UNESCO in Ruins: Anti-Semitism and the Perversion of Cultural Heritage Preservation

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The timeworn synagogue of Alqosh, nestled at the base of the Bayhidhra Mountains in the governorate of Nineveh, is one of Iraq’s few remaining Jewish houses of prayer. Vegetation has reclaimed the courtyard, and the outbuildings have been repurposed as rubbish tips, but inside the structure, amidst an array of rough-hewn ogival arches, rests the synagogue’s claim to fame — the 2,700-year-old plaster sarcophagus of the prophet Nahum the Elkoshite, comfortably ensconced beneath a green hand-sewn cloth. It was Nahum who famously predicted the fall of waning Assyria to waxing Babylon, in lyrics that still resonate in the war-torn region:

And as for Nineveh, her waters are like a great pool, but the men flee away. They cry, “Stand, stand,” but there is none that will return back. Take ye the spoil of the silver, take the spoil of the gold, for there is no end of the riches of the precious furniture. She is destroyed and rent and torn; the heart melteth, and the knees fail, and all the loins lose their strength, and the faces of them all are as the blackness of a kettle.

The theologian John Owen was entirely justified in his conclusion that “no one of the minor Prophets seems to equal the sublimity, the vehemence and the boldness of Nahum: besides, his Prophecy is a complete and finished poem; his exordium is magnificent, and indeed majestic; the preparation for the destruction of Nineveh, and the description of its ruin, and its greatness, are expressed in most vivid colors, and possess admirable perspicuity and fulness.” It seems altogether appropriate that the Hebrew word from which the prophet’s name is derived, *naham*, may indicate either comfort or sorrow, depending on the context.

The resting place of such an exalted figure is destined to emerge as a place of pilgrimage, and so Alqosh came to be for the Jews of Iraq, particularly those of Mosul, and particularly during the Festival of Reaping. Indeed, it was said that “he who has not made the pilgrimage to Nahum’s tomb has not yet known real pleasure.” Congregants would amass by the hundreds in the spacious courtyard, while Hebrew, Arabic, and Kurdish tongues filled the repository where processions were made, where the Book of Nahum was read, and where ripe fruit was left to be eaten the following day, after having received the prophet’s blessing overnight. When the archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard visited in the 1840s, he found that “on the walls of the room are pasted slips of paper, upon which are written, in distorted Hebrew characters, religious exhortations, and the dates and particulars of the visits of various Jewish families.” None of these traces remain today, save for a few stone plaques, one of which touchingly reads: “I have built a synagogue here, an institute for you to dwell in for eternity, in the year 1675.”

Nahum may have dwelled therein for all those years, but by the mid-twentieth century the extant Jews of Iraq were being subjected to wholesale purgation and expulsion, starting in 1948 with the state criminalization of Zionism, and in subsequent years with the Denaturalization Act and the ensuing Law for the Control and Administration of Property of Jews Who Have Forfeited Nationality. By 1953, the Alqoshian Jews who had safeguarded their *bet kenesset* from time immemorial were gone, leaving the Chaldean Christian community to maintain the site. Presently, however, cultural resource management takes something of a backseat to the existential struggle against the Islamic State, and the residents and refugees gathered in Alqosh, alongside Assyrian militias and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, are wholly preoccupied with keeping Daesh’s genocidal jihadists from irrupting through their town’s gates. “Draw thee water for the siege,” Nahum the Elkoshite once advised, and “build up thy bulwarks.” The modern-day Assyrians of Nineveh have done just that, as best they could, but another one of the prophet’s many haunting pronouncements continues to echo across the lush plateau: “thy people are hid in the mountains, and there is none to gather them together. Thy destruction is not hidden; thy wound is grievous.”

The damage done to the Alqosh synagogue has likewise been grievous, and the Islamic State has threatened far worse besides, prompting the Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Religious Affairs to petition the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for assistance in preserving the site. The 2016 request, which came some three years after an abortive attempt by New York-based donors to rehabilitate the synagogue, was brushed away on the grounds that the Kurdish Regional Government lacks standing to communicate with the agency, and that in any event the tomb has never received UNESCO’s hallowed imprimatur in the form of World Heritage status. And that was that. Shimon Samuels of the Simon Wiesenthal Center called this decision “heritage marginalized,” but it was more of an abnegation of heritage, in both the literal and psychoanalytical senses of the word. How much easier it is for the international community to whistle past this particular graveyard than to confront the doleful set of circumstances that the tomb of Nahum so forcefully evokes.

