

Jerusalem and Jewish Identity  
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There are two aspects to this title, both of which need separate evaluation before linking them together. About Jerusalem one needs to say very little as it is one of the most famous cities in the world. But at the same time because it contains so much history, it has been and remains the site of so many conflicts, we could spend hours examining each period and the ideas, hopes and fantasies projected upon it. For the purpose of this paper the starting point has to be King David's conquest of the city from which point it became of central concern for the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For the Biblical record, under King David the city became the capital of the newly united Israelite nation. His son Solomon built there a Temple which was to become the central and only sanctuary for the nation as a whole, the place where God's presence on earth was to be found. These two elements, the political and the spiritual, have remained intertwined ever since. As the Psalms record, Jerusalem and the Temple became the place of pilgrimage for the tribes that made up the nation, binding them together as a single people with a single God.

I rejoiced when they said to me, let us go to the House of the Eternal.

Our feet were standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem built up, like a city that is bound together.

For there the tribes would go up,  
the tribes of God, a testimony of Israel,  
to give thanks to the name of the Eternal.

For there were based the thrones of judgment,  
the thrones of the house of David.

Psalm 122:1-5

Yet precisely because the Temple was the place of the God who was the Creator of the entire world, it could not be restricted to Israel alone. Already in his prayer at the inauguration of the Temple, Solomon welcomed pilgrims from different lands, and asked God to answer their prayers (I Kings 8:41-43). Psalm 115, alongside seeking God's blessing on the House of Aaron, the priestly class, and the House of Israel, refers to a group known as '*Yirei Adonai*', those 'in awe of the Eternal', possibly non-Israelites who attended the cult. Such universal elements presumably existed in tension with purely nationalistic feelings, but they could lead to one of the most celebrated prophetic passages in the Bible. Both Isaiah and Micah describe the same vision:

It shall be at the end of days  
that the mountain of the house of the Eternal  
shall be fixed as the head of the mountains,  
and raised above the hills,  
and peoples shall flow towards it,  
and many nations will come and say,  
come, let us go up to the mount of the Eternal,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
who will teach us God's ways,  
and we will walk in God's paths,  
for Teaching shall come from Zion

and the word of the Eternal from Jerusalem.

Isaiah 2:2-3; Micah 4:1-2

But alongside prophetic visions, external historical forces had their impact upon the city. The land of Israel sits between two great competing empires, Egypt to the south and the Mesopotamian empires, Assyria and Babylon, to the north. The territory provided a land corridor between Asia and Africa, so whoever controlled it controlled also the trading and military routes. Which is why it was always fought over, and indeed the degree of independence of the Israelite nation depended upon the rise and fall of these empires and the various local alliances and conflicts with Israel's immediate neighbours. During the time of the prophet Isaiah, Jerusalem was threatened by the Assyrian army, but at the last minute the enemy troops had to withdraw. This gave rise to the belief that God had protected the city and always would do so because of the presence of the Temple. But prophetic voices, beginning with Isaiah himself, warned that the fate of the city was ultimately determined by God, who would judge it by the quality of justice that could be found within it (Isaiah 1:21-27).

By the time of the prophet Jeremiah, a century later, this belief in the inviolability of Jerusalem had taken on almost magical power, so that the prophet could complain about those who simply chanted: *'heichal adonai, heichal adonai, heichal adonay'*, 'the Temple of the Eternal, the Temple of the Eternal, the Temple of the Eternal' (Jeremiah 7:4). Such hopes were utterly shattered when the Babylonian army entered the city and destroyed its fortifications and finally the Temple itself. This tragedy, recorded vividly and painfully in the Biblical Book of Lamentations, marked a turning point in Israelite history and the beginnings of the experience of exile, Diaspora. It was in the exile that the rudiments were created of what would become Judaism, a religion that could exist without a Temple, or indeed all the formal trappings of national existence. In the Book of Psalms we find a passage reflecting the bitterness and anger of those in exile, but also the splitting of the understanding of the nature and role of Jerusalem in Jewish life. The Psalm speaks with the voice of one of the Levite singers, who would have performed in the Temple.

By the rivers of Babylon there we sat,  
there we wept when we remembered Zion.  
Upon the willow we hung our harps.  
For there our captors asked of us words of song,  
and our oppressors, joy:  
'Sing us of the songs of Zion'.  
How can we sing the song of the Eternal in a foreign land!  
If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its skill,  
let my tongue cleave to my mouth  
if I do not remember,  
if I do not raise Jerusalem above my greatest joy.

