

FEELING THE KOSEL

The *Kedushah* of the Western Wall

The Torah delineates three levels of sanctity for the areas of encampment around the Mishkan in the *midbar*, known as Machaneh Yisrael, Machaneh Leviah and Machaneh Shechinah and forbids entry to *tamei* persons according to the type of *tumah*. These three camps had their counterparts in the time of the Beis HaMikdash: 1) the city of Yerushalayim corresponded to Machaneh Yisrael, 2) the Har HaBayis platform corresponded to the Machaneh Leviah and 3) the Temple with its inner courtyard, the Azarah, corresponded to the Machaneh Shechinah (*Zevachim* 116b). There is a negative commandment punishable with lashes for one who had contact with a corpse or had a bodily emission to enter Har HaBayis, but a person with corpse *tumah* who enters Machaneh Shechinah or its counterpart, the Azarah, the Main Courtyard, is punishable with *kares*. *Zevachim* 32b discusses the situation of a *tamei* person standing outside the Azarah and performs shechitah with a long knife, reaching inside the Azarah, where the animal must be positioned for shechitah. This involves a person just extending his hand into a forbidden area but does not actually enter – this is called partial entry.

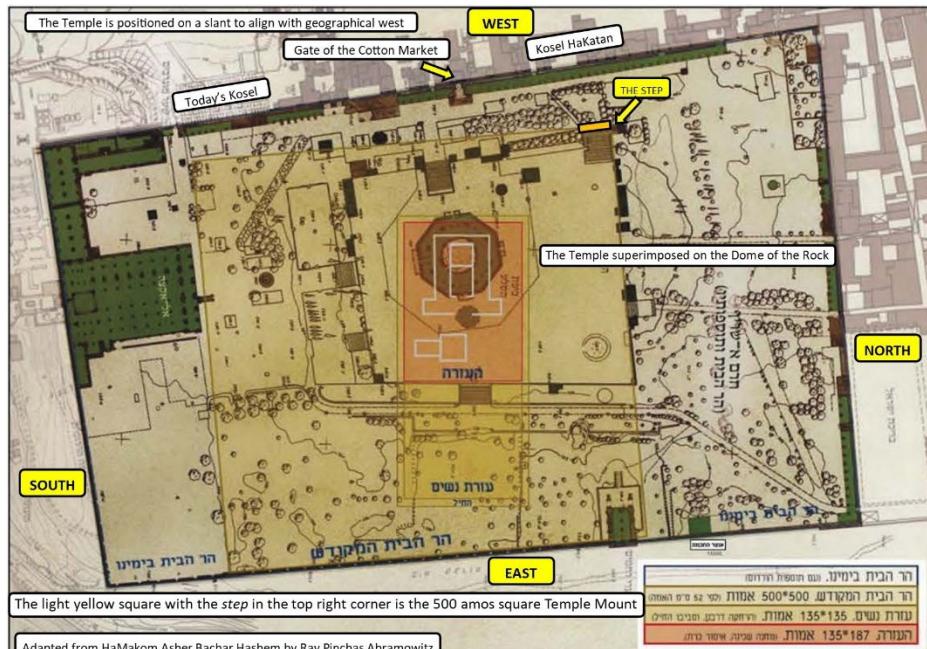
PARTIAL ENTRY

This discussion may have practical application nowadays in connection with the question of inserting one's fingers into crevasses between the stones of the Kotel, depending on the holy status of that wall. In our earlier article about the status of stones fallen from the Kotel, we referred to the question about its level of sanctity. The Kotel HaMaaravi is traditionally acknowledged as being a remnant of the western wall of the Beis HaMikdash, but there is uncertainty about which area it surrounded – is it the Azarah, the Temple Mount, or an area outside both of these? Rambam rules that the destroyed areas of the Mikdash retain their sanctity, and if the wall has retained Temple sanctity, inserting a finger into a crack in the wall may be regarded halachically as partial entry, which may be forbidden to certain *tamei* persons (*Rambam, Hilchos Beis HaBechirah* 7:15). Nowadays, everyone has the status of having had contact with a corpse and we have no way of removing that *tumah*. A person who has had a bodily emission such as *niddah*, *keri*, or *zav* can purify himself in a *mikveh*, and waiting for sunset, but a woman who has experienced childbirth is required to bring an offering to remove childbirth *tumah*, which is now not possible. Penetrating the Azarah area is much stricter for people who generally have corpse *tumah*, which cannot be removed, and entry is punishable with *kares*. Let us explore the debate about the sanctity of the Western Wall.

