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Jerusalem, from pain to peace

“Ten portions of beauty came down to the world, nine were taken by Jerusalem and one by the rest of the world”

This comment of the Jewish sages two thousand years ago (which appears both in the Ethics of Rabbi Natan and in the Talmud, tractate Kiddushin) is a lovely hyperbole describing the special beauty of Jerusalem: a beauty which, like all that is most beautiful, is not just “skin deep”, but has a deeper spiritual beauty that is unique.

However, not so many know the additional comment of our sages in the text:–

“ten portions of pain came down to the world, nine went to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world”.

Indeed, there is surely no other city in the world over which so many have fought, so much blood has been shed, and for which so many have suffered for so long!

And, still, in Jerusalem today, while there is restored beauty, that recurrent pain remains.

It is the pain that comes from exclusive claims on her embrace; the pain that results from seeing the other as a threat, a competitor for Jerusalem’s embrace; and the inability to see others attachments to Jerusalem as part and parcel of the magical beauty, glory and métier of the city.

In Psalm 122 verse 3 we read: *“Jerusalem that is built up is like a city that has been joined together.”*

When I first arrived in Jerusalem in the summer of 1967, those words seemed so amazingly prophetic to us .

The Jerusalem that we Jews had yearned to return to, for whose restoration we prayed three times a day as well as at grace after meals: the Jerusalem that we had been banished from time and again, the latest by the Jordanians in 1948 and which thereafter we could only barely view from afar; was now in our hands in the wake of the Six Day War. Jerusalem, east and west, were now joined together again and she and we were renewed once more.

However, the most well known Talmudic interpretation of the “joining together” in which the psalmist rejoices, understands the phrase as referring to the people :

What is the meaning of a city joined together ? It is *‘a city that makes all Israel friends’.*”
(*Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah*)

This homiletical comment is a play on the Hebrew word *chubrah* which comes from the root *chiber, chaver*, which means a friend (indeed a friend in Hebrew means one who is joined to you.) This vision of friendship was, of course, inspired by the festive pilgrimages of the people to Jerusalem.

Moreover the idea is rooted in the historical origins and role of Jerusalem.

It had been a Jebusite citadel initially unconquered by the Hebrew tribes and, while it was on the border of Judah and Benjamin, it was not occupied as part and parcel of their territory. Thus Jerusalem provided David with a perfect secure territorial focus around which all the different tribes could unite, and in which they could all feel that they had a stake.

Jerusalem thus expressed the idea of uniting different elements through a common ideal, above and beyond their disparities and separateness.

Psalm 122 contains another perplexing verse:-

“Seek the peace of Jerusalem, they that love you shall prosper.” (122:6)

The verse is problematic and sounds naïve in light (or rather in the shadow) of historical experience. Surely most of those who loved Jerusalem down the ages suffered for her, but did not prosper !

But the sages’ understanding of the previous verse referred to and the ideal that Jerusalem is meant to embody gives this verse a deeper meaning.

The “peace of Jerusalem” is the capacity to be united in (and through) our disparities. Indeed the Hebrew word for “peace”, “shalom” comes from the word “shalem”, meaning complete, unified.

Thus the “peace of Jerusalem” means precisely the capacity to rise above and beyond our differences and vested interests in relation to others. Indeed, it is that peace that enables us to prosper.

Furthermore, this idea, the essence of the name and ethos of Jerusalem (“ir shalom”), declares the ultimate religio-ethical message of our history and hers – that there is a higher meaning, value and purpose in life than our particular vested interests, and it is that transcendent element which is of enduring value.

This message then is key to being able to truly appreciate the full beauty of Jerusalem, above and beyond her physically perceived loveliness.

Only when we are able to see the presence of others who love Jerusalem and seek to embrace her as “children blessed in her midst” (Psalm 147:13), contributing in their different ways to actually make up the greater beauty of Jerusalem; will all of us who seek the peace of Jerusalem, truly prosper.

As already mentioned, what prevents us from doing are our exclusive and exclusionary embraces of Jerusalem. But these do not stem just from narrow mindedness, but also from genuine and deep fears of each other; and these fears are not without basis.

Indeed our past experiences give us good reason to fear one another. You know the witticism – “just because I am paranoid, it does not mean that they are NOT trying to kill me !”

Overcoming fears, suspicion and distrust, is not a simple matter; and it does not come naturally to most. Moreover such fears and suspicions keep us apart from one another, thus generally ignorant of one another, and thus easily prejudicial of one another.

This is why interreligious engagement is so important in Jerusalem and in relation to Jerusalem, for it is only through getting to know one another that we have the opportunity to overcome these hurdles.

Accordingly one cannot overstate the importance of the establishment of the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which was in many respects the fruit of blessed John Paul II’s pilgrimage to the Holy land in the year 2000 as well as the meeting of religious leaders from the Holy land that took place in Alexandria in 2002. Eventually Holy Land Council was established being made up of the Ministry of Waqf/Religious Affairs of the Palestinian Authority and its Sharia courts, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the Patriarchates and Bishopsrics of the Holy Land.

The three main purposes of the Council are:-

To keep open avenues of communication between the Israeli and Palestinian institutional religious leadership, and to “trouble shoot” where necessary;
to collaborate in combatting all violence incitement and disrespect against any one of the religions and their holy places;
and last but not least, to support efforts to bring about an end to the conflict, so that two nations and three faith communities can live in peace and harmony and flourish.

In the first respects the Council has been a modest success. For example, the members have taken strong stands together against attacks on places of worship; on occasions gathering together in solidarity at the site of such deplorable violence. Moreover the Council has sponsored a comprehensive academic review that is currently under way, regarding how the different religious communities and their traditions are portrayed in both Palestinian and Israeli text books. However the Council earnestly hopes that there will be greater interest in availing of its declared desire to help support initiatives to bring an end to the conflict.

On its most basic level, interreligious relations are a manifestation of the Abrahamic spirit of hospitality for which the Patriarch is reknowned in the Hebrew Bible and in the Quran.

According to the ancient Jewish midrash (homiletical expositions), Abraham’s tent was open on all sides during the day to ensure that no traveler would pass by without being offered hospitality. You will recall that Genesis (18:2) records how Abraham saw three men and ran out to greet them to offer them hospitality. In the course of the narrative we discover that these men are angels with Divine missions. In the next chapter, two of them go on to Sodom to deliver Lot and his family from the pending destruction; and that chapter opens with the words “and the two angels came to Sodom.....”.

A Hassidic master asked why with Abraham the figures are only identified as “three men”, but when going to Sodom the two are described as angels ? And he answered that regarding Abraham they did not need to be identified as angels because Abraham saw the angel in every human being.

This is the true peace of Jerusalem, the Moriah of Abraham, that must be our goal.

When we reach out to the other, when we can see the angel - the Divine image in the other, when friendship triumphs over suspicion, then we enjoy the peace of Jerusalem and all who love her will truly prosper.

Another Talmudic homily on the verse “*Jerusalem rebuilt, is like a city joined together*”, explains the “joining together” as referring to Jerusalem below (earthly Jerusalem) and Jerusalem above (heavenly Jerusalem). In other words ultimate redemption requires us on earthly Jerusalem to connect it to the Heavenly Jerusalem – and surely that Heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of the spirit, is precisely reflected in our recognition of the Divine in one another..

Then Jerusalem truly will be rebuilt, “shalem” (complete), “ir shalom” City of Peace. Then, say our sages (Exodus Rabbah 52), she will not only be a unique focus of beauty but also a unique focus of joy – of pain no more – in accordance with the description of the psalmist (Psalm 48:3) “*beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth*”

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