

# From a Partition to a Barrier

## • • • *The Separation of Men and Women in Israel's Jewish Holy Places*

Doron Bar

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines gender separation at Jewish holy sites in the State of Israel. From a rare and sporadic phenomenon just a few decades ago, gender separation at sacred sites has become normative. Segregation is in part directed 'from above' by the State of Israel's various religious arms, which fund, organize, and oversee the practice. But it also arises 'from below' as a result of the activity of individuals and Haredi groups—both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi—leading to the imposition of increasingly stringent modesty demands on Jewish Israeli women. Gender separation is presented as a religious obligation, and state authorities accept this extreme interpretation as if it represented a monolithic, unchanging religious position.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, gender separation, Haredization, holy places, pilgrimage, Western Wall

On Lag BaOmer (30 April) 2021, a terrible catastrophe occurred in Meron, a Jewish holy site located in northern Israel. Forty-five people, all men, lost their lives. The tragedy took place as crowds thronged to exit the site at the end of the annual pilgrimage event, which draws hundreds of thousands of worshippers. Many were injured and others trampled to death as a result of the great congestion created in the late hours of the night. After the fact, it became clear that the narrow lane in which the catastrophe took place, the 'Mehadrin path,' had been illegally established twenty years earlier in order to allow men to avoid contact with the women who also came to the sacred site. The path is part of an extensive series of fences, passages, and bridges that were built over the years at the gravesite of Shimon bar



Yochai in order to separate men from women. The gender barrier in Meron reflects the gender separation that exists today in many of the Jewish holy places in the State of Israel, where women pray separately from men.

While there is no complete list of all of Israel's Jewish holy sites, it appears that there are hundreds of pilgrimage sites that attract millions of visitors each year. The vast majority of sacred sites are gravesites of kings, prophets, and sages who are mentioned in traditional Jewish writings—the Bible, the Mishna, and the Talmud. Many of these places, some one hundred and thirty of them, are recognized by the National Center for the Development of Holy Places, a governmental body established by the State of Israel to manage and care for Jewish holy sites. In addition, there are also some hundreds of sages' and rabbis' tombs that have been dedicated in recent generations by private individuals or religious-Haredi organizations and associations. These can be added to the official register of Jewish holy places when they become important pilgrimage sites (Bar 2021; Bar 2023).

At many Jewish holy sites—both the official ones that are overseen by the state and the unofficial ones—women and men pray in complete separation. This division becomes more pronounced when annual celebrations, or *hilulot*, and other mass events take place at the sites—holidays, festivals, fast days, and prayers of thanks. The rigorousness of gender separation has intensified, as has the demand to be meticulous about women's 'modesty.' Signs direct visitors to their separate paths and gates; sidewalks and stairways lead worshippers to a sacred venue that is always split in two by a partition.

A historical perspective on Jewish holy sites in the Land of Israel demonstrates that this is a new phenomenon, one that began only in the past generation or two. Until a few decades ago, there was no separation at all between the sexes, and women and men prayed at holy sites together, offering supplications shoulder to shoulder.

The goal of this article, which is based on archival sources, photographs, websites, reports, newspapers, and visits to Jewish holy sites, is to examine gender separation at Jewish holy sites in the State of Israel, a phenomenon that is tied to the process of radicalization that Haredi society is undergoing. I show that the Haredization of the sacred sites is in part directed 'from above' by the State of Israel's various religious arms, which fund, organize, and oversee gender separation. At the same time, gender division also arises 'from below' as a result of the activity of individuals and both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Haredi groups, which leads to the imposition of increasingly rigorous modesty demands on Jewish Israeli women.

Gender separation and the ways different societies prevent women from visiting specific places has attracted academic attention in recent years (Arjmand 2017; Salarvandian et al. 2020; for Israel, see Allon 2013;

Tirosh 2020). The cases examined in this article dramatize the clash between liberal-universalist values of gender equality and the reality of particularistic, private, and communal religious values that promote gender separation and the exclusion of women. As such, they can serve as both a test case and a basis for comparison between the situation in Israel and circumstances at other holy sites around the world.

## **Separation between Men and Women at Holy Sites: A Global Perspective**

Women make up a large proportion of pilgrims to holy sites (on the connection between women and religion, see Sharma 1994; Yazbeck Haddad and Banks Findly 1985; on women and pilgrimage, see Werbner 2010), despite the fact that these spaces are often masculine in character and function. The masculinity of holy sites is expressed in the fact that, for the most part, they are operated by men, who also serve as their religious functionaries, thus shaping their physical layout and forms of worship (on religions in which women are both the majority of leaders and the majority of participants, see Sered 1994). Men set the codes of behavior in most holy sites (including, oftentimes, rules that restrict female pilgrims). Women, in contrast, are usually passive visitors with no role in shaping the ritual (Gonzalez-Paz 2016).

