

Jerusalem in the Jewish Mind

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Psalm 122 expresses the Jewish pilgrim's excitement on arrival in Jerusalem and reveals something of the unique character and place that Jerusalem has occupied in the life and consciousness of the Jewish People. The gatherings together from among all the tribes – in particular for the pilgrim festivals - embodied the remarkable vision ascribed to David whose appreciation of the need for a central geographic focus around which the disparate components of Israelite society could rally, served as something of a prototype for Washington DC and Canberra and their ilk, already millennia ago.

However this vision appreciated not just the need for a geographic capital which the various tribes could all view as their own, but also of the necessity to guarantee this unity as a spiritual one - a vision only realized with the construction of the Temple by David's son Solomon.

The remarkable national cohesion provided by Jerusalem was expounded by the sages of the Talmud in a comment on one of the phrases in this Psalm - "Rebuilt Jerusalem is as a city joined together."¹ The Hebrew word "joined" comes from the root for the word for friend, "*haver*". Accordingly the rabbis expounded on the phrase declaring that it means that Jerusalem is "a city that makes all Israel friends."²

Jerusalem, known as Zion³ and as the City of David⁴, was accordingly seen not only as the place Divinely chosen for the monarchy; but in expanding to contain the Temple Mount, also known as Mount Moriah⁵, it was viewed as being the site of the unique Divine abode in this world, "the city of God", to be identified with the location referred to in Deuteronomy 12:5 as "the place He chose from among all your tribes to place His Name there, you shall seek (Him) at His Sanctuary and come there " to bring your offerings etc.⁶

Thus Jewish Tradition viewed this site as the place where intrinsic holiness connects heaven and earth, creating a kind of spiritual vortex from whence holiness emanates to the world at large.

In keeping with this idea, another rabbinic interpretation of the aforementioned phrase in Psalm 122, "Jerusalem is as a city joined together" understands it to refer to the connection between earthly Jerusalem and celestial Jerusalem.⁷

The first chapter of the Mishnah in tractate *Kelim* gives halachic substance, in terms of laws of ritual purity, to this idea of spiritual centrality from whence in effect a series of emanations of increasingly wider - albeit diminishing potency- of sanctity, go out to the world from the Holy of Holies.

Thus Jerusalem is presented as the *umbilicus mundi* , the spiritual navel of the world.⁸

¹ Psalm 122

² Which Rabbis, where?

³ 1 Kings 8:1

⁴ II Samuel 5:7

⁵ II Chronicles 3:1

⁶ See II Kings 21:4

⁷ TB Ta'anit 5a. See also TB Hagigah 12b)

⁸ See Philo, Legatio ad Gaium, 294; and Josephus, Wars of the Jews, 3: 51-52

The Midrash declares: "As the navel is set in the middle of a human being, so the Land of Israel is located in the center of the world, Jerusalem is in the center of the Land of Israel, the Temple in the center of Jerusalem, the Sanctuary (*heikhal*) in the center of the Temple, the ark in the center of the Sanctuary and in front of the Sanctuary is the Foundation Stone from which the world began."⁹

Accordingly Jewish Tradition portrayed Zion as the principal focus of Divine engagement with the world even predating the history of the people of Israel and the Patriarchs, describing it as the place from whence Creation commenced and where the earth was taken for the creation of the first human.

It thus also identified it with central events of the Biblical narrative, such as Abraham's demonstration of faith at "the binding of Isaac", and Jacob's dream of the ladder connecting Heaven and Earth where he received the Divine promise and guarantee.

In keeping with its uniqueness, Jerusalem is perceived as especially glorious: "Beautiful to behold, joy of the whole earth, Mount Zion extending north, the city of the Great King"¹⁰; "Zion, **the perfection of beauty**, out of which God has shined forth"¹¹

The physical aspect of Jerusalem was of course enormously and impressively enhanced during the Second Temple period by Herod the Great.

Thus the sages declare that there was no beauty comparable to that of Jerusalem;¹² that of the "ten measures of beauty (that) came down to the world, Jerusalem took nine";¹³ and that "he who has not seen Jerusalem in its glory has not seen a truly beautiful city in his life."¹⁴

Indeed, Jewish Tradition ascribes seventy names to Jerusalem, attesting to her spiritual significance and beauty.

