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OPINION | COMMENTARY | HOUSES OF WORSHIP

ISIS Overlooks a Synagogue in Mosul

In the heart of the old city, a local historian discovered strange Hebrew inscriptions.

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

Oct. 18, 2018 7:03 p.m. ET



Omar Mohammed, Mosul's local historian known as Mosul Eye, Dec. 5, 2017. PHOTO: /ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the fall of 2016 I began filming a documentary about the battle to retake Mosul from Islamic State. I made a promise to myself and to my crew: Whatever risks and

obstacles the war unpredictably produced, we would reach the burial ground of the prophet Jonah on the Tigris River—right in the middle of the city.

The goal was met. Though the site was buried in rubble and ash, one of our film's scenes would show the final resting place of the most enigmatic and provocative biblical prophet. When my crew and I deemed our mission accomplished, we savored a double satisfaction: We had covered the first half of the war to destroy ISIS and also rediscovered an important site in the biblical narrative and Jewish history.

Then down came a bolt from the blue. It took the form of a phone call from the French human-rights activist Hugues Dewavrin. For the entire reign of ISIS, my friend told me, a certain Omar Mohammed had remained in Mosul, chronicling the devastation of his city on the blog, Mosul Eye.

This immensely talented “citizen historian” was madly in love with his city. His then-unsigned posts drew the attention of every journalist in the vicinity, as they knew he could provide reliable information on daily life in Mosul.

In late June, Omar Mohammed posted some astonishing photos. In the heart of the old city, in the very spot where the jihadists planned to make their last stand, appeared a synagogue. Mohammed tweeted that he had found some strange inscriptions in Hebrew carved into blue stone and needed volunteers to transcribe and translate them. The internet took it from there.

Carlos C. Huerta, a rabbi who served as an Army chaplain during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, said he had some ideas. Frida Ghitis, a former CNN correspondent, deciphered from the stones a blessing from Deuteronomy. An Israeli archaeologist responded that he saw a verse from the book of Kings and a tribute to Yahya Ben Meir and Meir David Halevi. To a London-based specialist in the Jewish and Arab history of Jerusalem stone, the words were from the Book of Proverbs. To another, based at the Brookings Institution, it was a passage from the Book of Numbers. A former Israeli diplomat posted century-old photos taken in a Mosul street showing Jewish cobblers repairing the shoes of their Arab neighbors. Seth Frantzman of the Jerusalem Post expressed his amazement at this apparently 2,800-year-old vestige.

In short, a few hours of lively conversation on social media generated at least one area of agreement: ISIS, in its abysmal stupidity, had not understood that in its midst, converted into a cache for rockets and ammunition, stood a synagogue on par with those found in Kurdish Iraq. The discovery is a reminder of Mosul's once thousands-strong Jewish community, which was evacuated in the early 1950s.

It also shows that what goes for hearts also goes for places: To survive, they sometimes have to borrow an identity, to pretend. It may well be, in other words, that cities, like Spanish Jews, can be Marranos, living undercover. This marranism is so powerful that when the jihadists took control of the region—and methodically destroyed churches, Yazidi temples and the ancient al-Nuri mosque—they managed to miss a holy place where the eternal continued to be praised, though in secret.

It raises a question: Is the world serious about saving what still can be saved of one of its oldest cities? Does Unesco mean what it says when it baptizes its program of urban and political reconstruction “the spirit of Mosul”? Will Americans and Europeans have what it takes to remake this disfigured city into what it was for centuries—a crossroads of peoples, religions and civilizations—and what its immortal soul aspires to become once again?

If so, we must heed the erudite Muslim of Mosul Eye. Watching and writing from his hometown, from the quiet heart of what was the epicenter of world jihadism, he called on us to rebuild the last synagogue still standing in the city of the prophet Jonah. If we prove unable to accept this splendid, sacred challenge, if we cannot rise to the height of this child of the Quran, who remembers that he is also Moses' heir—well, in that case, we shall have to say so long to fraternity, goodbye to peace, and hello to the long ordeal of religious and cultural war.

*Mr. Lévy is director of the documentary films “Peshmerga” and “The Battle of Mosul.”
Translated from French by Steven B. Kennedy.*

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