The masculinity of the holy sites ostensibly serves values of modesty, making it possible for people of both genders to visit the holy site while avoiding contact with one another and preventing mutual offense to religious beliefs and feelings. But one can argue that the masculine management of holy sites and the (at least partial) exclusion of women is undertaken without their consent and without due consideration of their desires and feelings (Rieder-Indursky 2020).<sup>1</sup> The exclusion of women from holy places at times leads them to visit 'marginal,' non-institutionalized holy sites where men's control is relatively insignificant and the rules are less stringent. There they can develop independent rituals that suit them (Bar 2021; Ouguir 2020: 90–112; Stadler 2015).

Among many of the world's religions, there is a propensity toward gender separation in prayer spaces. Some Jewish communities around the world divide their synagogues between men and women, with the latter inhabiting a separate space known as the 'women's section.' In mosques, women usually sit separately and at a distance from men during prayers (Disli 2019; Katz 2014; Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2002; Nyhagen 2019; Reda 2004). And the same holds for some historic and contemporary Christian communities (Aston 1990). The picture is different when it comes

to holy sites. In some religious traditions, sacred spaces and holy sites like monasteries are off-limits to women (Naoko 2017; on the ban on women's entry to Mt. Fuji, see Fumiko 2005; on the prohibition on women entering Mt. Athos in Greece, see Talbot 1996). But in the main, women and men tend to visit and pray at sacred places together. Some religions have even made joint pilgrimage an ideal—for example, the Bahai religion promotes complete equality between genders in general, and specifically with regard to visiting important sites (Maneck 1994). Similarly, many Christian sects encourage joint visits to holy places, such as sites of miracles and revelations, churches, and baptism sites, and do not require separation between believers. These religious leaders see value in the connection between the sexes and encourage shared seating, eating, and prayer.

The Qur'an may not expressly require gender segregation. Nonetheless, tradition in many Muslim societies prohibits physical-social interaction between men and women who are not acquainted with one another. Gender separation in many Muslim countries, then, is backed by religious law. Nonetheless, woman and men together perform the Hajj and Umrah, the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina and the series of religious ceremonies that take place there, and especially the Tawaf ceremony of circling the Kaaba. As at other Muslim holy places, there are no physical barriers dividing the genders (Buitelar 2010).

The lack of gender segregation is even more evident when it comes to Eastern religions, which do not physically separate worshippers in the holy temples. Women usually visit Hindu and Buddhist temples in India freely and with no restrictions,<sup>2</sup> and Sikh men and women jointly visit their holy places, most prominently the Sri Harmandir Sahib Temple (Sikh Golden Temple) in Amritsar, India (Jutla 2016).

## **Partition in the History of Jewish Sacred Sites in Israel**

Information about the ancient history of the Jewish holy sites in the State of Israel is partial at best. We do not know enough about the existence or status of the holy sites in the hundreds of years that followed the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem when the land was ruled by the Roman and Byzantine Empires and later the Muslims, and we have no information about the place of women in ritual during those periods (Reiner 2012).

It is only from the eleventh century, near the end of the early Muslim period and on the eve of the Crusader conquest of the Holy Land, that historical testimony about the existence of Jewish pilgrimage sites begins to grow (Frenkel 2011). The Crusader period (the twelfth and thirteen

centuries CE) is relatively rife with descriptions of Jewish pilgrims' travels as they visited the Land of Israel, attesting to the existence of a Jewish sacred space (Reiner 1999). Later on, when the Crusaders were pushed out of the land and Muslim rule was cemented there, an extensive array of Jewish holy spaces crystallized throughout the land (Reiner 2002). These sacred sites, which were often Muslim-owned and shared by Muslims and Jews, served the local Jewish population in the Land of Israel as well as Jewish pilgrims from Islamic countries and Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities abroad (Meri 2002). Jerusalem served as a focal point of pilgrimage and stood out because a significant part of the pilgrimage ritual involved crying over the destroyed Temple and yearning for its rebuilding (Reiner 2002). The eastern Galilee was particularly prominent, with many tombs of *tannaim* and *amoraim* being discovered and sanctified in the sixteenth century (Levin 2016).

It was not only that Jews and Muslims often shared these holy spaces and prayed in them alongside one another but also that the Jews apparently influenced and were influenced by the Muslims who would come—men and women alike—to the tombs of their saints (Yazbak 2011). Indeed, from the sixteenth century onward, we find more descriptions of women's presence in the holy places and of women's prayers there, but little indication of gender segregation (Eisenstein 1926: 138, 240; Yaari 1976: 609). It appears that separation took place only rarely, for example, on days of mass pilgrimage. During the *hilula*—celebration—of Lag BaOmer in Meron, men prayed before Shimon bar Yochai's tombstone while women had to suffice with praying in a nearby room. They were thus excluded from the central arena of the ritual.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with improvements in transportation and many geopolitical changes taking place in the eastern Mediterranean basin, Jewish pilgrimage to the Land of Israel increased significantly, a trend that grew with the end of World War I and the consolidation of British rule. This was a period of flourishing and development for Jewish holy sites (Goren 2017), and descriptions of sacred spaces and testimonies about women's presence and customs proliferated. One of the most prominent sites in this regard was Rachel's Tomb, a site whose name was known far and wide in the Jewish world. Rachel's tragic biblical story was a source of identification that attracted many women (Shilo 2005: 12–33). From photographs of the tomb, as well as photographs of other holy sites at that time, it is clear that there was no physical separation at all between men and women who prayed alongside one another.

