

Jerusalem!

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I remember the first time I visited Jerusalem. Up the steep heavenly hill every eye was drawn. One more twist of the road, one more turn – and there the city was, on the heights, casting a magical spell.

Jerusalem! The City of David. Solomon's Temple. Earthly Jerusalem. Heavenly Jerusalem.

Even now, fifty years later, I still feel the narrowness – the valley pressing in on the then two-lane road strewn with the charred remains of rusting vehicles, skeletons from the War of Liberation. Teenagers and young adults died here in a desperate effort to reach the stricken city and to break the siege. The best of the best of us gave their lives and the lives of their unborn children for the sake of our redemption. Their uncommon valor, proof of the nobility of the human spirit, and the indomitable Jewish will to live. Some of them were survivors of the Great Inferno, the bones of their families dust and ashes in the crematoria of Europe.

“The nation arises. Torn at heart but breathing, to receive the miracle; the only miracle. There will be no other. Dressed in battle gear, dirty. Shoes heavy with grime, they ascend the path quietly....full of endless fatigue and un-rested. Yet the dew of their youth is still on their head. Then a nation, in tears and amazement, will ask, “Who are you?” And they will answer quietly:

“We are the silver platter on which the Jewish state was given.” Thus they will say and fall back in shadows. And the rest will be told in the chronicles of Israel.” (Natan Alterman)

The chronicles of Israel will record the splendor of our youth, three years removed from the ovens. They knew there was only one way to break the siege - through this valley. The most savage fighting of the War of Independence was here – *Shaar Ha'gai* - the gateway to the valley. “Live again,” they whispered, before falling back in shadows:

“The hand of God came upon me and set me down in the Valley. And God said: ‘O dry bones, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you and you shall live again.’” (Ezekiel 37)

Jerusalem! We have returned to you. It is easier now. We take it for granted now. There is a six-lane highway now.

Two millennia – and it was our generation to see the City renewed, presented to us on a silver platter. Why? What are our merits? Why us, while a hundred generations past wandered the globe, exiled, persecuted, despised and oppressed?

Im eshkech Yerusalayim:

“If I forget thee O Jerusalem let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to my mouth if I do not remember you; if I do not elevate Jerusalem above my highest joy.” (Psalm 137)

We kept our vow. We never forgot you. We prayed daily for return. Even at the moment of our highest joy, at every Jewish wedding, the shattered glass reminded us of the shattered City. “Next year in Jerusalem,” we pledged. “May there always be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sounds of happiness, of rejoicing, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride; the shouts of young children at play.”

Who are these charlatans who lecture to us about Jerusalem, who tell us that there never was a Jewish presence there; that we are conquerors, usurpers, and colonialists from racist Europe? Jerusalem became sacred to you because of the Jews – who endowed the City with holiness a thousand years before the birth of Jesus and 1700 years before Islam.

Who are you – you religious authorities – who seek to erase and deny our covenant with David’s City? The Bible you love mentions Jerusalem over eight hundred times. “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,” Isaiah proclaims. “All you who love her join in her jubilation. “You shall find comfort in Jerusalem. Your heart shall rejoice. Your limbs shall flourish like grass. The power of the Lord revealed on behalf of God’s servants.” (Isaiah 66)

Who are you – you diplomats and politicians – who willfully ignore our bond with the Holy City? Two weeks ago – on November 30 – the United Nations General Assembly, by a vote of 151-6 – and nine abstentions – called on Israel to respect the status quo of the holy places in Jerusalem, citing specifically Haram al-Sharif – never mentioning – not once - Jewish holy sites.

How is this possible? How is it possible to mention the mosque sitting on the site of the two Jewish Temples, and never mention the Temple Mount – the very reason the mosque was constructed on that site in the first place? It is not merely an historical perversion. It is anti-Semitic in nature, for it denies the core of the Jewish faith – our connection to that place, to Jerusalem, to Zion and to the Land of Israel.

This is not to deny that others consider Jerusalem holy. It is not to deny that the Palestinians seek Jerusalem as their capital. I am in favor of two states for two peoples. For that to happen, some kind of accommodation on Jerusalem will be necessary. If and when it occurs, I will support it.

But let no one be fooled. Peace will never rise on foundations of sand. Any agreement will collapse under the weight of its own inconsistencies if constructed on a scaffolding of lies.

President Trump simply acknowledged reality. It is about time. It should have been done decades ago, in 1949, when Israel declared Jerusalem its capital. Many presidents – Democrats and Republicans - promised to move the American Embassy. It is American law, approved and supported by overwhelming consensus.

The Embassy will be in West Jerusalem. Who contests West Jerusalem? President Trump did not preempt the eventual borders of Jerusalem. He did not preclude a permanent status agreement. He simply acknowledged a fact. Where do people meet Israeli prime ministers, presidents, parliamentarians, and Supreme Court jurists – in Tel Aviv? Where did Anwar Sadat speak when he wanted to convey on behalf of the Egyptian people a message of peace to Israelis: Tel Aviv? It is for each country to declare its own capital. What other nation declares a capital

unrecognized by the nations of the world? What kind of special abuse is reserved for the Jewish nation?