A little less than a year later, on July 7, 2017, UNESCO was all action when its World Heritage Committee approved a resolution recognizing Hebron’s Old City and the Cave of Patriarchs as specifically Palestinian heritage sites, while simultaneously adding those sites to the list of World Heritage in Danger List, pursuant to Article 11(4) of its Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Only 54 properties have been afforded such a status, so the reader will likely assume the Cave of Patriarchs is in a parlous state, its walls calcined and wrecked, its chambers collapsed, its tombs threatened with desecration, not unlike, say, the Tomb of Nahum a thousand kilometers to the northeast. In fact, the Herodian-era Judean structure, which lies beneath a Saladin-era mosque, is in a remarkable state of preservation, and is still frequented by Jews (who enter by the southwest) and Muslims (entering at the opposite corner) in search of the tombs of patriarchs and matriarchs Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Leah. The structure is, admittedly, not handicap accessible, and the plastic covering over the main sanctuary is a touch indecorous, but it is hard to imagine anyone of good faith concluding that the complex is “threatened by serious and specific dangers, such as the threat of disappearance caused by accelerated deterioration” or “the outbreak or the threat of an armed conflict,” as the Convention ostensibly requires.

For Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, the Committee’s decision provided all the evidence he needed to conclude that UNESCO is a “politically slanted organization, disgraceful and anti-Semitic, whose decisions are scandalous,” while maintaining that “no decision by this irrelevant organization will undermine our historic right over the Tomb of the Patriarchs, or our right over the country.” Naftali Bennett, Israel’s education minister, similarly found it “disappointing and embarrassing to see UNESCO denying history and distorting reality time after time to knowingly serve those who try to wipe the Jewish state off the map,” while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu perhaps put it best when he exasperatedly exclaimed: “Not a Jewish site? Who is buried there? Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah — our patriarchs and matriarchs.” The mind reels. For her part, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley echoed these sentiments when she described the decision as an “affront to history” which “discredits an already highly questionable UN agency.”

In truth, UNESCO lost its credibility long ago. Its July 2017 vote, however odious, was hardly a shocking development. Back in 1982, UNESCO added the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls to its endangered list, notwithstanding the fact that the Israeli authorities had long before handed control of the Temple Mount to the Islamic Trust, or *Waqf*, while simultaneously preventing Jewish religious rites on the premises and abstaining from any archaeological investigations. The only meaningful excavation on the Mount in recent decades, one notes with interest, was carried out pursuant to the construction of the El-Marwani Mosque, which was built atop Solomon’s Stables and involved, as Shany Mor has observed, “a wanton and unrecoverable destruction of archaeological treasures ranging across three millennia of human patrimony. Unlike the imagined archaeological damage fantasists and fanatics accuse Israel of committing, this was never condemned by UNESCO or any other international body.” In 2015, UNESCO was at it again, accusing Israel of conducting “illegal excavations” in its own sovereign territory, and of damaging the “visual integrity” of the Old City by constructing a much-needed light rail system which will provide mass transit opportunities to Arab as well as Jewish quarters. The most recent meeting of the World Heritage Committee in Kraków managed to reach a new low, with the aforementioned ahistorical Hebron vote as well as the holding of a moment of silence for Palestinians immediately after a moment of silence for victims of the Holocaust. Israel’s envoy to UNESCO, Shama Hacohen, immediately rejected the “horrifying parallel between Holocaust victims to other victims and Palestinian victims,” but the damage was done.

If one goes back far enough, it becomes apparent that UNESCO’s deficiencies were present *ab initio*. The agency’s task, according to its lofty constitution, is to pursue the “education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace,” for “it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed,” but the 1948 UNESCO General Conference in Beirut quickly demonstrated the limitations of this kind of universalist program. Lebanon refused to grant entry to Israeli observers, prompting the Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, and Polish delegations to object strenuously to the choice of host, on the grounds that Lebanon constituted an “aggressor” against Israel in “violation of UN high policy.” While the Soviet bloc boycotted the event, the State Department, fearful of French and Italian efforts to create a “postcolonial caucus” alongside Latin American and Middle Eastern states, behaved rather shamefully in this instance, instructing its delegation to jettison its support for Israeli inclusion so as to preserve the “possibility of influencing [the Arab states] separately and also weaning them away from the Latin-American block,” according to a diplomatic preparatory report. Amidst the tensions of the Cold War and the litany of Middle Eastern crises, the State Department would lose interest in UNESCO as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, and the agency would gradually slither into an infamous morass of anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic sentiment.

