

On the Heavenly Jerusalem and the Earthly Jerusalem

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Some Personal History

I have lived in Jerusalem for 43 years, much more than half of my life by now. I made *aliyah* (went up to live in the land of Israel) in June 1979, just a few weeks after finishing my studies for a doctorate in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I came with my family straight to Jerusalem, the capital of the state of Israel and the spiritual capital of the Jewish people.

Since I spent a year of studies in Jerusalem in 1970-71 with my wife at the Hebrew University – during which time we became deeply attached to the land, the culture, and the people of Israel – we had decided that Israel would be our home and that we would live in Jerusalem. For a brief time, we contemplated living on a kibbutz in the northern part of Israel, but not for long. Jerusalem would be our home – the place where we would raise our children and the place that commanded our presence as Jews who wanted to live out our Jewish identity to the fullest in a state which we could call our own, where we felt we belonged, where we could make our own unique contributions to this emerging, exciting, and challenging society called Israel.

After we came to Israel, I held two jobs during my first two years. First, I was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Melton Center for Jewish Education of the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem. Second, I was a senior educator and supervisor of the Institutes of Jewish Zionist Education, an agency that conducted informal educational seminars for Jewish high school youth throughout Israel on issues of Jewish and Zionist Identity. We asked the students to think deeply and carefully about what it meant to live as a Jew in a Jewish state, how they would express their identity, how they would relate to the non-Jews in our midst, and many more existential questions. I did this second job for seven years, based in Jerusalem but also traveling all over Israel. It was a great help to me in getting to know the country and all the essential issues that we faced at that time (all of which we continue to confront).

After spending a year and a half in the United States in 1986 and 1987, I came back to Jerusalem to serve as the director of an American Jewish organization for four years. It was during this time that I became acquainted with the field of interreligious dialogue in Jerusalem and in Israel. In 1991, together with a few other people, I founded a new organization called the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) which I directed for 24 years, until the end of 2014, when I retired. During this time, I engaged intensively with Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the city. I also planned and implemented dialogue and action projects with diverse groups of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews for many years. In so doing, I discovered both the ideal and the real Jerusalem.

Heavenly Jerusalem and Earthly Jerusalem

According to Rabbi Art Vernon,¹ the concept of an ideal or heavenly Jerusalem appears to emerge in Jewish tradition in the second century CE. There is a midrash, a rabbinic homily, in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, a leading rabbinic figure in Tiberias in the early third century, who asserts, in

¹Rabbi Art Vernon, “The Heavenly Jerusalem,” in *My Jewish Learning*, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-heavenly-jerusalem/>.

part, that in the future the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem will be reunited as one. This teaching is based on an exposition of Psalms 122:3, *Jerusalem built up, a city knit together*. According to the midrash, ‘knit together’ means the uniting of the earthly Jerusalem with the heavenly Jerusalem as one. According to Rabbi Vernon:

The midrashic literature from the second century on is filled with descriptions of the rebuilt Jerusalem of the future. Various Midrash texts describe its dimensions, the materials of which it will be built, and the regard in which it will be held in terms that can only be categorized as fantastic.

The rabbinic imagination contemplates the restored and rebuilt Jerusalem of the future. It imagines a heavenly Jerusalem. But is that the whole story? According to Rabbi Vernon, there is more to the story:

The midrash in which Rabbi Yochanan is cited raises the question as to whether the heavenly Jerusalem is simply a template or mirror image of the earthly Jerusalem or a reality unto itself that one day will materialize on earth. From the context, it can be assumed that one rabbi believed that the heavenly Jerusalem exists intact regardless of the state of the earthly Jerusalem. Rabbi Yochanan seems to argue that it is only when the earthly Jerusalem is restored fully that the heavenly Jerusalem will be realized fully as well.

The Heavenly Jerusalem is the aspirational one – the pluralistic, open, inclusive, harmonious one – in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims could live together in harmony and peace. In this Jerusalem, we would all even be able to pray together in the “Holy Basin,” the Old City of Jerusalem, and even on Temple Mount, where, according to the Prophet Isaiah *My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples* (Isaiah 56:7). According to this ideal, Jerusalem would be a city that is shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims in a spirit of mutual understanding and continual cooperation. This, of course, is a messianic understanding of Jerusalem, one that we should aspire to and endeavor to make happen, at the same time as we realize that it may take a very long time to achieve it.

