The Mormon University on the Mount of Olives: A Case Study in LDS Public Relations
Blair G. Van Dyke
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Not all Mormon buildings are of the same magnitude nor import. Temples rank highest among adherents; chapels are exceedingly important; and institutes of religious education lie near the core of Mormon priorities as do facilities related to Church humanitarian undertakings. And next to temple construction, history may eventually bear out that the boldest building project undertaken by the Mormon Church in the twentieth century was the construction of Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies on the Mount of Olives.1 It stands today as an impressive eight-level building, with terraces gently cascading down the western slope of the mount, as if the limestone had been chiseled away to reveal the 117 delicate arches that compose the façade of the building. Each arch frames the Old City of Jerusalem and the Holy Mount sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is an architectural masterpiece (Berrett & Van Dyke, 2005).

What does the Center communicate about Mormons? For members of the Church, the Jerusalem Center was the concrete manifestation of their roughly two-decade presence in the Holy Land; a permanent place where Mormons in and around Jerusalem could meet and worship together. For Brigham Young University, the building housed their growing Near Eastern Study Abroad program, which had been operated out of a series of hotels and then a kibbutz south of Jerusalem. For Mormons, the Jerusalem Center was the logical outgrowth of their many years of cooperative coexistence with Jews in Jerusalem, specifically and with Israel generally.

However, for a small but very vocal segment of the Israeli population—primarily made up of Orthodox Jews organized into anti-missionary groups—the Jerusalem Center communicated grave peril to Jewry, even before it was constructed.2 These groups resolutely believed the Center was the impetus of an unmitigated Mormon missionary plot designed to convert Jews. From their vantage, this threatened the very fabric of Jewish life and the State of Israel as a distinctive Jewish nation because if you convert a Jew you simultaneously destroy his or her soul and inflict harm upon Jewry world-wide. The perception that Jewish souls hung in the balance created intellectual license among some Jews to construct theoretical paradigms to justify fierce opposition against, and in many instances, wholesale persecution of the Mormons.

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1 Brigham Young University is a private university of approximately 26,000 students. It is owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is located in Provo, Utah.
2 Judaism is not a monolithic faith tradition. Judaism supports a spectrum of belief, ranging from Orthodox on one end to Secular on the other, with Conservative and Reform movements in between. Orthodox are characterized by a desire to represent, as closely as possible, a set of practices that correspond to the written (codified in the Torah) and oral traditions (codified in the Talmud) that were given to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai and that both are binding. Some who self-identify on the even more traditionalistic end of Orthodox Judaism (often referred to as Haredi, literally “those who tremble” before God) believe that in order to abide by the law, separation from society at large is essential. While the Orthodox live in pluralistic societies, pluralism is not sought after nor endorsed. Rather, a tireless pursuit of Jehovah’s one true way is essential. The more traditionalistic Orthodox Jews hold that separation from mundane society is the most resolute way to adhere to God’s principles. Rationalism and humanism prevalent in western civilization are not valued by this sub-spectrum. They generally yearn for theocratic manifestations of governance couched in the Torah and Talmudic law and view themselves as the only true manifestation of Judaism. Secular Jews, at the other end of the belief spectrum, value Judaism as a cultural force in their lives but do not acknowledge the need to maintain or promote robust spiritual sensibilities at the expense of rational thought (i.e., reading the Torah as the literal word of God or following strict dietary laws). Generally speaking, Secular Jews value pluralism. For additional information consult Trepp, L. (2000). Judaism development and life. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
Yad L’Achim ("Hand to the Brothers") was the most outspoken Orthodox Jewish group to oppose the Jerusalem Center. Other like-minded groups, like Am Israel Hai and Agudat Yisrael, lent considerable support to the opposition as well. The specific purpose of Yad L’Achim then and now is to guard Israel from proselytizing efforts among the Jewish people. Yad L’Achim was certain that Mormon claims that the Center would be used for university purposes were a ruse. They identified Mormonism as one the most aggressive and successful Christian proselytizing organizations in the world, thus established a very aggressive defense. They proliferously churned out hundreds of articles, editorials, interviews, political cartoons, press releases, and reports of lectures opposing the Center that they felt “unveiled” Mormon intentions. Their efforts were calculated to protect Jews in Israel and the greater Diaspora from what they saw as an insidious Mormon threat. Additionally, they engaged radio and television, public rallies, documentaries, debates, and public protests that effectively conveyed their opposition to the Mormon building project to Israelis and to media markets abroad (Casper, 2003). Their sole intention was to block the construction of the “Mormon University” (as the Jerusalem Center came to be known by locals).

The opposition levied by Yad L’Achim and other like-minded Jews was so effectively orchestrated that their message took on a life of its own. Jews and Jewish sympathizers in the United States, Great Britain, and other parts of the world joined the discussion through letters to the editor of major newspapers, petitions to the Israeli Knesset, United States Congress, and so forth. In spite of their many years in Jerusalem, Mormons were being defined almost entirely by their opponents. Under these pressures, the Mormon Church formulated theoretical constructs to undergird a robust defense of the Jerusalem Center project and to justify their ongoing presence in a nation that appeared to be increasingly hostile toward them. Mormon responses were launched through various media outlets in Israel and abroad.