THE RADVAZ'S TESHUVAH

The Radvaz, the earliest authority to discuss the status of the Kotel HaMaaravi, surprisingly indicates that he considered the Western Wall to be the wall of the Azarah (*Teshuvos Radvaz* 2:691). It is estimated that the *teshuva* was written around 1552, when he lived in Yerushalayim, after having acted as Rav of Cairo for forty years. His question concerned community members who wished to pray as near as they could to the former location of the Beis HaMikdash. They would ascend balconies of Muslim dwellings built alongside the western perimeter of the Temple Mount. The Mamluks took control of the area in 1260 and encouraged the Muslims to construct their dwellings as close as possible to the Temple Mount. They raised the level of their buildings to that of the Temple Mount by constructing arches supported by the Western Wall, so balconies overlooked the Temple area towards to East. There was a tradition brought by the Kli Yakar (*Bereishis* 13:17) that one can be motivated by a unique attachment to the Shechinah when praying while looking at the floor of the destroyed Beis HaMikdash. The present-day Kotel section of the Western Wall was covered with buildings or waste at the time and was inaccessible, but residents of the Muslim quarter would allow Jews to pray from their balconies overlooking the floor of the Temple. Alternatively, they stood in the opening of Gate of the Cotton Market which is in full view of the Dome of the Rock – see

diagram. Today, Jews pray at the Kotel HaKatan, in between Muslim residences, a little further up the Western Wall. The question posed to Radvaz was whether it was permitted to stand on these balconies because of their proximity to the Temple Mount area, and his response has puzzled *poskim*, who see inner contradictions with what he says. The Radvaz appears to have detailed knowledge of the structures and measurements, but it is difficult to reconcile his measurement calculations with the facts on the ground. The Radvaz's designation of the Kotel HaMaaravi as the wall of the Azarah, implies that the area on the opposite side of the wall must have the status of the Har HaBayis, with all the attendant restrictions, which is obviously not the established *halachah*. As it cannot



be the wall of the Azarah, most *poskim* assume that it must be the wall of the Har HaBayis and that the Kosel Plaza does not have these restrictions, but some warn against touching the crevasses of the wall. However, I feel that an important authority like the Radvaz would not have made such obvious errors and that there is a possible solution to this enigma.

POSITION OF THE SQUARE

Many have attempted to reconcile the measurements of the Har HaBayis as described in the first chapter of *Mishnayos Middos* as a 500 by 500 *amos* square, with the size of today's Temple Mount, which is twice that area and is not square. Another early source is Josephus's *Antiquities*, which relates the story of how King Herod wanted to befriend himself to his Jewish subjects by rebuilding the dilapidated Temple into a magnificent structure. The walls he reconstructed are still visible today on all sides of the mount, identifiable by his distinctive margins on the masonry. However, these walls enclose an area of Har HaBayis which is twice the 500 *amos* size, and Josephus explains that his enhancements involved extending the Har HaBayis to cover a greater area. The original square must be located somewhere on the present-day Temple Mount, but the question is how to position this square within the larger area? Leen Ritmeyer devoted 30 years to researching this question as part of an archeological team and published the results of his research in his book, *The Quest*, which is essential reading for anyone interested in this subject. He discovered that the lowest step of a flight of stairs ascending the platform of the Dome of the Rock was of ancient stone, a survivor of the top of the destroyed wall of the original 500 *amos* Har HaBayis. This provided the position of the northwest corner of the 500 *amos* square. Imagine his excitement when he measured the distance from that point to the Eastern wall as exactly 500 *amos*. He used the Royal Egyptian cubit (*amah*) of 52.5 cm. as the size of his *amah*, based on the length of measuring sticks displayed in the British Museum and in the Egyptian Museum of Torino. *Divrei Hayamim* 2:3:3 relates that King Solomon was instructed to build the House of HaShem using *amos* "after the first measure" (*targum* translates this as ancient measure), which implies that he was to use a non-regular size for his *amah*. 52.5 cm measure was an ancient measure used internationally for Royal buildings. This discovery fixed the position of the 500 *amos* square, and this view is now being accepted by many experts in the field.



