

MOVE TO BUILD 3RD JEWISH TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM STIRS RESISTANCE

By Steve Rodan
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JERUSALEM -- Menachem Burstein lit a match to a walnut-size gray spice. Within seconds, it emitted a sharp scent. "This came from Saudi Arabia," Burstein said. "We're sending it abroad to test it for its ingredients, to see if it fits the requirements of the temple." Burstein is not a scientist by training. But he has spent years in research, trying to discover exactly what spices were used 2,000 years ago in the ancient Jewish temple. For Burstein and hundreds of his colleagues, the effort is far from being purely historical. Spurred by both religious belief and nationalist fervor and backed by the government, a group of Israelis and Jews abroad are quietly planning the construction of the third Jewish temple. The project has sparked a lively controversy in Judaism today, dividing theologians and political leaders. It has also united ultra-Orthodox Jews with fundamentalist Protestant Christians, both of whom share the dream of a third Jewish temple. Among the questions being raised: Can a temple be built or even planned without the arrival of the Messiah? What should be done about the Muslim shrines that for about 1,000 years have occupied the holy ground? Advocates of rebuilding the temple have no answers. But Rabbi Israel Ariel, head of the Temple Institute, has no doubt that a solution will be found. His institute has reconstructed 38 of the 103 ritual implements required for bringing sacrifices at the temple. "We believe that a temple will arise despite all the problems," he said. "It is the force that unites the Jewish people." The Israeli government is becoming active in the effort. Last month, the Religious Affairs Ministry sponsored the first-ever Conference of Temple Research. The first temple was destroyed by the Babylonians. Seventy years later, Cyrus, emperor of Persia, allowed the Jews to return from exile and rebuild the temple. About 45,000 Jews accepted the offer. Many more stayed in the diaspora. The second temple lasted 420 years and was destroyed by the Romans. The Romans refused to permit the temple's reconstruction and sent the Jews into exile. Although the Babylonian Talmud was vague, Jewish scholars later ruled that the temple must await the Messiah. The medieval sage Rashi said the temple will descend directly from heaven after the coming of the Messiah. His contemporary, Maimonides, was more specific. He drew up guidelines on recognizing the Messiah and planning the temple. One requirement: The temple will not be built until a majority of the Jewish people live in the biblical land of Israel. Less than a third of the world's 13 million Jews live in Israel. But in 1967, Jews began to believe that the construction of the temple was in sight. Repulsing an attack from its eastern neighbor Jordan, Israel captured the Old City of Jerusalem, the site of the ancient Jewish temple. Israeli authorities, trying to preserve calm, allowed the Muslims to continue to administer the Temple Mount. The Muslims have the Al Aksa Mosque, a complex that actually contains two houses of prayer and is regarded as the third holiest site in Islam. Israel banned non-Muslims from praying openly on the mount. Religious leaders supported the stand. First, Israel's chief rabbis forbade Jews to walk on the mount to guard against them stepping on the ancient Holy of Holies where, in temple times, only the high priest was granted access. Moreover, many rabbis could not fathom the coming of the Messiah at a time when a majority of the Jewish people did not observe basic religious precepts such as the Sabbath or Kashrut. Some of the rabbis were stung that advocates of a temple included secular Jews. "Suddenly, all these people say that the Sabbath is not important, Kashrut is not important; only the temple is important," said Rabbi Eliezer Shach, regarded as one of the last scions of European Jewish scholars. But slowly, some leading rabbis exhibited flexibility. Two schools near the Western Wall are teaching about 200 students the complex laws of the temple. Others, including former Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, have been researching the exact location of the Holy of Holies so that Jews can enter the mount without violating any commandment. Moreover, Haifa's chief rabbi, Shear Yeshuv Cohen, considered a candidate to be Israel's chief rabbi, ruled that the candelabra of the temple may be built today. Still, rabbinical advocates of researching the new temple remain cautious. They consistently remind their followers that their work is to prepare for the coming of the Messiah, not to replace him. As a result, even the maverick Rabbi Goren was sharply critical of a recent attempt by a group of Jewish activists, called the Temple Mount Faithful. The group, with police permission, brought a three-ton stone to Jerusalem Oct. 16 as cornerstone of the third temple. A ceremony was to have taken place on the Temple Mount. Police canceled the ceremony when Arab students rioted several hours before the event was to take place. Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kollek said the riot was aimed at preventing the ceremony. "The Muslims believe that this is a plot to take over their holy place," Mayor Kollek said. At the conference, researchers were careful not to endorse the idea of laying a cornerstone of the temple. But many of them appeared sympathetic to the aims of the Temple Mount Faithful. "We believe that all of our hopes and all of our attempts, such as the cornerstone for the temple, will cause some activity in the heavens," said Zev Golan, the American-born director of the Temple Institute. "And with God's help, the day will come soon when we will build the temple."

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