Second Temple times Jews had adopted the trend; the masonry over the Cave of the Patriarchs at Hebron and Absalom's Monument at Jerusalem were both constructed in this period.

There is literary evidence, too. 1 *Maccabees* 2:51-60, Ben Sira 44-50 ('Let us now praise famous men ...') and The New Testament *Hebrews* 11 have lists of holy exemplars most of whose names occur later in geographical works and pilgrim itineraries; Wilkinson (p. 48) thinks they may relate directly to pilgrim itineraries, but evidence for this is weak. The reproach attributed to Jesus, 'You build up the tombs of the prophets and embellish the monuments of the saints' (Matthew 23:29), is much stronger evidence that Jews engaged in activity of this kind in the late first century when the gospel was redacted, and implies that it was the continuation of an earlier practice.

The Lives of the Prophets, a Jewish document of which the core was compiled in Hebrew in Jerusalem in the mid-first century, is extant only in Greek and Syriac versions. The Greek

superscription reads: 'Names of the prophets, where there were and where they died and where they were buried'. The work incorporates many fables, but it also gives birth and burial places for the twenty or so prophets whose lives it covers. It is difficult to imagine why a list of this kind should be produced unless people were visiting the sites, presumably for prayer; why else, for instance, would anyone care to know that Haggai was buried near the tombs of the priests (in Jerusalem), honoured as though one of their number, unless there was some marked tomb or mausoleum there at which they might pray?

In the light of the available literary and archaeological evidence the virtual silence of the Babylonian Talmud on the matter is striking. It is not entirely silent, though. Rava (c. 270-330), for instance, on Caleb's determination not to be misled by the other spies sent out by Moses (Numbers 13:6):

Rava said: This teaches [us] that Caleb disassociated himself from the counsel of the spies; he went and cast himself on the graves of the patriarchs and said: My fathers! Pray for me to be saved from the counsel of the spies! (Babylonian Talmud: Sota 34b)

Rava may have had in mind a picture of the matriarch Rachel: 'Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard in Ramah — Wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone' (Jeremiah 31:15). In any case, his remark could only have made sense against a background where people were familiar with the notion of praying at the graves of holy people of the past. The Talmud is a vast work that prescribes appropriate behaviour for every aspect of life, yet nowhere does it mandate or even discuss the practice; such silence can hardly be accidental.

A remark attributed to Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel indicates distaste for if not rejection of such behaviour:

[Tosefta states] in the name of Rabbi Nathan: If [money is] left from [funds raised for burial of] the deceased they may build a monument over his grave and sprinkle his bier¹ ... [but] Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel taught, One does not make memorials for the righteous; their words are their memorial. (Talmud Yerushalmi *Sheqalim* 2:5 (47a))

Simeon ben Gamaliel speaks as a Torah sage. If you want to honour the sages you do not visit their graves, you repeat their words of Torah. Maybe a similar thought lies behind Deuteronomy's denial of knowledge of the whereabouts of Moses' burial-place: 'And no one knows his burial place to this day' (Deuteronomy 34:6). We can only wonder what Simeon ben Gamaliel would have thought of the proliferation of 'memorials for the righteous', including many of his colleagues, in Israel today.

¹ To keep the corpse fresh.

In Rava's lifetime Christian pilgrimage intensified with the encouragement of the Emperor Constantine, who in 325 built the Church of the Annunciation. This development took place within the context of a well-established practice of Jewish pilgrimage. Wilkinson has carefully examined the *Itinerary* of the Pilgrim of Bordeaux (written 333), Egeria's *Travels* and Jerome's (347-420) *Letter* 108 describing Paula's pilgrimage, and found a preponderance of 'Old Testament' over exclusively Christian sites, in these proportions: Pilgrim of Bordeaux: 23 Old Testament : 17 New Testament; Egeria's *Travels*: 63 Old Testament : 33 New Testament; Jerome *Letter* 108: 40 Old Testament : 27 New Testament. Presumably the 'Old Testament' sites were predominantly Jewish.

