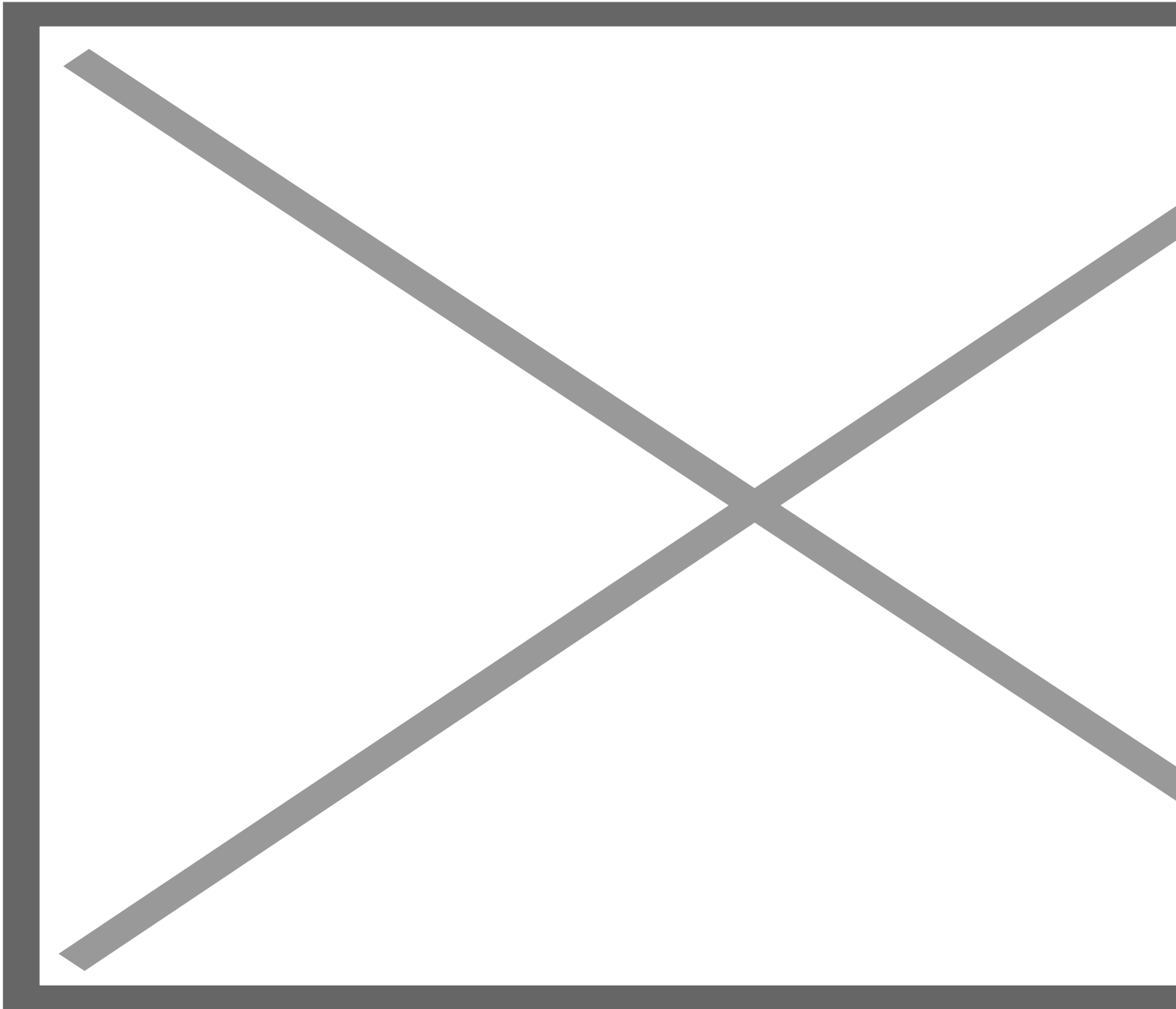


As Jerusalem holy sites reopen, Jews, Muslims, and Christians flock to pray

by [Michele Chabin](#)

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Theophilos III, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, second from left, attends the Washing of the Feet ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, April 9. (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean)

Thousands of Jews, Muslims, and Christians flocked to the Old City of Jerusalem on Thursday to pray at the Western Wall, Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the day after a two-week ceasefire was announced in the war between the United States, Israel, and Iran.