This was true of the Western Wall as well, the most prominent Jewish holy site at the time. Historical sources, primarily photographs, indicate that in the late Ottoman period (1799–1917), the Western Wall attracted

many women, who prayed next to the men and with no partition (Shai 2011: 94–101). This phenomenon characterized the British Mandate period as well (1917–1948), a time when the Western Wall became the focus of a national disagreement between Jews and Muslims. During these years, various Jewish agents attempted to erect a partition at the heart of the plaza, a reality that reflected their desire to separate the genders during holidays and mass gatherings; however, the partition was forbidden by the Mandate authorities (Triwaks 1931: 57).

The lack of separation at the holy sites remained following the establishment of the State of Israel and with the founding of the Ministry of Religions, which was charged, *inter alia*, with the development of sacred spaces. At that time, the Land of Israel was divided and access to many of the Jewish holy sites located on the eastern side of the armistice line with Jordan was barred. Jews' inability to reach the Western Wall, Rachel's Tomb, and the Cave of the Patriarchs led to the development of an alternative set of holy sites, none of which contained a partition between men and women (Bar 2007: 129–149, 2008). This phenomenon was still fairly rare in general in Israeli public space, though at times supporters of gender separation on beaches or at swimming pools voiced their opinions.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Six-Day War, the Western Wall, and the Prayer Plaza's Partition**

The most important holy site in the State of Israel is the Western Wall, the legendary remains of the Jewish Temple that was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE. The partition that separates the two sexes, which stands today at the heart of the Western Wall, was erected in July 1967, a few weeks after the end of the Six-Day War. The Western Wall, with its partition, was the first holy site in the State of Israel in which men and women were separated from one another, a significant precedent and turning point in the process of gender segregation at Israel's sacred sites.

In the late Ottoman and Mandate periods there was no physical separation at the Western Wall. In the nineteen years during which Jerusalem was partitioned, between 1948 and 1967, Israeli Jews were not able to visit the Western Wall freely, a reality that changed suddenly with the Six-Day War and the reunification of the city's two halves. The creation of a large prayer plaza and the unprecedented Israeli control over it required that the state appoint a body to be responsible for the Western Wall and its religious arrangements (Cohen-Hattab and Bar 2020). Following Prime Minister Levi Eshkol's decision that "arrangements near the Western Wall should be made by the chief rabbis,"<sup>4</sup> responsibility for the site was

transferred to the Ministry of Religions. The Minister of Religions, with the encouragement of the chief rabbinate, changed the custom that had prevailed before 1948 and imposed modesty rules that were common at Orthodox synagogues in the Western Wall plaza. This was possible using the Protection of Holy Places Law, enacted in late June 1967, which determined that the Minister of Religions was responsible for carrying out the law and authorized to issue decrees to ensure its execution.<sup>5</sup>

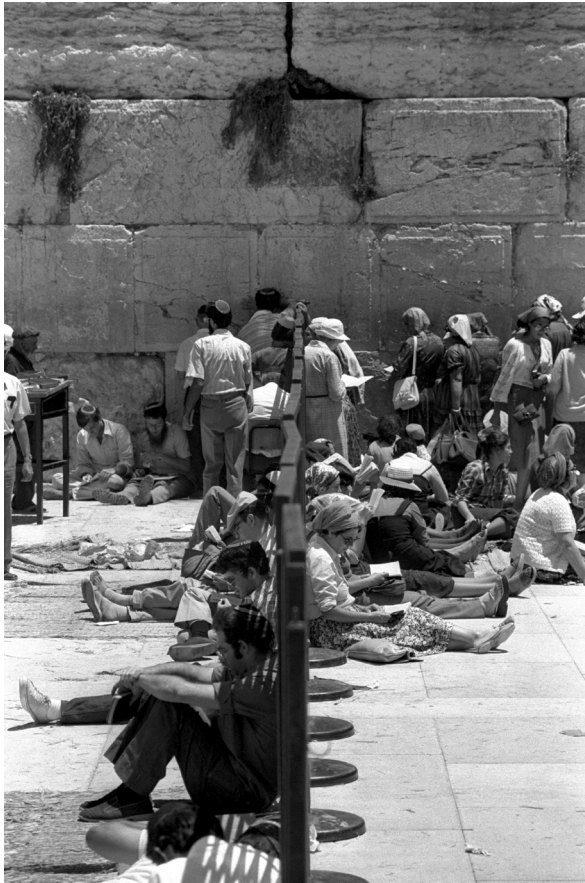
These decrees gave legal standing to the arrangements at the Western Wall in the weeks following the war and allowed the religious establishment to erect a partition in the center of the plaza in mid-July 1967. The temporary partition quickly became permanent, dividing the prayer plaza into a larger area for men and a more limited area for women. Inspectors from the Ministry of Religions were positioned at the entrance to enforce gender separation, ‘modest’ attire, and a head covering for men.