Fortunately, compilers and archivists have collected the volatile exchange of ideas between Mormons and the small, yet vocal factions of Orthodox Jews. My purpose is to go beyond the compilation of media artifacts and explore theoretical justifications for arguments articulated by opponents of the so-called Mormon University. Similarly, I will examine theoretical justifications for arguments the Mormons placed before the public to counter opponents to the Jerusalem Center. Finally, I will suggest, how this caustic fight, waged on an international stage and utilizing multiple media formats, continues to inform Mormon public relations today.

Two Fundamental Reasons for Opposition

Brigham Young University Travel Study groups first arrived in Israel in 1968 and enjoyed an ongoing presence in Jerusalem for seventeen years before opposition erupted in August 1984 (Berrett & Van Dyke, 2005). On August 21, bulldozers started making necessary cuts into the face of the Mount of Olives for construction of the BYU Jerusalem Center. This was

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3 It is noteworthy that in September 1984, one month after the ground breaking for the Jerusalem Center, Rodney Stark published his landmark study “The Rise of A New World Faith” (Review of Religious Research, 26 (1), 18-27). Stark estimated that in the passage of one century Mormon membership would climb to 250,000,000. His projections were based primarily upon robust growth from proselytizing throughout the world. It is generally agreed that these projections will not be met. However, Stark did provide evidence that Mormonism was destined to be the first world religion to emerge since Islam. It is possible that this study played some role in the heated opposition levied against the Mormons. However, further research is required to firmly draw this conclusion.

4 See, for example, Brigham Young University, Harold B. Lee Library, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, UA 952, Boxes 7-11.
the first visible indicator that a small religious group from the United States, known (among other things) for their resolute commitment to proselytizing, had acquired what could arguably be the finest piece of property in Jerusalem. Relations between Mormons and all segments of Jewish society prior to that time had been generally harmonious.

What turned these peaceful relations to turbulence almost overnight? We can identify two fundamental reasons for the opposition. First was the perceived purpose of the Center to proselytize Jews to Mormonism; and second, constructing the building on the exceptionally significant Mount of Olives. The Jews that most vigorously opposed the Mormon University, such as members of the anti-missionary group Yad L’Achim, believed souls were at risk and in retrospect it appears that they would go to almost any lengths to protect the Jewish people from the Mormon ”threat.” The documented history of their attacks against the Mormons reveals an uncommonly fierce campaign. Their arguments were usually laced, if not saturated in, ad hominem including dehumanizing caricature, abusive verbal exchange, and threats of physical harm—even murder.

**Spiritual Colonialism (Conquest by Proselytizing)**

Colonialism is the process of one group placing another group under their control—usually from a distant location. The Orthodox Jews that openly opposed the Jerusalem Center frequently framed their arguments in theoretical constructs grounded in spiritual colonialism—conquest of Jews through proselytizing sponsored by the distant Salt Lake City-based church. In other words, Judaism, as a religion, was positioned in a spiritual framework independent of concrete markers such as blood descent from Jewish ancestry and physical proximity to spiritual conceptions of time and place. Anti-colonialism arguments asserted that concrete markers of Judaism such as bloodline descent from Jews or one’s homeland can be negated through spiritual migration or conversion to another faith tradition. This spiritual conception can be observed in a letter written by Yehuda Schwartz, titled, “Open Letter To The Mormon Chiefs”, wherein he claimed that Mormons “speak of peace but you plan a religious war against our people—a war for our very souls . . . You speak of culture but you mean conversion” (Schwartz, August 16, 1985, para. 11-13). Similarly, a Yad L’Achim publication stated:

> the Mormon Church is known as the most powerful of all missionary groups and is legendary in its aggressiveness in church activities. Their verbal commitment is meaningless. . . . Only the simple will not see through their overt activities whose main purpose and target is the Jewish people in redeemed Zion . . . [to] enable them to drip their poisonous Christian doctrine on unsuspecting and ignorant JEWISH children (“Time Bomb on Mount Scopus,” 1985, para. 7).

Moshe Porush, the leader of Yad L’Achim, wrote that allowing the Jerusalem Center to proceed “is like inviting a thief into your home to prove you are not afraid of thieves” (Porush, 1985, p. 8). Finally, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres was laying a wreath to commemorate the lives of those who died at the Belsen Concentration Camp in Germany, and during the services two Orthodox Jews were protesting against the Mormon University in Jerusalem. They shouted, “How can you honour the six million if you agree to the Mormons continuing the Holocaust? . . . He who kills a Jew takes from him only this world, while he who makes a Jew abandon his faith, takes from him both this world and the world to come” (Struminski, 1986, 1).
Invading warriors, thieves, collaborators in holocaust—it would be difficult to vilify Mormons more poignantly in the Jewish media. At the core, the arguments emerge from a spiritual conception of Jewry.

