

JERUSALEM – THE PARTICULAR AND THE UNIVERSAL

Rabbi David Rosen

The unique defining character of Jerusalem for Judaism is encapsulated in the Mishnah, in the first chapter of the tractate Kelim. While dealing with matters pertaining to tithes and offerings brought to the Temple - their origins and place of consumption - the Mishnah presents a view of the world that is made up of emanating spheres of sanctity. The Holy of Holies is presented as the most sacred spot in the world – in effect the fulcrum of sacred space in the universe. Then there is the rest of the Temple Mount. The emanation of holiness also extends to the city of Jerusalem, or Zion, as a whole and thereafter to the rest of the Holy Land and beyond. We are accordingly presented with an image of sanctity radiating outwards to the whole world from Zion.

The city's holiness is thus derived from "the place where God chose to cause His Name to dwell," where the Temple was erected accordingly (Deuteronomy 12.v.5 & 11, I Kings Ch. 8, II Kings 21 v. 4 and Psalm 132). Indeed, the fact that the site is considered intrinsically holy for Judaism means that even in the absence of the Temple and in the absence of the appropriate rites of purification required for entry into the Temple precincts, the site is considered to be "out of bounds" and Jews are religiously prohibited to enter thereupon (Of course in the modern secular State of Israel, this religious prohibition is not enforced, even though for security reasons the Israeli police will still assist the Muslim Wakf in ensuring that no non-Muslim conducts prayers anywhere on the Temple Mount precinct).

The central role of Jerusalem in the religious national life of the Jewish people made it the focus of their collective identity, even to the point where Jerusalem or Zion became synonymous not only with the whole Holy Land but even with the people itself, for better and for worse. Thus, for example, when the prophet Isaiah (Chapter 49) brings his message of comfort and restoration to the people, he presents it as a response to "Zion (who) says, 'God has forsaken me and the Lord has forgotten me.'"

Indeed, throughout exile, the image of the restoration of Jerusalem is central to the sustaining expectation of national return and revival. A powerful expression of this in the Sabbath morning liturgy declares, "Have mercy on Zion for she is the house of our life." Furthermore all formal Jewish prayer may be described as "Jerusalem orientated" by the very fact that Jews are required to turn towards Jerusalem in prayer three times a day.

However, Jerusalem means more than purely the focus and personification of particular Jewish religious and national life. Moreover even within this particularity, we find universal import. Jewish tradition sees the first Biblical reference to Jerusalem by the name of Shalem in Genesis 14 v. 18 – the city of Melchizedek who welcomed Abraham with bread and wine and praised the Most High God. The very first reference to Jerusalem is thus associated both with the recognition of the One Source of all life, as well as with the idea of hospitality and human acceptance of the other. The rabbinical interpretations of the name Jerusalem as coming from the Hebrew word for peace, as well as that for reverence or faith in God, reflect this idea. Yet beyond the universal

availability of the Temple as envisaged by Solomon at its dedication (I Kings 8 v.41), prophetic literature envisions restored Jerusalem as a universal center of moral light, righteousness and justice for all peoples. (E.g., Jeremiah 33 v. 16 & 3 v. 17; Isaiah 1 v. 26 & 27; Micah 4 v. 1-5, Psalm 89 v.15)

Moreover, even the political motives that led David to establish the conquered Jebusite citadel as his capital city contain universal import. In his mission to unite the different tribes into one nation, David realized the importance of a capital that was not already part of any of the tribes' territories and with which all could identify accordingly. Jerusalem provided this role and thus for the nation symbolized the need and goal of transcending tribal interests for the greater good. This idea acquired its full embodiment with the establishment of the Temple of Solomon and the three annual pilgrim festivals for which the nation went up to Jerusalem in devotion. (Deuteronomy 16 v. 16)

Our grasp of this idea which Jerusalem is meant to personify – i.e., overcoming our differences through our common attachment to her – enables us to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of Psalm 122, which expresses the pilgrim's joy at being in Jerusalem. The Psalm contains a verse that seems rather ironic in historical perspective. Verse six urges us to "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" and declares that those that love her "shall prosper." Yet how ironic that sounds against the backdrop of history. Did all those who loved Jerusalem prosper? Surely there is hardly a city in the world over which more blood has been spilt and more tears have been cried – mostly of those who loved her, by those who loved her! Yet if the real meaning of "the peace of Jerusalem" means the idea of bringing together different groups who nevertheless transcend their differences in a shared higher commitment, then the meaning of the verse appears to be particularly poignant both historically and above all for Jerusalem today. Most of those tears and bloodshed over Jerusalem were the result precisely of failure to respect the attachments of others to Jerusalem, as particular communities or faiths claimed exclusive embrace of the city. However these who truly love Jerusalem, the Psalmist appears to be saying, must be able to transcend that exclusivity and while certainly not diminishing their own particular attachments, learn to live with respect for those of others who hold Jerusalem dear. That is the key to "the peace of Jerusalem." When we learn to love her as the embodiment of that ideal – then we will all truly prosper.

