

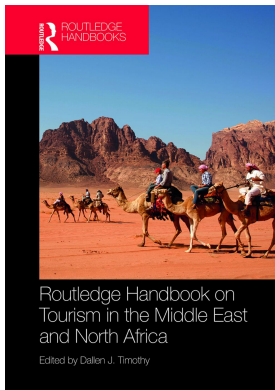
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11

CONTEMPORARY JEWISH TOURISM

Pilgrimage, religious heritage and educational tourism

Noga Collins-Kreiner

Introduction

What is the relationship between visiting Jerusalem as a religious obligation and visiting sites related to the Holocaust and youth summer trips to Israel? Can a religious duty that has existed for thousands of years truly be discussed in the same breath as popular visits to graves of hallowed saintly figures and the visitation of friends and relatives in Israel? These are the major questions that concerned me before starting to write the following assessment of contemporary Jewish tourism.

This chapter explores the connections between Judaism and tourism in the Middle East from historical and contemporary perspectives. The analysis it offers holds particular relevance for efforts to understand current trends in Jewish tourism and their relationship with religion and religiosity in the context of modernity. The discussion, however, is limited to Jewish tourism to and within Israel, as the current political climate in the Middle East precludes Jewish tourism to other countries. Jewish visitation to most MENA countries, including Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and many others, is either not possible at the moment or is not recommended for safety reasons (for more details, see the Israeli government travel warnings website at <http://nsc.gov.il/he/Travel-Warnings/Pages/allwarnings.aspx>). It should be noted, however, that there are Jewish heritage places scattered throughout the Middle East and North Africa, as will be described later, which could potentially be attractions if the political climate were different (Levy 1997).

As a result of this situation, virtually all Jewish tourism in the Middle East occurs to and within Israel. In 2015, 27 per cent of all tourists to Israel were Jewish (Israel Ministry of Tourism 2015), amounting to 839,322 visitors in total. In the last few decades, between one-quarter and one-third of all tourists to Israel have been Jewish, whereas most (approximately two-thirds) have been Christian. According to the Israel Ministry of Tourism (2015), adherents of other faiths seldom visit Israel.

Estimates for Jews in North Africa and the Middle East acknowledge the practical end of the Jewish presence in most countries and the ongoing reduction in size of the small Jewish



communities remaining mainly in Morocco and Tunisia, which were estimated in 2013 to have a population of 3,300 (Dashefsky, Della Pergola, & Sheskin 2013). Those indigent Jews' travel patterns have been barely researched, and the results are of little significance owing to the low numbers of samples involved.

This chapter aims to contribute to the literature by investigating a topic that has thus far evaded thorough exploration: the sensitive and complex relationship amongst Judaism, tourism, pilgrimage, heritage, culture and politics. Understanding the context in which these elements have developed and interacted within Jewish culture enables us to understand better the complex relationship between Judaism and tourism in both the past and the present.

This analysis is based on Smith's (1992) continuum of travel and the theory of de-differentiation that has come to be widely used in recent years (Collins-Kreiner 2010). According to Smith's model, pilgrims and tourists are distinct actors situated at the opposite poles of the pilgrimage-tourism axis, which ranges from *sacred* to *secular*. This axis traverses an almost endless range of possible sacred-secular combinations, with a central region that has come to be referred to generally as 'religious tourism'. These combinations reflect the multiple changing motivations of travellers, whose interests and activities may shift—consciously or subconsciously—from tourism to pilgrimage and vice versa. Smith (1992) understands the possible variations as stemming from differences in individual beliefs and worldviews.

Badone and Roseman (2004) have been more explicit, positing that rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism or pilgrims and tourists no longer seem tenable in the shifting world of postmodern travel, and, elsewhere, I maintain that the de-differentiation between different kinds of tourism has stemmed from the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between them (Collins-Kreiner 2010), as will also be explained in this chapter.