Part of this vision of Jerusalem is the idea that Jerusalem is meant to be a holy city (*ir hakadosh*), perhaps the holiest city in the world, according to some Jewish visions of this place. For example, in the traditional Jewish prayer of thanksgiving after eating a meal, we pray: *Let Jerusalem, the holy city, be renewed in our time. We praise You, God, for you rebuild Jerusalem with compassion.*

Indeed, the hope for the rebuilding of Jerusalem is part of the foundational nature of traditional Judaism. Another prominent example of this can be found at the end of the Passover seder, when we say: *Next Year in Jerusalem (L’shanah Ha-ba b’yerushalim)*, which was once meant to be a messianic wish but has now become a reality! (Interestingly, in Israel, we say: *Next Year in a Rebuilt Jerusalem*, which implies that Jerusalem is already in the process of being rebuilt!) The central idea being expressed here is that Jerusalem should be holy, special, unique, different from all secular cities. This, of course, puts a heavy burden on Jerusalem, one that is very difficult to achieve now, but nevertheless one that we should continue to guide to consciousness, one to which we should persist in aspiring.

However, there is Earthly Jerusalem, the physical (as opposed to the metaphysical) Jerusalem, the real city with real people of flesh and blood, who struggle to live together in some form of complicated coexistence on a daily basis, despite the constant political, security, theological, and social challenges. Contemporary Jerusalem represents a very complex, sometimes convoluted

reality, in which many factors make the idea of a heavenly Jerusalem just a distant dream or perhaps a wishful hope.

Today's Jerusalem is a city of contrasts, contradictions, and complications. Its demography is diverse, divided mainly between Palestinians and Jews. As of 2022, the Jews represent about 61 percent of Jerusalem, with the Palestinians at about 39 percent. Among the Palestinians, the overwhelming majority are Muslims and a small percent are Christians (whose presence is dwindling all the time). Among the Jews, there are major divisions, including the Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, traditional Jews, and secular ones.

The biggest problem among the Jews is with the ultra-Orthodox, most of whom reject modernity, pluralism, and tolerance, and have caused great tension via verbal and physical violence against Muslims and Christians (and Reform and Conservative Jews!) in recent years. Another serious problem emanates from the extremist so-called "religious Zionists" who establish purposely provocative "settlements" in many places in East Jerusalem, and work through various dubious organizations to displace innocent Palestinians, which also raises the level of tension often.

Among the Palestinians, there are similar problems with ultra-religious extremist Muslims and ultra-nationalist Palestinians who frequently seek to ignite the city via incitement to violence or actual violence, specifically acts of terror, which paradoxically make the lives of the Palestinians much worse. Some of this violence is initiated by people associated with Hamas, the fundamentalist version of Islam that dominates in Gaza and has people in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, or other Islamic groups, like the Islamic Jihad, whose sole agenda is "resisting Israel." Other times, the violence comes from individual Palestinians who are simply fed up with the humiliation of the ongoing Occupation or are taking revenge for home demolitions or killings or the jailing of relatives and friends. The harshness of the military occupation often drives some Palestinians to commit irrational acts of violence, since they feel that they have been driven crazy by so much oppression over so many years.

On the Palestinian side, there is also a special problem with Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, whose presence has been dwindling for decades. This is a serious problem, which in recent years is causing local Christians much consternation and has received international attention, including protests from the Archbishop of Canterbury and others. Writing in the *Sunday Times* of December 19, 2021, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem warned of a concerted attempt by fringe, radical Jewish groups to drive Christians away from the Holy Land – which takes place against the "historic tragedy" of the Christian population's century-long decline.

Last week, leaders of churches in Jerusalem raised an unprecedented and urgent alarm call. In a joint statement, they said Christians throughout the Holy Land have become the target of frequent and sustained attacks by fringe radical groups. In a joint statement they described 'countless incidents' of physical and verbal assaults against priests and other clergy, and attacks on Christian churches. They spoke of holy sites regularly vandalized and desecrated, and ongoing intimidation of local Christians as they go about their worship and daily lives.

