Jordan closes Aaron's Tomb after Jews seen praying at site

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Aaron’s Tomb in Jordan was closed by the nation’s Ministry of Awqaf Islamic Affairs and Antiquities on Thursday after the “illegal entry” of Jews to the site without knowledge of the ministry, according to Arab media.  
  
The decision to close the site was made after Israeli tourists were filmed performing “Jewish rituals” at the site, according to the Turkish Anadolu Agency. It was also decided that all visitors would have to obtain approval from the Awqaf in the Ma’an Governorate before entering.

A video circulated on local news websites purportedly showed about 500 Israeli tourists performing rituals in the area.

The site, located on a mountain in the area of Petra, is believed to be the grave of the biblical High Priest Aaron, brother of Moses.

Thursday night began the first day of the Hebrew month of Av, which is also the anniversary of Aaron’s death.  
  
In an interview with Ynet, tour guide Roni Ayalon, who was with the group of tourists, described being subjected to humiliating treatment by Jordanian authorities.  
  
“They just stripped down all of us,” he said. “They took off the women’s head scarves. All the boys’ yarmulkes were taken off. They took off everyone’s shirts to see if they had tzitzit (religious fringes) under their clothes and took [the tzitzit] off them. They confiscated any religious symbols they found on us.”  
  
“If there was this kind of humiliation of an Arab on our side who wanted to enter Jerusalem and they would dare to tell him to take off his shirt or confiscate his Koran, there would be a world war,” Ayalon said. “All the Arabs would jump up. But they can do whatever they want to us.”

At the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock are located, visits by religious Jews are monitored by Wakf guards and Israeli police – and all Jewish prayer, including silent prayer, is forbidden, according to the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. The Wakf, an arm of the Jordanian Ministry of Sacred Properties, administers the site. No sacred Jewish objects, such as prayer books or prayer shawls, may be brought onto the mount, according to tourism website Tourist Israel.  
  
“None of us came to make a mess,” claimed the tour guide.   
“There was one boy who had a bar mitzvah and at Aaron’s Tomb we made a little celebration for him. When the policeman saw that we were singing, he quieted us and said that it’s forbidden for us to sing.”  
  
Purported photos of Jewish tourists at the site which circulated through Jordanian media showed them praying with a Torah scroll.  
  
“I don’t know who read from a Torah scroll,” said Ayalon, according to Ynet. “Our groups acted according to the book. We tried to act in a subdued manner and without opposition, but the behavior [of the authorities] was awful.”  
  
According to Ayalon, the group was forbidden from praying while traveling in Jordan, even in their hotel room.  
  
The Awqaf ministry strongly condemned the entry of the tourists, adding that an investigation will be opened to find out what happened and who was responsible for allowing them into the site, according to the official Jordan News Agency.  
  
Former Jordanian tourism minister Maha al-Khatib stated that the Israeli ambassador in Jordan filed a complaint against measures taken to limit the actions of Israeli tourists, including the requirement for a guide during tours and a prohibition against wearing religious clothing, according to Al Mayadeen. Khatib also accused tourists of attempting to smuggle in religious clothing.  
  
The former tourism minister also accused Israeli tourists, whom she called “the most miserable tourists who make trouble,” of attempting to bury items at various sites in Jordan to “confirm” their claims of their history in the area.  
  
“There is a Zionist scheme to claim ownership of any part of our Arab homeland, especially in archaeological sites,” said Khatib.  
  
“They want to convince the world that any place they went through even for two nights in the old days is their right, but we are not allowed to mention the history of our existence,” said Khatib, according to the Shebab News Agency.