I want to address our own Reform movement:

I know that what I am about to say may be difficult to hear. If you disagree with me – welcome to the club. Write, call, tell me where you think I am wrong. I am open to it – I even encourage it. However, I believe that rabbis have an obligation to say what we think clearly and forcefully.

The Reform movement has been savaged by critics: Not only by our opponents, but by our friends and allies. I am actually not sure what our movement's current position is, and my guess is that if it is unclear to me, it is unclear to others. There have been several attempts to explain it. There is one official statement, signed by all sixteen Reform organizations – the entire institutional apparatus of the North American Reform movement. The operative clause reads:

“While we share the President's belief that the US Embassy should, at the right time, be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, we cannot support his decision to begin preparing that move now, absent a comprehensive plan for a peace process.”

Natan Sharansky, the hero of the Refusnik movement, former Minister in the Israeli government, Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, and our friend, is our most recent critic. Sharansky is the most dogged and prominent supporter of the Western Wall compromise. Three days ago, he said: “The Reform response to the recognition of Jerusalem was terrible. When...a superpower recognizes Jerusalem, first you...welcome it, then offer disagreement. Here it was the opposite.”

Sharansky is right. With the exception of one small hard-left party, there is wall-to-wall agreement among the Zionist parties in the Knesset supporting the Embassy move. We have alienated the very people who support and defend us in our campaign for religious pluralism and equitable funding.

But even more than our political acumen: our critics are right on the merits. It is not only about intellect and reasoning. In the words of Billy Joel: “It's all about soul. It's all about faith and a deeper devotion. It's all about soul.”

We have yearned for Jerusalem for two millennia. The source of our strength, the place where our people was formed, where the Bible was written, was there. Jews lived free and made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a thousand years. Our national existence changed the world and led to the creation of two other great faiths.

The world's superpower finally did the right thing – and we opposed it – not on the principle, but on the timing? Now is the not the right time? Two thousand years later, and it is still not the right time. We should wait. As if there is a peace process that the Palestinians are committed to and pursuing with conviction?

Martin Luther King's response to critics who accused the civil rights movement of moving too quickly was:

“The time is always ripe to do what is right.”

In the Letter from a Birmingham jail, King wrote:

“For years now I have heard the word ‘wait’...that [our] action...is untimely. This ‘wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see that justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

King often reminded us that time is neutral. It can be used constructively or destructively. Israel’s opponents have used time more effectively than we have. They have so distorted history that so many around the world question the very legitimacy of Jewish ties to Zion and Jerusalem. We have neglected teaching and conveying – even to our own children - our millennia-old love affair with the Land of Israel, and Jerusalem its beating heart. Judaism without *Eretz Yisrael* is not Judaism. Judaism without Jerusalem is not Judaism.

I know that many Reform Jews oppose the Embassy move, but my guess is that most members of Reform congregations support the declaration of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Along with the vast majority of Jews worldwide, my guess is that most Reform Jews welcome preparation for the relocation of the American Embassy to West Jerusalem. My guess is that the initial Reform statement of opposition does not reflect the views of most Reform Jews.

If our sixteen Reform organizations have had a change of heart – they should say it. All sixteen of them: we made a mistake.

And if not: if we still stand by our original statement, I want the Jewish world to know that this position is not my position. I want the Jewish world to know that multitudes of Reform Jews agree with me. I hope so anyway. If you do – you, too, can feel free to write to me. It is also important to receive support, not only to hear from critics.

At the same time, it is proper and necessary for us to remind ourselves and others, that we are committed to a two-state solution that will require territorial compromises from both sides, including in Jerusalem. We should continue to urge the American government to help bring about a negotiated peace.

We should also urge the international community to disabuse the Palestinian national movement of its exaggerated expectations and its insidious efforts to undermine and erase our connection to Zion. Until that happens, peace is an illusion.

This Shabbat is also the fourth night of Hanukkah. The Sages asked: If one only has enough money for either Shabbat candles or oil for Hanukkah candles, what should one choose. Rambam – Maimonides – answered that Shabbat candles come first because they bring peace into a household.

The Sages then asked: If one must choose between wine for Shabbat Kiddush and oil for the Hanukkah lamp, what should one choose? Rambam responded: One should kindle the Hanukkah lamp rather than sanctify the wine, because it is more important to publicize the miracle of Hanukkah. Even if a person has no food to eat, he should beg or sell his garment in order to buy oil and candles to light the Menorah – to publicize the miracle of redemption and to offer additional praise to God for the wonders bestowed upon us.

The survival of Jewish life is a miracle. The revival of Jewish independence is a miracle. The restoration of the Holy City is a miracle. Publicize the miracle. Let all the world see. Praise God for the wonders bestowed upon us.

*Baruch ata Adonai Elohenu melech ha'olam she'assah nissim l'avotenu bayamim hahem
bazman hazeh.*

Praise be God, Ruler of the Universe Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days –
and - at this time.

Be proud. Raise Jerusalem above your highest joy.

A song of ascent. A song of David.

I rejoiced. Our feet are standing inside your gates, O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem built up, a city knit together.

There, the thrones of judgment stood, thrones of the House of David.

May there be peace within your walls, contentment within your palaces.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you prosper.

(Psalm 122)