

The visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount for Jews or al-haram ash-sharīf (Noble Sanctuary) for Arabs on September 28, 2000 marks a significant downturn in the peace process. While the act is still debated as to who or what is at fault when the al Aksa intafida actually started, and so on, it was this date that can be directly linked to the disintegration of the peace process.

Quickly after Sharon's visit, the rumors spread, as if to underscore his very public declaration, "... this (site) will never be yours" -- a statement directed toward the accord that would give the Palestinians sovereignty over the area of the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aksa Mosque. Among the most prevalent rumors were the number of police and soldiers. The word spread: 2000 soldiers and 613 police. While none of the publicized numbers reflect these in actuality, the rumor became fact and soon began their destructive work among Jews and Palestinians alike.

The number 613 is the most common number of laws in Torah. It is a sign of the covenant. Interpreted symbolically (everything in the middle-east is highly susceptible to symbolism), the paraphrase would be: "This is ours by covenant. It can never be yours." Whether legend or fact, the statement communicated among the people spread despair and mistrust of the peace process among the Palestinians and Jews alike. The conflict escalated.

The middle-east is full of symbolic places and acts. A simple meal can be a covenant of friendship for a life time. A cup of water can become a promise of friendship for a year. A cup of coffee or tea, a greeting with a kiss, so much meaning in such simple acts.

Whether or not Mr. Sharon's visit precipitated the current conflict, it is a symbol that speaks loudly to division and broken relationships. There are other symbols. It was this reality that gave birth to another visit.

As a symbol of peace, a group of Americans will travel to Jordan, Israel and Palestine for a concert tour. Three internationally known opera soloists will join with other notable soloists and singers for a tour called **Prepare the Way... Concert Tour 2007: Peace on Earth, Good Will....** The tour will climax in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve 2007 as a gift of friendship to all the people of the middle-east. That night, they will be joined by members of the Edward Said Palestinian Youth Orchestra to present the Christmas portion of Handel's Messiah.

This tour came about through friendship. Sam Morris, an American pastor who teaches groups of students and Christians in the middle-east was friend with an outstanding choral music conductor, Robert McBain. Through McBain's circle of friendships in the area of classical music, the circle spread, friendship to friendship. So, as a gesture of friendship to the middle-east and with hope for peace on earth, they gather in another place of deep symbolism -- Bethlehem, the birth place of Jesus.