

Rabbis: Holy Site Can Be Shared

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WASHINGTON (AP) - One hundred rabbis declared Wednesday that Judaism does not demand exclusive Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount, the holy site in Jerusalem that is a contentious issue in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

“As Jewish leaders, we do not want the site of our Holy Temple to be an obstacle to peace between our two people,” they said in a statement distributed by the Jewish Peace Lobby, a dovish private group.

The site is considered sacred by both observant Jews and Muslims. A dramatic visit to the site of the ancient Jewish temple by Ariel Sharon, leader of the opposition Likud coalition in Israel, stirred resentment and violence among Palestinians.

The rabbis said they were “horrified by the shedding of blood in our Holy Land” and that they mourn the loss of Palestinian and Israelis lives in prolonged conflict between the two sides.

“We are even more horrified by the emergence of mob violence on both sides of the ethnic divide,” the rabbis said. “We appeal to all those responsible not to inflame or use the passions and anger of young people.”

While the Israeli government has sharply criticized the Palestinian Authority and its leader, Yasser Arafat, for Palestinian attacks on Israeli soldiers and civilians, the statement was evenhanded - taking neither side of the dispute that has claimed nearly 300 lives, most of them Palestinian.

The rabbis said Judaism does not demand exclusive Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount and cited a passage from Isaiah in the Bible that the Temple Mount is a “house of prayer for all nations.”

The rabbis were drawn from the Reform, Reconstruction and Conservative Movement. No Orthodox rabbis signed the statement, according to a lobby publicist.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in July offered Arafat control of some areas of Jerusalem, but rebuffed any attempt to assert Palestinian sovereignty over parts of the city. He has since suggested the dispute over Jerusalem be deferred and that Israel and the Palestinians conclude an interim agreement that would give Arafat most of the West Bank and Gaza and a state.