

WATCH

Empty Planes Fly 'Holy Fire' From Jerusalem Church to 10 Countries Amid Coronavirus

The ceremony typically draws tens of thousands of worshippers to an imposing grey edicule in the Holy Sepulchre that is believed to contain the tomb where Jesus lay two thousand years ago



[Nir Hasson](#)

Apr 18, 2020 2:51 PM



The sacred fire is taken out of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem on Saturday, April 18, 2020. Emil Salman

The annual Holy Fire ceremony in Jerusalem's Old City, which is marked a day before Sunday's observance of Easter among Eastern Orthodox denominations, was held on Saturday on a greatly reduced scale due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Normally tens of thousands of pilgrims come from a large number of countries, including Russia, Greece and Egypt for the occasion, but this year, in coordination with the Israeli police and Foreign

Ministry and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, a small group of clergy attended the ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which Christians believe is the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

The Holy Fire, which for the faithful symbolizes the resurrection, was taken from the church through the Old City's Jaffa Gate and from there by motorcade, accompanied by a police escort, to [Ben-Gurion International Airport](#) outside Tel Aviv. Ten aircrafts had landed at the airport earlier in the day from ten different countries to carry the flame back home. The crews from the planes were required to remain on board and diplomats stationed in Israel from the countries brought the Holy Fire to the aircraft.

The Holy Fire rite in Jerusalem, which is observed on a day known as Holy Saturday or Great Saturday, is one of the most important annual religious events in Israel. At the climax of the ceremony, the Greek Orthodox patriarch enters the tomb, the edicule, and emerges with the Holy Fire. It is then disseminated to the faithful in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond using oil lamps and torches.

During normal times, the ceremony is attended by clergy, members of the diplomatic corps and tens of thousands of pilgrims who crowd the narrow alleyways of the Old City awaiting the sight of the flame. The custom has been observed for hundreds of years in accordance with a set procedure that maintains the status quo among the various Christian denominations that have a presence at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Following extensive consultations held by Israeli police and Foreign Ministry with the denominations, an agreement was reached for the event to take place despite Israel's restrictive health regulations to combat [the spread of the coronavirus](#).

It was agreed, for example, that the ceremony inside the church would only be attended by the Greek Orthodox patriarch, the Armenian patriarch, the Coptic church archbishop and the Syriac archbishop as well as four other members of the clergy. They were accompanied by two police officers and a camera crew of two, who broadcast the ceremony live.

The Holy Fire is normally accompanied abroad by major church delegations to 11 countries in Eastern and Central Europe. This year, however, the Foreign Ministry arranged for ten of the eleven countries to dispatch an aircraft to bring the flame back home to awaiting masses of faithful. (Uzbekistan, the 11th country, decided not to send a plane).

Instead of the usual church delegations, the countries' diplomats accompanied the Holy Fire to Ben-Gurion airport. Planes were sent from Russia, Ukraine, Greece, Georgia, Cyprus, Romania, Moldova, Belarus, Poland and Kazakhstan. The flame was also transported over land to the West Bank, [Gaza](#) and Jordan.

"We managed to maintain all of the frameworks of the formal ritual," said Akiva Tor, who heads the Foreign Ministry religious affairs division. Tor noted that the agreement with the churches included arrangements to broadcast church masses to viewers abroad, while the usual large gatherings and processions in the Old City were cancelled.

"We tried to adhere to the status quo to the greatest extent possible," he said, adding that everyone understood where departure from usual practice was necessary.

