

Jews are disguising themselves as Muslims to pray on Temple Mount – report

Police trying to crack down on extremist group 'Returning to the Mount,' whose members dress like Arabs in order to enter Jerusalem holy site, where Jewish prayer is banned

By TOI STAFF 14 December 2021



Screen capture from video of an instructor of the Return to the Mount group demonstrating to members how to pray like a Muslim while reciting Jewish prayers. (Channel 13 News)

An extremist Jewish group arranges for its members to disguise themselves as Muslims in order to enter the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, where they quietly recite Jewish prayers while pretending to engage in Islamic worship, according to a report Monday.

The far-right Returning to the Mount group, which advocates Jewish sovereignty on the Temple Mount, has prompted concerns among security

officials, who warn that their actions could spark violence at the flashpoint holy site, Channel 13 news reported.

The Temple Mount, known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, is the holiest site for Jews and the third-holiest shrine in Islam. It is the emotional epicenter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; tensions there fueled the 11-day Gaza war in May earlier this year.

According to understandings reached after Israel captured the Old City and East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War, Jews are allowed to visit but not to pray there. Israel maintains overall security at the site, but the Muslim Waqf administers religious activities there.

“We are not prepared to accept the sanctions against Jews that exist on the Temple Mount,” Raphael Morris, head of the Returning to the Mount group, told Channel 13.

Morris noted that Jews are only permitted into the compound at limited hours of the day, are accompanied by police and must show no indication that they are engaged in prayer.

By contrast, Muslims can enter the compound whenever they want and are free to pray.



Screen capture from video of Raphael Morris, leader of the Returning to the Mount group. (Channel 13 News)

In lessons held in a Jerusalem apartment, the group teaches its followers to dress in traditional Muslim garb, to carry prayer mats, Misbaha prayer beads and even Arabic-language books about the Quran to make their disguise more convincing. In addition, members sometimes dye their hair and beards darker to make themselves appear more like Arabs.

Morris said the group puts an emphasis on appearing like Arabs so as to not raise the suspicions of police, Muslims, or the Waqf.

Yisrael, an instructor, was shown teaching group members how to go through the motions of Muslim prayer while actually reciting Jewish liturgy.

“At worst, okay, they catch you so you are arrested,” said one member, who used the pseudonym Baruch. “It is worth it to me in order to pray properly and so as to not surrender to the police humiliation.”

Baruch predicted that there will be “more and more who go up like this and then the police will simply need to open the gates to everyone.”

“Our vision is to be able to go to the Temple Mount at all hours of the day, and eventually to also succeed in building the Temple and restore the sacrificial services,” said Morris, the group leader.

He denied his movement was an “underground,” insisting that he acts “openly” and that his actions are legal.

An extremist Jewish group arranges for its members to disguise themselves as Muslims in order to enter the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, where they quietly recite Jewish prayers while pretending to engage in Islamic worship, according to a report Monday.

The far-right Returning to the Mount group, which advocates Jewish sovereignty on the Temple Mount, has prompted concerns among security officials, who warn that their actions could spark violence at the flashpoint holy site, Channel 13 news reported.

The Temple Mount, known to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif, is the holiest site for Jews and the third-holiest shrine in Islam. It is the emotional epicenter of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; tensions there fueled the 11-day Gaza war in May earlier this year.

According to understandings reached after Israel captured the Old City and East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War, Jews are allowed to visit but not to pray there. Israel maintains overall security at the site, but the Muslim Waqf administers religious activities there.

“We are not prepared to accept the sanctions against Jews that exist on the Temple Mount,” Raphael Morris, head of the Returning to the Mount group, told Channel 13.

Morris noted that Jews are only permitted into the compound at limited hours of the day, are accompanied by police and must show no indication that they are engaged in prayer.

By contrast, Muslims can enter the compound whenever they want and are free to pray.



Screen capture from video of Raphael Morris, leader of the Returning to the Mount group. (Channel 13 News)

In lessons held in a Jerusalem apartment, the group teaches its followers to dress in traditional Muslim garb, to carry prayer mats, Misbaha prayer beads and even Arabic-language books about the Quran to make their disguise more convincing. In addition, members sometimes dye their hair and beards darker to make themselves appear more like Arabs.

Morris said the group puts an emphasis on appearing like Arabs so as to not raise the suspicions of police, Muslims, or the Waqf.

Yisrael, an instructor, was shown teaching group members how to go through the motions of Muslim prayer while actually reciting Jewish liturgy.

“At worst, okay, they catch you so you are arrested,” said one member, who used the pseudonym Baruch. “It is worth it to me in order to pray properly and so as to not surrender to the police humiliation.”

Baruch predicted that there will be “more and more who go up like this and then the police will simply need to open the gates to everyone.”

“Our vision is to be able to go to the Temple Mount at all hours of the day, and eventually to also succeed in building the Temple and restore the sacrificial services,” said Morris, the group leader.

He denied his movement was an “underground,” insisting that he acts “openly” and that his actions are legal.

“The fact that the country doesn’t like it doesn’t mean that it is illegal,” Morris said.

Should anything go wrong during their undercover visits, they would call for police help, he said, dismissing concerns that his group’s action could spark widespread violence.

“For the sake of the Temple I am prepared to pay with my life,” one group member told the network when asked about the possibility that, if discovered, Muslims at the site could react violently.



Screen capture from video of Raphael Morris, leader of the Returning to the Mount group, disguised as a Muslim worshiper. (Channel 13 News)

Police and the Shin Bet security service are actively working against the group and, according to the report, members are frequently given court-issued restraining orders banning them from the Mount. Occasionally they are held in jail for a few days.

The Israel Police commander in charge of the Mount, Nati Gur, said there was broad and “significant” deployment of officers in an effort to prevent any backlash against “these extremists.”

As one group made its way to the Temple Mount, an instructor told Channel 13 he received a phone call from a concealed number, by a person claiming to be with police who was asking about Morris. The instructor told the station that the police, and likely also the Shin Bet security service, was tracking their actions.

Officers eventually intercepted the group and prevented them from entering the compound, according to the report.

However, two weeks ago members did succeed in entering the Temple Mount, in the dead of night and despite the rainy weather. In video of the event, a member of the group filmed the Dome of the Rock and could be heard reciting the Shema, the Jewish prayer declaring faith in the one God. In the background, the muezzin could be heard calling Muslims to prayer.



Israeli security forces stand guard, as a group of Jews visit the Temple Mount (Al-Aqsa) compound in Jerusalem, on July 18, 2021. (AHMAD GHARABLI / AFP)

In a closed-door meeting about the Temple Mount convened by Public Security Minister Omer Barlev, Shin Bet representatives said that every week individuals disguised as Arabs are caught trying to slip into the Temple Mount through entry gates that are dedicated for use by Muslims only. Channel 13 said it had come under pressure from security officials to not broadcast the segment amid fears even the information could spark violence.

A senior security source told the network shortly before it aired the report that officials take a “serious view” of all attempts to disrupt the stability of the Temple Mount and that those involved would be brought to justice.

In a ruling earlier this year on a petition demanding Temple Mount prayer rights for Jews, the Supreme Court found that “every Jew has the right to pray on the Temple Mount, as part of the freedom of religion and expression.”

It added, “At the same time, these rights are not absolute, and can be limited to take into account the public interest.”

In 2015, Returning to the Mount [offered to pay Jews \\$500](#) each to pray on the Temple Mount.