The Step

THE THICKNESS OF THE WALL

The Radvaz had no doubt that the Dome of the Rock was built to protect the *shesiyah* stone, the peak of Mount Moriah and the location of the Holy of Holies. He used that as his starting point to measure the extent of the Azarah area, which was clearly forbidden, and ruled that balconies facing within eleven *amos* plus the width of the wall, were forbidden. Eleven *amos* was the area between the back of the Temple and the Azarah wall, but he left the width of the wall undefined. The concept that the width of the wall attains the same *kedushah* as what is inside the wall is a *sugya* in *Pesachim* 85b and here the Radvaz applies this principle to include the storage room abutting the rear of the Temple. The Radvaz must understand that the part of the Western Wall that is directly facing the Azarah has the sanctity of the Azarah by virtue of it being its retaining wall. This is my understanding of Radvaz's designation of Azarah status for consideration of the *poskim*.

RECONCILING RADVAZ

In order for Herod to extend the Temple Mount area, he had to build retaining walls at a greater distance from the Temple and then fill the gap to raise the ground to the level of the Mount platform. Thus, the walls served two functions – that of a boundary wall and as a bulkhead for the landfill supporting the platform above. We can now understand the principle which attributes the *kedushah* status of the Azarah to any ancillary part of the structure without the need to sanctify that part. As long as the Azarah had its own retaining wall, the *kedushah* stopped with that wall. However, with the destruction of the walls of the Azarah at the time of the Churban, the outer Western Wall now constituted the retaining wall of the Azarah, and as such, acquired the status of the Azarah. Thus, we have a situation where the Western Wall gained Azarah wall status even though it is 80 meters (130 – 160 *amos*) from the Azarah, as the intervening area is considered the thickness of the wall. This answers the question posed by the *poskim* that is the Kosel is the wall of the Azarah, consequently the Plaza must have the status of Har HaBayis. According to my theory, if the Kosel attains its Azarah status because of the thickness of the wall principle, that does not create HaHabayis status for the Plaza.

WESTERN WALL OF FIRST TEMPLE ORIGIN

The Radvaz also states that large foundational stones indicate that the wall dates back to the First Temple. Whilst many argue that that the Western Wall was built by Herod, the four massive stones which can be seen in the tunnel underneath the Muslim quarter surely indicate First Temple origin. The largest stone, which is 45 feet long, is estimated to weigh some 570 tons, and the archeologists have absolutely no logical explanation as to how such large stones were lifted onto the lower course of stones. If they date from Shlomo HaMelech, we can understand that they were part of the miracles associated with building his Temple. The stones higher up are Herodian, but Herod may have chiseled the early stones to make them match the new stones, as Herod indeed did on the Eastern Wall. Why did they build a third retaining wall to the west of the First Temple at a slight angle to the other walls? Rav Alex Hool suggests that this Western Wall served as a sun clock to determine the exact time of midday. Our day is lop-sided, starting 4 mil before sunrise but ending three-quarters of a mil after sunset. The angle of 10 degrees creates a shadow at exactly the halfway point which is 33.5 minutes before noon (<https://torahway.org.uk> – 6th February 2025 and 18th March 2025). This Western Wall is today regarded by many as having no *kedushah*, but we have demonstrated why it may possibly have sanctity, and a basis for avoiding touching it.