

Jerusalem Day – 2010
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
May 15, 2010

Many of us have trouble keeping up with and observing long-standing Jewish holidays. Although it is probably theologically more important and central to the mission of Judaism than either Passover or Sukkot, Shavuot which begins on Tuesday night gets much less attention than its more famous cousins, Sukkot and Pesah. Truth be told, I can't recall the last time I heard someone insist that their children should be home for Shavuot. Or an even better tell tale sign of the importance of a holiday -- have you ever heard a couple argue over which set of in-laws they will be with for Shavuot. It is not as if someone is going to stand his or her ground and say to a spouse, "I have had it with you and your family. We were with your parents last Shavuot, now it is only fair that we be with my family this year!"

Suffice it to say, with, depending on how you calculate it, between about 10 – 12 Jewish holidays annually, it can be argued that the last thing we need is another Jewish holiday. Our most ancient ones go back to biblical times, and are set in a time when we were an agrarian people. And yet this past week we marked the newest addition to the calendar, making it the "youngest" of Jewish holidays. *Lecha Dodee*, a prayer sung at the Friday night service is always referred to as "young," since it was written about 500 years ago, but Yom Yerushalayim Jerusalem Day really is young. Jerusalem Day celebrates the day in June of 1967 when the IDF reunited the city of Jerusalem during the Six Day War.

Some of us are old enough to recall the euphoria surrounding the entry into the Old City and even the words proclaimed across the army radio, "*Har HaBayit beyadenu*, the Temple Mount is in our hands." But to truly understand the significance of the accomplishment, we have to know a little something about Jewish history, and most of us know too little about our past to truly comprehend the significance.

Jerusalem was founded by King David as his capital over 3,000 years ago.

Just a few weeks ago I walked in the area known as Ir David, the spot where it is believed he built his palace and which is described in the Bible. From that time forward Jerusalem only ascended in importance. It was romanticized by psalmists, and described throughout the millennia as the very heart and essence of the people.

After the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in the 6th century BCE the Jews who were taken captive and led into exile in Babylonia wrote lamentations to their beloved city. That is the source of the words proclaimed at weddings and other occasions, "*Eem ishkecheich Yerushalayim*, If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if you are not foremost in my thoughts." To this day a glass is broken at the end of a Jewish wedding ceremony to remind us of the loss of Jerusalem and to reflect our sadness over its destruction by the Romans in the year 70 CE.

Although the Roman invasion ended sovereignty over the city of Jerusalem for the next 2,000 years, Jews never relinquished their ties to the city. In addition to remembering Jerusalem in our wedding ceremonies, it is recalled on Passover and the end of the Yom

Kippur holiday when we proclaim "*Beshana Habaah Beyirushalayim: Next year in Jerusalem.*" Our weekday and Sabbath prayers express the centrality of the city in our thoughts and hearts, and it is the direction we face whenever and wherever we pray.

I could go on and provide more examples, but you get the gist of the historic and emotional connection of Jews to Jerusalem. It is fair to ask what happened to Jerusalem during the interceding 2,000 years, between the first century and the year 1967, and what other nations or peoples felt or did about Jerusalem. Interestingly, throughout the long history, and the succeeding waves of armies who captured Jerusalem, none made it its capital. None viewed it as little more than a remote desolate outpost. In fact, the Koran, the sacred book of the Moslem religion, which was founded in the 600's does not mention Jerusalem even once. This contrasts with the Hebrew Bible which mentions Jerusalem over 700 times. In point of fact, Muhammad mandated that Muslims should pray facing Mecca, in part so that their backs would be towards Jerusalem.

When the PLO charter was written in 1964 no mention was made of Jerusalem. During the time Jerusalem was in Jordan's hands, from 1948 until 1967 no leader of an Arab country made a pilgrimage to pray in Jerusalem. During that same time Jewish synagogues were destroyed. Tombstones from Jewish cemeteries were used to pave roads and Jews were not allowed to enter the city. Surely you recall the international outcry and condemnation and series of United Nations resolutions condemning these acts.

With Israel's capture of the Old City in 1967 access to Christian and Moslem holy sites was granted to all. In fact Israel showed its respect and peaceful intentions by giving control of the sacred sites to representatives of each of the three religions.

In the last few weeks several full page ads were taken out in American newspapers to remind Americans of the eternal bonds that link the Jewish people to this ancient city. One was a letter by Elie Wiesel, in which he wrote:

"...Jerusalem once again is at the center of political debates and international storms... Seventeen times destroyed and seventeen times rebuilt... Neither Athens nor Rome has aroused that many passions.

... Since King David took Jerusalem as his capital, Jews have dwelled inside its walls with only two interruptions; when Roman invaders forbade them access to the city and again, when under Jordanian occupation, Jews, regardless of nationality, were refused entry into the old Jewish quarter to meditate and pray at the Wall, the last vestige of Solomon's temple. It is important to remember: had Jordan not joined Egypt and Syria in the war against Israel, the old city of Jerusalem would still be Arab. Clearly, while Jews were ready to die for Jerusalem they would not kill for Jerusalem.