Even Jerusalem's limitations were interpreted as grounds for praise of her virtues: "Rabbi Isaac said, why are there no fruits of Ginnosar (growing) in Jerusalem? So that the pilgrims for the Festivals should not say 'had we made the pilgrimage just in order to eat the fruits of Ginossar in Jerusalem, it would have been worthwhile for us', with the result that the pilgrimage would not have been made for its own sake. Similarly Rabbi Dostai ben Yannai said 'why are the hot springs of Tiberias not in Jerusalem? So that the pilgrims for the Festivals should not say "Had we only come as pilgrims to bathe in the hot springs of Tiberias it would have been worth it for us, with the result that the pilgrimage would not have been made for its own sake."¹⁵

The destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem as a whole (586 B.C.E.) were thus seen as the ultimate catastrophe and in the ominous term "the day of Jerusalem" in the book of Lamentations, the city symbolizes the humiliation of the land, the people and their exile, so graphically described in that book.

Accordingly the weeping exiles by the rivers of Babylon declare:-

⁹ Tanhumah Ylamdenu Leviticus 78; See TB Sanhedrin 37a; Canticles Rabbah 7:5

¹⁰ Psalm 48:3

¹¹ Psalm 50:2; See also Lamentations 2:15; and Canticles 6:4

¹² Ethics of Rabbi Natan, 28:58

¹³ TB Kiddushin 49b

¹⁴ TB Sukkah 51b

¹⁵ TB Pesachim 8b; Sifre, Numbers 89

"If I forget you O Jerusalem let my right hand forget (its ability). Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not raise Jerusalem above my greatest joy."¹⁶

Nevertheless, destruction and exile are seen only as a temporary situation in Biblical and prophetic literature which express the total trust in Divine Love and commitment to His eternal promise in returning the exiles as foretold in Leviticus¹⁷, which will ultimately bring about the city's restoration and reunification with the people. Accordingly the chapters of consolation in the book of Isaiah¹⁸, contain an abundance of expression of fervent love for Zion and Jerusalem on the one hand and on the other, descriptions in hyperbolic poetic style of its anticipated future greatness and splendor, with its expected restoration. The Prophetic view of an exalted future for Jerusalem includes both physical splendor and a sublime religious-spiritual significance referring both to the near future and to the end of days.

In Jeremiah's detailed vision of the rebuilt Jerusalem,¹⁹ not only the Temple but the whole city will be "sacred to the Lord". Ezekiel²⁰ to an even greater degree endows this vision of the restored Holy City with a transcendent aspect in which the whole city, entirely sanctified to God as the abode of the Divine Presence, will be called "The Lord is there".

The vision of Zechariah recorded in the eighth chapter of the book looks towards that day when Jerusalem will be called "the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of Hosts, the holy mountain", and once again its "streets will be filled with old men and old women and boys and girls will play there".²¹

However the unique ***national*** role that Jerusalem provided, led to a remarkable identification of the city with the people of Israel themselves.

This is most dramatically demonstrated in the passages from the prophets concerning the city after its destruction by the Babylonians in the year 586 BCE. "**Jerusalem has sinned** grievously... therefore her fall is terrible" declares Jeremiah in the Book of Lamentations.²²

While the city is portrayed as a grieving widow, a bereft mother of the Jewish people, as the ravished "daughter of Judah" and "daughter of Zion"; she is also the very embodiment of the humiliated and desolate people itself – "**she dwells now among the nations** but finds no resting place".²³ "Zion stretches out her hands but there is none to comfort her.... the Lord has ruled against Jacob"²⁴ (1:17.)

Yet there is hope that when "the punishment of **the daughter of Zion's** iniquity will be accomplished, He will keep (her) in exile no longer".²⁵

Accordingly Jeremiah addresses the Jewish people as Jerusalem when communicating the promise of redemption "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem saying, thus says the Lord 'I remember the

¹⁶ Psalm 137

¹⁷ Leviticus 26:44-45

¹⁸ Chapters 40 - 66

¹⁹ Chapters 30 & 31

²⁰ Chapters 45 & 48

²¹ V 3-5

²² Lamentations 1:8-9

²³ Ibid, 1:3

²⁴ Ibid, 1:17

²⁵ Ibid, 4:22

devotion of your youth, your love as a bride. How you followed me in the wilderness in a land not sown”²⁶

And Isaiah continuously identifies the city and the people with one another, such as in chapter 51 verse 16 where he declares that God will once again “say to Zion, you are my people”.

Indeed the anticipated return of the people is described as the “return **of** Zion” and not as “the return **to** Zion”.²⁷

I am not sure if such total identification of a people and a city has ever existed elsewhere. To be sure Athenians saw their identity as bound up with Athens, but I do not think that they would ascribe to the city a personality that is exiled let alone redeemed.