Each of the chapter's three sections is devoted to a different segment of Jewish tourism, deriving from a different type of relationship between the Jewish religion and tourism, as well as to different historical periods: pilgrimage travel in Judaism in the pre-modern era, Jewish pilgrimage tourism in the modern period, and current Jewish heritage tourism. It is based on the premise that Jewish pilgrimage constituted the initial building block of Jewish tourism and for this reason must be the first element considered by any analysis. Broadening our understanding also requires consideration of the ways in which Jewish tourism has developed over the years, from a religion-based obligation to heritage-focused popular visitation. Whereas past research on Jewish tourism has typically considered Jewish pilgrimage solely from a religious perspective, it is now clear that the phenomenon must also be explored in the context of heritage, culture and politics.

The chapter's first section contextualises the concept of Jewish pilgrimage, the centrality of the Jewish Temple to the development of Jewish perceptions of pilgrimage, and the consequences of the demise of this centre (Luz & Collins-Kreiner 2015). The second section considers the main attributes and sites of Jewish pilgrimage in the pre-modern period and the emergence of a more nuanced and complex Jewish hagiographic map. It also discusses the dramatic changes in Jewish pilgrimage that have occurred during the modern period, particularly as part of the emergence of Jewish society within the state of Israel. The third section examines Jewish heritage, educational and diaspora tourism in an effort to understand tourism in Judaism not solely from a religious point of view but also from the perspective of the mixed motives of culture and heritage that are characteristic of the current period.

The chapter concludes with a discussion and summary that draws out the chapter's main insights and brings together its different sections. My main argument is that, just as scholars of tourism (e.g. Badone & Roseman 2004; Bilu 1998) argue that rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism are no longer tenable in the shifting world of postmodern travel, the

case of Jewish tourism is well suited to more fluid theorisations of the conceptual boundaries between 'sacred' and 'profane', as the sacred increasingly comes to encompass practices and sites that are not at all religious.

Pilgrimage travel in Judaism

Pilgrimage, as movement towards a sacred centre aimed at being exposed to God's presence (Coleman & Elsner 1995), lies at the very core of the Jewish faith. The biblical text is unequivocal about the importance of this journey and the religious imperative of performing it on both physical and metaphorical levels:

Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles. No one should appear before the Lord empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the Lord your God has blessed you.

(Deuteronomy 16: 16–17)

Following the ascendancy of Davidic traditions, Jerusalem and its religious centre (the Jewish Temple) became supreme and all other existing pilgrimage centres were shunned. The end of Jewish autonomy, reflected primarily in the destruction of this sacred site in 70 CE, only intensified Jerusalem's symbolic role in this context.

Like those of other religions, Jewish perspectives towards pilgrimage have changed over time. As noted, Jews were expected to 'appear before the Lord...at the place he will choose'. According to the prevailing Jewish narrative constructed by canonised texts that largely follow Judean literature, the Jerusalem Temple—after its inauguration by King Solomon in 970 BCE—became the most important and revered Jewish pilgrimage site. Although this narrative has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years (Eliav 2005, 2008; Finkelstein & Silberman 2001), there is ample evidence reflecting the growing role of the Jerusalemite temple as the focal point of Jewish pilgrimage (in Hebrew, *'aliyah la-regel'*) during the Second Temple period (Eliav 2005). Under King Herod (37–34 BCE), the compound underwent an extensive and highly ambitious renovation and refurbishment project, which, amongst other things, involved the construction of four massive retaining walls. This construction project transformed the temple into a separate urban entity, which since then has been known as the Temple Mount. Following the Temple's destruction by the Romans, the western retaining wall emerged as the most iconic Jewish pilgrimage site.

Over time, the city in general and the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall (as the most important relic of the former temple) in particular, regained its mythic and central importance. Jews continued to undertake pilgrimages to Jerusalem, culminating—political circumstances permitting—in a visit to the Wailing Wall (Prawer 1988). Thus, through a convoluted and meandering historical process that originated in biblical times, intensified during the Second Temple period, and finalised after the Roman conquest in 70 CE, Jerusalem and its temple were transformed from ideas that symbolised the Jewish presence in the Holy Land into spiritual and metaphysical symbols that came to constitute the very essence of Jewish existence. Hence, from Late Antiquity (between the fourth and sixth centuries CE) onward, Jewish pilgrims were no longer engaged in the canonical *'Aliya La-regel'* but rather performed rituals which can be better translated as, and bear a greater semblance to, the Latin term *'peregrination'*, or pilgrimage (Reiner 2014).

