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The Marvel, and the 'Scandal,' of Jerusalem

Anti-Semitism is rooted in envy of the Jewish people's eternal endurance.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Israelis wave national flags in front of the Damascus Gate outside Jerusalem's Old City, May 29, 2022. PHOTO: ARIEL SCHALIT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Thousands of religious Israelis are celebrating Jerusalem Day, which began Thursday at sundown. On Friday morning at the Western Wall, they will recite psalms of thanksgiving commemorating the moment in the Six Day War of 1967 that Israeli soldiers conquered the ancient city of Jerusalem, making it the heart of Israel's capital. Those assembled won't merely mark a military achievement 56 years ago. Their minds will travel back to the earliest origins of the sacred city, to its conquest by King David and to the empires that have destroyed it, only to have it rise again from the ashes. They will ponder how Jewish Jerusalem reflects the miracle of Jewish existence: one that allows us to understand why, for better or worse, the world's attention remains riveted on Israel.

No city in the world has a history like Jerusalem, and no other people has a relationship to a location like the Jews do to it. To study Jerusalem is to study the story of the world: from Egyptian pharaohs to Mesopotamian kings, from Greek and Roman emperors to kaisers and sultans. They, and others, sought to end Jewish presence in the ancient city permanently. Yet Jerusalem is a Jewish city restored, while other ancient cities of biblical past—Babel, Pi-Rameses, Nineveh—are in ruin.

As Norman Podhoretz once put it, Jerusalem reflects “the scandal of Jewish particularity”: The uniqueness of one city in world history testifies to the enduring nature of one people on this earth. Established as Israel’s capital when now-extinct empires bestrode the world, it was toward Jerusalem that the Jews prayed in exile, binding themselves to it as empire after empire became the Ozymandias of its age. Jews celebrate the anniversary of the Jewish return to ancient Jerusalem not only because it is central to their spiritual lives but also because it is a reminder of God’s providence in the history of their people and of the world.

Jews will gather from across the nation a week after hundreds of missiles rained down on the land from Islamic Jihad. Herein lies an irony: Some of the early Zionist leaders sought, in a Jewish state, a “normalization” of the Jewish people; the end of statelessness, they hoped, would produce the end of anti-Semitism. But only when we ponder the miracle of Jewish eternity can we understand the hatred Jews face.

The Christian thinker Robert Nicholson argues that the disease of anti-Semitism “almost always grows from a resentment of ‘chosenness’: the idea that the Jewish God appointed one nation, the nation of Israel, to play a special role in history.” Hatred of Jews, Mr. Nicholson explains, “is a grand anti-myth that turns Jewish chosenness on its head and assigns to the people of Israel responsibility for all the world’s ills.” The eternal people will never be normal and will continue to have enemies.

Deep down everyone knows the existence of Jewish Jerusalem—and of Israel itself—is a marvel. How else are we to understand that the world has become obsessed with a domestic dispute about Israel’s judiciary while the international community remains largely uninterested in the affairs and conflicts of many larger countries? Asked recently about the arrest of Pakistan’s former Prime Minister Imran Khan, Britain’s Rishi Sunak replied in Parliament that this is an “internal matter” for Pakistanis to address. Pakistan has a population of 230 million; Israel, about nine million. Yet everyone seems entitled to express a view about what should occur in one small sliver of the Middle East.

Those gathered in prayer in Jerusalem know its conflict with its enemies won’t be resolved in the near future and that the “wisdom” offered by much of the world will be of little help. These Jews know that Jew-hate has been part of Jewish history from the beginning—and they’re grateful that they now have a Jewish army to protect them.

But what will happen in the long term is beyond question. During the Camp David negotiations of 1978, President Jimmy Carter warned Prime Minister Menachem Begin that the accords were Israel’s last opportunity to achieve

peace. Begin replied: "Our people lived thousands of years before Camp David and shall continue to exist thousands of years after. . . . There are no last opportunities or chances."

The endurance of the Jewish people—and the indestructibility of its bond to Jerusalem—is assured. That's why, as enemies threaten from without and political disputes fester within, Jews this Friday will still stand at the center of an ancient city and sing words their ancestors sang in the same place millennia before: "This is the day that the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it."

Rabbi Soloveichik is director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York.

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