Thus the need to continuously recall the trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, to learn from our own tragic mistakes, but above all to sustain the hope for the return and reconstruction of Jerusalem (as a synonym for the Land of Israel as a whole) became a central focus of Jewish life.

The rabbis declared that one should really mourn the destruction of Jerusalem every day and in every place, but that it is not possible to mourn so much. “The sages have therefore ordained thus. A man may whitewash his house but he should leave a small area unfinished in remembrance of Jerusalem. A man may prepare a full-course meal, but he should leave out an item of the menu in remembrance of Jerusalem. A woman may put on all her jewelry except one or two in remembrance of Jerusalem”.²⁸

Most of all, it was through Jewish liturgy that the centrality of Jerusalem in Jewish consciousness was maintained.

In addition to facing towards Jerusalem for the three daily prayers, mention of her destruction and the anticipation of her restoration was made obligatory by the rabbis as part of all statutory services as well as in grace after every meal.

The fourteenth blessing in the weekday Amidah - the central prayer of statutory services – is devoted entirely to Jerusalem and reads “And to Jerusalem Your city return in mercy and dwell in her midst (again) as you have spoken, and (re)construct her up speedily in our days (re)built up for eternity, and (re)establish the seat of David Your servant within her; Blessed are You who (re)builds Jerusalem.”

And the seventeenth blessing of the Amidah concludes with the words “and let our eyes see Your return to Zion in mercy, Blessed is He who returns His Divine presence to Zion”

(The idea that God Himself is in exile from Jerusalem and the Land of Israel with His people, was developed by the rabbis in homiletical exposition of Biblical texts, e.g. TB Megilah 29a:- “Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai says, come and see how beloved Israel (the Jewish People) is before the Holy one Blessed be He; for wherever they are exiled, the Divine Presence is with them... and when they will be redeemed, the Divine Presence will be (redeemed) with them, as it is said²⁹ ‘and the Lord will

²⁶ Jeremiah 2:2

²⁷ Psalm 127

²⁸ Tosefta Sotah 15: 12-14; TB Bava Batra 60b

²⁹ Deuteronomy 30:3

return (with) your captivity' . It is not written, He will return you from your captivity; but that He will return, which teaches that the Holy One Blessed Be He will return with them from amidst the exile.”)

The Amidah of the evening service (*arvit*) is preceded by a prayer concluding the day beseeching Divine protection and peace as we retire for the night (and for Divine renewal of our lives for the next day.) On Friday evening the concluding blessing of this prayer is changed and expanded to include special mention of Jerusalem:- “Blessed are You o Lord who spreads His tabernacle of Peace over us and over all His people Israel, and over Jerusalem.

Of course the significance of Jerusalem’s loss to the Jewish people and the expectation of return, is particularly commemorated in the Hebrew calendar through the Fast days - above all the full night and day fast of Tisha B’Av , the ninth day of the month of Av, as the anniversary of the destruction of the two Temples.

On that day, in addition to reading the Book of Lamentations and the recital of elegies evening and morning, the aforementioned fourteenth blessing of the Amidah is changed to read as follows:-

“Comfort O Lord our God the mourners of Zion, the mourners of Jerusalem, and the mourning city that is destroyed and defiled and desolate - mourning (because she is) without her children, her homes destroyed, her honor defiled, and she is desolate without habitation. And she sits with her head bowed as a barren woman who has not given birth. And she is despoiled by legions and idolaters have taken her over and put your people to the sword, and willfully kill the most righteous. Therefore Zion weeps bitterly and Jerusalem gives vent to her voice. My heart, my heart (goes out) for their slain; my innards, my innards (ache) for their slain. For You O Lord have set her ablaze with fire, and with fire you will (re)build her, as it is stated ‘and I shall be for her says the Lord, as a wall of fire around (her) and for (her) glory I will be within her (Zechariah 2:9) ‘Blessed are you who comforts Zion and (re)builds Jerusalem.”

(In many communities in Israel today, notably the religious kibbutz movement, this prayer has been changed to reflect the transformed state of the Jewish People with the establishment of the State of Israel.)

