A ‘barbaric thing’

Israeli archaeologist sifts through dust of Temple Mount history

BY TOBY TABACHNICK  
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Thousands of archaeological relics containing the history of one of Israel’s holiest sites — the Temple Mount — rest in a dump less than a mile away in the Kidron Valley.

The brutal disposal of centuries of Jewish and Christian history is the work of the Islamic Waqf, which has controlled the Temple Mount since 1967. Beginning in November, 1999, the Waqf started using bulldozers for construction and renovations on the site, making no effort to preserve the rich archaeological remains there that date back to the First and Second Temple eras, and illegally dumping the relic-laden dirt.

But Israeli archaeologist Gabriel Barkay, and his team of volunteers, are doing their best to put the pieces of the history of the Temple Mount back together again.

“A toothbrush would have been too big [to use on that site],” Barkay told the Chronicle. “And they used a bulldozer. It’s the most barbaric thing one can think of. It shows a cultural battle against something other than Islam. And it was done on purpose.

“They removed in this barbaric act a quantity of 400 truckloads of earth that were saturated with the history of the Temple Mount,” he continued.

Barkay was in Pittsburgh this week to address various groups around the city about his work as director of the Israel Excavation Society Sifting Project, which, since 2004, has sifted through tons of debris at the dump site, and has recovered tens of thousands of artifacts documenting the early history of the Temple Mount.

Barkay, who was born in Hungary in 1944 and immigrated with his family to Israel when he was a child, stopped in Pittsburgh as part of a wide North American lecture tour to raise awareness — and funds — to help complete his project. The Bar-Ilan University professor, and recipient of the 1996 Jerusalem Prize for Archaeological Research, is also known for his discovery of ancient biblical texts containing the priestly benediction that pre-date the Dead Sea Scrolls by 400 years.

While here, he addressed the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on “Who’s Buried in Absalom’s Tomb?” (spoiler alert: it probably isn’t Absalom), as well as an audience at the Ellis School on his discovery of the priestly benediction scrolls.

On Tuesday, he spoke to a packed room at Rodef Shalom Congregation on his project recovering artifacts from the Temple Mount.

In the Torah, the Temple Mount is referred to as both Mt. Zion and Mt. Moriah, Barkay told the crowd at Rodef Shalom, and comprises one sixth of the Old City in Jerusalem.

Its historical significance to Jews dates back to Abraham’s binding of Isaac, through the First and Second Temple periods, until 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the Temple.

“But Jews never ceased to visit the place, to venerate the place,” he said.

A pagan shrine was built on the site in the second century, he said, and later came under the rule of the early Christians. In 638 C.E., the Muslims conquered the site.

“Later, various traditions emerged connecting Muslims to the Temple Mount,” Barkay said, although “Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Quran.”

“The Temple Mount is not only the soul and heart of the Jewish people,” Barkay said, “but it is also venerated by Christians and Muslims. It became a disputed piece of real estate — the most delicate and disputed real estate in the world.”

Many Muslims now claim that Jews have no history on the Temple Mount, Barkay said.

“These views, unfortunately, are widespread now,” he said, “but they are disconnected from reality. Temple denial, and the denial of a Jewish link to the Temple Mount, is spreading to intellectual circles in the West, including intelligent people sometimes.”

Barkay, though, has been recovering a plethora of tangible evidence of the presence of ancient Jews on the Temple Mount through his sifting project, even
Rabbi Akiva visited ruins of the holy of holies, a fox jumped out at him,” Barkay said.

But the most important discoveries, Barkay said, are the inscriptions.

“The inscriptions are directly telling us what people wanted us to read,” he said.

The project, which he heads along with Zachi Dvira under the auspices of Bar-Ilan University, is funded by The City of David Foundation and private donors, with the cooperation of the Israel National Parks Authority.

Barkay’s talks at the Ellis School and at Rodef Shalom were sponsored, in part, by Classrooms Without Borders, which supports the education of educators through study seminars abroad, and programs at home. Pittsburgher Marc Rice, a retired cardiologist with a keen interest in archaeology, traveled this past summer with CWB to Israel and saw first-hand the work of Barkay.

“It’s tragic that this stuff was just taken out and dumped. But it is brilliant to grab this stuff and go through it. You never know what you’re going to find.”

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