

“Hoping & Praying for Jerusalem”

Parashat Vayeishev; December 9, 2017; 21 Kislev 5778

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There is a stunning picture Judi¹ that you posted on your Facebook page, almost exactly three years ago, on December 10, 2014. That date, three years ago, fell on a Wednesday, also during the week of *Parashat Vayeishev*. Judi, I don't know if you remember what you wore that day, but I'll remind you. You are, in this particular photo, wearing a long denim skirt—below the knee—and a black sweater. You were wearing a backpack, and in front of you your hands are clutching a siddur. Behind you is the *Kotel*, the Western Wall. Peeking above the Wall is a pristine blue sky, not a cloud can be seen; and people nearby are clamoring to the holy stones to offer their prayers, their notes, their heartfelt yearnings to God. Looking at that picture reminded me of my first time in Jerusalem. I was 16 years old, and I was on a 6-week summer program sponsored by my local Federation.² This was long before cell phones or even calling cards. I remember calling my parents collect from a pay phone at the youth hostel where I was staying. There was a window right next to the phone with an incredible view of the Old City. I distinctly remember trying to describe to my parents, who at that time had never been to Israel, what I was looking at. I had to talk fast, because that was a very expensive call back then. As I stumbled to find the right adjectives to describe this incredible panorama, I could tell that my Mom was thinking more about her phone bill than *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav!*³ She wanted to know that I was safe, told me she loved me, and that was where the call ended. After I hung up, I lingered by the phone, aggravated with myself that I couldn't describe more succinctly what I was seeing. I so badly wanted my parents to be as enchanted by Israel as I was. And I felt that I let Israel down, because I didn't do it justice in a minute long conversation. In a sense I've spent the rest of my life repenting; as teaching, preaching, and bringing people to Israel (including, eventually, my parents) has been at the core of my life's work.

Vayeishev Ya'akov b'eretz m'gurei aviv, b'eretz C'naan... And Jacob settled in the land where his father Isaac had sojourned, the land of Canaan.⁴ These are the opening words of this week's

¹ Judi Lapidus is the mother of the bat mitzvah girl at this morning's Shabbat service

² "Cleveland-Israel Connection," Jewish Federation of Cleveland, Summer 1990

³ "Jerusalem of Gold," i.e. the popular Israeli song by Naomi Shemer, 1967

⁴ Genesis 37:1

Torah portion. But the commentators wonder why exactly we are reminded that Jacob is again living in the land of Israel when we already were told this information two chapters earlier.⁵ One commentary suggests that this detail is repeated because Jacob is making up for lost time. He spent many years in his uncle Laban's household in Haran, which today would be along the Turkish-Syrian border. Returning to the homeland, the Promised Land was Jacob's deepest desire. Indeed it has been the deepest desire of the people of Jacob, the people of Israel for 3,000 years and I have always felt that we are living in an extraordinary era of Jewish history, now that the Jewish people have returned en masse to live in our ancient homeland. But when Jacob settled in that land millennia ago, he was not alone there. There were Canaanites and Jebusites, Amalekites and Philistines. Indeed Jacob's willingness to settle in the Land of Israel even though he was surrounded by pagan neighbors is the source for the Talmud's statement that it is "preferable to live in Israel even in a city where the majority are idolaters, than to live dwell outside of Israel in a city of mostly Jews."⁶ That may sound bizarre to you, but our sages believed deeply that our connection to God is so much stronger when we are in *Eretz Yisrael* as opposed to outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. But just as the land was inhabited by many others in Jacob's time, that land is also inhabited by others today as well. Of the roughly 8 million people in Israel, a quarter of the population is not Jewish. And of the 800,000 people in Jerusalem, almost 40% are not Jewish. The Jews in Jerusalem are most located in the Western sector of the city, and the non-Jews, the Arabs overwhelmingly live in the eastern part of the city.

As many of you know, as beautiful, breathtaking, and wondrous as Jerusalem is, it is also a very complicated place. Just among Jews, Jerusalem is a divided place...1/3 of the population is Haredi, Ultra-Orthodox. Yet a quarter of Jerusalemites consider themselves secular, and these two populations rarely intermingle, sharing almost nothing in common religiously, politically, or culturally. And of course there is a huge rift between Jewish and Arab Jerusalem...children attend different schools, each side feels antagonized by the other, and tensions often run high. Israel's poet laureate Yehudah Amichai once wrote:⁷

The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams

⁵ E.g. Genesis 35:6

⁶ Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 110b

⁷ "Ecology of Jerusalem," Yehudah Amichai, *Poems of Jerusalem by Yehuda Amichai*. Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing, 1987.

Like the air over industrial cities

It's hard to breathe...