The new reality at the Western Wall plaza aroused a vigorous internal debate in Israeli society about who had the right to determine religious behavioral rules at the site. Protesters spoke out against gender segregation and demanded that the partition be removed. Yaakov Yanai, the director of Israel’s national parks authority, was one of the people who protested: “Since when has the Wall become a place that only religious people visit? Why do they believe that only Jews come to the Wall to pray? And the secular people in Israel—why will they be forced to stand next to the Wall without their wives? And what will someone do if he wants to stand at the Wall and commune with himself—quietly, without prayer?” (Rimon 1967). A writer in *Ha’aretz* agreed: “And who decided that the Western Wall has only a religious nature? Is it not a national historical remnant? . . . In many circles in the nation today a partition between men and women is unacceptable and intolerable” (Elitzur 1967).

The Minister of Religions, as the representative of the religious establishment, responded to Yanai and other critics by noting that the law granted him the authority to determine which sites were sacred and which were historic (and thus had no need for gender segregation), and that the Western Wall was a holy site for Jews before it became a historical site (on the tension between historic and sacred sites, see Bar 2018).<sup>6</sup> He determined that the arrangements at Jewish holy sites, including the separation between women and men, were a halakhic issue under the authority of the chief rabbis.<sup>7</sup> The Minister of Religions even claimed that because men and women were separated during the time of the Temple, that separation must be maintained at the Western Wall, the [allegedly] Temple’s remains.<sup>8</sup> Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Unterman agreed that “certainly a partition between men and women is necessary as this is the nature of our prayer houses, which do not imitate the ways of the nations, and that cannot be

changed.”<sup>9</sup> Here the chief rabbi proposed using at the Western Wall the same customs that prevailed in synagogues, where some Jewish communities separated men from women (on the history of the custom in ancient times and later on in Jewish history, see Golinkin 2012: 179–204).

And so, in late 1967, despite the fact that the Western Wall had not served as a synagogue before, gender segregation was established there, and it has remained until today. The protests voiced against gender segregation in the early years after the war faded over time. The religious-Haredi hold on the place became more entrenched and gender separation became one of the site’s most noticeable identifying marks. Later on, in the 1970s, the modesty requirements spread to other parts of the plaza.



**FIGURE 1.** Men and Women in lamentation of the Ninth of Av (Tisha Be'av) 1979 at the Western Wall (Photograph by Chanania Herman. The National Photo Collection)



Separate entrances were created and the partition grew into an imposing physical barrier (Shapira Rosenberg 2010: 11–12). In the late 1980s, the Western Wall became the site of a unique struggle when its religious customs were challenged for the first time. Since 1988, a group known as the Women of the Wall has continually challenged the gender segregation that was imposed after 1967, struggling for freedom of worship in the prayer plaza as well as the rights of members of the Conservative and Reform Movements to hold mixed prayers (Ben Shitrit 2021; Cohen-Hattab and Bar 2020: 148–193; Jobani and Perez 2017; Reiter 2016).

### **Gender Segregation at Sacred Jewish Sites: Top Down and Bottom Up**

Gender segregation characterizes many of the Jewish holy sites in the State of Israel today, whether these are central and established like the tomb of Shimon bar Yochai in Meron, Rachel's Tomb, the tomb of Jonathan ben Uzziel in Amuka, or sacred sites with local or sectoral meaning, such as the tomb of Avdimi in Haifa, the tomb of tzaddik Eliezer Shlomo Schick (Mohorosh), in Yavne'el, and the tombs of the rebbes Avraham Mordechai Alter and his son Pinchas Menachem Alter of Gur in Jerusalem. Each of these places has a partition to divide women from men or an allotted women's section.

It is difficult to determine when this process began, how it spread, and who initiated the practice of gender separation. In contrast with the well-documented case of the Western Wall, the spread of gender segregation at other Jewish holy sites is not recorded in documents, newspapers, or other sources. The sources that best enable us to observe the establishment and expansion of separation at these sites are photographs, from which we can learn about the past and observe how the division between men and women has become more prominent in recent years.

From photographs of many sacred sites, including the tomb of the prophet Samuel near Jerusalem, the tomb of Maimonides in Tiberias, the tomb of Rabban Gamliel in Yavne, David's Tomb on Mount Zion, and the Tomb of Baba Sali in Netivot, it appears that prior to the 1980s and 1990s there was no separation at all between men and women who prayed side by side. In contrast, since then, many partitions have been erected at holy sites.

One extraordinary feature of sacred sites in the State of Israel is that some of them are officially managed by the country's Ministry of Religions. Unlike in other countries, where sacred sites belong to religious orders, associations, religious trusts (known as *hekdeshim* in Israel), and

other private organizations, in Israel, the National Center for the Development of Holy Places is responsible for the most prominent Jewish holy sites (Bar 2018). This governmental body, an arm of the Ministry of Religions (today the Ministry of Religious Services), “preserves, maintains, and operates nearly 130 sites that have been recognized as holy to the Jewish nation for generations” and is responsible not only for their development but also for “enforcing order at the holy site” (NCDHP n.d.).