“**This Holy Mountain should be Jewish**” (Mormon Conquest of Jewish Land)

The fact is, most Israeli Jews are not and were not Orthodox and most were not alarmed by the potential of Mormon spiritual colonialism. For example, Aharon Nahmias (Jerusalem Post Magazine, June 14, 1985, 10) a member of the Israeli Knesset, made an effort to “soften the hyper-suspicious attitude of religious members of the Knesset to Mormon activities in Israel” by saying, “Don’t be so anxious. They’re not allowed to drink tea or coffee, not to mention any kind of alcohol, and the faithful have to give a tithe to the church. How many Israeli Jews would convert under such terms?”

But at the same time, many other Jews, Secular to Reform to Conservative, do ascribe a very real **Jewish-ness** to the land itself—especially land that is deemed significant to the history and culture of the Jewish people. In such cases, their protest was not that Mormons were building a center in Israel—this was acceptable to them—but rather, they opposed its location on the **Mount of Olives**; this was unacceptable. In his letter of resignation as a lecturer to visiting BYU students, Israeli Jew Joshua J. Adler captured this perspective. He wrote:

> In light of the controversy surrounding the building of the BYU Center on Mt. Scopus, I feel that I can no longer in good conscience continue to lecture to the BYU groups as I have in years past. Although I have no objections to the BYU building a campus here in Israel I do feel that the Mt. Scopus location should not go to any non-Jewish organization whether Christian, Moslem or Mormon. . . . In my view, had BYU been offered a less prominent location on the Israeli landscape all of the controversy would have been avoided and I would have been among those speaking in favor of the project (Adler, J., August 19, 1985. [Letter to D. Kelly Ogden]. Copy in possession of Blair G. Van Dyke).

Two months earlier Adler had voiced similar concerns in a letter to the editor of The Jerusalem Post, and added, “Zionism once meant that Jews redeem the land from non-Jews and build Jewish institutions on it. Today we find so-called Zionist leaders doing the opposite, which to me is both regrettable and a distortion of what Zionism was in the past and should again be in the future” (Adler, 1985, p. 8).

It is evident that Adler’s concerns stated in this letter are not situated in spiritual conceptions of Judaism and the potential threat Mormons might pose in this regard. His concern is concrete: Mormons are not Jewish, their building will not be a manifestation of Jewish culture or ethnicity, and therefore, Mormons should not be granted the right to build on the Mount of Olives—a Jewish mount. Similarly, Rabbi Solomon Sharfman explained that

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5 The Mount of Olives is divided by name into three segments: Mount Scopus (northern end), Mount of Olives (central), and Mt. Scandal (southern end). Taken together they collectively constitute the Mount of Olives. In the earliest literature, the Church and Brigham Young University identified the site for the Jerusalem Center as the Mount of Olives. Geographically, this identification is reasonable. At the same time, the Center is very close to the northern portion of the mount, so Mount Scopus is also a reasonable designation for the Jerusalem Center.
standards of tolerance in Israel are unmatched anywhere in the world. Christian and Moslem houses of worship have not been molested or opposed. All are free to worship as they choose. The Mormons themselves have three centres here—in Jerusalem, Herzilya, and Tiberias—and there has been no opposition to them. The Mormon Center on Mt. Scopus, however, is “a special case” because of its location (Sharfman, December 24, 1985, p. 8).

Many opponents to the Center anticipated two options for the Mount of Olives site: that a very “Jewish” building would occupy the site or it would be left in a natural condition. For example, it was common knowledge that the site the Jerusalem Center now occupies had been unofficially designated as the future location for the Supreme Court of the State of Israel (Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, pp. 36-37; Sharfman, October 25, 1985, p. 9). The Mount of Olives was also part of an established “green belt” surrounding Jerusalem that, by design, would prevent many construction projects in order to maintain a pristine view of historical Jerusalem (Berrett & Van Dyke, 2005, pp. 376-377). However, once Jews of this general bent learned that the Mormons had acquired the land legally (having complied strictly to all demands placed upon them by the government), their frustrations often shifted away from the Mormons and were aimed instead at city or national leaders that made it possible for the Mormons to build on that site. In the words of Adler: “To me this is all unfortunate and I blame [Jerusalem] Mayor Teddy Kolleck for having pushed through the program. . . . I trust that you will understand and hope that somehow may yet be found to change the location of the future BYU campus” (Adler, J., August 19, 1985. [Letter to D. Kelly Ogden]. Copy in possession of Blair G. Van Dyke).

Additionally, Sharfman explained that

We came to Israel to leave the ghetto, and to live in a country where Jews and Jewish culture are dominant. . . . We cannot blame the Mormons for misunderstanding this, but our leaders must be held to account for their actions. The issue is not one of exclusiveness, but of national self-respect. It is not fear of diverse ideas that motivates opposition to the Mormon centre, but a profound sense of our collective self-respect (Sharfman, December 24, 1985, p. 8).