On February 28, Israeli authorities closed all three holy sites to everyone but the clergy who work there, out of fears that Iranian missiles or a siren-triggered stampede could harm large numbers of worshippers.

But on Thursday, for the first time in 40 days, Old City merchants opened their shops in the hopes of making a few sales, while local people and some tourists appeared more interested in reaching the holy sites than buying jewelry or souvenirs—which included hats with images of President Donald Trump and the words “Make Israel Great Again.”

Mabelle Laxinto and Connie Occena, two Filipina caregivers who have lived in Israel for 25 years and 19 years respectively, rushed to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre the morning it reopened. Since the church was completely closed to the public during the war, both women attended Easter services at Catholic churches outside the Old City, where up to 50 people were permitted to pray at any one time.

Still, “it was very disappointing not to be able to celebrate Good Friday in the Old City,” Laxinto said. Even after spending the past 40 days in and out of bomb shelters, both women said they were grateful to live in Jerusalem, where they can retrace the steps Jesus walked.

“We thank God that we live here,” Occena said. “This is the Holy Land, the Chosen Land.”

A group of Serbian pilgrims who had just emerged from the Holy Sepulchre said they had arrived in Israel last Sunday, despite the cancellation of many flights. “We are Orthodox, so for us this is Holy Week,” said a member of the group named Petra.

Traveling to Israel prior to the ceasefire was an act of faith, she said. “Before we left Serbia, everyone said we would be praying to the door, not inside the church. But we prayed for the doors to open, and they did. Ask and you will receive.”

If the ceasefire continues to hold, the group and thousands of other Christians will be able to celebrate Orthodox Easter at the church on Sunday.

Omar Mahmud, a Muslim shopkeeper, was placing some wares outside his little store in the Old City’s Arab shuk, or market, for the first time in nearly six weeks, but he wasn’t feeling optimistic about business or the ceasefire.

“First we had COVID, then Gaza, now Iran,” he said, recalling the crises that have prevented many pilgrims from visiting the region in recent years. “This should have been high tourism season due to Ramadan, Easter, and Passover, but war doesn’t observe holidays.”

Despite the danger posed by Iranian missiles and the shrapnel that fell in the Old City, Mahmud said he believed the holy sites should not have been closed to the public.

“When things are at their worst, people turn toward God, but the holy places were closed,” he said, adding that he was planning to pray at Al-Aqsa in the coming days. “Personally, I think that if something is going to happen, it will happen, regardless of security measures.”

At the Western Wall, Elka Krupka, a computer programmer who lives in Jerusalem, said she could not miss the chance to pray at the second holiest site in Judaism after the Temple Mount, now that restrictions have been lifted.

“Those of us who live here know that things can change very quickly. We don’t know what tomorrow will bring,” Krupka said. “Praying at the Kotel (Hebrew for the Western Wall) is a way for us to keep our spiritual

batteries charged.”

Looking toward the women’s section of the wall, where hundreds of Orthodox Jewish women and teenage girls prayed fervently, many with their hands or foreheads touching the wall’s stones and others placing written prayers in the wall’s crevices, Krupka said she understood why Israeli authorities decided to make the Western Wall off-limits during the war.

“Our soldiers are fighting for us, and I understand that the country needs to choose where to put its manpower. Plus, it wouldn’t have been fair to keep the Kotel open when the other holy sites were closed,” Krupka said, even if it meant that tens of thousands of Jews could not celebrate Passover there this year.

Closing and then opening the holy sites simultaneously “was the right thing to do,” she said. —Religion News Service