

**City of our Souls:  
Reflections on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
Of the reunification of Jerusalem  
Parashat Behar-Bechukotai;  
May 11, 2007**

Monday, June 5, 1967. Forty years ago next month. At the sound of the sirens, Ben Hollander, a man who would – many years later – become one of my teachers... at the sound of the sirens Ben Hollander went into an underground shelter. In other parts of the country, Israelis were glued to their radios, listening to Chaim Herzog's later famous broadcasts about the progress of the war -- but the people underground had no communication with the outside world. What was going on above them? Days passed, and they knew that all the threats, all the waiting, all the anxiety of the previous months was coming to a head above them... but they didn't know the outcome.

On their third day underground, on June 7, there was a knock on the entrance to the bomb shelter. They opened the door, and the sweaty face of a young Israeli soldier looked down at them. His voice cracked with excitement, and he announced: "har habayit b'yadeinu...the Temple Mount is in our hands!"

Jordan had entered the war – unwisely, it turned out, and after the Israelis had begged them to stay out -- by seizing the UN headquarters. The Jordanians began indiscriminate shelling of the Jewish area of the city. The Israelis halted their advance, cut the Jerusalem-Bethlehem road, broke through to an area known as Ammunition Hill. By Tuesday

all of East Jerusalem north of the Old City was captured. And by Wednesday Israeli forces broke through Lion's Gate, and took the Old City. (Summary from the Encyclopedia Judaica) The emotional power of this moment surpassed anything else in the Six Day War, perhaps, in some ways – at least for other Jews around the world – it surpassed anything else that had happened yet, in the whole history of the Third Jewish Commonwealth. Jerusalem was whole! And the two severed parts of the city were officially reunited on June 28, 1967.

This past Wednesday, Nicholas Kristof wrote an column in the New York Times in which he asserted that people respond more to the image of an individual, than they do to the abstraction of an idea. “That’s the implication” he wrote, “of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people — good, conscientious people — aren’t moved by genocide or famines. Time and again, we’ve seen that the human conscience just isn’t pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.”

Kristof goes on to give examples: “the toddler Jessica McClure falling down a well in 1987, or the Lindbergh baby kidnapping in 1932 (which Mencken described as the “the biggest story since the Resurrection”)... A dog stranded on a ship arous[ing] so much pity that \$48,000 in private money was spent trying to rescue it...a red-tailed hawk, Pale Male, that had been evicted from his nest on Fifth Avenue in

New York City. A single homeless hawk aroused more indignation than two million homeless Sudanese.”

It is, perhaps, an exercise in metonymy. The part stands for the whole. A face. An image. An individual. We connect better to the personal, than to the abstract. There is a delicate dance between the particular and the universal. Between the self, and the group; then the smaller group, and the larger whole.

And so in Jewish dreams and Jewish visions, we begin with one place, and one people. One country... and one center. For poets and philosophers one city is all cities; Jerusalem... a gateway onto eternity.

The centrality of Jerusalem in Jewish life defies logic, and defines geography. City of David, Zion, the Mountain of the Lord. Ten measures of beauty there are in the world, and Jerusalem took nine (Talmud: *Kiddushin* 49b). “At the beginning of creation, the Holy One made, as it were, a tabernacle in Jerusalem, and God Godself offered up prayer there” (Midrash on Psalms); *Adam HaKadmon*, the primordial human being, was created from earth taken from the site of the future Temple (*Pirkei deRebbe Eliezer*). The Garden of Eden is somehow said to be there, although logic and the description in Genesis places it somewhere in Iraq; Abraham’s burial place is said to be there, although we know it to be in Hebron. The mountain on which Abraham offers Isaac was called Mt. Moriah, the root being *yud.reish.aleph*, the Hebrew word for reverence...but easily played upon to become *yud.reish.hey*, the root of

teaching, of Torah – and also of *horim*, parents. The site thus becomes the fountain of knowledge, the foundation of the human family. Jerusalem is called *tabbur ha'aretz*, “the navel of the world.” Or this: The Land of Israel is the center of the world. Jerusalem is the center of the Land of Israel. The Temple is in the center of Jerusalem; the *heikhal* is in the center of the Temple; and in front of the *heikhal* is the *even shetiyah*, the foundation stone from which the world was started. (*Tanchuma; Sanhedrin 37a*) (Kind of like that map, you know, the New Yorker’s view of the universe.)

People come, and go crazy. Jerusalem Syndrome it is called; those who were Bill or Bob in Texas or California, who now think they are Jesus, or Moses, or more.

Walking the streets, breathing the air, raising the sand of centuries, I taste the power of the city. Maybe it is the dream-like haze of the sun mixing with the dust and golden stones. Maybe it is the sights and sounds, the collage of color and collision of civilizations. Or maybe it is the sheer intensity of the place: the sense of every moment lived on the edge of time, every discussion focusing on the “really real”, life and death, dreams and struggles, visions of a desert God and the gripping hand that claims the wholeness of the soul. There is a penumbra of importance, a palpable sense that life *matters*.

Of course all of this is supremely subjective. It is a matter of a mental map, of reading oneself in. The magic isn’t there for everyone; it

doesn't always work. Where some are transported by dreams, others see only delusions. As I have said so many times before, really, you have to go to know.

What is Jerusalem? It is layers, and circles. Windmills and walls, in and out.