...It belongs to the Jewish people and is much more than a city. It is what binds one Jew to another in a way that remains hard to explain. When a Jew visits Jerusalem for the first time, it is not the first time; it is a homecoming... Its sadness and its joy are part of our collective memory.

Today, for the first time in history, Jews, Christians and Muslims all may freely worship at their shrines. And, contrary to certain media reports, Jews, Christians and Muslims

ARE allowed to build their homes anywhere in the city. The anguish over Jerusalem is not about real estate but about memory... As the Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav said, 'Everything in this world has a heart; the heart itself has its own heart.' Jerusalem is the heart of our heart, the soul of our soul."

The Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations also took out full page ads in major newspapers across the country on Wednesday, Yom Yerushalayim, containing Former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's speech in the US Capitol Rotunda on the occasion of the 3,000 year anniversary of the founding of Jerusalem. Rabin was the commanding general who led the battle into the old city. You may recall the famous picture of him walking alongside Generals Motti Gur and Moshe Dayan as they entered the city.

He said to the members of Congress and others, "...Three thousand years of history look down upon us today, in the city from whose stones the ancient Jewish nation sprang, from whose clear mountain air three religions absorbed their spiritual essence and their strength. Jerusalem to which every believing Jew turns three times a day in the prayer 'May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy.'

Three thousand years of history look down upon us today, in the city where the Jewish Priestly Blessing mingles with the calls of the Muslim muezzins and bells of the Christian churches; where, in every alley and in every stone house, the admonitions of the Prophets were heard; whose towers saw nations rise, whose towers saw nations fall and Jerusalem stands forever.

Three thousand years of history look down upon us today, as do the dreams which cover the hyssop of the Western Wall and the silent graves of the Mount of Olives and Mount Herzl; the hush of the footsteps of the pilgrims and the thunder of the nailed boots of the ruthless conquerors; whose walls resonate with the prayers of the children and the pleas of the praying; where the exultation of victory mingled with the tears of the paratroopers next to the remnants of the temple, liberated from the yoke of strangers.

Three thousand years of dream and prayer today wrap Jerusalem in love and bring close Jews of every generation from the fires of the Inquisition to the ovens of Auschwitz, and from all corners of the earth from Yemen to Poland.

Three thousand years of Jerusalem are for us, now and forever, a message for tolerance between religions of love between peoples, of understanding between the nations, of the penetrating awareness that there is no State of Israel without Jerusalem, and no peace without Jerusalem united the City of Peace. On the day that the Government Offices were moved to Jerusalem, on December 13, 1949, the first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, said, "The State of Israel has, and will have, only one capital, Eternal Jerusalem. So it was 3000 years ago and so it will be, as we believe for eternity."

United Jerusalem is the heart of the Jewish people and the capital of the State of Israel. United Jerusalem is ours. Jerusalem forever!"

One may ask why the need to remind the world, and for that matter, Jews of these matters? It is not just because Yom Yerushalayim was this past week, but because of

certain political discussions. The Obama administration went apoplectic over the announcement of a municipal committee to approve housing permits in Ramat Shlomo, an area of North Jerusalem. While we all know about that, and next week I will speak about the two meetings I had at the White House, one of them a couple of days ago, we know less about an interesting action on the part of the British government. The British Advertising Standards Authority has prohibited Israel's Ministry of Tourism from including pictures of the Western Wall in its ads since they are part of the occupied territories, and could lead readers to think that they were in the state of Israel."

During the Camp David negotiations Yasser Arafat, to the surprise and consternation of his American hosts and Israeli counterparts repeatedly asserted something which has now become widely accepted in the Arab world: that the Jewish people never had a presence in Jerusalem, and that there was never a Temple built there. How can Israel be expected to negotiate with those who do not even accept basic indisputable historical fact or reality.

Being a tolerant, peace-loving people, we are taught to be reasonable and are inclined to be comprising in the interest of resolving disputes. It is almost as if it is ingrained in our very perception of what it means to be a Jew. While this tendency may serve us well in interpersonal relations, to give up so much of what is precious and historically meaningful reflects not tolerance or reasonableness, but more often than not ignorance and a lack of appreciation of our history. It leads not to reconciliation but to greater conflict for it encourages the other side to be even more demanding.

The young woman who proudly showed us the archaeological discoveries at the City of David providing evidence of the Jewish presence in the city dating back to the time of King David she picked up a small stone she held in her hand and said, "It is said that some hearts are like stone, and some stones have hearts - such are the stones of Jerusalem. But even more than that, the heart of the city is its people, the Jewish people who have returned and rebuilt a vibrant, dynamic city."

This is why Elie Wiesel concluded his letter, "Jerusalem must remain the world's Jewish spiritual capital, not a symbol of anguish and bitterness, but a symbol of trust and hope." And the best hope for this is when it remains in Jewish hands, the undivided eternal capital of the Jewish people.

©Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
May 15, 2010
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org