Even though no pilgrimage is ever mandated in the classical rabbinic sources other than the biblical pilgrimage to Jerusalem, *historical* sites are mentioned as opportunities for thanksgiving to God. The Sages of the Talmud prescribe blessings to be pronounced when you see a place in which a miracle was wrought for yourself, your ancestors or the Jewish people as a whole; this presupposes that such places were identified, though to what extent they may have been pilgrimage sites is difficult to say:

The rabbis taught: One who sees the [place of the] crossing of the [Red] Sea (Exodus 14:29), the crossing-place of the Jordan (Joshua 3:17), the crossing-place of the Arnon (Numbers 21:14), the Algavish stones at the descent of Beth Horon (Joshua 10:11), the rock that Og, king of Bashan, sought to hurl against the Israelites,² the stone on which Moses sat when Joshua fought Amalek (Exodus 17:12), Lot's wife (Genesis 19:26), the wall of Jericho that was swallowed up in its place (Joshua 6:20) — for any of these he should offer thanks and praise to the All-present (Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 54a).

Why are no ancestral burial sites or similar monuments listed here or among the items with which the Talmud supplements the list, seeing that such sites existed and evidently attracted visitors? Hazardous as it is to draw conclusions from silence it looks very much as if the rabbis wanted to discourage visits to these sites, or indeed any kind of pilgrimage other than that sanctioned directly by scripture. You might in the course of your travels happen upon some historical site, or a site of personal significance to you or your family, but it should not be regarded as a holy place, simply as an occasion on which to thank God for some past deliverance.

The rabbinic understanding of sacred space does derive not from association with holy persons but from fitness of the location for the performance of the *mitzvot*, or divine commandments. The Mishnah (*Kelim* chapter 1) spells out the ascending degrees of holiness of the Land of Israel:

² There is no biblical source for this; the Talmud (54b) cites an *aggada*.

6. There are ten degrees of holiness. The Land of Israel is holier than other lands, for the Omer sheaf, the first-fruits and the two loaves [for Shavuot] are brought from its produce, but not from that of other lands.
7. Walled cities [within the Land] are holier, for lepers are excluded from them, and though a corpse may be moved around them, once it has left it may not be returned to them.
8. Within the wall [of Jerusalem] is holier still, for offerings of minor holy holiness and second tithe may be eaten there.

The Temple Mount is holier still; a zav, zava, menstruant or newly delivered mother may not enter. The outer precinct [of the Temple] is holier still; non-Israelites and persons defiled by contact with a corpse may not enter.

The women's courtyard is holier still; a t'vul yom may not enter, though he is not liable to a sin-offering [if he inadvertently enters in that state].

The courtyard of Israel is holier still; those who await their atonement offering [to complete their purification] may not enter, and they are liable to a sin-offering [if they inadvertently enter in that state].

The courtyard of the priests is holier still; Israelites may not enter except when they are required to place their hands on the head of the sacrifice, to slaughter it, or for the waving ceremony.

9. Between the portico and the altar is holier still; blemished [priests] or those with untrimmed hair may not enter.

The sanctuary is holier still; none may enter without first washing hands and feet.

The Holy of Holies is holier than any other place; no one may enter but the High Priest on the Day of Atonement as he performs the [divine] service.

Rabbi Yosé said, In five ways the area between the portico and the altar is equal to the sanctuary: no one may enter if blemished, with untrimmed hair, intoxicated or without first washing hands and feet, and they must vacate the area between the portico and the altar when incense is being offered.

The nub is that the Land is holy since it enables the fulfilment of God's commandments; maximum holiness is attained annually when the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement in fulfilment of God's commandment and thereby brings the people close to God.

The positive conceals a powerful negative. The Land is holy because it is the locus for the fulfilment of God's commandments, *not* because the ancestors or holy persons walked or died there. Because the Land is where God's commandments are best fulfilled, people are to be encouraged to live there. Because faithfulness to God's commandments brings forgiveness, the Palestinian Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat (third century) declared, 'He who dwells in the Land of Israel dwells without sin',³

³ Babylonian Talmud: *Ketubot* 111a.

citing Isaiah 33:24: 'None who lives there shall say, I am sick; it shall be inhabited by folk whose sin has been forgiven'.

Peace? The ideal of the rabbis was for Israel to live at peace in its Land, in perfect harmony with God and nature under the guidance of the messiah, and for all humankind to share freely in this universal peace. It remains an ideal.

Popular Judaism : Tombs of the Saints

Whatever the views of the rabbis of the Talmud popular Judaism encouraged pilgrimage to holy sites, including the resting-places of patriarchs, prophets and sages. These pilgrimages have varied in form and motive, and we shall review a selection.