I have two photographs, two slides taken four years apart, taken while standing in the same spot. The pictures are both of the Damascus Gate. There, in 1980, carts and donkeys and my girlfriend that year, on the steps leading down to the gate. Then, in 1984, in the same place, merchants and spice racks, long loaves of bread and zatar to sprinkle on it...but something different. Something new, and very old. Lower, and to the left, a hundred feet or so down there is another gate, a parallel port. Beneath the Damascus Gate of Suleiman... now unearthed... is the Damascus Gate of the Roman era. The Cardo, the heart of the ancient city. Suspected but unseen in 1980; open to the world in 1984. A city of layers, whose stones have stories they have yet to share. Every time I go there is, literally, more to see.

And walls. In the mid-1800's the city was crowded and poor; disease broke out; conditions were deteriorating. A wealthy British Jew, Moshe Montefiore, paid to build the very first neighborhood, the very first home outside the walls of the Old City. Yemin Moshe it is called today, the right hand of Moses. And the people he paid to live there would

occupy his houses by day, go about their work, pleasing their patron, a regular Potemkin Village. But then, before the city gates would close for the night, they would all sneak back inside... afraid of the open, the wild and exposed.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, scion of scholars, heir to the Hasids, who marched with Martin Luther King and stood up against the war in Vietnam... Heschel knew that the road to the universal comes straight from the particular. He came to the breadth of the world, out of a profound place of Jewish depth.

Heschel writes: "July, 1967. I have discovered a new land. Israel is not the same as before. There is great astonishment in the souls. It is as if the prophets had risen from their graves. Their words ring in a new way. Jerusalem is everywhere, she hovers over the whole country. There is a new radiance, a new awe.

"My astonishment is mixed with anxiety. Am I worthy? Am I able to appreciate the marvel. I did not enter on my own the city of Jerusalem. Streams of endless craving, clinging, dreaming, flowing day and night, midnights, years, decades, centuries, millennia, streams of tears, pledging, waiting – from all over the world, from all corners of the earth – carried us of this generation to the Wall. My ancestors could only dream of you – to my people in Auschwitz you were more remote than the moon, and I can touch your stones! Am I worthy? How shall I ever repay for

these moments? 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth...'"

And I... I have other pictures, other image as well. Businesses which come and go: Richie's Pizza, gone now, the American hangout, where in the days before everyone had a phone you would just leave messages for friends on the wall, confident they find it and connect. Or this: a traffic jam at a busy intersection; rush hour in the new city, pedestrians obliviously crossing between the cars while glued to cell phones, right in front of an Internet Café.

Jerusalem is a place where yesterday crashes into tomorrow with more intensity than anywhere else I have ever been. There are visionaries and optometrists, prayers and plumbing. No one, perhaps, captured the intersection of time better than the unofficial poet of the city, Yehuda Amichai. A whole year of studying his words would be time well spent. Here he is, on the past, and the present:

*Kol hadorot shel'fanai tar'mu oti  
Kim'a kim'a k'dai she'akum kan birushalayim  
Bevat echad, k'mo beit t'filah, o mosad tzedakah.  
Zeh m'chayev...*

All the generations before me  
Donated me, bit by bit, so that I'd be  
Erected all at once  
Here in Jerusalem, like a house of prayer  
Or charitable institution.  
It binds...

Or this, from perhaps his best known poem: *Tayarim*, Tourists

בקורי אבלים הם עורכים אצלנו,  
 יושבים ביד ושם, מרצינים ליד הכותל המערבי  
 וצוחקים מאחורי וילונות כבדים בחדרי מלון,  
 מצטלמים עם מתים חשובים בקבר רחל  
 ובקבר הרצל ובגבעת התחמושת,  
 בוכים על יפי גבורת נערינו  
 וחושקים בקשיחות נערוטינו  
 ותולים את תחתונייהם  
 לייבוש מהיר  
 באמבטיה כחלה וצוננת.

פעם ישבתי על מדרגות ליד שער במצודת דוד, את שני הסלים הכבדים  
 שמת לידי. עמדה שם קבוצת תיירים סביב המדריך ושמשתי להם נקודת  
 ציון. "אתם רואים את האיש הזה עם הסלים? קצת ימינה מראשו נמצאת  
 קשת מן התקופה הרומית. קצת ימינה מראשו". אבל הוא זז, הוא זז!  
 אמרתי בלבי: הגאלה תבוא רק אם יגידו להם: אתם רואים שם את  
 הקשת מן התקופה הרומית? לא חשוב: אבל לידה, קצת שמאלה ולמטה  
 ממנה, יושב אדם שקנה פרות וירקות לביתו.

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
 They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
 They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
 And they laugh behind heavy curtains  
 In their hotels.  
 They have their pictures taken  
 Together with our famous dead  
 At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb  
 And on Ammunition Hill.  
 They weep over our sweet boys  
 And lust after our tough girls  
 And hang up their underwear  
 To dry quickly  
 In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by agate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!" I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

Forty years. It is a powerful number, a symbolic one. An entire generation has passed since 1967. This night I have not touched on politics and morality, mistakes and madness, fences or firearms, the compromises and concessions that will no doubt come in the future. This night has only been one of reflection and remembrance, a vision of the past, and a dream of tomorrow. Forty years since reunification, bringing with it problems and promises, and a new connection with an eternal dream, Jerusalem, the capital city of our souls.