This definition allows the Ministry of Religious Services, a body that has been run since the founding of the state almost continuously by the religious and Orthodox parties, with their total male dominance, to define the agenda at Jewish holy sites and make determinations about their regulations and customs. The fact that men create policy and norms in bodies that have non-Orthodox representation is what leads to the gender segregation at the holy sites. The examples of this phenomenon are abundant and are expressed in many of the sites run by the center.

That is what happened, for example, at Maimonides’ tomb, under the auspices of the same body. In early photographs of the tomb, it is clear that the sacred site is open for visits from men and women alike with no partition at all, but in the early years of the twenty-first century it was divided by a partition which became permanent in 2017, when the site underwent renovations at the initiative and funding of the National Center for the Development of Holy Places and various governmental bodies. Men were given a wider space and a staircase was built that was intended for women only (Blau 2018).

A similar process took place at the tomb of Samuel the prophet, a place that is also a national park. The Nature and Parks Authority, a governmental body entrusted with preserving the State of Israel’s nature and heritage, which is responsible for the site, took an active role in instituting the gender segregation there. As part of the sacred site’s development, a partition was erected to divide men from women. Separate entrances to the crypt were created, and the tomb space is divided (Gimon Solomon 2013).

An additional holy site in which gender separation was imposed is David’s Tomb in Jerusalem. Here, too, no gender separation was in place and men and women prayed together facing the gravesite. In 2005, at the initiative of the National Center for the Development of Holy Places, men and women (both Israelis and tourists) were separated from one another. The hall leading into the tomb and the space of the tomb itself were divided in two using a partition and the men were even allotted a special prayer room (Arutz 7 2005).

These cases and others indicate that various authorities in the State of Israel—governmental ministries, different branches of government, regulatory bodies, municipalities, and a variety of regional councils—



**FIGURE 2.** Men's section next to David's Tomb, Mount Zion (Photograph by Doron Bar)

involved in the physical development of the holy sites and their imposed gender separation.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of cases in which men—usually via Haredi associations and non-profit organizations, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi—initiate the ‘revelation,’ the creation and development of holy sites and, at the same time, physically divide men from women. These men are the ones who erect fences and signs in holy sites that impose gender segregation, sometimes in the early stages of ‘discovering’ the holy site and developing it in advance of it being opened to worshippers.

This Haredization of holy sites is led by Haredi-Hasidic groups whose involvement in the development of Jewish holy space has increased greatly in the past generation, as well as by non-profits and groups from Middle Eastern, North African, or Balkan extraction. The religious moderation at the sites has been exchanged in recent years for religious extremism that is expressed, inter alia, in cultivating gender segregation at holy places (see Brown 2017: 108–157; Leon 2010: 128–131).

In contrast, an example of a process of separation ‘from below’ is the gravesite of the Baba Sali (Israel Abuhatzzeira) in Netivot, in the western

Negev, a site that is run by the Baba Sali Memorial Fund. Israel Abuhatzzeira passed away in 1984 and was buried in the Netivot cemetery. Because of his impressive standing and the aura of sanctity that characterized him during his life, his family built a prominent structure above his grave, and soon the gravesite became one of Israel's most popular sites of worship, drawing crowds of thousands. The Baba Sali Memorial Fund restored the site in 2005, and since then women and men have been separated using gates and a partition that was erected within the space (Shadar 2009). The fact that Israel Abuhatzzeira's son and successor, the Baba Baruch, was supported by the Shas Orthodox political party enabled him to receive state funds that were directed to the development of his father's tomb and the cemetery around it.

Another case where to borders between 'above' and 'below' in the development of the Jewish sacred space and the division of men and women at holy sites are not clear is the development of the grave of Rachel, wife of Rabbi Akiva, in Tiberias, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Yaari 1976: 157). In 1994, Rabbi Raphael Cohen, a member of Tiberias's council and chairman of the Bnei Mordechai non-profit organization, began to develop the partially destroyed tomb and erected a monument in the center that separated men from women. The tomb, formally a Muslim pilgrimage site associated with Sitt Sukayna, great-granddaughter of Mohammad, prophet of Islam, became a Jewish religious attraction that drew believers from all over the State of Israel, many of them women who came because of the merits for marriage that were attributed to Rachel (Luz 2019). Cohen used the partition he positioned in the heart of the ancient domed building to canonize and elevate the centrality of his site, flag it as Jewish, and raise its prestige against many other Jewish holy places in Tiberias and its vicinity that were not yet divided by gender. At first, Cohen acted alone in his attempt to 'redeem' the 'ancient' Muslim tomb and Judaize it. Very quickly, with his political ties in municipal and national politics, he gained support from the Ministry of Religions and Shas MKs, who pushed to support and finance his activity.<sup>10</sup>

