

Jerusalem Then & Now

- Basil Herring

1. And so Israel's electorate has spoken. Finally, there seems to be a mandate and direction for its fractious and divided nation. And the suspended so-called Apeace process@ will likely proceed apace. But there was one telling statistic that you may have missed: the split between the vote in Tel Aviv and that in Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv 65% voted for Barak and 35% for Netanyahu. In Jerusalem it was reversed: 35% for Barak, and 65% for Netanyahu. 2 cities, two populations, 2 attitudes, 2 sets of priorities.

2. Indeed the most crucial consequence of the election is for what it augurs regarding the future of Jerusalem. Even though Barak has said that it will remain the undivided capital of Israel, many questions and uncertainties fill the air. It is no secret what the Palestinians demand and expect. A recent poll made it very clear: they want a State with Jerusalem as its capital. So committed are they to getting Jerusalem that when asked Awould you want a state even if it did not include Jerusalem? 87% said no, and only 13% said yes! No wonder the Palestinian authority has already appointed a A Governor of Jerusalem, who runs a shadow Jerusalem municipality in Abu Dis, right outside the city's borders. And who was quoted in a recent interview with the New Republic as saying Awe are not planning a war over Jerusalem, but we are convinced that Israel will give in to international pressure.@ And so the battle for Jerusalem will proceed, and we have only begun to see its contours.

3. With this in mind, both today and tomorrow my derashot will speak of Jerusalem, then and now. Actually my text for today is taken from tomorrow's Torah reading, for reasons that will become clear. We will read Devarim 14-16, starting with Aser te'aser, describing first the laws of maaser, and then the yomtovim. Again and again, 6 times in all, the Torah refers to a central location in the promised land dedicated to sacrifice and prayer, as Athe place upon which God will choose to place His name. That place is where the Jew is expected to come for the shalosh regalim, the three festivals, including Shavuot, to worship and serve God. And of course, that place is Jerusalem. The place where by tradition Yaaakov Avinu dreamt his dream of a ladder from earth to heaven, hence as he put it beit Elokim veshaar hashamayim, Aa place which is the house of God, the gate to heaven.

4. It is Jerusalem which joins the upper and lower worlds, physical/spiritual and human/divine. As Hazal put it, it is the neck between the body and the head.

5. Reflected in Shir shel Yom for the 2nd day of the week, the day in Creation which separated heavens from earth, when rakia/shamayim of the celestial world were established opposite erez of the material world, the Levites in the Temples in Jerusalem sought to bring heavens and earth closer together, by singing the anthem of Jerusalem par excellence: Psalm 48.

6. Today, both so as to study Torah on Shavuot, and so as to focus on Jerusalem, we will take few minutes to understand that mizmor, and what it may say to us, as we contemplate the future and destiny of Jerusalem in our time. For indeed, as we will discover, it captures a moment in Jerusalem history very much like our own.

7. Read text Psalms 48. Various interpretations. Nachum Sarna, recent book titled AOn the Book of Psalms,@ has an entire chapter on this Psalm. Accepts the scholarly view that it refers to the amazing biblical episode of Sancheriv and Jerusalem, as found in 2 Kings 18.

8. Background: Jerusalem, geographically at the very center of the country, a mountain top

military fortress surrounded on 3 sides by steep valleys. Joshua could not conquer it. David waited 7 years to do so after becoming king.

9. 722 BCE Assyrian king Shalmanezar attacks Israelite northern kingdom, conquers Israelite Northern Kingdom, exiles the 10 tribes to Babylon. Hizkiyahu, king over Judea and Jerusalem throws out idols from the Temple, offers special sacrifices in Jerusalem, strengthens the city's walls and water supplies. Allies himself with Egypt to the South. 705 Sancheriv attacks. First conquers surrounding Canaanite and Mediterranean nations, who join his forces as vassals in attacking Judea. The towns of Judea are quickly overrun. Soon Jerusalem is surrounded.

Hizkiyahu tries appeasement (sends all the silver in the Temple treasury, even the gates of the Temple!) To no avail. General Ravesheka issues an ultimatum: total surrender/exile or complete destruction. Isaiah counsels fortitude, foretells salvation. The barbarians are literally at the gates. That night: salvation! As foretold by Isaiah, 185,000 Assyrian soldiers die overnight, the rest flee. Jerusalem is saved, not because it is impregnable (it is not!), but (as made clear by Isaiah) by the grace of God, and as a consequence of the righteousness and loyalty to God of its king and people.

10. Soon thereafter, the Israelite people come up to Jerusalem, and this Psalm commemorates their sentiments (Read again.)

11. What are the lessons for us?

a. Jerusalem is not impregnable, its fate for the Jewish people depends on our loyalty to God and Torah. The righteousness of Hizkiyahu saved the city from his contemporary Superpowers and their local allies. [Today the parallels are clear: Iraq/Iran and their Palestinian allies who, having taken over Shomron and the other Arei Yehudah are at the gates of Jerusalem.]

b. You can't trust/appease sworn enemies, or even supposed allies who believe that they are stronger than you. [Parallel: no salami tactics, go for final status negotiations]

c. You don't wait for miracles. First you make your military preparations, only then do you pray and put your trust in God [Tzahal].

d. As with Psalm 48: aliya la-regel, visit/live/support Jerusalem, make it an essential part of your life.

12. Haporais sukkat shalom aleinu ve'al kol Yisrael, ve'al Yerushalayim (special mention!)

Jerusalem finds peace only when there is Al kol Yisrael, i.e., solidarity and unity over its future.