Arguably, the Wailing Wall and its environs have constituted the most iconic landmark and the fulcrum of processes that have played a role in the increasing importance of the religious sphere in contemporary Israel. Jews yearned for and venerated the site for centuries before it once again became accessible to Jewish pilgrims after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. The state played an active role in transforming the site by altering its spatiality. The changes were designed not only to produce a central pilgrimage site for Jews but also to reflect an emergent religious nationalist understanding (Nitzan-Shifan 2011). The centrality of this site and its canonical status as the most important national and pilgrimage icon must also be understood in the context of everyday Jewish Israeli attitudes towards a mythologised past, manifested in the geographical concept of Eretz Israel as the ‘historical’ foundation of modern-day Israel. Each year, millions of international and domestic visitors make their way to Jerusalem in general and to the Wailing Wall in particular.

Current Jewish pilgrimage tourism

A new phase in Jewish pilgrimage tourism emerged out of the socio-political changes that ultimately led to the emergence of Israel as a Jewish state within the geographical setting of the biblical Holy Land. The twentieth century, particularly following the creation of Israel in 1948, witnessed a dramatic growth in pilgrimage sites (whether old, new or renewed) and a soaring increase in the volume of Jewish pilgrims, along with significant trends of religious radicalisation and religious resurgence (D. Bar 2004, 2009, 2010; G. Bar 2008; Bilu 1998, 2010; Collins-Kreiner 2004, 2007, 2010; Epstein 1995; Sered 1986, 1989, 1991, 1998; Sasson 2002).

Today, the holy sites dating from historical periods consist primarily of the burial places of saintly figures (Cohen Ioannides & Ioannides 2006; Collins-Kreiner 1999; Sered 1998), including, amongst others, the Tomb of Rachel the Matriarch in Bethlehem, the tomb of Maimonides in Tiberias, and the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. It must be noted, however, that most of these sites are recognised as saintly graves based on later traditions and do not necessarily mark the saintly figure’s (*zaddik*) exact burial location.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Galilee region in general and, more specifically, the Upper Galilee city of Safed, where new lunar months (*Roshei Hodashim*) were announced, became the main Jewish centre. Tiberias, on the shore of Lake Kinneret (Sea of Galilee), was also an important spiritual centre in Mishnaic and Talmudic times, and the Sanhedrin (an assembly of 71 ordained scholars, which served as both a legislature and a supreme court) was relocated there from Yavne. During this period, the Galilee also emerged as an important centre for Jewish sages and poets, and Safed and Tiberias took their place as two of the four Jewish holy cities.

For example, one of the most important of these major peripheral centres in Israel is the tomb of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai, located on Mount Meron near Safed. Shimon Bar-Yochai lived during the second century and preached against the Romans, from whom he lived in hiding in a cave for 13 years. He is believed to have written the *Zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the most important book of Jewish mysticism (Levy 1997) and to have performed miracles. Pilgrims visit the site throughout the year, but mass visitation occurs only on the festival of *Lag Ba’omer* (the 33rd day after Passover), which is the site’s major day of celebration. On this single day, an estimated 250,000 people visit the locale, representing approximately 5 per cent of all Israeli citizens, whereas the site’s estimated annual number of visitors stands at approximately 1.5 million. The site is a major attraction of domestic tourism in Israel, drawing members of all segments of Jewish society in the country and imbuing the place with a largely popular character. Other major peripherally located pilgrimage centres of a popular character include the

tombs of Rabbi Yonatan Ben-Oziel near Safed, Rabbi Meir Ba'al Hanes near Tiberias, Rabbi Akiva in Tiberias, Honi Hamegel at Hatzor Haglilit in the Galilee, Rabbi Yehuda Bar-Elaee near Safed and many more.

Most if not all of these sites are located in peripheral areas. According to the Israel Ministry of Tourism, the number of annual visitors to each of these locations is estimated in the tens of thousands. At the sites themselves, religion, folk beliefs and customs mix freely. Each locale is believed to have its own special properties, and, on this basis, pilgrims come to pray, to ask for personal favours and blessings (*brachot*), and to seek assistance related to marriage, health and fertility. People also visit the sites to meet up with family members, friends and others, and to eat, talk and even dance.