Psalm 137:1-6

Here we can see the splitting of the identity of Jerusalem. Zion for the Psalmist represents the Temple and the religious centre of his world. But Jerusalem, the political centre of the nation, becomes the basis of his oath, a curse upon his own skills as musician and singer if he ever forgets the city. The singer of religious songs becomes a partisan, vowing to return.

This urgent sense of watching and waiting for the return is captured in a passage in the latter part of the Book of Isaiah.

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem  
I have set watchmen;  
All the day and all the night  
They shall never be silent.  
You that stir the Eternal to remember,  
Take no rest,  
And give God no rest,  
Till God establishes Jerusalem  
And makes it a praise in the earth.

Isaiah 62:6-7

The hope of the return of the exiles, the restoration of the city and the Temple were expressed by the Prophet Zechariah:

Thus says the Eternal:  
I will return to Zion  
and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem,  
and Jerusalem will be called  
'the city of truth'  
and the mountain of the God of Hosts,  
'the mountain of holiness.'

Thus says the God of Hosts:

Old men and women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem  
each with a staff in their hand because of their age.  
And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls  
playing in her streets...

Thus says the God of Hosts:

See, I will save My people from the land of the East  
and the land where the sun sets  
and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem;  
They shall be My people  
and I shall be their God,  
in truth and in righteousness.

Zechariah 8:3-5, 7-8

These expectations and hopes became central to the beliefs of the Jewish people when the second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, and Diaspora existence became their only reality. Now Jerusalem took on different dimensions as the various themes, already seen in the Psalms and prophetic writings: the return of the exiles to the land, the re-establishment of the kingdom of David, the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of the sacrificial cult, became part of the evolving liturgical life of the people. The Amidah, the so-called 'standing prayer' or 'eighteen benedictions' which is at the core of the three Jewish daily services, includes a series of verses about this return, with the focus on Jerusalem:

To Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion, and may You dwell in it as You promised. May you rebuild it rapidly in our days as an everlasting structure, and install within it soon the throne of David. Blessed are You, Lord, who builds Jerusalem. (Blessing 14)

In this rebuilt Jerusalem, the Temple cult would be restored:

Find favour, Lord our God, in Your people Israel and their prayer. Restore the service to Your most holy house, and accept in love and favour the fire offerings of Israel and their prayer. May the service of Your people Israel always find favour with You. And may our eyes witness Your return to Zion in compassion. Blessed are You, Lord, who restores His Presence to Zion. (Blessing 17)

God is to return to Jerusalem as the political capital and the reign of David is to be restored. But it is to Zion that the Presence of God is to return to a rebuilt Temple with all its sacrificial cult restored.

For two thousand years of exile in all aspects of the prayer life of the Jewish people this hoped for return is echoed. At every mealtime one of the blessings speaks of the restoration of Jerusalem. At every traditional wedding ceremony we recite seven blessings, two of which speak of Jerusalem, the last one concluding:

Soon Lord our God, may there be heard in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, the sounds of joy and gladness, the sounds of the bridegroom and the bride.

At the end of the Passover Seder, the home service, and at the end of the New Year celebrations we say, '*L'shanah ha-ba'a virushalayim*', 'Next year in Jerusalem'.

The yearning for this return to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages is expressed by the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi in a series of poems, '*shirei zion*', 'Songs of Zion', playing on the language of the Psalms. One begins:

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west –

How can I find savour in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet

Zion lies beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains.

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain –

Seeing how precious in my eyes to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

True to his desire at the age of fifty he set off for the Holy Land. It is recorded that he arrived in Alexandria, but after that nothing is known beyond the legend that he reached Jerusalem and there was killed.

Judah Halevi is just one example of the people who not only yearned for the return to the land of Israel but also made the journey there, either as pilgrims or as settlers. Indeed, apart from a few centuries after the Romans banned any Jewish settlement in the land, there has been a small but continuous Jewish presence there. Nevertheless the general view of Jewish tradition was that the exile was a punishment by God for Israel's sins, and our task was simply to wait patiently for God's own time to bring us back to the land. But the entire basis of traditional Jewish life changed dramatically with the Emancipation which broke the power and authority of the religious tradition as Jews entered Western society as individuals. It is from this point on that the question of Jewish 'identity' emerges.

