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News

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King David's Tomb
Israel news photo

Israel's Control of Mt. Zion in Danger

by Hillel Fendel

(IsraelINN.com) Ten-year-long negotiations between Israel and the Vatican appear to be drawing to a close, with concerns rising that Israel will cede control of the building housing King David's Tomb in Jerusalem.

The Bilateral Permanent Working Commission – a team of negotiators representing Israel and the Vatican – released an upbeat press release at the end of last week, speaking of "meaningful progress," "great cordiality," and a mutual commitment to reaching a final agreement "as soon as possible."

Tellingly, a plenary meeting has been announced for this Thursday, April 30, at the Foreign Ministry. The meeting will be chaired by the two states' deputy foreign ministers, Danny Ayalon and Monsignor Pietro Parolin. It is widely believed that the agreement will be signed then.



Church Demands Parts of Mt. Zion

The two states have been negotiating a treaty since March 1999 on matters having to do with Church-owned or Church-claimed property in Israel. Among the most significant issue under negotiations is the Vatican's demand for the Last Supper room, located on the second floor of the ancient Mt. Zion building that also houses the tombs of Kings David, Solomon, and Hezekiah.

In addition, the Vatican is claiming areas around Lake Kinneret, as well as in Caesaria and Jerusalem.

Hints and implications in the Vatican and Catholic press have long indicated that the negotiations are expected to end successfully, from the Catholic vantage point, in time for Pope Benedict's visit to Israel two weeks from now.

"This is a shame and a disgrace of unequalled proportions," said Daisy J. Stern, M.D., who has been leading an information campaign on the topic. "Giving away these important areas has no Halakhic [Jewish legal] validity, of course, but signing it away will definitely make it very difficult to ever reclaim them."

Mt. Zion - International Center for Catholics?

At present, since shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Diaspora Yeshiva



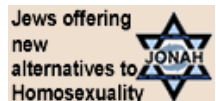
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has run the Mt. Zion compound, on which it is located, and warns of the catastrophic implications for Israel and the Jewish People if the deal goes through.

The director of the yeshiva explained that if the Catholic Church receives control of the area, just a few hundred yards from the Temple Mount and adjacent to the Old City walls, it will turn it into "the international center for Catholics all around the world, and if the pope just gives the word, Christians will be flocking over here en masse."

"This is an enormous issue that is being pushed through without any public debate whatsoever," he said.

Vatican Signs Agreement with Arab League

Dr. Stern notes that though there had been reports that an agreement might be signed last week, "nothing happened – except that while they [the Vatican representatives] were talking with Israel, they signed an agreement with the Arab League. This is very worrisome. There are no details on the agreement with the Arab League, except that it aims to promote 'peace, security and stability.' Who knows what that really means? Are they dividing up the spoils of the future Vatican agreement with Israel – or perhaps they are preparing for the next Arab war with Israel? We don't know."

"This new agreement with the Arab League renders the Vatican, most gravely, an interested party in the Israeli-Arab dispute," said Prof. Hillel Weiss of Bar Ilan University, who has been closely following the issue.

Of further concern is the fact that Israel is investing some 6 million shekels in improvements and renovations to various sites in preparation for the Papal visit. Work at the Last Supper room has been underway for some time.

Blueprint of an Agreement

A Foreign Ministry official confirmed in 2005 that a "blueprint of a possible agreement with the Vatican has been received." The proposed contract, as *Israel National News* reported at the time, read as follows:

"The State of Israel hands over to the Holy See the use of the Cenacle [the room of the event known as the Last Supper, above King David's tomb - ed.], of the access path to it, and of the spaces adjacent to it... It is the Holy See's intention to inform the Bishops - and through them the world's Priests - that the Catholic Church has been given the use of the Cenacle, inviting them to visit the Holy Place together with their faithful... The Holy See hands over this use of the Cenacle to the Custody of the Holy Land [which acts on behalf of the Holy See]... [which] will keep the Cenacle open from 6 AM to 8 AM for the celebration of the Holy Mass... Official liturgical celebrations of non-Catholic Churches can take place only upon prior written permission by the Custody of the Holy Land."

The proposed agreement also stipulated that the Holy See will preserve the historic character of the site and keep it open to pilgrims and tourists, and that Israel will provide for the safety of the site. The Foreign Ministry official said at the time that "Israel is not prepared to relinquish its jurisdiction over this area." The world will find out later this week whether this position is still valid.

Rabbi Mordechai Goldstein, who founded and still runs the Diaspora Yeshiva, officially known as Yeshiva Toras Yisrael, told *Israel National News* in the past that "according to their bible, the Land is to return to the Christians, and 144,000 Jews are to return to Mt. Zion. Their plan is for them to take control of the site, and then to announce that they are holding a mass reenactment of the Last Supper, with [all types of religious rituals], and to invite millions of Christians to come to Jerusalem and celebrate." Rabbi Goldstein said that this means much tourism money for Israel, and that someone in the Israeli government is apparently very interested in making this happen.

The King David's Tomb complex, some 100,000 square feet, is "certainly one of the holiest spots in the Land of Israel," a yeshiva source said. "David, Solomon and others kings of Judea are said to be buried here. We've already given away the Temple Mount and the Machpelah Cave, except for here and there

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when we're allowed in; now they want to give Mt. Zion away as well? For thousands of years, this area was almost always totally closed off to Jews. G-d gave it back to us in 1948, but parts of it were still in range and sight of Jordanian snipers and were not in full use. After 1967, Rabbi Goldstein founded the Diaspora Yeshiva here - and it became an island of holiness, the first yeshiva for baalei teshuvah [newly religious] in Israel; we were there day and night learning Torah. Rabbi Goldstein was almost prophetic in establishing this yeshiva at that time at that spot; destiny from above intertwined him with Mt. Zion."

Dr. Stern and others are attempting to organize a public protest, beginning with an email and fax campaign to Deputy Foreign Minister Ayalon, who will represent Israel at the Thursday meeting. The Director-General of the Foreign Ministry can be emailed at mankal@mfa.gov.il, and the fax number is 02-5303704 (from abroad, replace leading 0 with 972).

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