Since the 1980s, new sacred sites for Jewish saints have been established or 'discovered' in several Israeli development towns. Several studies, such as those of Weingrod (1990, 1998) and Ben-Ari and Bilu (1997) and Bilu and Ben-Ari (1992), reflect on the reasons for this new kind of peripheral site and find that the socio-cultural and political characteristics of Israeli society, in conjunction with the new Jewish immigrants who arrived in the country in the 1950s, primarily from Muslim North Africa, were major factors in their emergence. These immigrants brought with them the popular Muslim tradition of '*ziyara*', or visitation of the sacred graves of holy figures. About ten such minor centres currently exist throughout the country and their number is growing. Most have only a limited hinterland, but some are popular throughout the entire country and enjoy a large number of visitors throughout the year, especially on Jewish holidays and the *hillulot*, marked by a gathering at the grave of the saintly figure on the anniversary of his death.

The major reason for visits by these Jewish 'traditional' (*masorti*) believers is their faith in the holy persons themselves and in what they have to gain from the visit. Most traditional visitors are women of all ages from throughout the country, usually of low to medium socio-economic status. Most of them are of Sephardic origin, and many typically visit the sites as part of an organised group, asking for assistance relating to fertility, health, marriage, or some other personal need. The women place their written supplications on the gravestone of the saintly figure, light candles, and tie coloured cloths around the branches of a 'wishing tree' in hopes of having their wishes granted.

The most popular site of this kind is the Tomb of the Baba Sali in the town of Netivot in the Negev Desert region of southern Israel. Another pilgrimage site of this kind is Rabbi Chaim Chouri's tomb in Beer Sheva (Weingrod 1990). Many tombs located in North Africa—in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, in particular—also attract visitors from Israel, who visit them as pilgrims.

The number of pilgrims/tourists to these sites has continued to increase, and new platforms are being used to increase public knowledge and awareness about this burgeoning practice. Social media, Internet forums, general information websites, and websites of specific sites are becoming increasingly widespread, reflecting not only a proliferation and an increase in the number of sites but also the more general religious resurgence that is currently underway throughout Israel.

Heritage, educational and diaspora Jewish tourism

The term 'heritage tourism' has been used to denote the interest of large numbers of visitors in aspects of a nation's history, archaeology, culture, religion, art and natural landscape (Prentice 1993; Timothy 2011). This meaning is consistent with Boniface and Fowler's (1993: 150) definition of heritage as 'the cultural expression of what makes us what we are, our spiritual DNA'.

Jewish heritage tourism (JHT) is defined as the supply of, and demand for, sites and activities connected to the Jewish faith, culture and tradition, including both relics of the past and products of the present (Krakover 2012, 2013, 2017).

Overall, in the category of ‘roots tourism’, ‘diaspora tourism’, ‘pilgrimage to memorial sites and concentrations camps’, ‘pilgrimage of nostalgia’, and ‘heritage tours’, JHT has been on the rise since the turn of the millennium and has been the focus of many different studies (Biran, Poria, & Oren 2011; Cohen 2016; Kidron 2013; Krakover 2012, 2013, 2017; Russo & Romagosa 2010; Stone 2006; Stone & Sharpley 2008). Most research on Jewish diaspora tourism relates to Holocaust sites around the world but also to sites and experiences in Israel (Feldman 1995, 2001, 2002, 2005; Gruber 2002, 2007; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Collins-Kreiner and Olsen (2004) have offered a comprehensive segmentation of the element of demand, spanning heritage tours, interaction tours, solidarity missions and ritual tours.

Jewish heritage tourism is a complex segment combining different visitors with different motives that all relate to their Jewish identity and are therefore addressed in this chapter. Some can be classified as ‘roots tourism’, meaning Jewish visitors trying to find their identity while visiting Israel, while others can be classified as ‘event tourism’, as in the case of Jewish families coming to Israel to celebrate a ‘Bar-Mitzvah’ (a Jewish boy’s 13th birthday) (<http://barmitzvah-in-israel.co.il>). Such an event is partially religious in nature and partially heritage-oriented, and the differing levels of each element, depending largely on the religiosity of the family, provides a good example not only of how such a visit could be located at different locations along Smith’s 1992 continuum, but also of the difficulty of differentiating amongst different activities, motivations and characteristics.

