

**Commentary: Lecture by Dr. Mordechai Kedar - How Jerusalem became  
holy for Islam?**

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Dr. Mordechai Kedar of Bar-Ilan University, one of the significant experts in the world on the Islamic world and the Arabic language, gave a lecture in which he presented a research explanation why Jerusalem is perceived by the Muslims as a holy city. Jerusalem does not appear in the Quran, and the founder of the Muslim Empire (who was a peer of Mohammed when he was alive), the second Caliph Umar ibn Al-Khattāb, did not refer to the Temple Mount as a holy place for Islam or as having importance to the Prophet Mohammed. In other words, how did Jerusalem become a city sacred to Muslims?

Beforehand, Dr. Kedar explains the source of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Islam. In the Quran, it is related that Mohammed would frequently visit a city of believers called Ta'if. The journey to this city, which was about forty kilometers southwest of Mecca, lasted two days, and therefore he would spend the night with a group of believers at a village called Jeharna.

In Jeharna, there was a wadi (valley) with two mosques – the mosque on the near bank of the river to the village was called the Al-Adna Mosque (the near mosque) and the mosque on the far bank of the river was called the Al-Aqsa Mosque (the far mosque). In chapter 7 of the Quran it is told how God took Mohammed in the middle of the night from the village where he stayed the night to the far mosque and then returned him. Those of Mohammed's time understood this story in its literal sense, since they knew where these places, Ta'if and Jeharna, were found in the region that is today called Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Dr. Kedar notes a story told by the most important historian of Islam, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, on the second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattāb,

who conquered the 'Al-Sham' region (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel) and came to Jerusalem. With him there was a Yemenite Jew called Kaab (who was close to Mohammed from the beginning). When they reached the Temple Mount, Kaab removed his shoes because of the holiness of the place. Umar asked him for the reason for his actions. Kaab answered that it is a holy place, and Umar in response was angered and told Kaab that he was attempting to introduce Jewish ideas into Islam and that he must put on his shoes immediately. Kaab was forced to don his shoes. Hence, Umar, who was close to Mohammed in his life, in the seventh century, did not yet know that Jerusalem is a place holy to Muslims.

Therefore, according to Dr. Kedar, how did Jerusalem become a city holy to Muslims?

At some stage, because of different considerations, the Fifth Caliph decided to shift the capital of the Muslim Empire from Mecca to Damascus. This decision caused all the treasures of the Christian world that were looted from the churches of the Byzantine Empire to be moved to Damascus, thus causing the residents of Damascus, who had not gone to war, to be very rich.

The financial riches of the residents of Damascus caused them to indulge in revelry, which included a series of actions not commensurate with the commandments of Islam. However, with all their sins, they believed that if they went to Mecca once a year and fulfilled the Haj commandment (one of the cornerstones of Islam) then they would be forgiven for the wrongs they committed.

The story of the many sins of the Damascus residents spread throughout the Muslim Empire and at some stage, in the year 682, the Bedouin in Mecca, under the leadership of Abd Allah al-Zubayr, did not agree to allow the people from Damascus to complete their pilgrimage to Mecca and fulfill the Haj commandment. The Bedouin in Mecca argued that first they needed to stop committing sins in Damascus and then to embark on the Haj, and thus for eight years they did not allow pilgrims from Damascus to come for the Haj.

Since the Haj is a foundational commandment in Islam, the religious sages in Damascus thought about an alternative place for the Haj. At some stage, they suggested Jerusalem as an alternative Mecca for the Haj pilgrimage. However, since Jerusalem did not appear in the Quran, they needed to find justification for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Therefore, they added a chapter in the Hadith (the oral commentary of Islam) addressing Jerusalem.

In this story they wrote, they took the story of Al-Aqsa from the Quran and shifted it from the region of Saudi Arabia to Jerusalem. There they determined that Mohammed came on a flying donkey called Al-Buraq (a story similar to the story of Pegasus from Greek mythology) to Jerusalem and from there he ascended to the heavens, where he was given a series of tests of prophecy by the angels and the prophets and righteous men from Judaism and Christianity and then Allah gave Mohammed the commandment of prayer and he prayed at the head of all. This story is further justification in Islam of the fact that Islam is superior to Judaism and Christianity.

To provide further basis to the fact that Jerusalem is superior to Mecca as a holy place, the Islamic theologians added literature called 'Praises of Jerusalem' or 'Advantages of Jerusalem', which include thousands of stories, so as to convince the public to go on the Haj to Jerusalem and not to Mecca. For example, there is the story where Mohammed supposedly said that if a person comes to Mecca he has 7 times the reward in the Garden of Eden and if he prays in Jerusalem then he has 77 times the reward. An example of another story in the Hadith is that somebody heard Mohammed say, supposedly, that if a blind person goes to sleep in the streets of Jerusalem, then on the following day he will see.

During those years, the Dome of the Mosque was constructed and the Foundation Stone sacred to Jews became a sacred place to Muslims so as to create religious competition for the Kaaba in Mecca. Thus, for eight years the Muslims of Damascus, convinced by all the stories written about Jerusalem, performed the Haj to the Temple Mount.

According to Dr. Kedar, after the Muslims from Damascus were permitted again to conduct the Haj in Mecca, all the stories about Jerusalem were 'archived' and forgotten.

Jerusalem was forgotten and even became a garbage dump for construction materials, aside from the periods in which the Muslims identified that there was a risk that members of other religions would rule in Jerusalem. The first such period was the Crusades, the second period was in the First World War, and the third period is the period of Zionism and the existence of the State of Israel. To justify to the Muslims the waging of a war against non-Muslim nations over Jerusalem, they retrieved all these stories and used them again.

As proof of the fictive relationship between Muslims and Jerusalem, Taqī ad-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymiyyah, one of the most important theologians in the history of Islam, who lived in the period of the war against the Christian crusaders, composed an entire book in which he prohibited the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on Haj and forbade sleeping in Jerusalem for the curing of diseases. He understood that the relationship to Jerusalem was not a religious connection but rather a political one, in the framework of the struggle between the center of the Muslim Empire in Damascus and the center in Mecca. Therefore, he reduced Jerusalem to the level of any other city in the Islamic Empire.

Source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWxea25dOqw>