Tombs in the Land of Israel

Mention has already been made of the Cave of the Patriarchs at Hebron and of Absalom's Monument at Jerusalem. Rachel's tomb just outside Bethelhem may stand on an ancient site, though the current onsite structure, a cube topped by a dome, was built around 1620 by the Ottoman Turks and lengthened in 1860 by Sir Moses Montefiore. Benjamin of Tudela visited c. 1167 and wrote that passing Jews would carve their names on the monument, which was made of eleven stones corresponding to the sons of Jacob⁴ and topped with a cupola (Eisenstein p. 27). Jews were given exclusive prayer rights at the tomb by the Pasha of Egypt in 1615, but the politics have changed and you now get there in a No. 163 bullet-proof bus from Jerusalem. Women pray there for fertility; rituals include lighting candles and tying threads.

Awarta, 5 miles southeast of Nablus, was an important Samaritan centre between the 4th and 12th centuries, thought to be on the *Hill of Phinehas* (Joshua 24:31). Burial sites of Ithamar and Eleazar, sons of Aaron the High Priest, are there, as well of those of Phineas with his son Abishua, of special significance to Samaritans, and nearby is a cave said to hold remains of the 70 elders. Muslims hold that Joshua and Ezra are buried there too.

These sites all lie on the West Bank, and are currently sites of strife.

⁴ Jacob, of course, had twelve sons, but perhaps the reference is to the eleven who were alive when Rachel died giving birth to the youngest, Benjamin. As Eisenstein observes, the version of the story cited in *Seder haDorot* speaks of eleven stones capped by a twelfth laid by Jacob himself.

Tombs of the Sages

Tombs of several Sages from the period of the Mishnah, as well as of some later rabbis including Maimonides, are located in Tiberias and at other sites in Galilee. Some of the identifications are highly probable, others less so; in some instances tombs were identified by the kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534-72) who was said to have accomplished this through conversations with the spirits of the departed Sages at those locations.

Rabbi Meir

Rabbi Meir, one of the most prominent personalities in the last generation of Sages of the Mishna, died on a mission in Asia Minor. An obscure passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Kil'ayim* 9:3 (43a)) has been interpreted to mean that he requested burial 'by the sea' in the Land of Israel, and at least since the thirteenth century Jews have visited his tomb just outside Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, especially to pray for healing; a large charitable foundation is based there. There is also much superstition, involving celebration of the first haircut of three-year-old boys (a kabbalistic practice) and the burning of candles, and thousands flock to the tomb on the date believed to commemorate his death.

Simeon bar Yohai; Meron

Mount Meron was described by Benjamin of Tudela who mentions tombs of various Sages but not of Simeon ben Yohai; Simeon became associated with it only in the 15th century, when Safed was home to Luria and other kabbalists who thought he had authored their guiding text, the Zohar. Pilgrims now flock to Meron on 18 Iyar, the minor festival of Lag baOmer, which is said to be the anniversary of Simeon's 'ascent' to the higher world. The processions up the mountain are spectacular; pilgrims camp in the open, light bonfires and throw hair from boys' first haircuts into them.

Virtual Pilgrimage

Not everyone who wants to can get to Meron or the other sites, but the good news is that modern technology has obviated the need to be present in person. The website <http://www.po-ip.co.il/> offers this service:

Our unique religious content solutions for Cellular 3G users as well as our Prayer Delivery Service enables believers around the world to get the feeling of any Holy Site. **Our solution**

enables their prayers heard in Jerusalem and in other Holy sights across Israel. **Thanks to a new service, you too can look online at any Holy Site at the Holy Land.**

From now you can voice your prayer, from anywhere and at any time, and have it heard in Jerusalem or in other Holy sites across Israel. Send now your prayer for Health, matchmaking and livelihood - directly to the holy site in Israel – let our service bringing you close to the important site as possible.

This does at least clarify the popular understanding of the motivation for visiting and praying at the sites; it is to assure health, matchmaking and livelihood. To this we may add the social cohesion and mutual affirmation of the faithful, the shared experience of holiness and spirituality, and the sheer exhilaration of camping out in one of Israel's most scenic nature reserves.

None of this has much bearing on the broader issue of peace.

Jewish Pilgrimage Sites in the Islamic World

The Maghreb

Saints, holy shrines, frequent pilgrimages, belief in miraculous power of saints and holy men (*walis*), though pre-Islamic, were often adopted and shared by Muslims and Jews across North Africa. During the Muslim conquest garrisons (*ribāt*) were often set up, manned by religious students and military volunteers known by the term *mourabit* ('one who is garrisoned'). In the Berber pronunciation *marabout* came to mean 'holy man' or 'saint' (equivalent to Hebrew *tzaddik*). Marabouts serve as intermediaries with the supernatural and as conveyors of God's grace (*Baraka*) (Weingrod p. 220). In Algeria *murābit* referred for the tomb, usually domed, in which a pious man was buried; many of these became pilgrimage locations.