These tactics are being used by such radical groups 'in a systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land,' the Jerusalem church leaders said in their statement. It is for this reason that when you speak with Palestinian

Christians in Jerusalem today you will often hear this cry: ‘In fifteen years’ time, there’ll be none of us left!’

Clearly there is growing concern that there are systematic attempts to force Christians out of Jerusalem by Jewish extremist groups like *Ateret Cohanim* and radical anti-Christian groups such as *Lehava* and settler groups that are often supported by radical right members of Knesset in Israel, such as Itamar Ben Gvir.

In addition, they are frequently taunted by some extreme ultra-orthodox Jews when they walk around the Old City of Jerusalem, and some of their churches have been vandalized in recent years by fanatic groups under the slogan of *Tag Mechir* (Price Tag). I have witnessed this myself via my involvement over more than a decade with a group called *Tag Meir* (Light Tag), which combats hate crimes via solidarity visits to institutions that have been damaged and people who have been injured and their families. Fortunately, this coalition of more than 50 Jewish groups in Israel represents the sane, humanistic, religious culture of Judaism, and gives some hope to local Palestinian Christians, who are living in fear of the radicals and who feel that they are trying to encourage them to leave the city.

The Political Context

Whether you view Jerusalem as heavenly or earthly or both, contemporary Jerusalem is part and parcel of a problematic political context.

Jerusalem today is the capital of the State of Israel. However, following the 1948 War of Independence, from 1948 to 1967, it was a divided city. Half of the city, which was on the eastern side, was part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The other half was in Israel. After the Six-Day War of June 1967, the eastern side of the city was officially annexed to Western Jerusalem, so that there is now officially (according to the government of Israel) only one Jerusalem, which is allegedly “united.” However, most of the international community has never formally recognized this annexation, so it remains an ongoing issue in diplomacy. In the meantime, the reality on the ground is that Jerusalem remains a very divided city, even if there is no longer a border in the middle of it, as was the case between 1948 and 1967.

In the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, it was agreed that the final status of Jerusalem would be negotiated by the parties to the conflict after five years of the interim agreement. But, unfortunately, this never happened, so that the official status of Jerusalem is still an issue in international diplomacy. This continues to cause anxiety, especially for the Palestinians in the city, who have been hoping for a long time that somehow Jerusalem would be shared, i.e., that there would be a capital for the State of Palestine in East Jerusalem and a capital for Israel in West Jerusalem. This dream has become very remote in recent years, as the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian authority has become frozen.

Accordingly, Palestinians in Jerusalem, who make up almost 39 percent of the population of the city, remain in limbo. They are residents of Jerusalem and can vote in Jerusalem’s municipal elections, but they cannot vote in either Israeli or Palestinian national elections. Moreover, even though they pay taxes in Jerusalem, they do not get their fair share of infrastructure so that building homes and apartments is very difficult for them. They often feel oppressed and humiliated, and live mostly in poverty, and endure the constant threat of house demolitions, since they often build illegally when there is no other way. Also, psychologically they feel that they are part of the

Palestinian community in the West Bank (as opposed to being part of the community of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel).

There are some prominent NGOs that try to address these issues, such as *Bimkom* and *Ir Amim*. But, until the governments of Israel and the Palestinian Authority enter serious and sustained negotiations to resolve the basic political problems in Jerusalem, these issues will continue to fester and disrupt the daily coexistence of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews for a long time to come.

A Vision for Jerusalem Is Necessary

While the reality of Jerusalem can be harsh sometimes – with violent incidents that upset the delicate fabric of constrained coexistence that does in fact prevail daily, most of the time – there is still a need to return to keeping a vision of the ideal Jerusalem alive, of a city that we would like to inhabit, for the mutual benefit of Palestinian Arabs (Muslims and Christians) and Israeli Jews alike. Jerusalem must become an inclusive and tolerant city supporting all its citizens' rights, affording them all opportunities to lead meaningful and safe lives.

