

THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF JERUSALEM IN JUDAISM

Rabbi David Rosen

Scholars of religions have noted various factors that cause cities to be considered holy. There are cities that are considered sacred due to their natural location and cities that are holy as a result of the presence of objects of veneration or shrines in their midst. More usually, cities are rendered sacred in different faiths as a result of events believed to have taken place within them and often as a place where future events of the greatest consequence for humanity are anticipated. There are also holy cities - as distinct from holy places within or around them - that were either constructed to reflect a cosmic vision or which have acquired such a mythological aspect in themselves often as images of a celestial reality. All these elements are to be found in the spiritual significance of Jerusalem. While I have been asked to focus in this article upon this significance in Judaism; Muslim and Christians will easily be able to discern the profound parallels and shared associations on this subject within their own Traditions. Learning about these, should lead us to greater mutual respect for one another and all that binds us together in Jerusalem, so that she may indeed fulfill the dream of her name - City of Peace.

As is well known, the historical relationship between the Jews and Jerusalem goes back to the reign of David when the city served as the royal centre that united the disparate tribes. However, what really invested Jerusalem with spiritual significance for the Jewish people was the construction of the Temple by Solomon that gave the city its special sanctity as the place with which God chose to uniquely associate His Holy Name (Deuteronomy Ch.12 v.5). That location - The Temple Mount, is thus considered to have been made intrinsically holy - in fact the only real Holy Site for Judaism. For that reason, in the absence of the Temple rites for ritual purification and the precise knowledge of the exact place of the holy of holies, Orthodox Jewish teaching prohibits Jews from entering today on to the site where the Temple itself once stood. (One might note in passing, that as a result Judaism not only poses no current threat to Islamic religious control on the Temple Mount, but in

fact helps safeguard it!). Accordingly the holiness of Jerusalem is first and foremost, the emanation of sanctity from the Temple Mount which gives the whole City a sanctity greater than anywhere else beyond it. When the Temple was standing the children of Israel were obliged to go up to Jerusalem in pilgrimage three times a year (Deuteronomy Ch. 16 v.16 & 17). Jerusalem thus served as the focus of the spiritual unity and purpose of the people (see Psalm 122). Accordingly Jews continue today as in the past, to face towards Jerusalem for their prayers three times a day.

Jewish Tradition ascribes seventy names to Jerusalem, some of which are better known than others. There are those that are mentioned explicitly in Scriptures, such as Zion; Scriptural names which are identified as Jerusalem, such as Moriah; and many descriptive titles of Tradition attesting to her spiritual significance and beauty. In addition to the rich body of religious literature extolling Jerusalem's physical and spiritual virtues, the city is associated with central religious events in human history, starting with Creation itself. The foundation stone, "even hashetiyah", was not only at the centre of the Temple, but was considered the centre of the world from whence Creation had commenced and the place from which the earth for the creation of the first human being was taken. Jerusalem is also identified with events in the life of the Patriarchs. Most notable of all in this regard, the supreme Pentateuchal example of dedication to God; namely, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice to God that which was more precious for him than life itself - his son and heir. The place of Jacob's dream (which he had on his journey from home when fleeing from his brother Esau) in which he received Divine revelation and promise, is also identified by Jewish tradition with this site. Moreover in Judaism, Jerusalem acquires further cosmic significance both as the Divine footstool underneath God's throne (and thus as the natural fulcrum, as it were, of spiritual energy in the world) and also as a mirror image of the Heavenly Jerusalem that will eventually be united with the earthly Jerusalem. This global image finds its ultimate expression in the messianic hope for the ingathering of the exiles and universal peace with the establishment of the Divine Kingdom on Earth.

Accordingly, when the Jewish people was in exile, Jerusalem served as the focus of their prayers and dreams for restoration, to the extent that both in prophetic and Rabbinic literature, Jerusalem became a symbol and personification not only of the land, but of the people itself. These hopes, that placed their trust in Divine mercy and promise, found their expression in the three daily prayer

services and in grace after every meal. Perhaps the most poignant and succinct of these prayers is the blessing that we continue to recite after the Scriptural readings in the Sabbath morning service. "Have mercy on Zion, O Lord, for she is the house of our life. And deliver the grieving soul (i.e. the people of Israel) speedily in our days. Blessed art Thou O Lord who makes Zion rejoice with her children". Recognition of the unequalled sanctity of Jerusalem was maintained in Jewish religious consciousness as it continues to be today, through restricting certain prayers and religious rituals to Jerusalem alone, thus heightening the ideal of living in the city. However, many who were unable to realise this goal were sent for burial in Jerusalem (mainly on the Mount of Olives), both so that their final resting place should be on holy ground and above all to await the ultimate messianic resurrection at the center stage of those final events.

The memory, meaning and hope of Jerusalem is similarly sustained in the Hebrew calendar. No matter how far away from Jerusalem Jews may be and no matter what season it may be there, the calendar that determines their year and its festivals, celebrates the agricultural seasons of Zion. And in their prayers not only do they face Jerusalem, but they recite the order of the Temple offerings, as they were offered up on each calendar occasion, almost two thousand years ago. In addition special days of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, sustains the central character of the city in the spiritual life of the Jew. Moreover, at the conclusion of the two most prominent religious ceremonies in the Hebrew calendar; the holiest day of the Jewish year, the Day of Atonement, when Jews fast for twenty five hours; and the Passover meal on the first night of this seminal festival of Jewish life and history, Jews continue to recite the words that nurtured the vision throughout the millennia - "leshanah haba'ah biYerusahalayim" - next year in Jerusalem.

Indeed Jerusalem is so inextricably part of Jewish religious consciousness and practice, as well as of its religious vision and hope, that the words of the above-mentioned Sabbath morning prayer are no exaggeration. She is indeed "the house of our life".