The Jewish communities of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya followed a similar cult of sainthood, with associated shrines. The cult has been maintained by Jews of Maghrabi origin in other countries, notably Israel. Indeed, an older Moroccan saint, Rabbi David uMoshe, is alleged to have been miraculously transported from the Moroccan Atlas to a new shrine in Israel. The only post-biblical female saint of whom I have seen mention, Bu Shaif of Libya, achieved a similar convenient transportation, when her grave was discovered to have arrived miraculously in a village near Tel Aviv; the memorial synagogue erected there attracts thousands of Libyan-background Jews to the annual *hillula* (celebration). (Weingrod p. 233)

One of the most famous Moroccan-Jewish saints was Rabbi Yaakov Abuhatzeira (1805-1880). He left Morocco in 1879 to make his way overland to Palestine, but fell ill and died while passing through the Egyptian city of Damanhur. A ceremony is held annually at his tomb in Egypt on the anniversary of his death, 19 Tevet, and this is attended by hundreds of devotees, many travelling from Israel.

His grandson Rabbi Israel Abuhatzeira (1890-1984), known as the Baba Sali (Arabic: 'Praying Father'), was renowned for his alleged ability to work miracles; his tomb at Netivot is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Israel.

A new saint: Chayim Chouri.

Since the late 1960's Tunisian-origin Jews, now joined by Moroccans, visit the grave of Rabbi Chayim Chouri (Djerba 1885 – Beersheba 1957) in the Beersheba municipal cemetery – lighting candles, praying, eating, drinking and dancing 'in an outpouring of spontaneous gaiety and thundering power'. Weingrod asks why modern secular Jews join in this; he suggests it is a feature of 1970's ethnic pluralism, a reassertion of Moroccan ethnicity in Israel after what was perceived as Ashkenazi/European domination (Weingrod pp. 218-19), an 'ethnic renewal ceremony' akin to the Notting Hill carnival in London (p. 232).

Iraq and Iran

Shia Islam has developed major pilgrimages other than the Hajj to Mecca, such as the tombs of Imam Ali in An Najaf, of Imam Husayn in Karbala and of the Seventh and Ninth Imams at Kazimayn, near Baghdad. Living among people for whom pilgrimage to such shrines was a way of life no doubt had its influence on local Jewish populations, but several sites associated with biblical figures actually go back to pre-Islamic times.

One of the best known of these is the mausoleum of Esther and Mordecai in Hamadan, Iran. The current brick and stone structure dates only to the 13th Century CE; it may have been erected over other and more ancient tombs. In form it resembles Islamic constructions, and consists of an entrance, a vestibule, a sanctuary and a Shah-ni-shin (King's sitting place). It contains two exquisite wooden tomb-boxes, reputedly containing the remains of Esther and Mordecai; one of them has a Hebrew inscription.

Ezekiel's tomb

Two tombs are claimed to be the final resting place of the prophet Ezekiel. One is in Dezful, Khuzestan, Iran, but the better known one is located in Al Kifl, Iraq, between Najaf and Hilla on the Euphrates. Before the mass exodus of Jews from Iraq in the mid-twentieth century some 5,000 Jews

used to visit the tomb during Passover. On the walls inside appears Hebrew script under a dome with medieval Islamic floral designs.

Benjamin of Tudela, Navarre (Northern Spain), visited c. 1170, and his description is of interest (Eisenstein p. 34)):

From there it is three parasangs to the Synagogue of the Prophet Ezekiel (peace be upon him!) on the banks of the Euphrates, where stands the synagogue of the prophet Ezekiel (may he rest in peace!). The synagogue area is fronted by sixty pillars, and between each pair is a [small] synagogue. In the court of the [main] synagogue stands an ark, behind which is the sepulchre of Ezekiel, son of Buzi the priest. Over this is a large cupola, and the building is very beautiful. It was erected by Jeconiah, King of Judah and the thirty-five thousand Jews who accompanied him when Evil-Merodach released him from prison and is situated between the river Chebar and the Euphrates. [The names of] Jeconiah and all those who accompanied him are inscribed on the wall, the King's name first, Ezekiel's last.