Indeed, the perception of a morally constructive relationship between the particular and universal is central to the biblical Prophetic ideal that Jerusalem personifies. The vision of the messianic age is not of a denationalized society, but rather of a truly international society in which "many nations shall go up to the mountain of the Lord" and "nation shall not lift up sword against nation," etc. (Micah Ch. 4 v. 2 & 3; cf. Isaiah, Ch. 11)

It has become painfully evident in our modern world that universalism which seeks to ignore or even stamp out particular identities is at best futile and often becomes dangerously inhuman and morally destructive. People are the products of specific components of particularity that are the building blocks of human identity and to deny these is to undermine the individual's psycho-spiritual well-being. On the other hand particularism that does not have a universal aspiration invariably becomes xenophobic narcissistic and racist. Only a universalism that comes out of and is produced by

particular identities can really lead us to a sustainable universality of moral responsibility and peace.

It should in theory be natural for Jews, Christians and Muslims to live in mutual respect in Jerusalem not only because of their respective affirmations of the transcendent reality that we call God, who is also imminent in our lives, but also precisely because there is so much in common in their different traditions' views of the city. While the three have their own religious mythic historical associations with the city – for Christianity it is the geographical location of the key historical events of its fundamental faith tenets and for Islam it is place from whence the prophet ascended to Heaven on the *miraj*, his miraculous night journey – they respectively share a sense of the central spiritual significance of the city in the life of their traditions.

This binding nature of such perception should be reinforced above all by the shared ethical monotheistic heritage that all three see as going back to Abraham our common father. Indeed Judaism identifies and names the Temple Mount as Moriah where Abraham was willing to make the supreme sacrifice for his faith in the One God. (Genesis, 22 v. 2)

Undoubtedly the potential for cooperation between the children of Abraham has been overshadowed by their competition in which exclusive claims of inheritance have sought to deny the legitimacy of other members of the family. Yet this has almost invariably been within the context of political power and its territorial aspirations. The result has been the prostitution of religion on the altar of political interests. To a degree this continues to be the case in our region, even where secular power dominates as such. However where territorial differences can be resolved, it is possible to realize the potential of interreligious cooperation. This is increasingly the case within the State of Israel itself, where the Arab minority that constitutes a fifth of the country's citizens is overwhelmingly reconciled to being part and parcel of the State. The absence of territorial conflict within the society means that the primary concern of the different ethnic and cultural elements within it is to advance their well-being as part and parcel of the society as a whole. This has led to increasing interfaith cooperation over the years. The Israel Interreligious Coordinating Council – an umbrella organization for more than sixty associations and institutions with a commitment to interreligious cooperation – has in the past been overwhelmingly made up of constituents with a Western background and/or orientation. However in recent years it has embraced a slow but steadily increasing involvement of local Jews and Arabs, Christian and Muslim, including the officially recognized College of Higher Islamic studies in Israel.

Precisely because the question of Jerusalem's future is so politically charged, the leadership of both the State of Israel and the Palestinian Authority have agreed to delay discussions on this subject until the latter stages of the peace process. For as long as the matter of territorial authority remains contested, religion will inevitably be utilized in order to help affirm conflicting political aspirations. Nevertheless, we are fast approaching the time when one way or another, the technical issues will be resolved. Political resolution however is not enough to guarantee "the peace of Jerusalem." Only through promoting an environment in which the different deep psycho-spiritual

attachments that make up the identities of the peoples who both live and who are attached to Jerusalem, will the real purpose and prosperity of those who love her be achieved.

To this end we have to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes of the past so that with each community, people will learn to respect the attachments of the other communities and traditions devoted to Jerusalem. Inevitably the more the peace process advances, the easier this will be. However, we are able already to witness seminars bringing Israeli and Palestinian educators together, and the beginning of an educational program in Israeli schools to become more aware and sensitive to the bonds of devotion that are at the heart of the different traditions' presence in Jerusalem, both past and present.