The Mussaf (additional) Amidah on the Sabbath and on Rosh Chodesh (New Moon), but most of all on the Pilgrim Festivals, reinforces Jewish awareness of Jerusalem’s historic role and the anticipation of its future. “Merciful King, with your abundant mercy have compassion again upon us and on Your Temple and rebuild it soon and greatly increase its glory..... Bring back our scattered ones from among the nations and gather our dispersed from the ends of the earth. Bring us to Zion Your city with joyous song, to Jerusalem, your Temple with everlasting joy.”³⁰

Daily morning prayers include a liturgy of confession, which is substantially extended on Mondays and Thursdays. This text dwells upon the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile and suffering of the Jewish people commencing early on with verses from the prophet Daniel’s lament for the city³¹ beseeches Divine forgiveness for sins and the restoration of the people and the city.

One of the most dramatic phrases in the liturgy regarding Jerusalem is found in the third blessing after the reading of the Haftarah, the reading from the prophets on the Shabbat and Festivals, beseeching God to “have mercy on Zion, for **she is the house of our life**”!

³⁰ Mussaf Amidah for the Festivals

³¹ Daniel 9:4-19

The place of Jerusalem is overwhelmingly prominent in liturgical hymns (*piyyutim*), including those chanted in the liturgy of the High Holidays, in the *selihot* (penitential prayers) recited in the days beforehand and through the Ten Days of Penitence .

In addition most of the popular Sabbath table hymns contain verses both mourning Jerusalem, extolling her lost beauty, and anticipating the city's glorious restoration.

One of the most popular of liturgical hymns is "Lcha Dodi" composed for the Sabbath by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (16 c.) Based on the rabbinic description of the Sabbath as both a Queen and a Bride, it became part and parcel of the Jewish liturgy for welcoming in the Sabbath around the Jewish world.

However the majority of its verses focus on Jerusalem, abundantly using Biblical phrases and terms (especially from Isaiah.) The third stanza reads:- "King's Temple, Royal City, arise go out from the upheaval. For long enough have you dwelt in the valley of tears; but He shall have pitiful compassion on you."

Many other ritual practices deepened this consciousness even further such as the conclusion of the Day of Atonement – the holiest day in the Hebrew calendar – and the conclusion of the Passover meal, with the words "next year in rebuilt Jerusalem".

As indicated, the awareness of and hope for Jerusalem was not only present in the statutory prayer services, but also at every meal. The third benediction of the Grace after Meals is largely devoted to Jerusalem and includes prayers for the city, for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty, and for the rebuilding of the Temple. It concludes with the words "blessed are you O Lord who rebuilds Jerusalem in His mercy".

Furthermore, of the seven blessings that conclude the Jewish wedding ceremony, the fifth and the seventh refer to the anticipation of Jerusalem's restoration.

"May she who was left bereft, greatly delight as her children gather together in joy in her midst. Blessed are you O Lord, who causes Zion to delight with her children!

".....Speedily, Lord our God , let it be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem, cries of joy, song, merriment, and delight — the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride, the jubilant voice of bridegrooms from their canopies, and of youths from their feasts of song. Blessed are you O Lord, who causes the bridegroom and bride to rejoice together!"

While these passages highlight the fact that the people is made up of its family cells and thus their destinies are one; their inclusion in the wedding ceremony was above all born out of the prophetic imagery of the joy of the bridal couple epitomizing the joy of the people restored to their land and city ³². Moreover the ceremony is commonly concluded with a breaking of a glass to remember the destruction of Jerusalem even at this most joyous time. Before breaking the glass the groom declares the words of the exiles from Zion as recorded in Psalm 137, "If I forget you O Jerusalem let my right hand forget (its ability.) Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not raise Jerusalem above my greatest joy."

³² Isaiah 62:5

The practice of sending the earthly remains of Jews from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel traces its origins to the Patriarch Jacob³³. However Jerusalem and especially the Mount of Olives remained a particular focus of this due to hope of the resurrection at the end of days with the coming of the Messiah in Jerusalem.

This custom reflected the bond between the land and the people, but also the particular view of the intrinsic sanctity of the location. In the words of Rabbi Anan³⁴ "Anyone buried in the Land of Israel is considered as if he was buried beneath the altar; it is written 'An altar of earth (*adamah*) you shall make for me³⁵, and it is written 'His land (*admato*) will atone for His people.'"³⁶