To the present day this place remains holy for Israel as a minor Temple. People come here from distant lands to pray, particularly between New Year and the Day of Atonement, and they celebrate with great joy. Even the Resh Galuta and heads of the Colleges arrive from Baghdad, and their camp in the open stretches two miles. Arabian merchants come and set up a great fair. A parchment scroll in the prophet Ezekiel's own handwriting is produced and they read from it on the Day of Atonement.

A lamp burns night and day over the sepulchre of the prophet Ezekiel, and has not gone out since the day he himself kindled it; the oil and wicks are renewed as necessary. A large dedicated house is there that contains numerous scrolls, some from the first and second Temples. The custom is that whoever dies childless bequeaths his books to this sanctuary.

Jews who arrive from Media and Persia to pray bring money that the people of those lands have vowed to donate to the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel. The synagogue owns also bequests, land and villages that belonged to king Jeconiah, and when Muhammad came he confirmed the Synagogue's ownership of all this.

Leading Muslims also come here to pray out of their love for the prophet Ezekiel, and they call the place dar el-melihā (the agreeable abode); numerous Arabs also come to pray at the sepulchre. Even in times of war no-one, Jew or Muslim, would in any way harm the sepulchre of Ezekiel.

It is interesting that Benjamin concludes his report with a comment indicating that the tomb of the prophet was regarded as a place of peace, not to be disturbed even in time of war, and respected by Jew and Muslim alike.

Norman Stillman (pp. 73 ff.) has remarked how the Sefardic, especially Moroccan, tradition of saint veneration, focused on men such as 'Baba Sali', has in modern Israel allied with H²asidic Tzaddikism; it is to this that we now turn.

Hasidic Pilgrimage

The Hasidic Movement owes its inspiration to Israel 'Baal Shem Tov' (1698-1760), a charismatic healer who travelled through Ukraine and Eastern Poland urging people to worship God and to keep His commandments in simplicity and with joy. At Medžibož (Volhynia, Ukraine) he gathered a remarkable circle of followers, some of them men of considerable learning. The movement spread through much of Eastern Europe and introduced a charismatic leadership style previously rare in Judaism, not unlike that of the Doukhobors, a Christian sect in common with whom they stressed the divinity within each individual. The Tzaddik ('righteous one') or Rebbe ('Master') was thought to possess an elevated soul through which ordinary H²asidim might derive divine sustenance, a doctrine which generated a kind of personality cult requiring frequent visits to the 'Court' of the Rebbe and, after his death, pilgrimages to the graveside.

With the destruction of Central European Jewry in the Holocaust and the transfer of the centres of Jewish culture to Israel and the West the old Hasidic sites disappeared or fell into disrepair. Organisations such as the *Agudas Ohalei Tzadikim* ('Association for the Abodes of the Righteous'), founded by Rabbi Israel Meir Gabbai in 1989, have assiduously located and restored Jewish cemeteries and the graves of 'Rebbs' in Eastern Europe, often setting up and maintaining guest houses adjacent to the sites, so encouraging 'pilgrimage'.

Nah²man of Bratslav

The Hasidic leader Nah²man of Bratslav (1772-1810), born in Medžibož, Volhynia, Ukraine, settled in Braclav (Bratslav), Podolia, in 1802, and moved to Uman in 1810. After his death later that year his close disciple Nathan Sternharz declined to step into Nah²man's shoes on the grounds that (a) he was unworthy and (b) the Master had said he would continue to be accessible to those who came to pray at his grave. Ever since then Bratslaver H²asidim have visited Nah²man's grave annually at Rosh Hashana, and continued to do so in the face of considerable obstacles throughout the communist

era. Since 1989, when 250 attended, the pilgrimage has attracted a popular following among Jews of many denominations from across the world; attendance at the 200th anniversary of Nahman's death in 2010⁵ was estimated at 25,000, and there are plans to erect a Bratslaver Historic-cultural Centre which would contain the world's largest synagogue, seating 5000 worshippers.

The London-based Jewish community development consultant Rabbi Pinni Dunner reported in *The Jewish Chronicle* of 17 September 2010:

In Uman there is no such thing as an outsider. Whoever you are, and wherever you are on the religious compass, you will be embraced and welcomed by everyone. And you will find yourself doing the same to them. Uman belongs to nobody, so it belongs to everybody ...