The imminent arrival of the year 2000 also brings with it great opportunities for promoting trilateral dialogue and cooperation, though it also highlights the problems and challenges. The fact is that each of the faith communities retains the memory of victimization by one or both of the others. For many Muslims and for many Jews, the "invasion" of Jerusalem by millions of Christian pilgrims is not something to be anticipated with enthusiasm. There is a suspicion in many Jewish and Muslim quarters that behind this phenomenon lies the motive to proselytize, to "conquer" Jerusalem for Christendom as Christians sought to do in the past.

Moreover with all the political sensibilities that prevail in Jerusalem and its environs it is all too easy to set off a chain reaction of misunderstanding and/or misbehavior. The presence of extraordinarily large numbers in Jerusalem will increase the chances of such. And while the vast majority of such pilgrims will be Catholics motivated by the Pope's call and example to visit the Holy Land in the traditional spirit of pilgrimage, there will be other with more apocalyptic expectations.

These will come in particular from the evangelical fundamentalist community primarily in the U.S., amongst which there is a sense that the final messianic advent is fast approaching and an interpretation of history and current politics accordingly. This prophetic dispensationalism invariably interprets the State of Israel as part of the divine final plan for the second coming of Jesus who will reenter into the Temple itself. In order to do so, such eschatology reasons, the Jews must rebuild their Temple and thus the mosques on the Temple Mount must be removed.

While the vast majority of those who believe in the eventual fulfillment of this scenario are content to leave the matter for Divine execution and schedule, there are those fringe elements motivated to initiate the process. One does not need to elaborate on the terrible consequences of any such violence on the Temple Mount and the chain reaction that this would produce both physically and politically. Moreover just as there are Jewish extremist elements that would be only too happy to take advantage of such Christian extremism, the latter would also provide "justification" for extremist Muslim violence accordingly.

In order to ensure that such scenarios do not even find an opportunity, maximal intelligence and security cooperation is required to ensure that the vast majority of peaceful pilgrims as well as residents of the city of Jerusalem are able to go about their

business without fear. Above all, the logistics involved to accommodate and facilitate the itineraries of such large numbers of pilgrims, pose a substantial challenge.

However beyond these practical challenges, is the great opportunity presented to advance interfaith understanding generally and Christian-Jewish reconciliation in particular, in keeping with Pope John Paul II's vision for "the Great Jubilee."

The vast majority of Christians and Jews still suffer from a great deal of ignorance about one another and also about the enormous strides that the Church has taken in the last thirty-five years to overcome the past "teaching of contempt" towards the Jews. Similarly there is a great deal of ignorance and misrepresentation of Islam within the other communities. If prepared for appropriately, pilgrimage may provide a profound educational experience that facilitates the discovery of the living presence and reality of the other branches of the Abrahamic family both by the visitors and by the visited.

In addition, in the buildup to the year 2000, an increasing number of interfaith events and activities have already been taking place involving the Palestinians and Israelis from the three religious traditions. These may not be of great transforming significance in themselves, especially for as long as political rivalries have not yet been fully resolved. Nevertheless they serve as a most important testimony of what can and should be, especially when political developments will facilitate the advance of such relations to a far greater degree.

There is a well-known statement in Jewish tradition that declares that "ten portions of beauty came down to the world – nine went to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world." We who love Jerusalem have no doubt of the veracity of this comment. Jerusalem's beauty, like any lasting beauty, is far more than skin deep. While she does have a lovely external aspect to her, her beauty is precisely the spiritual beauty that reflects the depths of devotion that made Jerusalem so significant to so many from the traditions of Abraham – Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Less well known is the continuation of the aforementioned comment which adds "ten portions of pain came down to the world – nine went to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world" – a statement that reflects the aforementioned historical reality of blood and tears that has predominantly been the fate of Jerusalem and her peoples.

As indicated above, the ultimate vision for Jerusalem, as envisaged by the Prophets and Sages, anticipates the final realization of Jerusalem's name as city of peace, in which she will no longer be a city of pain, but only of beauty and joy. (Psalm 48 v. 3; Exodus Rabbah, 52) This vision will be facilitated only when we all who feel bound to this city truly strive for the aforementioned "peace of Jerusalem" in which the different attachments to Jerusalem live in mutual respect, above and beyond their differences. Thereby Jerusalem will serve as a true beacon of light in the world, and as the example it is meant to be of the coexistence between the particular and the universal, which is essential for the health and well being of humanity as a whole.