

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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A Holocaust survivor, who discovered the silver scrolls containing the priestly blessing from 600 BC, has passed away

An obituary for Gabriel Barkay by Thomas Paul Schirmmacher

(Bonn, 03.02.2026) Dr. Gabriel Barkay (1944–2026) was a pioneering Israeli archaeologist, born in Hungary as a Holocaust survivor and moving to Jerusalem at age six, where the city became his lifelong passion. He earned his bachelor's degree summa cum laude from Hebrew University in 1967 and his PhD summa cum laude from Tel Aviv University in 1985, studying under luminaries like Yigael Yadin and David Ussishkin. As professor emeritus at Bar-Ilan University, he taught biblical archaeology, Jerusalem studies, and epigraphy, renowned for his encyclopedic memory and engaging lectures.

Barkay's fame rests on unearthing the Ketef Hinnom silver scrolls in 1979—the oldest known biblical texts, inscribed with the priestly benediction from Numbers (ca. 600 BCE). The silver scrolls with the priestly blessing are considered the oldest known written attestations of the Aaronic blessing, showing that this blessing was already in use in Jerusalem in the 7th century BCE. They are therefore of great significance because they vividly illustrate early religious practice and the connection between temple worship, personal piety, and the belief in divine protection in both life and death.



Thomas Schirmmacher and Gabriel Barkay at work sifting relics from the Temple Mount © Thomas Schirmmacher



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He co-founded the Temple Mount Sifting Project in 2004, salvaging over 500,000 artifacts from illegally removed earth from the Temple Mount, illuminating Jerusalem's history from Bronze Age to Ottoman times. Honored with the Israel Prize for Archaeology in 1996 and the Moskowitz Prize for Zionism in 2014, Barkay bridged scholarship and advocacy, fiercely protecting antiquities and antique locations amid political tensions. His vibrant storytelling and unyielding pursuit of truth inspired generations, cementing him as the “dean of biblical archaeology.”



The Temple Mount Sifting Project © Bibelausstellung Sylt/Alexander Schick

The Temple Mount Sifting Project in Jerusalem is an archaeological initiative founded in 2004 by Dr. Gabriel Barkay and Zachi Dvira. It systematically sifts through approximately 400 truckloads of earth removed illegally from the Temple Mount in the late 1990s without archaeological supervision and dumped in the Kidron Valley—particularly during the unauthorized construction of the El-Marwani Mosque in Solomon's Stables by the Waqf authority. Israel's Supreme Court permitted the examination of this debris in 2004 to salvage valuable artifacts and reconstruct the site's history.

The aim is to recover and analyze small finds like pottery sherds, coins, seals, and bones spanning all periods of Jerusalem's history (from the Bronze Age to the Ottoman era), reconstructing the Temple Mount's stratigraphic context since direct excavations there are impossible. Dr. Barkay co-directed the project until his death. Among thousands of artifacts are Byzantine mosaics, Crusader medallions, and Jewish ritual objects, offering insights into the site's layered history.

Alexander Schick recalls: “Gaby, as he was known, was always willing to explain the significance of the finds from the Temple Mount to tourists. He taught at Jerusalem University College (Institute of Holy Land Studies) for over 40 years



Alexander Schick points to his article in the The Temple Mount Sifting Project © Bibelausstellung Sylt/Alexander Schick

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and also taught many of today's evangelical Jerusalem scholars. He is already considered one of the giants of archaeology in Jerusalem and Israel. Rarely has an Israeli archaeologist been accorded such worldwide respect as Prof. Bakay received upon his death. Obituaries for him can be found in The Jerusalem Post, The Times of Israel, and The New York Times. A truly great man has left us. His love for Israel and Jerusalem infected everyone who had the privilege of knowing him."

Downloads and Links:

- **Photo 1:** Thomas Schirmmacher and Gabriel Barkay at work sifting relics from the Temple Mount © Thomas Schirmmacher
- **Photo 2:** Alexander Schick points to his article in the The Temple Mount Sifting Project © Bibelausstellung Sylt/Alexander Schick
- **Photo 3:** The Temple Mount Sifting Project © Bibelausstellung Sylt/Alexander Schick
- **Photo 4:** The silver scrolls with the Aaronic blessing © Bibelausstellung Sylt/Christian Walker
- **Photo 5:** Gabriel Barkay and Thomas Schirmmacher in the Temple Mount Sifting Project © Thomas Schirmmacher
- **Photo 6:** Gabriel Barkay at work, washing excavated material from the Temple Mount © Bibelausstellung Sylt

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