

The Educational Challenge of Yom Yerushalayim

By Rabbi Reuven Spolter

Here in Israel, the celebration of Yom Yerushalayim has become something of a challenge, both religiously and educationally. As time progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the day is marked by and large solely by the Religious Zionist movement. Why has Yom Yerushalayim lost its luster over the past four plus decades? Rabbi Reuven Spolter, through the lens of Tehillim 122, offers a suggestion.

שיר המעלות, לְדוֹד: שְׂמַחְתִּי, בְּאֶמְרִים לִי בֵּית ה' נִלְךָ. עַמְדוֹת, הֵיוּ רִגְלֵינוּ בְּשַׁעְרֶיהָ, יְרוּשָׁלַם. יְרוּשָׁלַם הַבְּנוּיָה כְּעִיר, שְׂחַבְרָה-לָהּ יַחְדָּו. שָׁשָׂם עָלָיו שְׁבָטִים, שְׁבָטֵי-קֵה--עַדוֹת לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: לְהַדוֹת, לְשֵׁם ה'. כִּי שָׁמָּה, יָשְׁבוּ כְּסָאוֹת לְמִשְׁפָּט: כְּסָאוֹת, לְבֵית דָּוִד. שָׂאֵלוּ, שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם; יִשְׁלִי, אֶהְבִּיךָ. יְהִי-שְׁלוֹם בְּחִילָךְ; שְׁלוֹה, בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיךָ. לְמַעַן, אַחִי וְרַעִי- אַדְבָּרָה-נָא שְׁלוֹם בְּךָ. לְמַעַן, בֵּית-ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ-- אֲבַקֶּשֶׁה טוֹב לָךְ.

A good friend of mine from the United States – a relatively recent Ba'al Teshuvah – visited Israel for the first time last year. After spending a week at a hotel in Yerushalayim, he arrived in Yad Binyamin for Shabbat. After a hearty hug I asked him, "Nu...how's the visit?"

He immediately intuited what I was asking him: What were his impressions of the Holy Land? He gave me a frustrated look. Something was clearly bothering him, and I pestered him until he finally opened up.

"It's not really what I expected," he told me with no small amount of disappointment. "From what I had heard, Jerusalem was supposed to be different: ancient, holy perhaps. But the reality of what I saw reminded me more of the shopping districts in Michigan than the Holy Jerusalem that I had imagined..."

At first glance, the Chapter of Tehillim (122) most closely associated with Yerushalayim paints a picture celebrating the great, holy city in all her majesty and glory. The chapter itself begins with a sense of wonder and bewilderment: "שְׂמַחְתִּי, בְּאֶמְרִים לִי בֵּית ה' נִלְךָ" *To the House of God? Really? Is that even possible?* We, along with the writer, lift our eyes to the sights, sounds and wonder of the city as our feet carry us through the holy gates that until this point we had only dreamed about, yearned for.

And this is not just any city. Rather, it is an, עִיר שְׂחַבְרָה-לָהּ יַחְדָּו. What indeed does Yerushalayim connect? The vague language of the text leaves us to imagine the connections of Jerusalem: She connects to herself – a great, complete city; but she also connects people together; she connects between the physical and spiritual worlds, between heaven and earth. Moreover, this city serves as the religious and spiritual source of holiness for the Nation of Israel. She is not just the home for "a testimony unto Israel" - representing the presence of God among the nation. Rather, this city serves as the source and fountain of Torah, justice and government as well.

And yet, immediately following this wondrous, bewildered, awe-inspired description, something changes. We suddenly find a request for a prayer of peace on behalf of the city: שְׂאֵלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלוֹם יִשְׁלִי אוֹהֲבֶיךָ. This verse also represents a change in narration. We no longer hear the voice of the awestruck visitor, but someone else. Who is asking? What is he requesting? Amos Chacham explains that,

These are the words of parting that the citizens of Jerusalem say to the עוֹלֵי רֶגֶל as they take their leave towards their homes. [The citizens ask of them], "Wherever you may be, ask in your prayers that peace reign in Jerusalem." (Da'at Mikra commentary)

To this request the visitors reply,

יהי-שלום בחילה; שלום, בארמנותיה. למען, אחי ורעי אדברה-נא שלום בך. למען, בית-ה' אלקינו אבקשה טוב לך.

What we find in this chapter, is a conversation between two groups. The people of Jerusalem send the visitors on their way, calling them to pray and seek out their "peace". In response, the departing visitors answer with words of blessing on behalf of the city and her inhabitants.

Why though do they suddenly speak about the peace of the city? Why should this wondrous and fantastic city now require prayers for peace? From a certain perspective, the Chapter omits the most important aspects of the story. It opens with the visitors entering the city, and then skips to their departure. What happened during the visit? How was it? What happened between the visitors' arrival and their departure? Why would the author fail to describe what was sure to be a magical, wondrous and surely unforgettable visit to the Holy City?

Moreover, a fundamental change seems to have taken place. What happened to our wide-eyed visitors? Why are they now the ones assuring the city's citizens as they take their leave? What caused this sudden switch? What happened to the feelings of awe and amazement that they expressed as they entered?

The switch we have discovered in our text emanates from the natural gap between the imaginary expectations which emerge from the poetic, spiritual descriptions of Yerushalayim, and the actual, physical city itself. The עולה לרגל arrives with expectations of holiness and awe. Yet, despite the expected overt miracles in the Beit Hamikdash, the city is also crowded and overflowing. Our עולה לרגל finds himself facing businessmen who know that he carries with him money from מעשר שני that he must spend in the city on food-related items, and it stands to reason that their prices have been raised commensurately. The city must deal not only with holiness, prayer and sacrifice in the Temple, but also survives on a tourist economy which must support its inhabitants year-round. Suddenly, facing this frustrating reality, our visitor begins to wonder: Where is the Jerusalem I had dreamed about? Where is the Yerushalayim, "that is connected together?"

His departure is quite different than his arrival. Our visitor leaves frustrated and depressed from the great gulf between his expectations and the reality that he actually experiences.

It is for this reason that the people of the city ask for his prayers. *It is true – this is not what you expected! But were those expectations realistic? Did you have to deal with the sudden arrival of millions of people on a single day for a weeklong visit? Did you need to address the physical – and not spiritual - needs of these tourists? Did you provide them food, lodging, and even clean their trash from the streets after yet another busy day?*

Do we not have a similar sense of frustration at times not just from modern-day Yerushalayim, but also from our relatively young State?

For two millennia we dreamed about her, waited for her, yearned for her with poetic, fantastic visions of grandeur:

מתי תמלוך בציון?... ובנה אותה בקרוב... וכסא דוד מהרה בתוכה תכין!

Yet, at the moment that this distant and seemingly impossible dream began to materialize, we began to feel those same sentiments of frustration that the עולה לרגל in our chapter feels, and that my friend expressed to me during his visit.

Nonetheless, our chapter concludes with words of blessing: יהי שלום בחילך. Despite the normal (and perhaps expected) frustration, we must pray that we merit witnessing the full realization of our dream. One day, we will merit seeing that gap between our imagination and reality diminish until we can indeed return to the beginning of our Chapter and declare, proudly and joyously,

בית ה' נלך... ירושלם הבנויה, קעיר, שחברה-לה יחדו!