Two extreme examples express the complexity of what a Jewish identity might have meant from any time in the nineteenth century. On the one hand the traditional

world still existed, especially till much later, in Eastern Europe. Here the expectation of God's intervention in the life of Israel through the arrival of the Messiah was a tangible reality, especially at times of greater persecution or pogroms. This expectation is nicely illustrated in the case of the Chasidic master Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811). I do not know the source of this story, but it rings true. When his daughter married, the invitation to the wedding was worded: 'The wedding of my daughter will take place on such and such a date in the holy city of Jerusalem.' There was a mark beside the word 'Jerusalem' indicating a footnote at the bottom of the invitation which read: 'If, in the meantime, the Messiah has not come, the wedding will take place in Bratslav.'

Contrast this with the complex love-hate relationship with Judaism of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). He converted to Christianity on quite practical grounds as a way to obtain what he called his 'entrance ticket into European culture'. And while despising things religious, he nevertheless paid close attention to the changing social position of his fellow Jews. Towards the end of his life, in the grip of illness, he could describe himself as a poor suffering Jew. In his *Hebraische Melodien* (1851) he turns to the figure of Judah Halevi, whom he saw as a fellow poet, but with his own understanding of the Jerusalem of which Halevi dreamt.

Xix

For with love there must be ladies,  
And the lady was as needful  
To the tuneful minnesinger  
As, to bread and butter, butter.

Xx

And the hero whom we sing of,  
Our Jehuda ben Halevy,  
Had his heart's beloved lady,  
But a strange one he had chosen..

Xxiv

She, beloved of the Rabbi,  
Was most sorrowful and wretched,  
Piteous spectacle of ruin,  
And was called Jerusalem...

Xlvii

At the feet of his beloved  
Died Jehuda ben Halevy;  
And his dying head he rested  
On Jerusalem's fair knees. <sup>1</sup>

How far Jerusalem remains relevant to questions of Jewish identity today is difficult to answer. Jewish status is still determined by the classical religious criteria – to be born of a Jewish mother or to enter the Jewish faith by conversion through a

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<sup>1</sup> The remarks about Heine and the text here are taken from Irene Zwiép *To remember and to forget: Jerusalem in Jewish Poetic Memory* European Judaism Vol 31, No 2 Autumn 1998 Issue No 61, 54-66, 61.

recognized Jewish religious authority. Here, of course, the contemporary issue arises about who has such authority in the struggles between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox religious movements. Though one usually debates the question, 'Who is a Jew?', the real question is often 'Who is a rabbi?', since it is still rabbis who make that determination. The highly influential American Reform movement, especially in terms of numbers, has adopted a policy that would allow children of a Jewish father to be accepted as Jews if raised with a Jewish education. This radical break with the religious tradition is justified on the basis of the high levels of intermarriage in the United States (around 50%) and the desire to include as many people as possible within the broader Jewish community. Its critics argue that such openness discourages people from undertaking the necessary studies and commitment needed formally to convert to Judaism. But beyond Jewish 'status' is the far broader one of who identifies him- or herself as 'Jewish' and on what basis, from ethnic to purely cultural.

Just to indicate the complexity we need only consider the following examples. After the Shoah many Jews found themselves as displaced people in different parts of Europe or elsewhere in the world. Any documentation that would have proven their Jewish status might well have been lost causing problems should they wish to marry another Jew in a religious ceremony. Moreover many people suffered persecution by the Nazis having been defined by them as 'half' or 'quarter' Jews, even though they would not qualify for Jewish status under Jewish law. Who is to deny them a Jewish identity if they choose to assert it for themselves. In the former Soviet Union, for seventy years, Jews were identified as an ethnic group with the word 'Jew' in their passports, but on the basis of a Jewish father, not a Jewish mother. Now that they are free to adopt their Jewish identity, there are many problems about status. Of the 700,000 Jews who immigrated to Israel in the first wave after the fall of the Soviet Union, up to 200,000 would not be recognized as Jewish by Orthodox religious authorities. Or take a possible scenario in the United States. A Jewish man marries a non-Jewish woman and they have two children who are brought up as Jewish in a Reform Temple. Later they divorce and the man marries a Jewish woman who had been previously married to a non-Jewish man, and whose children were not brought up to think of themselves as Jewish. Now you have a new family with a Jewish husband and wife, but two children who think they are Jewish but are not, by strict Orthodox criteria, and two who are, by strict Orthodox criteria, but know nothing about Judaism!

