

Oy! Jerusalem

*Jerusalem is short and crouched among her hills,
unlike New York, for example.
Two thousand years ago she crouched
in the starting position.
All the other cities went out, for long
laps in the arena of time, they won or lost,
and died. Jerusalem remained in the starting-crouch:
all the victories are clenched inside her
hidden inside her. All the defeats.
Her strength grows and her breathing is calm
for a race even beyond the arena.¹*

“Calm”?! “Calm,” you say? What was Yehuda Amichai thinking? Did the poet of contemporary Jerusalem happen to catch his city in such a moment? Or is it another example of Amichai’s irony, a loving wink at his fraught and difficult hometown?

Today was Yom Yerushalayim, the anniversary of Jerusalem’s “reunification” in the Six-Day War of 1967. It was celebrated in some synagogues with Hallel and other prayers of rejoicing. And who among us does not rejoice to see Jerusalem spreading over its nearby hills, glowing in its special sunlight, standing guard at the border of desert to the east and the green westward slopes that fall off toward the Mediterranean to the west? “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning, my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth...if I put not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy!”

It is strange to contemplate the contrast, the fraught internal tension, of a tradition – we call it Judaism – that is pulled between its wilderness origins and its expectation of redemption that centers on a particular city that David conquered for his capital some 3,000 years ago. Jon Levenson draws on this contrast in his book, *Sinai and Zion*.² Sinai is the ownerless mountain at which the newly liberated tribes of Israel received the Torah. Yet we also recite, “For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah.” Zion is Jerusalem – Torah was been imported there from the wilderness, and imparted from there to the

¹ Yehuda Amichai

² Jon. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Harper, 1985)

world. We are wanderers who long for a settled life. And now that the Jewish People has returned to its ancient city, we find that history remains as unsettled as it ever was.

This week we begin a new book, Bamidbar, Numbers, “In the wilderness”. The people, having received the Torah at Sinai, now organize for the journey. It will not be a quick victory, no Six-Day blitz of conquest and liberation. This will become a 40-year trek, with battles against external enemies and the crushing of revolts that erupt from within. There will be signs and miracles, betrayals and disappointments.

Gershom Gorenberg has written a gripping history of the Six-Day War and its aftermath. The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977. Israel, he argues, was neither expecting nor prepared for its quick victory in June of 1967. The policies that emerged in the aftermath were improvised, but were certainly fueled by Zionist ethos of settling the land, an ethos that had created the infrastructure of the newly born State of Israel. Only 19 years had elapsed since Israel’s founding and this war that tripled its territory. The fear of imminent annihilation changed to the shock of conquest. Messianic fervor was released into the bloodstream of the body politic.

In the wilderness, the Israelites prepare for battle:

Adonai spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: The Israelites shall camp each man with his standard, under the banners of their ancestral house; they shall camp around the Tent of Meeting at a distance. Camped on the front, or east side: the standard of the division of Judah, troop by troop. Chieftain of the Judites: Nahshon son of Amminadab. His troop, as enrolled: 74,600. Camping next to it: the tribe of Issachar. Chieftain of the Issacharites: Nethanel son of Zuar. His troop, as enrolled: 54,400. (Num. 2:1-6)

And Gorenberg summarizes the fateful battles of June, 1967:

Initially, the Israeli counterattack was defensive...Yet once the troops crossed the Green Line, the logic of avalanche took over. On the ground, commanders seized opportunities. In the cabinet, politicians renewed dreams unconnected to defense. By the war’s first afternoon, Menachem Begin and Yigal Allon—rightist and leftist made partners by territorial desire—arrived at [Prime Minister Levi] Eshkol’s office and pressed...to take Jerusalem’s Old City... [B]y the predawn hours of June 7, with a U.N. cease-fire call expected, Eshkol gave the go-ahead to exploit opportunity, and [Defense Minister Moshe] Dayan ordered Colonel Gur’s paratroopers to conquer Old Jerusalem.

“The tribe of Zebulun. Chieftain of the Zebulunites: Eliab son of Helon. His troop, as enrolled: 57,400. The total enrolled in the division of Judah: 186,400, for all troops. These shall march first.” (Num. 2:7-9)

Gur rode the lead half-track himself that morning, through the gunfire and smoke at St. Stephen’s Gate on the east side of the Old City, through narrow alleyways and another gate onto the wide plaza in the shadow of the Dome of the Rock. At precisely 10:00 A.M. he radioed Narkiss, “The Temple Mount is in our hands” [*Har ha-Bayit b’yadeinu.*] Narkiss’s jeep pulled up moments later, followed by Rabbi Goren, who arrived on foot carrying a Torah scroll in one hand and a ram’s horn in the other, recited biblical verses, and let loose with the horn’s wild wail while the troops began singing “Jerusalem of Gold.” Hurrying on, some of the soldiers descended from the Mount into the alleyways and found the courtyard of the Western Wall...