A similar process of genderizing took place at the compound of the tomb of Rabbi Gedalia Moshe Goldman, the Rebbe of Zvhil, who died in 1949 and was buried in the Sheikh Badr Cemetery, located today behind the Supreme Court in Jerusalem. For many years, the rabbi's tomb drew little attention, serving as a prayer destination for the members of a small Hasidic group. But in 2008, a significant turning point came for the cemetery, and the place was suddenly on the Haredi pilgrimage map. This was similar to other cases in Israel in which Jewish holy sites were 'redeemed' from below at private initiative, often as a result of a reported dream or revelation (Bilu 1998). The myth of sanctity that was successfully cultivated



**FIGURE 3.** Tomb of Rabbi Gedalia Moshe Goldman, the Rebbe of Zvhil with a barrier separating men and women (Photograph by Doron Bar)

at the place stated that those who visited the sacred grave on successive Mondays, Thursdays, and Mondays (the days of Torah reading at the synagogue) would receive many merits. The pilgrimage to the grave of the rebbe became massive and cross-sectoral and hundreds of visitors, many of them female pilgrims, arrive at the cemetery on the central pilgrimage days, Mondays and Thursdays. Visits are separate, with an infrastructure of pathways and fences built at the site. Barriers and fences were placed around the sacred tomb at a very early stage of its development. These were meant to determine the custom and arrangement of space and claim ownership over the site. Although the rebbe's tomb is not yet supervised by the National Center for the Development of Holy Places, it seems that its growing popularity will soon lead the center to adopt it, sponsor physical changes there, and formalize gender separation.

## The Effect of the Gender Segregation Process on Jewish Holy Sites in the Diaspora

In the past generation, the tendency of Jewish believers (both in Israel and the Diaspora) to visit tombs of *tzaddikim* in Morocco, Poland, Tunisia, Ukraine, and the United States has greatly increased (Deshen 1997; Gitlitz and Davidson 2006; Sekkat 2019). If in the more distant past, the historical sacred sites in the Land of Israel and around it enjoyed exclusivity (Ben Yaakov 1974), in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, new sites developed in other places (Assaf 1997: 432–434; Gellman et al. 2018; Horowitz 1999; Raspe 2011; Shoham-Steiner 2004). This took place in, among others, a number of lands in North Africa, such as Morocco and Tunisia, and Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland; in the latter, Hasidic communities sanctified tombs that became pilgrimage destinations. A male majority characterized these religious gatherings, but it is clear that women prayed alongside the men with no physical barrier.

The great waves of immigration of the nineteenth century and the horrific aftermath of the Holocaust led to the emptying of the area from its Jewish population, and many of the sacred tombs were left with no believers. The same happened in North Africa, where Jewish emigration in the second half of the twentieth century led to the abandonment of cemeteries and their gravesites.

But in the most recent generation or two, a ‘return to [one’s] roots’ is evident, and the decentralization of Jewish sacred space has grown. Jewish North Americans not only visit sages’ graves there, but also travel to visit the graves of rabbis and rebbes in Eastern Europe (Hager 2019; Wodziński 2018: figure 9.2.1). French Jews conduct heritage trips to Morocco and Tunisia and visit graves there (Levy 1997), and Chabad Hasidim from Israel fly to the United States to visit the grave of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Women also take part in this widespread movement (see *And I* 2013–2014).

This phenomenon is a result of the relative ease of movement from place to place, the decline in prices for flights that makes it possible for more potential visitors to fund these trips, and primarily the many demographic changes that have characterized the Jewish world in recent generations. The strengthening of Jewish communities around the world and the rise in the status of Hasidic communities in Israel and other places in the Diaspora buttress this phenomenon. This “return to [one’s] roots movement” is noticeable in two areas in particular, Morocco and Eastern Europe. There, and in particular since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, a number of prominent sages’ tombs have become ‘ecumenical,’ and they

draw believers from all communities (including those from the Middle East, North Africa, and Balkan countries).

Aside from the tomb of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav in Uman (Marchenko 2014; Resenfeld 2014), the tombs of the Baal Shem Tov from Medzhybizh (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the founder of Hasidism) and Rabbi Levi Yitzvhak of Berditchev (all three in Ukraine), and the tomb of Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum in Lizhensk (in Poland) also draw large crowds. In Eastern Europe, there are many dozens of tombs, serving as a lodestone for members of specific Hasidic dynasties such as Sadigura, Sanz, Vizhnitz, Chabad, Slonim, and Belz (Ferziger 2011). The solidification of this movement is expressed in the visits made by individuals and organized groups, mostly of men, to these cemeteries, in the widespread restoration of destroyed grave markers, and in the reconstruction above other gravestones that have been found in recent years, at great effort (Marchenko 2014).