How do these questions of Jewish status and identity relate to Jerusalem? One major new factor is clearly the establishment of the State of Israel, which offers an entirely new basis for Jewish identity after nearly two thousand years of Diaspora existence. The nineteenth century movement that set out to create the state, Zionism, reflects the centrality of the name Zion as a symbol of the land and the nation. The political and then the military struggles to establish the State in 1948 created an entirely new dimension to Jewish existence. It became a home for millions of refugees, from Europe and Arab countries, and for those seeking a new kind of Jewish existence. Yet the true watershed in making Jerusalem a central factor in Jewish self-understanding was actually the Six Day War in 1967 that radically affected a global sense of Jewish identity. Jews long since assimilated and even indifferent to the creation of the State were galvanised by the events leading up to that war, when it seemed as if the State was likely to be destroyed. When, instead, not only was there an almost instant victory, but the

whole city of Jerusalem came into Jewish hands, the impact was extraordinary. For the soldiers who first reached the 'Western Wall' in Jerusalem it amounted to a mystical experience, and for many it was as if we had witnessed a miracle in our own day. At some deep emotional level, the unexpressed feeling was the crude equation that God had taken six million in the Shoah but had now returned Jerusalem to the Jewish people.

Looking back some forty years on, it is possible to see what indeed was gained, in terms of a renewed Jewish commitment, at least to Jewish peoplehood, but also the price in Jewish and Palestinian suffering. Indeed this radical new situation of the State of Israel, from a 'pioneering society' as envisaged by its founders, to a powerful military occupying power, polarised attitudes of Jews both within and without the State. As in the great mediaeval struggles of Christianity and Islam over 'ownership' of this troubled part of the world, it remains the broader realities of political power broking that control or influence the fate of 'Jerusalem'.

If we remain within our topic of Jewish identity there are clearly very different realities for Jews living within the State of Israel, struggling with the messy political, social, legal realities of creating a country in almost impossible circumstances, and the supportive but often critical position of Diaspora Jews who have the luxury of distance and a different kind of security. Since Zionism envisaged the return of all Jews to the land once the State had been created, political, religious and social pressures were exerted on Diaspora Jews to make 'aliyah', and come to the land. But with the exception of those facing difficult situations, as in the Former Soviet Union, most Jews were perfectly happy to stay where they were and at best be a kind of 'supporters club', for the State. I remember the debates in the UK Reform Jewish movement about the question of whether the movement should endorse what came to be known as the Jerusalem Platform<sup>2</sup>, a six-point set of Zionist affirmations about the centrality of Israel in Jewish existence. Some argued, in what is typical of contemporary spirituality, that it was not for religious movements to support what was essentially a political platform – even though in the past Judaism did not separate religion from any aspect of human life, individual or collective. The compromise in the case of the UK reform was to create a separate organisation,

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<sup>2</sup>. The Jerusalem Platform

The aims of Zionism are:

The unity of the Jewish people, its bond to its historic homeland Eretz Yisrael, and the centrality of the State of Israel and Jerusalem, its capital, in the life of the nation;

Aliyah to Israel from all countries and the effective integration of all immigrants into Israeli Society.

Strengthening Israel as a Jewish, Zionist and democratic state and shaping it as an exemplary society with a unique moral and spiritual character, marked by mutual respect for the multi-faceted Jewish people, rooted in the vision of the prophets, striving for peace and contributing to the betterment of the world.

Ensuring the future and the distinctiveness of the Jewish people by furthering Jewish, Hebrew and Zionist education, fostering spiritual and cultural values and teaching Hebrew as the national language;

Nurturing mutual Jewish responsibility, defending the rights of Jews as individuals and as a nation, representing the national Zionist interests of the Jewish people, and struggling against all manifestations of anti-Semitism;

Settling the country as an expression of practical Zionism.

Prozion, which people could join voluntarily. That is to say, Jerusalem as a key focus for Jewish identity was indeed present again, but as a reflection of the splitting of consciousness that is modern Judaism.