In the end, when a different site was not imposed upon the Mormons by government authorities, most Jews yielded. Their physical conception of Jewry gave way to a stronger ethic of legalism and pluralism—values of Judaism manifest through the secular governance of the modern state of Israel.6

But this was not so with the small Orthodox anti-missionary organizations such as Yad L’Achim. Just as proselytizing was to them “spiritual colonization,” acquiring control of a portion of the Mount of Olives constituted physical colonization. One protestor in Jerusalem’s Sabbath Square held up a large sign that was pictured in the Jerusalem Post that read: “Should the most beautiful of the state’s lands be given to a missionary cult?” (Golan, 1985, p. 2) The theoretical construct of this argument, and a host of others similar to it, was grounded in strong communitarian leanings and flooded Israeli media markets and beyond. In other words, many

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6 The Mormons were meticulous in obtaining necessary approvals and meeting all requirements associated with leasing the land and acquiring subsequent building permits from the Israeli government. These requirements included supplying public notice in major Israeli newspapers that construction was near-at-hand and that concerned citizens could voice opposition to the project within a certain time frame if they so desired. That time came and went with no significant opposition (Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, pp. 42-43).
Jews, in light of their collective history, culture, and religion, possess a vision of what a Jewish Jerusalem should be like. Threats or disruption to that community vision are subject to the sensibilities of the members of the society in question (for an overview of communitarian thought, see P. Devlin, 1965). Rabbi Sr. Sholom Gold reflected this perspective in his comments opposing the Mormon University:

The struggle against the Mormon Centre is not the outgrowth of fear, paranoia or galut-bred psychology. On the contrary. Jewish pride, grandeur, and home-grown self-respect motivate the tens of thousands who oppose the Brigham Young Campus. What is at issue here is the prophetic vision of a holy Jerusalem that should be a centre for Tora study, Jewish ethics and morality, demonstrating clearly for all to see the beauty, dignity and eternal message of Judaism. This city is not a second Rome, Mecca, or Salt Lake City. Its skyline should be punctuated with structures of Jewish learning and culture reflecting our response to the historic challenge and opportunity of 2000 years. Those who fear opposition to the Mormon Centre are guilty of the galut psychology of “What will the Goyim say?” That most choice site on Mount Scopus overlooking the Temple Mount should be reserved for something uniquely Jewish (Gold, 1985, p. 11).

The argument rooted in physical colonialism reached a zenith when its focus went from significant public land to property that was infused with ritual significance—specifically a connection to the Holy of Holies of the Second Temple. Yehuda Schwartz explained that Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, “spit on the deep sentiments and legitimate rights of the Jewish people wishing to protect themselves from ‘alien gods’ by supporting and allowing the construction of a Mormon Temple which would overshadow our Holy Temple Mount” [emphasis added] (Schwartz, August 23, 1985, para. 3). Other Jewish opponents of the Mormon University called for BYU to abandon the building or sell it “so that a yeshiva might be erected on this holy spot, overlooking the Holy of Holies” (Shapiro, November 15, 1985, p. 1).

These examples illustrate how opponents to the Mormon University crafted communitarian arguments designed to convince the public that the physical and spiritual continuity of Jerusalem were in jeopardy. The Mormon University was not a university at all, they argued; it was like a temple—a sinister and unwelcome rival to the ancient Holy of Holies. Just as in terms of spiritual conquest, nothing would be more persuasive to Orthodox Jewish sensibilities than connecting supposed missionary intentions of the Mormons to the Jewish Holocaust and the destruction of souls. So it was that in terms of physical conquest, nothing would be more persuasive than depicting the Mormon University as a foreign attempt to replace, or at least overshadow, the site once occupied by the Second Temple including its Holy of Holies. As one activist proclaimed, “Our failure to act will result in . . . an irreversible degradation of our Holy Capitol. We must collectively try to save the sanctity of Jerusalem for the Jewish people for all generations” (Schwartz, July 19, 1985, p. 2).

Orthodox anti-missionary organizations led an effective public relations campaign, flooding major domestic and international newspapers with letters to the editor opposing the Jerusalem Center, organizing rallies that included prominent Israeli personalities and pop stars, utilizing television and news outlets whenever possible, and a host of other activities. Notably, their aggressive political tactics in the Israeli Knesset gave them momentum among certain constituents of the Jewish population in Israel and abroad. Even though the Mormon Church and Brigham Young University had complied with every legal requirement necessary to construct the
Center, they were losing a public relations battle which was being waged on an international stage. The Church’s image and identity were being dictated almost wholly by outsiders. In Israel, the perception was that Mormons were generally what their enemies told the public they were. Up to this point, the Mormons had lacked a voice in the media and a response to the accusations being waged against them.