I asked a rabbi, a bishop, and a Muslim professor – all of whom have been active in peacebuilding efforts in Jerusalem with me for a long time – to share their visions of Jerusalem with the readers of this article.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum, who is one of the leading young Masorti (Conservative) rabbis in Israel today (and is my rabbi at Kehillat Zion in Jerusalem), offered her thoughts:

I would like to see Jerusalem become a holy city, in which there will be a shared life for all citizens. There should be a way for people to express their national feelings of belonging as well as their religious faiths. I would like to see a set of relationships in Jerusalem where everyone respects the other in a good and positive way. I would like to see Jerusalem as a 'place of prayer for all peoples' [Isaiah 56:7]. I would really love to see Jerusalem as a city which provides the opportunity for all human beings to dream about their lives. Our lives should be filled with holiness and human dignity. There should be a place for everyone. It should be a city of *hesed*, where lovingkindness and justice are found among all the people, as our classical biblical prophets described it. I feel certain that this is possible.

One of the leading Christian peacebuilders in Jerusalem, Bishop Emeritus Munib Younan, is apparently very much in agreement with Rabbi Elad-Applebaum. He has devoted much of his life to thinking about how Jerusalem could become a city of peaceful coexistence. As an interreligious peace activist, and as a Lutheran world leader, he has always struggled for peaceful and just solutions to the question of how Jerusalem can somehow be shared among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and he has developed his own ideas for this. Bishop Younan believes that Jerusalem has a special mission in the world. In both the present and the future, Jerusalem should be a unique city due to its holiness and spiritual history.

As a religious leader, I feel that Jerusalem must be a city of peace, coexistence and tolerance, where the three faiths share in this city. I would like to see that the holy places are places of worship and prayer, not centers of conflict. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim places should be fully respected. That is a key for peace. Once you respect the other's holy place, there will be less conflict between the people of the different religions and nationalities in Jerusalem. I think that this idea is not messianic, but actually possible.

Professor Mohammed Dajani, the founder and chairperson of *Wasatia*, the Middle Way in Islam, who comes from a distinguished Palestinian family with deep roots in Jerusalem, also believes that Jerusalem must be shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The city of Jerusalem has a special place in the consciousness of the great monotheistic Abrahamic religions. For thousands of years, the holy city of Jerusalem has been the vital center of worship for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To seek a solution to the issue, we need to filter out the religious zeal and the political rhetoric from the reality on the ground. A viable solution could be reached by recognizing the attachment of each faith to the city. Rather than working to exclude each other from entering it, join hands to make it a model city open to pilgrims from all religions.

A win-win solution may be successfully achieved if Jerusalem is viewed in terms of the historic Old City embraced by the wall and excluding the modern new city that was created in the last century outside the wall. I believe the city should be reclaimed by both sides as a religious rather than a political capital.

All three religious leaders and interreligious activists share a vision for Jerusalem, which has guided them and still guides them in their peace activism.

Conclusion

I live in the earthly Jerusalem, but I am inspired by the Heavenly Jerusalem, the one of my dreams and visions, the one imagined by Jewish Tradition. The Heavenly Jerusalem of pluralism, inclusiveness, holiness, justice, and peaceful coexistence is the one that inspires me, gives me hope, allows me to look forward toward a better future. In this ideal Jerusalem, followers of the main religions in the city – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – will engage in dialogue and cooperate on projects of mutual interest. There will be no more need for terror and counter-terror operations. Respect for diversity and different opinions and lifestyles will reign. Religious, political, cultural, educational, and scientific leaders will work together for the betterment of all the citizens of the city.

But, in the meantime, down here on earth, in the real Jerusalem, we still have a lot of work to do to bring the real closer to the ideal in this very special city, which is holy to three major religions, and to which two nationalities are affiliated, the Palestinian people and the Jewish people. Yet, I submit that this is our imperative in the years ahead – to close the gaps, to bridge the differences, to make this a city that will inspire the whole world, a city of peace and harmony, in the spirit of the Prophet Isaiah (2:3): “For out of Zion will go the Teaching, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”