

A Biblical Promenade Built on Human Remains

Hala Barakat

Al-Yusufiya Cemetery, established during Muslim rule in Jerusalem under the Ayyubid dynasty, is known as the martyrs' cemetery, where soldiers from Palestine, Iraq, and Jordan have been laid to rest since the Six-Day War in 1967. Since 2021, Israeli authorities have actively participated in the leveling of Al-Yusufiya Cemetery and the destruction of graves to make way for a biblical park. This process includes the exhumation of graves, uprooting Palestinian identity deeply interwoven within the layers of history.

These actions are part of the constant structural violence directed toward Palestinians. For Israel, this involves displacing Palestinians and severing their ties to the land through the dispossession of their homes and resting places. The result is the erasure of Palestinian existence and cultural identity enacted through the enforcement of necropolitical laws that justify spatial violence against both the living and the dead.¹

Al-Yusufiya Cemetery is sited just a few meters from Al-Aqsa Mosque on the eastern side of the Old City wall, adjacent to the prominent Lions' Gate, which serves as one of the primary entrances to the Old City. For nearly 800 years, Muslims have interred their deceased in this cemetery, originally commissioned for construction in 1467. Al-Yusufiya holds profound significance for Muslims in Jerusalem, and it is recognized within Islam as the foremost site from which the deceased will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment. According to Islamic belief, on the Day of Judgment the departed will gather in Jerusalem for a final reckoning, as Jerusalem's importance will surpass that of Mecca and Medina, and those buried in this cemetery will be the first to be resurrected.

Property of the Absentee

In 1948, when Israeli forces took control of the western part of Jerusalem and displaced Palestinian residents, they enacted a law that classified all Islamic endowment lands, including cemeteries, shrines, and mosques, as "absentee property," bringing these sites under Israeli state jurisdiction. In 2014, the occupying authorities prohibited burials in the northern section of the cemetery and removed 20 graves of Jordanian martyrs. Through historical revisionism, the municipality now asserts that the cemetery area in question is designated as a public green space in spite of human remains that have been unearthed inside its boundaries. In the same year, Israel prohibited Palestinians from burying their kin in the cemetery and subsequently poured concrete over approximately 40 graves.²

In 2021, the cemetery became a site of renewed conflict between Palestinian residents and the Jerusalem Municipality and Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The latter announced plans to develop a national park in the north of the cemetery and erected a fence that they asserted marks the cemetery's northern boundary. Conversely, Palestinians argued that the cemetery's grounds extend beyond the fence. In fact, during excavations carried out as part of redevelopment efforts in the area, human remains were discovered that appeared to substantiate their claim. Despite this, a legal petition challenging this work was dismissed by the Magistrate Court in Jerusalem. The court persist in clandestinely burying their family members in this area, an act which can be viewed as a form of protest against the infringement of their rights to the land.³

Pour the Earth Over Me

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The act of leveling the ground materializes a relationship between the land, human remains, and elimination as signified by the bulldozer. The violation of Palestinians' rights to the land, whether they are deceased or alive, enacts erasure of Arabic and Muslim identity in Jerusalem. The destruction and sabotage of the cemetery is part of the occupation authority's long-term plan to systematically dismantle and excavate the historic fabric of the city.

Najah Bakirat, the deputy director-general of the Jerusalem Waqf, explained that bulldozing is part of a broader Israeli strategy with three objectives: to eliminate the Palestinian presence, including Islamic cemeteries and residences, and replace them with Israeli parks featuring Hebrew signage; to displace Muslim residents of Jerusalem, leading many to bury their deceased outside the city, while simultaneously attracting and increasing the number of settlers in the city; and to rename public spaces and historical sites and alter the overall geographic landscape.

Bakirat anticipates that Israel's actions will not be limited to targeting just four dunams of the Al-Yusufiya Cemetery but will extend until complete control is achieved. The Israeli Authority of Nature and Antiques has so far shown no intention of relinquishing plans for the biblical park.

While the soil continues to accept the bodies of newly martyred Palestinians, we cannot normalize the ongoing regime of violence. The techniques of settler-colonial occupation in Palestine, marked by their manipulation of both the deceased and the living, underscore the pressing need to abolish the apartheid system today more than ever. Honor them dead and alive, for Palestinians are not mere statistics. They are actively fighting for existence and equity, even when their rightful repose is disrupted.

¹ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

² Jessica Baubuser, "Picnic Alongside Graves: Jerusalem to Build Biblical Park Over Palestinian Graves," *Toward Freedom*, May 20, 2022, <https://towardfreedom.org/story/archives/west-asia/picnic-alongside-gravesjerusalem-to-build-biblical-park-over-palestinian-graves/>.