**The Mormon Response**

August 1, 1985 was a watershed moment for the Mormon Church regarding how it responded to the bombardment of opposition against the BYU Center. Up to this point, Mormons operated under assumption that their verbal commitments not to proselytize would be taken at face value by all Israelis. In February, 1985 Elder Howard W. Hunter, Elder James E. Faust (both Mormon apostles), and Jeffrey R. Holland, president of BYU, traveled to Jerusalem to offer assurances to Israelis through the editorial staff of *The Jerusalem Post* that the Center would not be used as a base for proselytizing Jews (Shapiro, February 21, 1985, p. 5). But in March, opposition from Yad L’Achim and other groups (like Agudat Yisrael) began to gain considerable traction in the Orthodox communities of Israel and beyond. It is likely that Mormons underestimated the power of these organized attacks against the Center, and they did not launch a media campaign of any serious consequence at this time although BYU Study Abroad director in Jerusalem, David Galbraith did write a letter to the editor of *The Jerusalem Post* countering a piece written by the leader of Yad L’Achim, Moshe Porush (see Galbraith, Mormons in Jerusalem, *The Jerusalem Post*. March 8, 1985, p. 15). In May, Orthodox anti-missionary groups demanded that Mormons provide formal written commitments that they would not proselytize in Israel. As reported in *The Jerusalem Post*, David Galbraith told the chairman of the Knesset Interior Committee, Dov Shilansky, that the suggestion was “demeaning”, adding that “the oral pledges given, when permission was sought to establish the Mormon Jerusalem Centre for Near East Studies on Mt. Scopus, were stronger than any written undertaking” (Mormon Leader Calls MK’s Demand ‘demeaning,’’ May 29, 1985, p. 2). Just one month later, opposition had heated to a point that construction was on the brink of being halted by the Israeli government and Mormon leaders agreed to the demand to sign a formal pledge.7

This brings us to August 1, 1985, which was the day Jeffrey Holland signed the commitment. Shortly thereafter, he was in Jerusalem with the document in hand, and “He chose to deliver the pledge in person to emphasize the importance he and university officials attribute to the centre” (Shapiro, August 7, 1985, p. 3). This personal delivery was likely motivated by a carefully orchestrated demonstration of seven thousand Orthodox Jews at the Western Wall in Jerusalem to offer a “prayer of mourning” against the planned Mormon University (Shapiro, July 19, 1985, p. 2). Earlier demonstrations against the building project rallied thousands of protestors near the construction site on the Mount of Olives and an estimated twenty thousand demonstrators at a separate rally in the Mea She’arim district of Jerusalem. The opponents of the Mormon University had established a critical mass of keenly interested and active followers.

Even so, what Holland (1985) determined during his August 1985 visit was that “the mainstream citizen, the man in the street was terrifically confused about all the publicity and

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7 Kuper, T. (1985, June 14). “Agudat Yisrael Totally Opposed to Mormons,” *The Jerusalem Post*. Jeffrey R. Holland sat on a committee with Howard W. Hunter and James E. Faust of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church. This committee was created by the Church’s highest governing body--the First Presidency. Holland functioned then as president of Brigham Young University and a member of this significant committee (see Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, p. 34).
emotion swirling around [the Jerusalem Center]” (“Visit to Jerusalem Clarifies BYU’s Role,” p. 7). When he arrived in Jerusalem all members of the media referred to the Jerusalem Center as the Mormon missionary center “because that’s all they heard from the protestors. By the time we had been there a day or two, they were using the center’s official name. . . . I think when we went into it we were probably 20-80 behind, and now we’re 65-35 ahead. So I feel good about the trip” (“Visit to Jerusalem Clarifies BYU’s Role,” p. 7). Holland’s comments were telling. The Church had been defined by its opposition in the media which had almost wholly swayed public opinion. BYU spokesperson Paul C. Richards (1985) explained shortly after Holland’s return that “we need to counter misinformation that’s circulating with facts. People seem willing to listen and talk and welcome information if we will provide it for them” (“Jewish Leaders Offer ‘Significant Support,’” p. 3).

As university administrators and Church Public Communications/Special Affairs officials considered the best way to frame a response, their decision was somewhat counterintuitive, but essential. There was a need to “de-Mormonize” the Jerusalem Center as an institution in the eyes of the Israeli public and concerned Jews in the greater Diaspora. The theoretical justification for this argument follows John Rawls’ theory of “political liberalism,” which demands “public reasons” in order to promote and defend public positions in a pluralistic society (Rawls, 2005). These reasons include the appeal to arguments that resonate across sectarian lines. Furthermore, Jeffrey R. Holland’s reference to “the man on the street” resonates with the writings of Lord Patrick Devlin, who championed community values as the basis of public policy. Devlin maintains that complex and difficult questions confronting society may be answered by the collective common sense found in the people of the community itself—namely, “the man in the street” (Devlin, 1965).

Though the theoretical positions of Rawls and Devlin served as rival theories, in this instance, political liberalism and communitarianism provided a cocktail suitable for Mormon use in their public relations campaign. It was determined that the most suitable media strategy for the Church was to create a more robust barrier between the Mormon Church and the Mormon University and allow the common sense of typical Israelis—the vast majority of which were not Orthodox—to determine if the Mormon University was, in fact, a legitimate institution of higher learning or an institution devoted to executing stealth evangelizing activities from a prominent building camouflaged as a university.

Laying aside the “Mormon faith” in this Rawlsian fashion would make it possible to keep the debate out of the unpredictable landscape of faith-based charges. All arguments set forth by Mormons would attempt to situate meaningful dialogue and disagreements under the lamp of public secular scrutiny that could be ruled upon by secular law; wherein public reasons—not religious reasons—established the criteria for resolving disagreements between parties.