The issue of cultural heritage and its preservation in Israel and Palestine is of paramount importance, which makes UNESCO’s moral failings all the more frustrating. When the American philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. pledged several million dollars for the construction of an archaeological museum in Jerusalem, he plausibly asserted that “the past of Palestine is more important to the world than the past of any other country, and there are no monuments more precious than those which reveal to us the past of this land toward which all civilized people turn with reverence.” When that land becomes contested, however, its heritage becomes contested as well. As Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler put it, archaeology is not just “part of a wider battle,” it helps determine “the nature of the battlefield itself.” The sites, the artifacts, and even the names used to describe them can all become potential tinderboxes, as the British Government of Palestine found out in 1931 when it was accused by the Jewish community of showing an untoward preference to Arabic place names:

The Palestine Administration has lately decided to banish most of the Biblical names from official use, and this even in Hebrew documents! All cultured men and women who may be able to appreciate the value of the remnant of the old Palestine civilizations as preserved in the traditional names, are invited herewith to let their word of protest against that vandalic decision be heard.

*Plus ça change.* UNESCO has repeatedly raised hackles in Israel by, for example, referring to the Wailing Wall only as “Buraq Plaza,” after the name for the flying horse which, in the Muslim tradition, transported Muhammad to Jerusalem during his mystical “Night Journey.”

These are not purely symbolic considerations. Jerusalem was wracked by pogroms in 1921, 1929, and 1936, all too often spurred on by unfounded allegations that Jews were planning campaigns of mosque desecration — a Levantine twist on the age-old blood libel. UNESCO’s predilection for sounding equally baseless alarms, as Jonathan Tobin recently noted, is “feeding into efforts to foment hatred against Jews” and thus amounts to an official “UN endorsement of anti-Semitism.” It has become clear that UNESCO, like the UN Human Rights Council, is so ensorcelled by this insidious ideology that it can no longer be treated as some kind of bureaucratic curate’s egg; the rot has spread too far for it to be considered remotely salvageable. At least Ambassador Haley and the current administration seems to understand this, in a distinct and welcome break from the last regime. In 2010, when Israel announced a decidedly sensible national heritage site protection and rehabilitation plan including the Cave of Patriarchs, it was not just UNESCO and neighboring Arab states that caviled. The Obama-era State Department spokesman Mark Toner stated at the time that the “administration viewed the move as provocative and unhelpful” and “U.S. displeasure with the designations of the Cave of the Patriarchs in the West Bank town of Hebron and the traditional tomb of the biblical matriarch Rachel in Bethlehem had been conveyed to senior Israeli officials by American diplomats.” The ash heap of history is too kind a place to consign such a perverse, ahistorical policy, and it is just as well that the Trump administration has so vocally and thoroughly abandoned it.

The cognitive dissonance which continues to be placed on display at UNESCO is genuinely stunning. It should be obvious that the disparate treatment of historic sites described above comes down to ulterior motives wholly unrelated to the agency’s mission of cultural heritage preservation. Yet the abandonment of the synagogue in Alqosh is not even the most brazen example of the World Heritage Committee’s craven hypocrisy. For that, one must think back to the year 2000, during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, when the Tomb of Joseph, Son of Jacob in Nablus was targeted by Palestinian rioters. First the on-site yeshiva was destroyed and its books incinerated, and then the memorial’s dome was splashed with green paint. On October 7, 2000, after Israeli Defense Forces pulled out of the region entirely, the site was thoroughly pillaged and set ablaze. It was Rabbi Hillel Lieberman who courageously rushed to the scene to assess the damage to the holy site. His bullet-riddled body was later found on the outskirts of town. Since then, what is left of the *Qever Yosef* has routinely been subjected to vandalism and other outrages, most notably on October 16, 2015, when petrol bombs were once again hurled at the tomb. A group of Jews who arrived in the aftermath of the defilement, armed only with paint cans and besoms, were beaten and detained and their vehicles burnt. A search for a UNESCO resolution on this distressing matter will produce no results whatsoever.

The reader, in his mind’s eye at least, can hover over the Bayhidhra Mountains and look down at the crumbling synagogue in Alqosh, where the Tomb of Nahum is threatened by time and terrorism, and can proceed to the valley separating Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, and perceive the gratuitous destruction wrought upon the resting place of the patriarch Joseph. He may, in turn, visit the Hebron Hills and view the Cave of the Patriarchs and its well-tended subterranean chambers, or the Temple Mount and its holy places, nominally freely-accessible but open only to Muslim worshippers. The reader is urged to consider UNESCO’s total lack of regard for the first category, and its monomaniacal and historically dubious treatment of the latter, and draw his own conclusions, as I have certainly drawn mine. And though the wounds that have been inflicted by UNESCO have indeed been grievous, at least the damage is not hidden, and the necessary corrective action can be taken in good conscience as a consequence.