

Jerusalem: Blessing and Challenge

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I am blessed to be able to spend time in Jerusalem every summer. I know my way around “my” parts of the city. I have my favorite restaurants and shops, including workshops of the artisans who make the most magnificent fine art Judaica in the world.

I lived in Jerusalem for a year, over three decades ago, my first year of rabbinical school. In those last days before the first Intifada, or Palestinian uprising, Jews and Arabs casually and freely. Everyday Jerusalemites engaged in commerce and employment in ways that masked underlying injustices and fears. I thought nothing of eating in an East Jerusalem Arab restaurant or getting in an Arab-driven cab. Arab employees of the Hebrew Union College were valued and embraced, as they were at countless other Jewish-operated establishments. Yet, I am merely describing tranquility, which is entirely different from equality, let alone justice.

In the fall, a Sukkah was erected in the courtyard outside my ground-floor apartment. One day, I went out to study there. I don't typically wear a *kipah*, or head covering, and I didn't that day. An older gentleman who lived in the building, an observant Jew, told me that it's not nice to sit in a Sukkah without a *kipah*. I quickly fetched one. That was the closest I came to experiencing discrimination on the basis of being a Reform Jew in Jerusalem in 1985-6. Admittedly, I have the privilege of being male, and my female classmates faced often-unfriendly questions when they told Israelis that they were studying to be rabbis.

Today's Jerusalem little resembles the city in which I studied. The ultra-Orthodox population of Jerusalem grew from 22 percent in 2000 to 34 percent in 2017,¹ not to speak of what I'm sure was a similar trend between 1985 and 2000. Jerusalem's holy sites are debased by bitter religious confrontations, the most notable example being the hostility and even violence that greets Women of the Wall's gatherings to welcome each new month. Jerusalem is infinitely more segregated than it was 35 years ago. Since the Second Intifada and its reign of Palestinian terror upon Israeli civilians, foreign workers have taken many jobs previously held by Arabs, and the interface of Arab and Jew in Jerusalem is more fraught.

The blessing of Jerusalem pervades this week's Torah portion. Unlike earlier books of Torah, Deuteronomy requires that all worship take place at “the site that

the Eternal our God will chose amidst all your tribes as God’s habitation—[that is, the Temple]—to establish God’s name there.”ⁱⁱⁱ One may dismiss this injunction as a power-grab: The King of Judea is eager to centralize all worship in his capital city, requiring ever male Israelite to appear there three times a year and doubtless contributing to Jerusalem’s economy. Still, bringing people together is a high value. David initially established Jerusalem as capital because it did not belong to any of the tribes, much as early Americans built Washington, D.C. between north and south, not as part of any one state. The city belonged to the king, and beyond that, it belonged to every single one of the Children of Israel.

Our ancient rabbis placed the Torah, not Jerusalem or any geographical location, at the center of Judaism. Still, throughout millennia of exile, our people faced Jerusalem in prayer and to look forward to the day when we might return.

The United Nations partition plan of 1947 called for two states, one Jewish and the other Arab, with Jerusalem as an international city. Neither side loved the plan, but the Zionists accepted it, while the surrounding Arab nations attacked. At the end of the resulting war, West Jerusalem was in Jewish hands, surrounded on three sides by territory that Jordan claimed as its own, rather than establishing a Palestinian state, as the U.N. intended. Israel built its capital in West Jerusalem, its government center far from concentrations of Arab population. Had the Arab states permitted Palestine to be established, nothing could’ve stopped its capital from being East Jerusalem.

During those years, the Jordanians desecrated Jewish holy sites in the Old City. Nevertheless, Israel did not seek to capture Jerusalem. When Israel found itself under siege from Egypt and Syria in the spring of 1967, author Michael Oren tells NPR, “the Israeli government sent a message to King Hussein of Jordan, saying, ‘What’s about to happen in the south is between us and the Egyptians. You stay out of it and we’ll stay out of it;’”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ meaning that Israel wouldn’t seek to occupy the West Bank, even the Old City and East Jerusalem.

Jordan, allied with Egypt, did attack, and the rest is history. Jerusalem has been united under Israeli rule for more than half a century.

Ever since my first visit to Israel, shortly after my Bar Mitzvah in 1976, I have enjoyed the fruits of Israel’s victory. The Old City is a wonder to explore—the Western Wall, the gold- and silver-domed mosques of the Temple Mount, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, not to mention the Arab bazaar and the modern Jewish quarter.

This summer, though, I also saw injustice up close and personal. Steps from the Old City, I have often visited the City of David, a compelling archeological site

believed to be the original site of Jerusalem. I knew that it was in an Arab neighborhood, and that some controversy was associated with it. I only learned the details in July.

Unlike most excavations, carried out under academic auspices, the City of David is operated by El Ad, “a non-profit organization ... dedicated to the preservation and development of the Biblical City of David and its environs.”^{iv} I visited the house right next door to the City of David, home to a Palestinian family for generations. Now, El Ad seeks to take control of that home—utilizing an arcane law to declare it “ownerless,” despite its continuing to serve as residence of the same family—to expand the archeological site and Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, heretofore home only to Arabs.

Jerusalem is the most challenging city in the world, home to holiness and heartbreak, liberation and oppression. The rabbis extolled the city: “Ten measures of beauty descended to the world; Jerusalem took nine and all the rest of the world took one.”^v The magnificence of the holy city is paradoxically undiminished, even as it is tarnished by the wickedness carried out in its name by religious and nationalist extremists, both Jewish and Arab.

The name, Jerusalem, may be built on two words, “ir,” meaning “city;” and “shalom,” meaning peace. Let us pray that, one day, that beautiful city may also be worthy of its exalted name.

Amen.

ⁱ Aaron Rabinowitz, “Jerusalem Is Not Becoming More ultra-Orthodox, but Its Nonreligious Neighborhoods Are,” *Ha’aretz*, December 17, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 12:5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eric Westervelt, “Six Day War: Shaping the Modern Middle East,” *NPR*, June 4, 2007, 11:15am ET.”

^{iv} CityofDavid.org.il.

^v Kiddushin 49b.