A previous approach similar to this was taken by Harold B. Lee, the first president of the Mormon Church to travel to Jerusalem. He arrived with Apostle Gordon B. Hinckley in September 1972, and David Galbraith, resident director of Brigham Young University’s Travel Study program in Israel, arranged for the high-ranking Mormons to meet with the two chief rabbis of Jerusalem. Both rabbis were very aware that the Mormon Church places immense focus on proselytizing, and this troubled them. Galbraith, who was in the meeting, describes the exchange between the Jewish and Mormon leaders:
In violation of protocol, I suppose, before hospitable greetings were even shared, one of the rabbis asked, ‘Does your visit signal the desire of your faith to proselytize in Israel?’ The response by President Lee was inspired. He said, ‘We do not come in through the back door to any land but through the front door invited.’ I saw those two rabbis relax, and I could see them thinking to themselves, ‘Well, we will never invite you, and you won’t come through the back door, so we can be friends.’ The meeting went on for a half hour, and it was delightful (Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, p. 33).

Lee neutralized the unpredictable situation by taking Mormon faith claims and intentions relative to proselytizing in Israel off the table. In fact, his “front door—back door” descriptor of the Mormon’s strict adherence to national policies and laws regarding proselytizing was employed throughout the oft-times tumultuous engagements with concerned Israeli citizens, government officials, and Jews living abroad. For example, in a letter to the editor of The Jerusalem Post, David Galbraith wrote:

The Mormon missionary programme is not found in a single country in the world where we do not have the authorization of the host government or, in other words, where we have been invited through the “front door.” Likewise in Israel, without such authorization, the Church would not engage in proselytizing nor seek to send missionaries through the “back door” in the guise of university students (Galbraith, March 8, 1985, p. 15).

With this as a background, a similar approach was taken in the mid 1980’s relative to the Jerusalem Center. To accomplish this, Church Public Communications argued their case in three basic public domains: historical, political, and legal (addressed below). It is also significant that near the end of 1985, the Church hired Gitam Image Promotion Systems (hereafter known as Gitam), an Israeli public relations firm, to more carefully and strategically execute these goals (Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, 46-47; Berrett & Van Dyke, pp. 396-397; “Mormon Centre Progresses on Two Fronts,” 1985, p. 9). This outside help was essential. Tensions ran so high against the Mormon University at this time that fifteen armed guards patrolled the Jerusalem Center construction site nightly to protect the rising building from being vandalized (Mormon Centre Progresses on Two Fronts, 1985, p. 9).

**Historical**

Significantly, Mormons and Jews have lived side-by-side harmoniously in Salt Lake City for over 125 years. In the midst of the Mormon/Jew skirmish in Israel, leaders of the Jewish community in Salt Lake City (1985) sent a telegram to the Israeli Prime Minister, to the President, to the mayor of Jerusalem, and to ministers serving in the Israeli government. The missive explained that Mormons are trustworthy partners in community affairs, are honest in their dealings individually and collectively, and that a commitment from the Mormon Church can be wholly relied upon. They heartily endorsed the construction of the Jerusalem Center on the Mount of Olives and encouraged Israeli officials to clear the way for the completion of the project. The telegram specifically stated:
For over 100 years, the Jewish and LDS communities have coexisted in the Salt Lake Valley in a spirit of true friendship and harmony. It has been our experience that when the leaders of the LDS Church make a commitment of policy, it is a commitment which can be relied upon. The stated commitment of Brigham Young University not to violate the laws of the State of Israel or its own commitment regarding proselytizing in the State of Israel through the Jerusalem based Brigham Young facility, is a commitment which we sincerely believe will be honored. This belief is supported by our long experience in being neighbors with the LDS Church and the special relationship of mutual respect and understanding which exists between our two communities and, in particular, the LDS Church’s affinity for the State of Israel (“Utah Jewish Council Endorses BYU Center,” p. 7).

Richard P. Lindsay (1985), managing director of the Public Communications/Special Affairs Department, said at the time that “the relationship of mutual trust, confidence and respect which has existed between our Jewish and Mormon communities for more than 100 years should be the best answer to those in Israel who fear the presence of the Mormons there (“Utah Jewish Council Endorses BYU Center,” p. 7).” Similarly, to quiet fears about aggressive proselytizing of Jews to Mormonism Rabbi Eric A. Silver of Congregation Kol Ami in Salt Lake City wrote an open letter in the Jerusalem Post assuring Israeli Jews that the Mormons would keep their commitments. Furthermore, respected Israeli diplomat, Abba Eban, noted that “authoritative Israeli statistics tell of four conversions of Jews to Mormonism, [and] we know of 17 conversions—of Mormons to Judaism!” (Eban, 1986, p. 10). Ironically, the historical advantage of conversions between Jews and Mormons rested squarely with the Jews.

In December 1985, Gitam arranged for David Galbraith and his family to appear on Israeli television to talk about the Mormon presence in Israel. Galbraith had lived in Israel for two decades, earned a Ph.D at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, promoted educational travel to Israel, and met his wife, Frieda, at an Israeli kibbutz. Galbraith was a long-term advocate for Israel. At one point during the broadcast, Galbraith played recordings of some of the threatening telephone calls he, his wife, and children had received from Jewish opponents to the Center. One caller said: “This is your last warning: we’re bloodthirsty. If you don’t leave Israel, we’re going to kill all of you, one by one” (Berrett & Van Dyke, 2005, p. 396). Other recorded phone calls were played that also made death threats against the Galbraith children. Commenting on the television program, Phillip Gillon wrote in the Jerusalem Post:

Dr. Galbraith . . . played a tape of voices in Hebrew threatening violence by telephone. In the darkest hours of the night against the children of the Mormons if they did not leave the country forthwith. Threats and violence against children! How low can a Jew sink? (Gillon, 1986, p. 11).

Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, also commented on this television program. He said in reference to radical elements in Jewish society:

To where have their idiocy, evil and feelings of inferiority taken them? They started with telephone threats against a few Mormon activists in Jerusalem. They threatened the 5-year-old child of one of the Mormons. They are acting like the Italian Mafia (Fisher, 1986, p. 12).
Galbraith identified this television interview as a turning point in the media effort to portray Mormons in a balanced and positive light that connected well with “the man in the street.” In fact, on the heels of this television appearance, Fisher (1986) reported that the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith offered Mormon officials advice on how to cope with bomb threats against the Center (p. 12).

The Mormon argument to continue building the Center was historically compelling. Framing the historical progression of events from years of peaceful coexistence in Israel to the fierce debate between Mormons and Jews in strictly secular terms was key. From a historical perspective, Mormons were not actively proselytizing Jews in Salt Lake City nor in Jerusalem. Also, Jewish rabbis and other leaders of the Jewish community in Salt Lake City identified the Mormons as trustworthy partners for over one century. Finally, David Galbraith’s family, when viewed in light of the threats they faced at the hands of certain Jews, were viewed very favorably by mainstream Jews in Israel. Faith-based reasons were not given as a defense for the Center nor for the Mormons themselves. Public reasons were provided, couched in actual historical occurrences, and the public relations campaign was more effective.

**Political**

Many Israelis understood that Mormons in America, like Jews in America, enjoyed greater influence in the United States Senate, the House of Representatives, among state governors, and in other high ranking government offices than their mere numbers as a people would suggest. One author explained that “it would be foolhardy to court the hostility of the Mormon community in America” (Goell, 1985, 8). In other words, to offend the Mormons was akin to offending the United States, in some Israeli circles. With this in mind, one of the first public relations moves Gitam put forward with the Mormon question was designed to highlight politically expedient relationships between Mormons and American power. The Congress of the United States of America was solicited to write a letter in support of BYU’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. 154 members of Congress signed a letter, dated May 8, 1986, that stated in part:

One of the main motivations for our longstanding support for Israel has been its commitment to democracy and plurality. Recent events in the region, and increased terrorist activities by numerous states, stand in sharp contrast to Israel’s dedication to democratic ideals and respect for human life. Of course, an important facet of Israel’s democracy has been its commitment to basic freedoms, including freedom of religion. These factors, as well as many others, have formed the basis for the long and healthy relationship we enjoy. . . . By allowing this center to be built and used as intended, Israel will be reaffirming its commitment to pluralism and to the special nature of Jerusalem. We believe that rather than hinder U.S.-Israeli ties, the BYU Center will be a further source of understanding and cooperation between our two countries (Congress of the United States of America, 1986).

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8 It is noteworthy that the president of the Mormon Church during most of the construction of the Center and related opposition was Ezra Taft Benson, former United States Secretary of Agriculture in the cabinet of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.
This letter appealed to the vast majority of Israelis that were not Orthodox and were not seeking a theocracy through which to govern Israel, as were the Orthodox. Most Israelis value pluralism, religious freedom, and democratic ideals. In this way, the letter from Congress to the Israeli Knesset, personally signed by one-hundred and 154 of Congress was compelling. However, the political message was even more convincing. The Mormon University project on the Mount of Olives received political backing from the most powerful governing body on earth. Both aspects of the letter, which was published in all major Israeli newspapers, were significant. Once again, Gitam’s recommended media approach shifted all focus away from the claims of the Orthodox that Mormons were defiant of laws and civil order to achieve their proselytizing ambitions. To the contrary, with the endorsement of the United States Congress behind the Mormons, Israelis willing to view the Jerusalem Center with settled and rational thought were more likely to abandon, or soften, reservations about religious connotations of the Mormon project. David Galbraith explained:

This letter had an incredible political impact. We enlarged it and ran center-page ads in the thirteen or so major newspapers circulating in Israel at that time. Every signature and the committee assignments that particular member of Congress held was included. Then we sent a personal copy of this important letter to every member of the Knesset. Gitam orchestrated this, and it made a powerful impression on most Israelis, including those opposed to our presence (Galbraith & Van Dyke, 2008, pp. 46-47).