The building of the markers, especially the popular ones that draw large, mixed crowds, is often accompanied by gender separation, with the space at the tomb being divided between women and men or, alternatively, a women's section built nearby. In 2012, for example, the women's section was established at Rabbi Nachman of Uman's tomb, where women who come to the town can pray. But four times a year, in preparation for the great waves of pilgrimage when tens of thousands of men come, the women's right to pray there is revoked (Ifergen 2019). A women's section was also established at the tomb of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad dynasty. The tomb's surroundings, located in the Ukrainian town of Hadiach, were purchased by the Chasdei Yosef organization, and they led the construction of the The Ohel of Rabbeinu Hakadosh the Baal Hatanya in 2003, prepared it for masses of visitors, and established the women's section above the tomb. At Rabbi Elimelech Weisblum's tomb in Leżajsk (Lizhensk), women usually stay in a side room, but sometimes the main hall is separated by a curtain (Traczewska 2018: 136). The Ohalei Tzadikim association that runs the compound of the Baal Shem Tov of Medzhybizh's tomb in Ukraine plans to redesign the surroundings. Within the changes, a women's section will be built with a separate entrance (Uman 2019).

In Morocco, in contrast, there is no gender separation at tombs, which have been visited in recent years by many groups of pilgrims, at times ones with a majority of females (Sekat 2019). In contrast with pilgrimage to rebbe's graves, the *ziyarat*, as visits to sages' tombs are known in Morocco, has always had a familial and communal nature, and women hold a significant and central role.<sup>11</sup> Visiting the graves of these sages made it possible for women to express their religious faith and devotion in a relatively equal way and to take part in the worship of the righteous

(Bilu 2009: 25–26). The religious proximity between Jews and Muslims and the replication of the joint pilgrimage custom to sages' tombs also added to this (Mernissi 1977). These historical elements, as well as the religious nature of the Jewish community in Morocco today, have a great influence on the pilgrimage to tombs of *tzaddikim* in Morocco. The visit to them is sectoral, and many pilgrims are from the second and third generations of immigrants who came to the State of Israel or France in the 1950s and 1960s. These visitors see no need to separate the genders; pilgrimage is generally conducted mixed, with no separation between men and women.

## Conclusion and Discussion

One of the most noticeable religious phenomena in the State of Israel is the thronging of hundreds of thousands of people to visit Jewish religious sites (Bar 2021). From a social-religious phenomenon that was relatively marginal, visits to the tombs of *tzaddikim* have in recent years become one of the most prominent religious rituals.

The noticeable growth in veneration of *tzaddikim* is closely bound up with the religious and Haredi population growth in the State of Israel, and it has also had a noticeable influence on the nature of traditional pilgrimage. The growing involvement of Sephardic rabbis, of associations and non-profits of the Middle Eastern, North African, and Balkan communities as well as Hasidic groups in developing Jewish sacred space led to a noticeable change in the nature of pilgrimage and the appearance of the holy sites. If in the past pilgrimage to graves of *tzaddikim* was celebrated in popular fashion and the gathering there was often accompanied by eating joint family meals near the sacred site and dancing and singing, this tradition has disappeared over the years. From colorful, familial fairs (like the Lag BaOmer *hilula* in Meron) many of the pilgrimages have become restrained, conservative religious events in which stringent halakhic rules are kept and the presence of women has dramatically waned. One prominent expression of the Haredization of Jewish holy sites is the gender separation that has characterized many of them in recent years. Gender separation is now a symbol of the site's 'Kashruth,' its fitness in accordance with Jewish 'law.'

This separation is found in sites where women's presence is relatively dominant, and therefore 'disturbs' male worshippers who feel they need to separate themselves from women. Peripheral and less popular holy sites are left in their 'natural' condition with no partition. When, on rare occasions, women attend gatherings, they will usually stand on the side, detached from the praying men.



This is not a deeply rooted, historical phenomenon within Jewish tradition, but rather a new phenomenon in the chronicles of the Jewish sacred sites, only one or two generations old, that is intensifying before our eyes. From an arbitrary and unusual phenomenon until a few decades ago, the separation between genders in sacred sites has become normative. Signs for men and women, barriers, passageways, and double stairways that separate male and female worshippers and lead them to the sacred tomb whose surroundings are also divided by a high partition have become the norm. The sacred space allotted to women is always smaller than that allotted to men, one more explicit manifestation of the unequal conditions of men and women in holy sites. There is no symmetry between men and women in public sites at holy places.

It is the official authorities of the State of Israel—ministries, municipalities, and regional councils—that fund and advance the erection of fences, stairs, and gates there as well as the various religious organizations and non-profits that promote the separation in many other places. When the establishment of partitions comes from ‘below,’ they are oftentimes made by heaping barriers, garbage cans, fences, and railings. When the state, with its various branches, is involved in the gender segregation, it is oftentimes a planned, designed partition. The outcome of this process, whether it comes from ‘above’ or from ‘below,’ is the evolution of many of the Jewish holy sites into spaces that are entirely gender segregated. The separation is presented as being a religious obligation, and the state authorities accept this extreme position as representing the monolithic, unchanging religious position.

Men are, with no exceptions, the managers of the totality of non-profits, centers, and ministries that develop and care for holy sites. Men are the ones who run the religious activity at a holy site and determine the behavioral rules and religious norms that are expressed in the suppression of the women. This activity is done in order to protect the ‘authenticity’ of the Jewish holy sites and the ‘ancient’ customs taking place there. This division, which is based on conservative halakhic conceptions, is meant first and foremost to protect the man from the woman, whose sexuality is perceived by those who visit the holy sites as an impediment. The verse in Psalms that says that “All glorious is the king’s daughter within the palace” (Ps. 45:14) is used to justify the modesty demanded of women that can be achieved by building physical barriers at holy sites (Radai 2013; Rimalt 2003).

