

Yom Yerushalayim 5771 / Jerusalem Day 2011

Jerusalem for Everyone

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When you think about Jerusalem these days, does it make you want to sing? Maybe so, but what kind of song hits the right notes?

Wednesday, June 1, 2011 (28 Iyar 5771) will be [Yom Yerushalayim](#) – a holiday marked by Israeli Jews and many Jewish diaspora communities to commemorate the day in 1967 when Israeli forces took control of the Old City and East Jerusalem, bringing the entire city under Jewish sovereignty.

Some Jewish prayer communities celebrate Yom Yerushalayim by singing the joyful series of praise psalms known as Hallel (Psalms 113-118) which traditionally mark Jewish holy days. This practice frames the unification of Jerusalem as a religiously significant event for which God deserves praise. Others choose not to elevate Yom Yerushalayim to the status of the holy days with Hallel, but might include special readings at prayer services or public gatherings. And in today's political climate of violence, contestation, and religious fundamentalism centered on Jerusalem, the city can inspire more sorrow and anxiety than joy.

The joy associated with Jerusalem is famously and exultantly expressed in the Sheva Brakhot ("Seven Blessings") that conclude a traditional Jewish wedding. Part of the seventh blessing cites Jeremiah 33:10-11:

od yeshama b'arei Yehudah
u-v'chutrot Yerushalayim
kol sasson v'kol simchah,
kol chatan v'kol kallah.

May there soon be heard in the towns of
Judea
and in the streets of Jerusalem
the sound of joy and gladness,
the sound of groom and bride.

We'll return to the groom and bride in a moment. But first let's examine those sounds of joy.

It turns out that some medieval rabbis were opposed to using this verse in the wedding ritual, as the scholar Meir Raffeld has described.¹ They objected: What do you mean *b'arei*, *in* the towns, and *v'chutrot*, *in* the streets? If people there are hearing those sounds of joy, it's possible that the sounds are coming from elsewhere, and there is not actually joy in Judea and Jerusalem! So some rabbis (as well as the Yemenite wedding liturgy to this day) have preferred another verse in Jeremiah, 7:34, which is *almost* exactly the same:

od yeshama *m'arei* Yehudah
u-*m'chutrot* Yerushalayim
kol sasson v'kol simchah,
kol chatan v'kol kallah.

May there soon be heard *from* the towns
of Judea
and *from* the streets of Jerusalem
the sound of joy and gladness,
the sound of groom and bride.

The *b'* or *v'* (letter *bet/vet*) meaning *in* is replaced here by *m'* (letter *mem*) meaning *from*. According to this reading, if people *outside* can hear the sounds of joy *from* Judea and Jerusalem, then it must mean that the joy is coming from *inside*!

But to me, this second verse has a problem as well – it still leaves the possibility that those on the outside are not experiencing the joy of those on the inside. If people are hearing sounds of joy *from* Jerusalem, then it might imply that they don't have their own joy. How can we accept that possibility? After all, as another song goes, "*ki mi-tzion tetzeh Torah, u-dvar Adonai mi-yerushalayim*" – "Torah will emerge from Zion,

and divine words from Jerusalem” (Micah 4:2). Jerusalem should be a source of joy and wisdom for the whole world, not only for those within it.

So which verse makes for a better blessing? Joy that’s heard *in* Jerusalem, or *from* Jerusalem? Joy experienced by those on the outside, or those on the inside? Language and liturgy seem to force us to choose one over the other.

Tragically, the politics of Jerusalem today are also framed as an either-or competition. Either the Jews get what they want and the Palestinians lose out, or the other way around. If I hear that my opponent is happy, then it must be bad for me. And for me to rejoice, I assume that it must come at my opponent’s expense.

But the utopian vision of Jeremiah tells us that in a repaired world to come, both verses can be true at once. Everyone can have their own joy, and hear the joy of others, at the same time – in all parts of Jerusalem, and also beyond. We might even imagine that hearing the joy of others will itself be a source of joy for us.

Yet the groom and bride still present us with a problem. The heterosexual norm expressed by Jeremiah, in both of these verses, is part of the brokenness and incompleteness that keeps the prophet – and us as well – from getting to that world to come. When the full range of human love and life partnerships is not recognized and celebrated, when some people’s joy is

proclaimed while others’ is silenced, then Jeremiah’s vision remains unfulfilled, and *none* of us can have hope of redemption. That reality is still with us in Jerusalem today, where homophobia poisons the culture, and violence has greeted the city’s Pride Parade. CBST is proud to partner with groups like the [Jerusalem Open House](#) that are working to heal those divides.

Now we can begin to see the outlines of a redeemed Jerusalem, of what it might truly mean to speak of a “unified” Jerusalem. Not a mere question of military control and political jurisdiction – but a city where love is made whole, where joy is shared by people of every ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and where everyone rejoices to hear the song of their neighbors. Now *that* would be a good reason to sing Hallel.

¹ Meir Raffeld, “Jerusalem’s Ruins and a Renaissance in the Wedding Blessing,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 9 (2006), pp. 181-189.

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