Another interesting market within JHT is the ‘educational tourism’ segment, which also includes a variety of programmes. Some of these programmes are intended for high school and college students and young adults, and others are open to all ages (www.jewishagency.org). However, they all have one thing in common: their aim of strengthening the Jewish identity and connection to Israel of Jews living outside the country (Cohen 2016).

Numerous researchers have examined other patterns of Jewish tourism, including Cohen Ioannides and Ioannides (2006), Ioannides and Cohen Ioannides (2002) and Kugelmass (1993), who investigated patterns of Jewish travel in the United States. Other researchers have written about aspects of Jewish summer youth trips to Israel, and especially the impact of ‘Taglit-Birthright Israel’, which provides young adults between the ages of 18 and 26 with a free educational trip to Israel (see, for example, Chazan 1992, 1997; Cohen 2016; Kelner et al. 2000). Other works include Goldberg’s (1995) ethnographic perspective on visits to Israel, Shapiro’s (2001) study of the three-month *Livnot u’lehibanot* work-study program, Heilman’s (1995) study on the visits of members of the Young Judea youth movement, and Cohen’s (1999) work on the ‘Israel Experience’.

The year 2000 witnessed the launching of the above-mentioned Taglit-Birthright program, which quickly came to have a significant impact on the world of Jewish educational tourism. Within a decade, this programme had several hundred thousand alumni, primarily but not exclusively from North America (Cohen 2016). Another initiative launched around this time was the MASA Israel Journey program, which provided a cohesive umbrella organisation to match young adults with long-term study programmes lasting from several months to several years. Available programmes cover a wide range of areas of interest such as archaeology, ecology, history, religious studies, Hebrew language, community service and more. Between 2004 and 2011, some 55,000 individuals joined study programmes via MASA. The growth in participation in these three main branches of organised educational tourism—Israel Experience,

Taglit-Birthright Israel and MASA—is notable, with around 10,000 to 13,000 people participating in each one in 2011 (Cohen 2016).

Solidarity tours of Jewish visitors and interaction tours are also part of the heritage tourism market and are currently offered by different organisations in Israel. There are also currently numerous international projects with different itineraries that bring youngsters to Israel for short visits (Cohen 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the primary aspects that have characterised the varied and diverse relationship between Judaism and tourism over time. First is the fact that pilgrimage to holy sites in general, and to Jerusalem in particular, was the most prominent feature of Jewish tourism in the past and remains so today. Second is the fact that there appear to be several motives, and different combinations of religious, heritage and cultural reasons, for travel in the context of Jewish tourism. Whether or not Jews feel a personal affinity with Israel or Judaism, current Jewish travel patterns suggest that their cultural and religious identity have a strong influence on their touristic activities.

Third, it is clear that this trend is consistent with the current literature (Badone & Roseman 2004; Collins-Kreiner 2010; Smith 1992) regarding the growing de-differentiation amongst pilgrimage, religious tourism and heritage tourism, as well as between the sacred and the profane. A good example of this continuum and the growing de-differentiation is the case of Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Jews, known in Hebrew as 'Haredim'. This group's population in Israel stands at approximately 700,000, constituting some 10 per cent of the country's overall population. Studies have postulated that because each subgroup within this unique population is different in its socio-economic, cultural and religious attributes, they each display a significantly different set of travel expectations and consumer behaviour patterns, from totally religious travel, motives and behaviours to almost secular forms of travel, focused primarily on leisure and enjoyment (Cahaner & Mansfeld 2012).

The fourth conclusion is that the commodification of national identity and ethnicity has been one of the most distinctive features of Jewish tourism development over the past decade. One motivation for this process has been increased interest, amongst Jewish communities and individuals, in learning more about their collective pasts and identities by discovering family roots and expanding their awareness of past historical events and places.

In conclusion, Jewish tourism today is a complex term that brings together a wide variety of sites, motives, visitors, meanings, worldviews and identities and appears to be well suited to more fluid theorisations of the conceptual boundaries between sacred and profane, as the sacred comes increasingly to encompass practices and sites that are not necessarily religious at all.

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