The exclusion of women from Israeli space is growing. It characterizes primarily the settlements and neighborhoods in which the Haredi population lives and is active. These days, the planning of these places takes modesty into consideration, with all public buildings created separate.

But in recent years this trend is spilling into general Israeli public space and is expressed in a variety of ways: *Mehadrin* (enhanced or stringent) bus lines, where women sit in the back of the bus (Rimalt 2012; Triger 2013); various educational institutions, including within Israel's academy, that hold separate studies (Feldman 2021; Kashti 2021); and cultural events that are held with separation (Kashti 2018). Modesty rules are imposed on female soldiers serving in various units in Israel's army (Yefet 2016); and all of this is supplemented by the regular and widespread defacing of images of women on billboards (Yalon 2020). These phenomena, despite having become more widespread in recent years, are not accepted, and a public debate about them—and sometimes even a legal one—is taking place in Israel.

In contrast, gender separation at holy sites, the most prominent Israeli public space in which segregation takes place, has been accepted with almost no challenge, not on the part of the secular public in Israel and not on the part of the traditional population. The majority of Israelis feel that Jewish holy places belong to the Orthodox, allegedly the historical and authentic 'owners' and 'keepers' of the sacred space. The partition, which cropped up a few decades ago in a handful of holy sites and whose primary goal was to prevent movement from side to side, has today become a fixed element and constitutes a barrier that also prevents exchanging a glance or viewing the other side.

This is a relatively short 'historical' process, only a few decades old, in which the norm of splitting men and women has become entrenched. The partition at the Western Wall becoming normative; the establishment of the National Center for the Development of Holy Places; the appointment of a Haredi rabbi in charge of holy sites; the increase in political power of the Haredi Ashkenazi and Sephardic parties, which have no female representation (Rieder-Indursky 2018); and the extended control of Haredi agents in the Ministry of Religions have all dramatically affected the expansion and entrenchment of the gender segregation at holy sites. The fact that the prevailing perception in Israeli public opinion is that the holy sites 'belong' to the religious-Haredi community and the fact that the Jewish religious rituals are a taboo that the courts will not take up (Lahav 2013) are what make possible and engrain the gender segregation that prevails today.

**DORON BAR** is Professor of Land of Israel Studies at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. He researches Jewish holy places in the State of Israel and the development of national holy sites. His recent books include *Landscape and Ideology: The Reinterment of Renowned Jews in the Land of Israel 1904–1967*; *The Western Wall: The Dispute over Israel’s Holiest Site 1967–2000* (with Kobi Cohen-Hattab); and *Yad Vashem: The Challenge of Commemorating the Holocaust in Jerusalem’s Mount of Remembrance, 1942–1976*.

E-mail: Doron.Bar@Schechter.ac.il

## NOTES

1. On the competing view that gender segregation at holy places is convenient and welcome to female worshippers, see Rimalt (2003: 112–119).
2. One exception is the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, in southern India, where women were not permitted to enter during their fertile years. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India terminated the prohibition. See Joseph (2019).
3. Haredim have demonstrated against the opening of mixed swimming pools such as the Galei Gil pool in Ramat Gan and on Emek Refaim Street in Jerusalem as well as against mixed beaches and, at times, there was an echo of the demonstrations in the public discourse.
4. Israel State Archive [=ISA], GL-2-2603, “Statements of the Prime Minister, Mr. Levi Eshkol, in a Meeting with the Chief Rabbis and the Spiritual Leaders of all the Ethnic Groups in Israel,” 7 June 1967 [in Hebrew].
5. Law for the Protection of the Holy Places, 1967, paragraph 499 from 28 June 1967 [in Hebrew].
6. “Warhaftig Explains His Ministry’s Handling of Issues at Western Wall.” [In Hebrew.] *Ha’aretz*, 25 July 1967.
7. These statements were made at a session of the National Religious Party’s directorate. See “National-Religious Party Strongly Protests Intentions to Impair the Sanctity of the Western Wall.” [In Hebrew.] *Ha-Tzofe*, 4 August 1967.
8. “Between the Hammer and the Podium: The Knesset Rejects Attempts to Impinge on the Authority of the Chief Rabbinate.” [In Hebrew.] *Ha-Tzofe*, 20 June 1968.
9. ISA, HZ-2-4293, Isser Yehuda Unterman, “Opinion,” 12 March 1968 [in Hebrew].
10. ISA, GL-10-17476, Rephael Cohen to various Knesset members, 18 February, 1996; ISA, GL-10-17476, Eyal Nun to Shimon Shitrit, 20 February, 1996.
11. Ben-Ami (1984) discusses women’s visits to sages’ tombs in Morocco and brings many eyewitness testimonies from female pilgrims but does not mention any gender separation.

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