To give another example, the Israeli government introduced in 1968 *Yom Yerushalayim*, Jerusalem Day, to celebrate the 'reunification' of Jerusalem, and the chief rabbinate gave it the status of a minor religious festival, as shown by the recital of the Hallel Psalms, otherwise restricted to religious occasions. It is celebrated with parades and educational projects in Israel. But outside Israel, within the various religious movements, it has had very little impact, whereas Israel Independence Day is fully celebrated. Perhaps it is simply too soon. But perhaps there is still too much ambiguity about the status of the city, legally, practically, and emotionally. Though the State is pledged to ensure the security and right of access to the holy sites of both Christianity and Islam that are so prominent within the city, the question of spiritual ownership and how it can be shared constantly bumps up against practical issues of land appropriation, maintenance of the different neighbourhoods and deep-seated fears, angers and, from all sides, religious fanaticism. From the Israeli government perspective Jerusalem is once again the capital of the nation, a united city, and one whose Jewish dominance must be asserted and developed by expanding its size and borders. From the Diaspora perspective Jews are polarised between unquestioning support and radical dissatisfaction. Within the 'non-Orthodox' Jewish movements, within Israel and in the Diaspora, the universalism that was part of the prophetic legacy still finds its expression. New liturgies reflect attempts to come to terms with the reality of the State but also to define a possible role for Jerusalem. References in the Amidah may be amended to include the hope that it will become a '*m'kom t'fillah l'chol amim*', 'a place of prayer for all peoples'. But all such expressions of hope from within Judaism mean little unless they are matched by similar commitments by the two daughter faiths, Christianity and Islam, that are also torn between their spiritual and political commitments, desires and fantasies about the city.

The power of Jerusalem in Jewish popular imagination and emotional commitment is well illustrated by the song written by Naomi Shemer, *Yerushalayim shel zahav*. Composed for a song competition shortly before the Six Day War, it rapidly became almost a hymn during that troubled and extraordinary period and ever since, a national spiritual song for a largely secular Israeli society. Immediately after the war she added a concluding verse reflecting the radical change in Jerusalem's status brought about by the war. The song echoes the words of Judah Halevi, but set in this entirely new situation. Emotionally powerful though it is, its perspective reflects the understandable but problematic assumption that the city had no real existence or life in the absence of a Jewish presence.

The mountain air is as clear as wine, and the smell of the pine tree  
is carried on the evening breeze with the sound of bells.  
The city is imprisoned in a sleep of tree and stone,  
the city which dwells alone and in its heart a wall.  
Jerusalem of gold, of copper and of light,  
I am a harp for all your songs.

But when I come today to sing to you and to crown you,  
I am less than the least of your children and the last of your poets,  
for your name burns the lips like the kiss of a seraph.  
If I forget you, O Jerusalem, which is all gold.  
    Jerusalem of gold, of copper and of light,  
    I am a harp for all your songs.

We have returned to the water cisterns, to the market and the squares.  
A *shofar* is heard on the Temple Mount in the Old City.  
In the caves in the rocks a thousand windows gleam.  
Let us once again descend to the Dead Sea by way of Jericho  
    Jerusalem of gold, of copper and of light,  
    I am a harp for all your songs.

*Naomi Shemer*

Of course Jerusalem defies definitions, including religious and spiritual ones. If Judaism is only judged in terms of its classical tradition, many Jews, including spiritual ones, stand on the borderline or outside the old beliefs and practices. Yet even here one can find echoes of messianic hopes and spiritual commitments. One of the great poets of modern Israel is Yehudah Amichai. Born in Wurzburg to an orthodox family, his poems reflect the many different dimensions of contemporary Jewish and Israeli life. Here he features the historic stone buildings of Jerusalem with an unexpected reflection on redemption.

*Tourists*

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!"

I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family".

Yehudah Amichai

In the context of the great poets I have quoted, it is somewhat chutzpadik to add my own contribution. But I spent six months studying in Jerusalem, a time that coincided with the Six Day War, and spent the week of the war working as a doctor in Hadassah hospital. But before and after the war I found myself totally enraptured by the city. Years later I wrote my own poem in praise of the city, more detached than before, but trying to recognize its many-sidedness.

Nevertheless  
it is still possible to fall in love with  
Jerusalem

all over again.  
Despite everything.  
Despite the fear in the streets of the old.  
Despite the anger in the streets of the new.

For any hidden courtyard  
any vista  
any crowded corner  
can snatch away your breath  
by its sheer ...  
density.

It is not the holiness,  
for that was always a political commodity,  
nor its age alone.  
It is something else:  
a sad mocking at our pretensions  
and a wonder at our dreams.  
To have invested so much  
in a couple of hills and valleys,  
to have suffered so much to possess them  
and done such harm to hold them  
in the name of so many gods,  
so much hope and greed.

So boast not of unity,  
promise no eternity,  
where Jerusalem is concerned,  
for she will outlive our rhetoric  
and lose even the memory of our passing -  
another relic  
for antiquarians to ponder  
and archaeologists tenderly to reconstruct.

No,  
better to tread softly,  
woo her with care  
and give the love we feel  
to all her many children.