³ Aseel Jundi, "Jerusalem Palestinians Fight to Preserve Cemetery Site as Demolition," *Middle East Eye*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jerusalem-palestine-israel-cemetery-demolition-fight>.

⁴ Ahmad Melhem, "Israel Demolishes Muslim Cemetery Near Al-Aqsa Mosque to Build Park Al-Munzir," *November 2, 2021*, <https://www.al-munzir.com/signa/2021/11/israel-demolishes-muslim-cemetery-near-al-aqsa-mosque-build-park/#:~:z=81vst6WV>.

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Zionist Anxieties Upon Looking in The Mirror

Ada Newman-Plotnick

An unabridged version of this essay can be read at yalepprika.com.

An utterance of the phrase "from the river to the sea" is nearly guaranteed to make Zionists appretic. As Emmy and Peabody-winning journalist Laila Al-Arian distills: "They want you to think that wiping out entire Palestinian families and bloodlines isn't genocide, but it's genocide to say 'from the river to the sea'."

It is dreadfully boring but absolutely necessary to point out that an argument asserting that the phrase is a call to antisemitic

To be clear, this is patently false. Article 6 of the Palestine National Charter of 1968 states unequivocally: "The Jews who had normally

resided in Palestine until the beginning of the Zionist invasion will be considered Palestinians." According to the foundational documents of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Palestine includes Jews.

However, the Zionist imaginary becomes an excuse for their continued subjugation of Palestinians, in the same way that white nationalists claim "Black Lives Matter" is a coded call for "white genocide."

Why is it so easy for Zionists to imagine this racist fantasy? Perhaps because it is exactly and precisely how the State of Israel established itself, right down to pushing Palestinians into the sea.

On April 25, 1948, nearly three weeks before the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, Zionist paramilitary forces, including the infamous Irgun, began shelling the Mediterranean city of Jaffa, the largest Palestinian city with about 100,000 inhabitants. Over the subsequent weeks, nearly all Jaffan Palestinians became refugees.

As the battle neared its end, Jaffa was so isolated from other routes of escape that 10,000 to 20,000 Palestinians were forced to flee by boat. As Israeli architect and architectural historian Sharon Robard writes in *White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa*, "Such was the sense of panic at the port, many died in their desperation to escape, drowning after having forced off overcrowded boats or from swimming out to reach them. Of all the numerous, unwaranted times the phrase 'push them into the sea' has been flippantly banded around... this may be the only instance in its history when the expression has literally taken form."

In its twisted logic, Zionism equates Jewish liberation with its own national ambitions, and the realization of these ambitions in conditions meant the

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To be clear, I am by no means an expert—though I am a member of the bargaining committee, my involvement in the organizing infrastructure has largely felt like happenstance, finding myself in the right place at the right time. In turn, the observations I compile below are not profound. They are largely practical lessons drawn from the everyday encounters of organizing.

I began organizing at Yale for the graduate worker union when I first started in the PhD program here in the fall of 2017. It has been an auspicious time to be involved with the Local 33 movement to say the least. In those two short years—after 30 years of continuous labor agitation—we collectively built a massive, inter-school movement, won the election in a landslide, and are now well on our way to bargaining a first contract. As we wind down this eventful year, I thought I'd take this last column as an opportunity to reflect on the lessons I carry forward from my experience as an organizer.

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I began organizing at Yale for the graduate worker union when I first started in the PhD program here in the fall of 2017. It has been an auspicious time to be involved with the Local 33 movement to say the least. In those two short years—after 30 years of continuous labor agitation—we collectively built a massive, inter-school movement, won the election in a landslide, and are now well on our way to bargaining a first contract. As we wind down this eventful year, I thought I'd take this last column as an opportunity to reflect on the lessons I carry forward from my experience as an organizer.

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Ola Nabata, a 57-year-old mother to Alaa, who was buried in the cemetery in 2017, asked the Israeli soldiers to bury her next to him and pour the earth over her. Ola clung to her son's grave and successfully prevented the occupation forces from razing his remains. The mother's intuition, however, proved correct; officials later returned with trucks full of steel and soil to cover the remaining graves, including Alaa's. As workers started pouring the soil, Nabata held onto the grave with all her might to prevent them from burying it.

The act of leveling the ground materializes a relationship between the land, human remains, and elimination as signified by the bulldozer. The violation of Palestinians' rights to the land, whether they are deceased or alive, enacts erasure of Arabic and Muslim identity in Jerusalem. The destruction and sabotage of the cemetery is part of the occupation authority's long-term plan to systematically dismantle and excavate the