Legalism

For many months, Church and university officials, especially David Galbraith, were able to satisfy civic and political authorities with verbal agreements that Mormons would not proselytize in Israel. However, forces brought to bear by concerned Israeli citizens changed that landscape. As described earlier, President Jeffrey R. Holland eventually traveled to Jerusalem to present a formal, written, and binding commitment on behalf of Brigham Young University stating that the Jerusalem Center would not be used for proselytizing purposes. This formal document is dated August 1, 1985. It marked a chapter of legalism in the Mormon University narrative, the very nature of which communicated that the stakes for both sides were now higher. Indeed, the August agreement did not satisfy Orthodox opponents, who easily identified the organizational separation between the university and the Church. In an effort to further appease concerns, Holland’s legal document was followed a few months later by an official letter from Ezra Taft Benson, President of the Church, to Mayor Teddy Kollek. Benson wrote:

Your efforts to keep Jerusalem as an open city and a Holy City for Jews, Moslems, and Christians is most commendable. . . . Hopefully the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies of the Brigham Young University will be a bridge of understanding that will help the efforts to make Jerusalem a city of peace. . . . I am confident that the undertaking given by President Jeffrey R. Holland . . . will be honored. We will also continue to honor, obey, and sustain the laws of the State of Israel and the city of Jerusalem (E. T. Benson, personal communication, December 20, 1985).

Even with this assurance, the government of Israel requested a formal and binding statement from the Church in addition to the legal document signed by President Holland on
behalf of Brigham Young University. This was sensitive terrain to navigate, given the central role proselytizing plays in Christianity generally and in Mormonism specifically. The government of Israel had made no such requests of any other Christian churches in Jerusalem (Berrett & Van Dyke, 2005, 395). Yet political forces made the demand seemingly unavoidable.

Almost three years after the university formally agreed to not proselytize in Israel, the Church crafted a document that succinctly stated: “The Church will not engage in any missionary activity within the borders of Israel.” Howard W. Hunter signed the document in Jerusalem on May 18, 1988. Another document reaffirming the university’s commitment not to proselytize was also signed that day by BYU President Jeffrey R. Holland. In February of 1987, during events leading up to these formal agreements, one final attempt was made by Orthodox activists to derail the Mormon University project. In a meeting with James E. Faust of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, opponents of the Center demanded that the Church formally commit never to proselytize in Israel. Faust explained that the Church would never proselytize uninvited, but that Mormons would “never say never.” Certain Christian imperatives whether in public or in private simply could not be eliminated (Peterson, 1995, p. 346; Galbraith & Van Dyke, pp. 47-49; Berrett & Van Dyke, pp. 397-398). The religious right backed down from their demand and the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies went forward and was completed. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that a significant level of unique legalism had been imposed upon the Mormons through general agreements, specific contracts, uncommon disclosures, and declarations.

Interestingly, the Church used the climate of legalism to their advantage from a public relations standpoint, by weaving legal agreements carefully into published documents in the media, intended to strengthen the Mormon position. For example, Gitam orchestrated the publication in all major Israeli newspapers the August 1, 1985 agreement signed by Jeffrey R. Holland. That document contained four major declarations related succinctly to proselytizing and the agreed role of the university in Israel. The appearance of the statement in the newspaper contained the fundamental attributes of a legal agreement. It bore the name “Professor Jeffrey R. Holland” as the executive of the University, and it included the official seal of BYU. However, while this document contained the basic content of the August 1st legal agreement it also included other important components of the Mormon viewpoint in addition. It astutely communicated philosophical moorings of the Mormons, their historical credibility, a brief chronicle of Mormon grievances received at the hands of certain factions of Israelis, and a firm statement that the “Mormon University” would continue construction to completion and go on to achieve the stated goals and objectives of the Center. The document is a fascinating blend of legalism and public relations in appearance, language, tone, and content, and it was effective. In this way, majority of public opinion was eventually turned to favor the Mormons.

Conclusion

A compelling component of a pluralistic society is the breadth and scope manifest in the media platform that sustains rigorous debate in the public square. The variety of arguments against Brigham Young University’s Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies and their theoretical justifications were impressive. This case had all the complexities expected from a project simultaneously rooted in religious, political, social, and economic considerations. It was a high profile “Mormon moment” that compelled the Church to navigate internal, national, and international media landscapes in order to achieve success.
Some fundamental lessons learned or reinforced in Mormon institutional memory that continue to influence Church interplay with media include, but are not limited to, the following: 1) As a religious minority, faith-based reasons in public arguments will be very difficult—if not impossible to sustain among non-Mormons; 2) leaning heavily on conceptions of public reasons infuses greater impact into Mormon media efforts in Israel and elsewhere; 3) media must reach the masses so that Devlin’s “man in the street” will determine a rational conclusion; and, 4) the Church must be self-defining in the media. The Church has learned in Jerusalem and elsewhere the damage caused by allowing disingenuous opponents to define Mormonism in the media.

As a final note, what does the Mormon University on the Mount of Olives—the actual building—communicate to the residents of Jerusalem? In 2001, Jerusalem city leaders invited Brigham Young University to permanently light the exterior of the Jerusalem Center at night. Significantly, only structures deemed historically and architecturally significant may be permanently illuminated at night in Jerusalem (such as David’s Citadel, the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, the Ottoman walls that enclose the Old City, the King David Hotel, and Hebrew University). It is remarkable that such an invitation was extended to the “Mormon University” a mere fourteen years after students first moved into the building. From this case study it seems apparent that careful engagement with the media, rather than calculated distance from the media, yields greater long-term results for the Mormons.
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