Rabbi Nachman's message of religion through joy, self-criticism and introspection, through non-judgmentalism, and eternal optimism, is reflected in this spirit of unity.

This is charming, but disingenuous. The 'spirit of unity' might be more aptly described as a spirit of group self-affirmation, not unlike that of supporters of a football team. There *are* 'outsiders', for instance all women. I also wonder what the relationship is between the exotic visitors and the local, Christian inhabitants.

Nahman claimed to have received special enlightenment on his visit to Palestine in 1798, a visit brought to an untimely end by the arrival of Napoleon; he assured his followers that the land of Israel, physically speaking, was like other lands, but that its spiritual qualities were unique.

After Israel, Ukraine has become the capital of Jewish pilgrimage, all of it of Hasidic hue. There are well over 40 identified sites, including the graves of the Baal Shem Tov at Medžibož and of the first two Lyubavichi Rabbis, Shneur Zalman and Dov Baer; the last Lyubavichi Rabbi, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), was laid to rest in New York, where he continues to receive visitors.

Elimelech of Litzhensk

Other East European countries, from Latvia to Bulgaria, have their sites too. Poland boasts several Hasidic pilgrimage sites, of which the most notable is at Leżajsk (Yiddish 'Lizhensk'), a small town in southeastern Poland famous for its Bernadine basilica and monastery and a major brewery. The Jewish cemetery houses the remains of Elimelech (1717-87), one of the first 'Rebbes' to disseminate Hasidism in Poland.

⁵ The Jewish year 5770 in which the anniversary fell extends to September 2011.

From the family website of Edward E. Ohlbaum, a relative of Elimelekh, I cite what is presumably Ohlbaum's translation of Shalom Yam's⁶ poem, *Lizhensk of Rabbi Elimelech*:

*The gravesite that was famous
In the region as well as the world
Of the Tzadik Rabbi Elimelech, and the splendor of his holiness
All the households of Lizhensk basked in his influence.*

*The cave in which was found the grave was located close to the synagogue and Mikva
It implanted in all who cared for it hope and expectation,
By means of a "kvitel" left at the grave
One can express one's wishes, and the soul of the Tzadik will assist.*

*The gravesite was bustling on weekdays and Sabbaths,
Everyone comes together with his troubles to the gravesite;
One is barren, or finds it difficult to give birth,
Another was abandoned by her husband,
Still another has been struck by financial difficulties,
A couple needs to marry off a child,
Another requires a match for himself,
For since he became a widower his world has darkened;
All of them turn themselves,
Turn to the gravesite.
The gravesite is always bustling
Something is always taking place there.*

Not the greatest poetry, perhaps, but it does convey a sense of belonging, of hope, a sense that the soul of the *tzaddik* in the world beyond still cared for them and could and would help. This is not indeed sound Jewish theology, which teaches that one should pray to God and to God alone; the *tzaddik* has become a sort of Jesus figure, or a Christian saint or icon.

New Year Grave Visits

Jacob b. Moses Moelin (1365 – 1427), rabbi of Mainz, is generally known by his Hebrew acronym as Maharil. He codified the customs (*minhagim*) of the Ashkenazi Jews of his time, including the custom of praying at the 'graves of the righteous' on fast days. This was ratified by Moses Isserles (1520-72),

⁶ Shalom Yam is unknown to me and cannot be traced online. I do not know whether (s)he wrote in Yiddish or Hebrew.

at least with regard to the Eve of the New Year,⁷ and has persisted among Jews as the practice of visiting their parents' graves prior to the New Year festival, with rituals such as walking around the graves or placing a hand on the tombstone. Maharil himself seems to have found the custom theologically embarrassing, since he defends it by arguing that we do not ask the righteous to intercede on our behalf in heaven, but rather we pray on sacred ground that God have mercy on us through their merits;⁸ perhaps he is distancing himself from the Christian practice of praying to saints to intercede, though as we have seen there is Jewish precedent for this.

