

Yom Yerushalayim: Reflections on a City Divided

By Rabbi Toba Spitzer

This week, many in Israel and in the Jewish community celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, Jerusalem Day. The 28th of Iyyar (May 16th this year) commemorates that day in June 1967 when Israeli forces re-unified the city of Jerusalem, winning the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and ushering in the now 40-year-long occupation of those territories.

The word “Yerushalayim” comes from the Hebrew for “city,” “ir”, and the root “s.l.m.,” from which both “shalom” (peace) and “shalem”(whole) derive – thus, Jerusalem is conceived of as a city of peace, and of wholeness.

It is therefore a painful irony that Jerusalem’s modern history has been marked by war and division. The first such division was created with the founding of Israel, when the city was cut in half between the new Jewish state and the nation of Jordan. With the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, to the joy of many the city was reunified, making the holy site of the ancient Temple once again accessible to Jews.

Yet at that moment of reunification, a new division had been introduced to Jerusalem and to the Jewish nation, one which would only emerge in all its force over the next four decades: the division between Israelis and Palestinians, between occupier and occupied, between those who live as full citizens of Israel and those in the limbo of statelessness, under military rule.

How sad, then, that as we mark the reunification of Jerusalem, we also have to acknowledge yet another new division in the city: the separation wall, built in an attempt to contain the hatred, violence, and despair that has festered and grown since June 1967.

The barrier that runs through East Jerusalem as it winds its way through the West Bank – keeping suicide bombers out of Israel, but also dividing Palestinian villages in half, here a fence, there a 25-foot concrete wall – is the physical marker of the profound division between Israeli and Palestinian societies. On the Israeli side, it has brought a measure of calm, although not complete peace; on the Palestinian side, it has created a ghetto, with all the desperation and suffering that implies.

Perhaps, as we mark 40 years of occupation, 40 years of unified and re-divided Jerusalem, we can reflect on what it might take to move beyond the physical symbols of unification and division, to be able to celebrate Jerusalem as a city of wholeness once again. Let us make Yom Yerushalayim an opportunity to dedicate ourselves to the work of building a City of Peace: a city where all inhabitants can live secure, full lives, where the walls of hatred and mistrust have been eradicated, and where not only streets and buildings, but hearts and minds can be brought into wholeness once again.

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