

Jerusalem: A Personal Tribute

By MONTY NOAM PENKOWER

In accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature in December 1966, Shmuel Yosef Agnon made this observation: “As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.”

On a personal level, I can readily appreciate this poetic declaration.

My first encounter with Jerusalem, then a small, provincial city, came in the summer of 1955. I had arrived with my parents and three siblings to become the first American Jew to celebrate his bar mitzvah in the fledgling Jewish state, then numbering not quite 1.8 million in population. The wish that I do so had been that of my maternal grandfather, Abraham Max Stavisky – one of the founders of Mizrahi in the United States and the early purchaser of an orchard in what much later would flourish as Ramat Gan – who had passed away in November 1953.

A Jerusalem apartment at 7a Narkis (then referred to by locals as “bet haLordim” because prominent Mizrahi leaders lived there), in which he and his wife Fanny had resided for six months each year, became our central abode during this and subsequent trips. Speaking modern Hebrew and enveloped in a Zionist atmosphere on a daily basis at Camp Massad, to which our dear parents, Rabbi Murry S. and Lillian S. Penkower, had sent us each summer, certainly enhanced our visit.

I shall never forget chanting in Jerusalem’s Bet Knesset Yeshurun the *maftir* of *parashat VaEtchanan* and the *haftarah* for *Shabbat Nachamu*. Its high point that morning came with a blessing bestowed upon me after I had concluded by then-Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, a close family friend. The Penkowers were warmly received by Rabbi Herzog and his remarkable wife, Sarah, at their home for *erev Shabbat* dinner, followed by a separate meeting at the home of Chief Sephardi Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim. We also had the honor and pleasure of an audience with President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and his equally special wife Rachel Yanait at their home in Rechavia.

Another visit to Israel took place two summers later, but it was not until July 1967 that I fully experienced what would be the decisive turning point in my life. As a member in the bass section of the New York City-based Zamir Chorale, I arrived shortly after the miraculous Six-Day War in order to participate in the triennial

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Zimriya festival. We sang throughout the country, the apex coming in a performance with all the other choirs, joining under the baton of Gary Bertini at the Hebrew University amphitheater on *Har HaTzofim*.

As the sun set over the Judean Hills, our four-part voices rang out with a musical composition that had been especially created by Haim Alexander for the occasion, drawing upon chapter 122 in *Tehillim*. Words cannot do justice to the thrill of singing “*omdot hayu raglenu b’sh’arayikh Yerushalayim*,” even as barbed wire was still in evidence along with signs warning passers-by to beware of mines that had not yet been deactivated from last month’s war.

On the one free *erev Shabbat* I had during that extraordinary trip, we paid a visit to the family of Abraham and Leah Goodman on Jerusalem’s 50 HaNevi’im St. Abraham’s brother, Rabbi Isidor Goodman, had married my mother’s oldest sister, Esther, and so the Goodman children and the Penkower children shared a common aunt and uncle. During the course of that wonderful evening, one filled with *divrei Torah*, song, and spirited conversation, a vision in blue across the table greeted my eyes. I was deeply impressed, even smitten, by the second of the three Goodman daughters, Yael. Her beauty, her warmth, and her intelligence were all readily apparent.

Once I returned home, we began a lengthy correspondence, using the thin blue airmail letter forms of those years with which to express our deepest feelings and our fondest hopes. After another visit of mine six months later and one by Yael to New York a year after that, we were married on July 27, 1969, in Jerusalem. Our song, to which Yael marched down accompanied by her parents, had become “*Hitrag’ut*,” a lovely melody by Paul Ben-Haim which I had sung with the Zamir Chorale, and our favorite prayer, understandably, *Tehillim* chapter 122.

Many – far too many – years were to pass before we returned to take up permanent residence in Jerusalem. I began to teach modern Jewish history and to publish studies on the Shoah and on the rise of the state of Israel, while Yael became a pioneer in Judaica reference librarianship and in teaching Talmud to women. Each of our two sons celebrated his bar mitzvah in Israel, our oldest began his high-school years in Efrat, our three daughters attended a one-year program of Torah study in Jerusalem after high school, and our younger son learned for one year in Yeshivat Har Etzion.