Modern Secular 'Pilgrimage'

Since the latter half of the twentieth century a new, secular kind of 'pilgrimage' has evolved among Jews. There are, for instance, collective tours of Israel by youth groups and others. Shaul Kelner, who deals with the socio-political rather than the religious aspects of these tours, places them in the general context of 'Homeland Tourism'. This is quite distinct from recreational tourism, since it involves preparation, a journey, usually with like-minded people, to a significant destination, and some kind of 'enlightenment' at the destination — Barack Obama's autobiographical *Dreams from my Father*, describing the search for roots in his ancestral Kenya, is an excellent illustration of the genre. As Seth Kunin puts it, 'The experience of the pilgrims is not meant to be one of visiting a museum. All the activities and elements of the pilgrimage emphasize the active and the experiential ... The pilgrim is meant to almost become a part of Israel rather than an observer of it.' (Kunin, p. 79; cf. Cohen, 1992:54)

The March of the Living

The March of the Living, an annual educational program established in 1988 and run in conjunction with the Israel Youth Hostel Association, brings students from all over the world to Poland. On Holocaust Memorial Day (*Yom Hashoah*) participants march silently from Auschwitz to Birkenau, the largest Nazi German concentration camp complex built during World War II. The March is followed by a visit to Israel.

The object of the march, as formulated in its organisers' Vision Statement (<http://www.motl.org/>), is to strengthen the Zionist awareness and identity of Jewish youth and impart knowledge about Judaism and Jewish culture. Diverse aspects of Jewish identity are explored, special emphasis being

⁷ Notes to *Orah Hayyim* 581:4.

⁸ Maharil *Sefer haMinhagim: Taanit* 18

placed on the topic of the Holocaust and Jewish life in Central Europe prior to WWII. The programme seeks to encourage young Jews to proceed to 'higher education in Israeli universities and eventually making Aliyah - the ultimate expression of Jewish unity. In their homes, participants become ambassadors among their siblings and friends'. 'The March of the Living is mainly aimed at Jewish high school students and its goals are both universal (to make them better human beings, to fight racism and injustice etc.) and in particular (to fight anti-semitism, to strengthen their Jewish identity and connection to Israel).'

When the marches commenced some 20 years ago I was, frankly, alarmed at the strident and defiant tone of the marchers, who seemed blind to the reality of Polish society around them, as if to say, 'You tried to destroy us, but look how strong and successful we are'. Others have voiced criticisms, and in recent years the March of the Living has attempted to broaden its agenda from focus on the Holocaust, and to include other programme content in the Poland portion of the trip. These elements include: celebrating Jewish life before the war, establishing dialogue with Polish students, meeting with Polish 'righteous among the nations' (i.e. those who saved Jews during the Holocaust), and connecting with the contemporary Polish Jewish community. In a private communication Kate Craddy, Director of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, tells me that a small percentage of groups now visit her museum, albeit briefly; in her view, the marches are a long way from achieving the kind of aims I have outlined. This view is borne out by Jonathan Ornstein, Director of the Jewish Community Council of Kraków, who complains that 'there is virtually no attempt to connect to today's Jewish community', and a refusal to acknowledge the immense changes in Polish society over the last 65 years.

All this is disappointing, especially at a time when many non-Jewish Poles are learning to value the Jewish contribution to their country and society. The marches could easily provide an opportunity for reconciliation and peace, and it is to be hoped that the modifications so far made will lead in this direction.

Pilgrimage as Metaphor

Pilgrimage as a metaphor for individual or collective spiritual progress is well attested in Jewish spiritual writing and practice, but can be touched on here only briefly.

Liturgy

The 'Counting of the Omer' (Leviticus 23:15-21), when fifty days are counted from Pesach to Shavuot, is commonly interpreted as a re-enactment of the journey of the Israelites in the desert from Egypt to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah; this is understood as a progress from the physical survival and national foundation accomplished by the Exodus to the spiritual formation of the nation at Sinai.

Likewise, the 40-day penitential period extending from the beginning of the month of Elul and culminating in the Day of Atonement marks the spiritual progress of each individual through penitence to hoped-for forgiveness. Other rituals too are interpreted in this vein.

Philosophy and Theology

Life in this world, in the view of many theologians and philosophers of religion, is a pilgrimage toward life everlasting; 'This world is an antechamber to the world to come; prepare in the antechamber so that you may enter the hall' (*Pirquei Avot* 4:24, in the name of Rabbi Jacob).

Jewish Neoplatonists such as the Egyptian physician Isaac Israeli (c. 855-955) developed the theme of the soul returning to its heavenly source, drawing on the pagan philosopher Proclus' description of the soul's ascent to the One as a three-stage process of self-purification, illumination and finally union with the One. For the philosophers, self-purification meant liberating oneself from the material world; for the rabbis, self-purification meant devoting oneself to Torah study and fulfilment of the commandments; 'Illumination' followed, and 'Union' was interpreted by Israeli as the stage at which the soul became pure intellect, or spirit, in closeness to God.⁹ In subsequent Jewish mysticism including kabbala these concepts have undergone innumerable metamorphoses, but the general idea of a spiritual journey back to the source is preserved.

