

Is this museum of tolerance being intolerant?



DANNY RICH

Non-Jewish graves deserve as much respect as Jewish ones

ON A recent trip to Israel with my teenage son, I stopped at the Mamila (Muslim) cemetery, which I have always walked through en route from the headquarters of the World Union of Progressive Judaism in King David Street to my cousins' home near Meah Shearim.

"When I was on my *shnat* programme, we had an interfaith project to clean up this cemetery. My friends and I would come but the Arab boys and girls rarely turned up," remarked my 18-year-old.

I was rather surprised but quietly delighted that one of his projects of voluntary work in the Jerusalem area had been an interfaith cemetery-cleaning rota.

As we walked around the cemetery, we came to a boarded-up area which abuts it and which is now guarded by casually dressed civilian security personnel. This is the site of Jerusalem's planned Museum of Tolerance. A project of the American-run Simon Wiesenthal Centre, headed by Rabbi Marvin Hier, the site had been

used as a municipal car park where, for nearly 50 years, Jews, Christians and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, rabbis, priests and imams had parked their vehicles without a single protest.

In its submission to the Supreme Court (which backed the construction) the museum trustees produced evidence that a former Grand Mufti of Jerusalem had planned to build a Muslim university on the whole site — both the existing cemetery and the car park — on the basis that it could have been declared *munaras*: abandoned and, therefore, no longer sacred.

Nevertheless, the discovery of skeletons — admittedly some 300 or even 400 years old and without markers to identify name or religion — has thrust the museum into a sea of controversy.

Criticism has been heightened by allegations that the construction company had sought to hide the discovery of the bones, whereas it is a common practice when Jewish remains are discovered for the building work to be halted while the Israel Antiquities Authority investigates, which can lead to reburials, diversion of roads and even changes in plans and location.

A Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem is a fantastic idea but, on a site which offends the religious sensibilities of Muslims, it will become a running sore and hinder the establishment of a peaceful environment in Jerusalem.

The desecration of graves is always painful and Jews certainly know just how wounding it can be. The late, leading Liberal rabbi, John Rayner wrote:

"It is not enough to pray for peace. We have to work for it... to denounce injustice, not only when it is committed against us but also when it is committed against others; to defend human rights, not only our own but also theirs; to insist that peace requires sacrifice — of pride, or wealth, or territory; to practise and promote the way of moderation, compromise and reconciliation; and to build bridges of respect and understanding, trust and friendship, across the chasms that divide humanity."

A Museum of Tolerance offers a unique opportunity to bridge historic divides. But its currently proposed site promises to create further division.

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