“On the south: the standard of the division of Reuben, troop by troop...” (Num. 2:10) And on through the list, each tribe accounted for and in position: Simeon, Gad, Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, Naphtali. Each tribe in its assigned spot; and the Levites, counted separately, are placed in charge of the sanctuary and its sacred vessels. Thus will Israel be forged into an army, the army of the Lord of Hosts.

Dayan: “We have reunited the dismembered city...”
Goren: “This is the most exalted moment in the history of the [Jewish] people,” he proclaimed, describing the conquest as “heralding redemption.”

... [Gorenberg continues,]

Military advances were outpacing plans elsewhere as well... Initially, the cabinet approved conquering only the high ground that forms the West Bank’s spine, running south from Jenin, Nablus, and Ramallah through Jerusalem and on the Bethlehem and Hebron, but as the Jordanian army cracked, the IDF rolled forward all the way to the Dead Sea and the Jordan River, taking the entire West Bank.³

The eastern part of Jerusalem, annexed and expanded, has now been under Israeli control more than twice as long as it was under Jordanian control. Prime Minister Netanyahu declares that Israel will not share sovereignty over Jerusalem.⁴ “United Jerusalem is

³ Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977* (Holt, 2006) pp. 36-37.

⁴ AP cited in Chicago Tribune, 5/22/09.

Israel's capital," Netanyahu said. "Jerusalem was always ours and will always be ours. It will never again be partitioned and divided."⁵

Yehuda Amichai:

*The air over Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams
like the air over industrial cities.
It's hard to breathe.*

*And from time to time a new shipment of history arrives
and the houses and towers are are its packing materials.
Later these are discarded and piled up in dumps.*

*And sometimes candles arrive instead of people,
and then it's quiet.
And sometimes people come instead of candles,
and then there's noise.*

*And in enclosed gardens heavy with jasmine
foreign consulates,
like wicked brides that have been rejected,
lie in wait for their moment.*

Oh, it is fraught, all right. Jerusalem remains in many ways a divided city. Hagai El-Ad, former director of the Jerusalem Open House, the LGBT center in Israel's capital, now blogs on the Huffington Post. This week he bleakly cites a report from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel:

- 9,000 children in East Jerusalem cannot attend school: they simply don't have classrooms to study in.
- 2 out of every 3 residents live below the poverty line.
- More than 150,000 people living in East Jerusalem cannot get a legal connection to the water network.
- Systematically, it is all but impossible for East Jerusalemites to build legally, for lack of city planning or building permits. The result: a growing number of house demolitions, while thousands live in fear that they might be next.⁶

And it is even more complicated that that. Jerusalem is really at least three cities in one, divided between religious Jews, secular Jews, and Arabs. And each of those subdivisions

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/21/netanyahu-jerusalem-will_n_206456.html

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/hagai-elad/jerusalem-42-years-later_b_206218.html

is further divisible: Muslim and Christian Arabs; Orthodox and *ultra*-Orthodox Jews; secular Jews of the right and the left. Oy, is it fraught – everyone waiting “for their moment.”

The wilderness journey and the eternally undivided capital. These are the poles of our earliest dreams and our wildest, most fearful imaginings. Yehuda Amichai (again) imagines land-locked Jerusalem herself as a port and the Temple Mount as a ship setting out on a voyage:

*Jerusalem is a port city on the shore of eternity.
The Temple Mount is a huge ship, a magnificent
luxury liner. From the portholes of her Western Wall
cheerful saints look out, travelers. Hasidim on the pier
wave goodbye, shout hooray, hooray, bon voyage! She is
always arriving, always sailing away. And the fences and the piers
and the policemen and the flags and the high masts of churches
and mosques and the smokestacks of synagogues and the boats
of psalms of praise and the mountain-waves. The shofar blows: another one
has just left. Yom Kippur sailors in white uniforms
climb among ladders and ropes of well-tested prayers.*

*And the commerce and the gates and the golden domes:
Jerusalem is the Venice of God.*

The journey has not ended. The ship of the Israeli state sails on the high and wind-swept seas of international politics. She is beset by enemies without, and threatened by fanaticism from within. Jerusalem, anything but calm, crouches among her hills. Who will bring her peacefully into port?