Yehuda Halevi

No account of Jewish pilgrimage can omit reference to the greatest Hebrew poet of medieval times, Yehuda Halevi (c. 1070-1141), who combines in his poetry imagination, linguistic clarity and fluency, and deep personal religious experience. One of his best-loved poems, *Tziyyon ha-lo tish'ali*, written early in his lifetime in Toledo long before he made his way to the Holy Land, is read in the Synagogue on the fast day of 9 Ab as a *qina* (lament, or dirge), but in a recent work on the poet Joseph Yahalom

⁹ There is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether some later Jewish mystics adopted the notion of *unio mystica*; Israeli certainly did not.

has insisted that it is no dirge, but a poem of love and longing, modelled on the Arabic *Muwashshahat*, addressing the beloved 'Zion' (Jerusalem and the Land of Israel) in the name of her 'captives' who are bound to her in bonds of love:

Zion, will you not ask how your captives fare?
For they, the sheep of your flock, seek your welfare.
From west, east, north and south, from every side, far and near, receive peace!

... My desire is to pour out my soul [in prayer] in the place where the spirit of God poured forth
on your chosen ones

... O that I could wander in the places where God was revealed to your seers and your envoys!
Who will make me wings that I could wander from afar and my broken heart could move among
your ruins ...

Not until late in life was Halevi able to fulfil his wish and, motivated overwhelmingly by 'yearning for the living God' (Yahalom p. 107), make his way to Jerusalem, then under Crusader rule. His poetry and his journey both implement what must surely be the ideal of pilgrimage — the quest, motivated by love, to be in the Presence of God.

Conclusion

It is time to set down some conclusions.

Do Jews 'do' pilgrimages? If we take the word in a broad sense, undoubtedly yes; numerous examples have been given. So I was astonished when I checked my *Oxford English-Hebrew Dictionary* and found that the only translation offered for 'pilgrimage' was *aliya l'regel*. That is the classical expression for 'going up for the festival', i.e. the three-times-a-year pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Native Hebrew speakers tell me the expression is now commonly used in connection with the other events I have described; this is an anomaly, for visiting the sepulchres of holy men is neither *aliya* (going up, i.e. to Jerusalem, which is situated in the hills) nor is it a *regel* (one of the three biblical festivals). From a theological point of view there is a categorical difference between *aliya l'regel* and the other activities; this was clearly perceived by the Sages of the Talmud and is presumably why they did not endorse other forms of pilgrimage.

We have four categories, each with its distinctive objectives and relationship to peace:

Aliya l'Regel, the classical biblical pilgrimage, remains the model though not currently in operation. Its objective is to rejoice in the Presence of God, and it promotes the ideal of peace first by stressing the unity of the Tribes of Israel, and then by welcoming strangers from all nations.

Love of Zion, so powerfully expressed by Yehuda Halevi, has been translated by some into a secular political programme. From the religious point of view it shares with *aliya l'regel* the objective of being in the Presence of God, but rather than an intense occasional experience it seeks constant holiness in daily life. Theologians such as Abraham Isaac Kook (1860-1935) have sought to set this in a universal context, with the attainment of world peace before God as its ultimate objective.

Praying at sepulchres of prophets and saints is, from a Jewish theological perspective, an altogether more questionable activity. Many hold that it is not acceptable to ask the dead to intercede. But if the purpose of visiting is simply to ask God to have mercy on us for the sake of the departed, surely we could do that without visiting their graves? In reality, such visits achieve other, quite different, ends. For instance, people who visit the graves of Hasidic Rebbes feel a heightened spirituality and a firmer identity, and derive inspiration from the Rebbes as role models. None of this has any obvious bearing on the issue of peace beyond the immediate circles concerned.

Then we have the various forms of secular 'pilgrimage'. These are sometimes hijacked for narrow political or 'educational' purposes, but if conducted with proper consideration can offer opportunities for reconciliation between Jews and others and in that way create paths to peace.

All that I have said concerns specifically Jewish 'pilgrimages', but we should not overlook the fact that many Jews the world over are enthusiastic participants in marches, pilgrimages and other forms of collective activity that bring people of all faiths together in the pursuit of peace, justice, a sustainable environment and a better world.

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Preprint