Even though it's occasionally hard to breath there; even though the various factions, enclaves and districts can occasionally make it feel suffocating, I love Jerusalem. I have been back countless times. I lived in the city for a glorious year. I know its streets, its neighborhoods, its cafes and holy places. One part of the city that I am in awe of is Givat Ram. The name means "officer's assembly hill," and it is the location of Israel's national government campus...the Keneset, the Supreme Court, the National Library, the Israel Museum, the Academy of the Hebrew Language, numerous Government ministries and offices. That it all sits atop what was once the staging grounds of the 10th Roman Legion seems historically appropriate. Where our oppressors once mounted their chariots, and made ready their spears and daggers to launch wars and campaigns against my ancestors is now the seat of the strong sovereign, democratic, Jewish state is nothing less than remarkable. My heart flutters along with the massive Israeli flag that flies above the parliament building, and the institutions of that place are a testimony to the vibrancy and robustness of the modern State of Israel. I am grateful that the President of the United States acknowledged what the Jewish people have known since King David relocated the royal palace to Jerusalem from Giv'ah; from the time that Solomon built the first Temple atop Mount Moriah; from the 660 plus references to Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible to the countless mentions of Jerusalem in the daily prayers of the Jewish people. We didn't need a Presidential Proclamation to know that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, but it was nice to have the historical wrong of denying that recognition by most of the world righted, at least by the United States government. In the President's statement⁸ he said, and I quote, "The United States continues to take no position on any final status issues. The specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties. The United States is not taking a position on boundaries and borders." I think this was a critically important line, that I hope doesn't get drowned out in all the noise about this announcement. You see, the boundaries of Jerusalem are a tricky subject. In 1947 the U.N. Partition Plan for both a Jewish and Arab state in Palestine actually omitted Jerusalem and Bethlehem, setting them apart separate entities

⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/12/06/presidential-proclamation-recognizing-jerusalem-capital-state-israel-and>

to be administered by an international body. Even Ben Gurion was willing at the time to sacrifice Jerusalem as the necessary price to pay for a Jewish state. In 1949, after the Independence War, Ben Gurion declared Jewish Jerusalem as the Capital of the State of Israel. The eastern half was occupied and annexed by Jordan until the Six Day War in 1967, when it was captured by Israel. But UN Resolution 181 was never officially overturned, and the separate status of Jerusalem is still considered binding under international law. Of course, all nations—including Israel—have the right to determine their own capitals. Jerusalem, though, is like no other city in the world. It is home to the holy sites of the three Abrahamic faiths. It is a city of deeply held convictions and passions, and at times significant rage and wrath. If you walk into the office of any Palestinian official and many Palestinian homes, you will see a picture of Jerusalem or the Dome of the Rock hanging on the wall. And in recent surveys, Palestinians report that having the capital of a future Palestinian state in Jerusalem is more important than refuges, more important than settlements, than prisoner releases; more important than the separation barrier, the checkpoints, borders, or water rights. Jerusalem is the most important issue for Palestinians, and it is an issue of deep significance on the Arab street in many countries, far beyond the Palestinian territories.

So I worry about the violence that this announcement has already unleashed and may be yet to come. I worry that the President wasn't as precise as his Russian counterpart was back in April when the Russian Federation recognized specifically West Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel.⁹ I worry that this announcement may strengthen the hands of extremists in Hamas and Islamic Jihad who will ignore the nuances of this statement and simply take advantage of the opportunity to foment another intifada. I worry that this announcement will provide additional oxygen to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. I worry about the effect this announcement will have on the perception of the United States as an impartial peace negotiator. I do *not* believe that previous American presidents lacked the courage or will power to do what this president did. I believe, as Dennis Ross writes that “they held off in order to give the Palestinians and Arabs the political space they needed to make hard decisions for peace.”¹⁰ I emphatically hope that that essential space for peace making has not been erased.

⁹ http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2717182

¹⁰ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/07/moving-the-us-embassy-to-jerusalem-is-not-a-disaster/>

Look the embassy is not going to move tomorrow. It took 8 years and \$1 billion to relocate to the new American Embassy in London, and there are 800 people who work in the Tel Aviv embassy who need to be relocated to Jerusalem, to a building that has yet to be built, on a site that has yet to be selected. But as this process unfolds, we pray that it does not foreclose the possibility of peace in a city that is named for peace.

There is a midrash¹¹ that describes how Jerusalem got its name. According to tradition, Abraham and Shem, one of Noah's sons, each called Jerusalem two different names. Avraham called it *Yir'eh*—meaning God will show—and the other, Shem called it *Shalem*—meaning wholeness or peace. God did not want either to feel wronged, so God compromised and called the city *Yir'eh Shalem*, or Jerusalem. A city that, to paraphrase Ben Gurion, has played a greater role in the life of the Jewish people than any city in the world has done for any other people is also a city whose very name is a result of compromise. I pray that Jerusalem will always have space for its many residents, its many inhabitants, its many pilgrims who consider it holy; who draw inspiration even from its stones and its dust. *Baruch Atah Hashem*, Praised are You God, *Boneh Yerushalayim*,¹² the Builder of this remarkable, complicated, nuanced, ancient, modern, beautiful, gritty, holy city called Jerusalem. May the current generation be its worthy caretakers. May the current generation be its worthy peacemakers.

¹¹ Grateful to my colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous for identifying this source

¹² From the daily Amidah prayer