Yet not all the sages encouraged such practice, as reflected in the story told in the Jerusalem Talmud about Rabbi bar Kiri and Rabbi Elazar who saw coffins arriving in the Land of Israel from the Diaspora. Rabbi bar Kiri said to Rabbi Elazar, "What are they achieving? I apply to them the verse 'You make My inheritance desolate (during your lives), and you came and defiled My land (in your death).'"³⁷ (i.e. they should have lived in the land rather than send their dead bones here.) However Rabbi Elazar replied "When they arrive in the Land of Israel, a clod of earth is placed in the coffin, as it is written, 'His land will atone for His people.'"³⁸

The memory, meaning, and hope for Jerusalem, sustained the Jewish Diaspora which for more than a millennium and a half constituted the overwhelming majority of Jews. Nevertheless, a continuous Jewish presence remained in the Land and many sought to live in Jerusalem awaiting messianic deliverance. However, under Byzantine rule Jews were usually prohibited from living in Jerusalem altogether and were only allowed to visit on the anniversary of the Temple's destruction to mourn its loss and reveal their humiliation. Restrictions were even more severe during Crusader rule

As most Jews were unable to return to the land during the course of this long exile, it was accordingly deemed meritorious to contribute to the maintenance of Jewish communities who, despite the great hardships, persisted in living in the land and in Jerusalem in particular when possible.

It is understandable that the bitter Jewish experience of persecution and suffering in and for Jerusalem, led to the perception in the Jewish mind of the relationship between the Jewish People and the city as an exclusive one

However already in Solomon's original prayer of dedication, the place of the Temple in Jerusalem is seen as having a universal appeal.

"And also the foreigner who is not of your people Israel, who comes from a far country for Your Name's sake. For when they will hear of Your great Name and Your mighty hand and outstretched arm, and will pray at this House. You will hearken from the heavens from the abode of Your dwelling place and will do all that which the foreigner will call upon you for, in order that all the nations of the

³³ Genesis 49:29

³⁴ TB, Ktubot 11a

³⁵ Exodus 20:21

³⁶ Deuteronomy 32:43 (the rabbis here intentionally reinterpret the literal meaning of the verse.)

³⁷ Jeremiah 2:7

³⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Kilayim 9:3 and Ketubot 12:3

earth will know Your Name to revere You as (do) Your people Israel and to know that Your Name is designated on this house that I have built."³⁹

Moreover the prophets envision restored Jerusalem with the Temple at its center serving a universal destiny in the messianic era.

Zechariah⁴⁰ describes how Jerusalem will become the global focus of pilgrimage; and also how the nations will come up to Jerusalem in particular to celebrate the festival of Tabernacles.⁴¹

This is in keeping with the vision of Isaiah, echoed by Micah, in which the place named "the mountain of the House of the Lord" and "the House of the God of Jacob" are identified with Zion, Jerusalem, from whence learning, justice and peace will emanate to all the nations.

Indeed Isaiah's vision of the messianic era has many nations declaring "let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob, and He will instruct us in His ways and we will walk in His Paths, for from Zion shall go forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."⁴²

In this light I would like to close my remarks with my own homiletical exposition of Psalm 122 with which I opened my presentation.

Verse six states "Seek the peace of Jerusalem, they who love you shall prosper".

But this claim seems to be more than hollow in the light, or rather the shadow of history.

Mention has been made of the famous statement of our sages that ten measures of beauty came down to the world, Jerusalem took nine and one went to the rest of the world.⁴³ Less well known however, are the following statements of the sages in which inter alia they declare that "ten portions of pain came down to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world."

Indeed has the pain of a city ever been memorialized as has that of Jerusalem? Has any city witnessed more continuous bloodshed than Jerusalem? Has any city had more tears shed over her than Jerusalem? How can it be said that those that love her prosper?

However if we recall both the vision in the Psalm and also the exposition of verse three as Jerusalem being a city that should bring people together, we may get a better understanding of the verse .

The peace of Jerusalem means the peace of unity that embraces diversity. In other words, when we learn to embrace the diverse attachments of Jerusalem, then we shall truly prosper.

The pain of Jerusalem substantially flows from efforts to deny the attachments of others to Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem is more than any one attachment. This is the lesson that has still not yet been fully learnt, even though it may fairly be said that in comparison to the past, we are not doing *such* a bad job.

Yet it is when we truly respect the attachments of others to Jerusalem, that we shall, truly prosper morally and spiritually. Then Jerusalem will live up to its name as city of peace and the joy of the whole world.⁴⁴

³⁹ I Kings 8:41-43

⁴⁰ Zechariah 8:22

⁴¹ Ibid, 14:16

⁴² Isaiah 2:3

⁴³ TB Kiddushin 49b

⁴⁴ Psalm 48:3