In time, the three oldest children, Avi, Talya, and Yonina, took degrees at Bar-Ilan University, married, and began raising families of their own in Israel. Yael and I visited the country often, and in January 2002 purchased our future home on Derech Hevron in Jerusalem. On July 1 of that same year, I made *aliyah* along with our third daughter, Ayelet; for Yael, of course, it was a return home. Ten years later, our younger son, Ariel, and his family came on *aliyah* as well.

When the wheels of El Al flight 22 touched down on

the tarmac of Ben-Gurion Airport on 21 Tamuz 5762, I kissed the ground and, turning to my soul mate Yael, exclaimed with tears in my eyes, “*higanu haBaita v’ze-hu!*” Our children wrapped us in an Israeli flag and sang “*v’shavu banim l’gvulam*.”

Yael became the librarian at Bet Morasha and, upon retirement, volunteered at the Central Zionist Archives, both in Jerusalem. I taught in Jerusalem at the Machon Lander Graduate School of Jewish Studies before retiring after almost forty years in the world of academia, and then focused on completing my projected trilogy about the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty in Israel between 1933 and 1948.

The years that followed my *aliyah*, with all of our children, their spouses, and twenty grandchildren living in the biblically covenanted *Eretz Yisrael*, were the happiest of our almost forty-seven years of marriage. Alas, Yael passed away in March 2016, leaving us bereft but fully aware of, and deeply grateful for, the varied gifts this *bat Yerushalayim* had bestowed upon us and upon so many others. While ever contending with this incomparable loss, we continue to be blessed.

On a regular basis, Yael and I loved walking the streets of Jerusalem and taking many trips to the shuk. We reconnected after a long hiatus with friends in the city, and with family members who have lived here for many years, including my brother Jordan, cousins, and in-laws. The Jewish National Library, special exhibits at the Israel Museum, plays at the Jerusalem and Khan Theatres, Torah study at different venues in celebration of *Shavuot* – all enriched our lives.

Witnessing four grandsons put on *tefillin* for the first time at the *Kotel*, where I also arrived to mark the completion of my hiking *Shvil Yisrael*, provided additional reason for celebration. At the same time, the tragedy of losing Dr. David Applebaum, the son of a cousin, and his daughter Na’ava to a terrorist attack at Emek Refaim’s Café Hillel the night before her wedding, as well as attending military funerals at Har Herzl, were fundamental in forging a new identity. Attending political protests in Jerusalem made a deep impression as well. In sum, so much of my daily life is wrapped up in this truly unique place on earth.

Since I began with Agnon, it is most fitting that I close these ruminations with additional words he uttered on that historic evening in Stockholm, the first and still the only Israeli writer to have received the Nobel Prize for Literature:

“If I am proud of anything, it is that I have been granted the privilege of living in the land which God promised our forefathers to give us, as it is written (*Yehezkel* 37: 25): ‘And they shall dwell in the land that I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; and they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever.’”

How much more so, I add, in this joyous fiftieth-anniversary year of the reunification of the eternal capital of our people’s nation-state after 2,000 years of Jewish exile, to live in Jerusalem!

The Blueprint And All Its Components

By Rabbi YEHESKEL LEBOVIC

From all the chaos surrounding us, it is easy to conclude that the world is becoming more and more depraved, with many groups using their belief systems to justify acts of terrorism and evil.

But the reality is that God’s plan continues to unfold.

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The Rambam (*Hil. Melachim*8:11) states that non-Jews who observe the seven mitzvahs of Bnei Noach are referred to as “the righteous from among the nations” – but only if their observance of these laws is based on acceptance of them as having been given by God at Sinai.

If, however, their adherence is based on their own intellectual recognition and conclusion, they are neither “*ger toshav*” nor are they counted among the “righteous of the nations” – not even among their wise ones.

Which raises the question: Why not among the wise ones, since it was their wisdom and intellect that led

them to recognize that these precepts ought to be followed?

The answer lies in the proper understanding of the opening verse of the Torah: “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” The Hebrew for “in the beginning” is “*bereishis*,” in which the prepositional letter “b” can also be understood as “for the sake of.”

Accordingly, this verse is interpreted (Rashi, *Bereishis* 1:1) as follows: God created heaven and earth for

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