

# Unearthing the Conflict: The Jewish-Islamic Dispute Over the Museum of Tolerance at Mamilla Cemetery

In the heart of Jerusalem, amidst the ancient ruins and sacred sites, lies a contentious battleground that has ignited a heated debate between the Jewish and Islamic communities: the proposed Museum of Tolerance at Mamilla Cemetery. This ambitious project, intended to commemorate the Holocaust and bridge cultural divides, has instead become a catalyst for deep-seated religious and historical tensions.

## The Mamilla Cemetery: A Sacred and Contested Ground

Mamilla Cemetery, established in the 15th century, is one of the most revered Muslim cemeteries in Jerusalem. It is the final resting place for thousands of Muslim scholars, saints, and historical figures, including the renowned Sufi mystic Shams al-Din al-Sufi. For centuries, the cemetery has been a site of pilgrimage and spiritual contemplation for Muslims around the world.



## Contesting Symbolic Landscape in Jerusalem: Jewish/Islamic Conflict over the Museum of Tolerance at Mamilla Cemetery by Yitzhak Reiter

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## **The Museum of Tolerance: A Vision for Reconciliation**

In 1995, the Israeli government proposed the construction of a Museum of Tolerance adjacent to the Mamilla Cemetery. The museum, founded by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, was envisioned as a place to educate visitors about the horrors of the Holocaust and promote tolerance and understanding between different ethnic and religious groups.

### **The Conflict Erupts**

The announcement of the museum's construction sparked immediate opposition from the Islamic community in Jerusalem. They argued that the museum's proximity to the cemetery would desecrate the sacred burial ground and violate Islamic religious beliefs. The Wakf, the Islamic religious authority responsible for the cemetery's upkeep, filed a lawsuit to prevent the construction of the museum.

### **Religious and Historical Objections**

The Islamic community's objections to the museum were rooted in their religious beliefs regarding the sanctity of burial grounds. In Islam, cemeteries are considered sacred and inviolable, and any disturbance of them is seen as a grave offense. The Islamic leaders claimed that the construction of the museum would create noise and disturbance, which would interfere with the tranquility of the cemetery.

Additionally, the Islamic community argued that the museum would distort the historical narrative of the Mamilla Cemetery. They emphasized that the cemetery was a Muslim religious site, not a Jewish one, and that its proximity to the museum would give the impression that it was part of a Jewish heritage site.

## **The Jewish Perspective**

Proponents of the Museum of Tolerance argued that the museum would be a valuable educational tool and a symbol of reconciliation between Jews and Muslims. They claimed that the museum's location adjacent to the cemetery was not meant to disrespect the Muslim burial ground, but rather to emphasize the universality of human suffering and the need for tolerance.

The Jewish community also highlighted the need for a place to commemorate the Holocaust in Jerusalem, a city that had been central to Jewish history and had witnessed its own share of suffering during World War II. They argued that the Museum of Tolerance would be a respectful and appropriate memorial to the victims of the Holocaust.

## **Political and Legal Challenges**

The conflict over the Museum of Tolerance quickly became entangled in political and legal battles. The Israeli government, determined to proceed with the construction of the museum, faced fierce opposition from the Islamic community. Street protests, legal challenges, and international pressure ensued.

In 2000, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled against the construction of the museum, citing the potential harm to the Mamilla Cemetery and the need to

respect the religious sensitivities of the Muslim community. The ruling caused widespread disappointment among the Jewish community and led to further tensions between the two religious groups.

## **The Role of UNESCO**

In 2016, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the Mamilla Cemetery as a World Heritage Site. This designation further strengthened the Islamic community's argument that the museum should not be built, as it would violate international law regarding the protection of cultural heritage sites.

## **Ongoing Negotiations and Compromise**

Despite the legal setbacks, the Israeli government and the Jewish community have continued to pursue the construction of the Museum of Tolerance. In recent years, there have been ongoing negotiations with the Islamic community to find a compromise that would address the concerns of both sides.

One proposed compromise is to relocate the museum to a different site, while still maintaining its proximity to the Mamilla Cemetery. Another proposal involves modifying the design of the museum to minimize its impact on the cemetery.

The conflict over the Museum of Tolerance at Mamilla Cemetery reflects the complex and intertwined histories of Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem. It is a battleground where religious beliefs, historical narratives, and political tensions collide. As the conflict continues to unfold, it is vital for both communities to find a path forward that respects their respective religious sensibilities and fosters true understanding and reconciliation.



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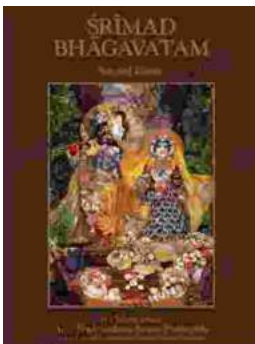
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