

SHABBAT SERMON

MAY 15, 2010

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Jerusalem

Greetings from Israel ... and most especially, greetings from Jerusalem – East Jerusalem as well as West Jerusalem.

No matter how many times you go to Israel, each time you see it in a different light and from a different perspective. And that is especially true when you go with your entire family; each one notices something different and unique. And although ten of us had been there before, this was the first trip for my one year old granddaughter, Elana, and her first introduction to hummus and shwarma on Ben Yehuda Street was truly memorable.

Sherry and I really enjoy Tel Aviv ... it is where we stayed during my sabbatical and I am as familiar with its streets as I am with the streets of downtown Baltimore. But there is no place on earth like Jerusalem ... no city that has as much meaning for a Jew. And in some ways, for me, most especially during this visit for this visit came as Israel was preparing to celebrate Yom Yerushalayim – the 43rd anniversary of Jerusalem re-united in the shadow of the controversy that erupted between the U.S. and Israel with the U.S. demanding that all construction by Israel in East Jerusalem be stopped in order to encourage negotiations with the Palestinians. I toured some of those homes and areas that Jews have built up in East Jerusalem and we met with some of the people living there. And to tell you the truth when peace does eventually come, I don't know when push comes to shove, what will be Israeli and what will be Palestinian. But I do know that if Palestinians can live in West Jerusalem as they do, why should there be any question about Jews living in East Jerusalem? And why does this issue have to be dealt with *now* – at the start of the negotiations, when everyone knows it is going to be the most difficult issue to resolve. It was with this in mind that on Sunday, April 18 in the New York Times and other newspapers, Elie Wiesel took out a full page ad entitled “For Jerusalem” containing these words: “It was inevitable: Jerusalem once again is at the center of political debates and international storms ... for me, the Jew that I am ... Jerusalem is above politics ...

the anguish over Jerusalem is not about real estate, but about memory. What is the solution ... is there a solution? There must be, there will be. Why tackle the most complex and sensitive problem prematurely ... Jerusalem must remain the world's Jewish spiritual capital not a symbol of anguish and bitterness, but a symbol of trust and hope. As a Chassidic master, Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav said: "Everything in this world has a heart; the heart itself has its own heart." And then Wiesel concluded with these eloquent words: "Jerusalem is the heart of our heart ... the soul of our soul."

Beautiful! Really beautiful! But you know what? Lots of people had a problem with what he had to say. The British Advertising Standard's Authority had a problem. When the Israeli government tourist office published an advertisement depicting the Kotel – the Western Wall, the most sacred spot on earth for the Jew – as being part of Israel, the British Advertising Standard Authority ruled that the ad is a false one; it is untruthful because, they said, the wall is not in Israel – it is part of the "occupied territories of the West Bank."

The Arab press took Mr. Wiesel to task, saying: who is he to claim that Jerusalem is above politics ... who is he to claim that only for the Jews does Jerusalem have a special sacredness?; with Palestinians claiming that the temple never existed in Jerusalem and the Jews have no historic rights to Jerusalem.

Now you tell me: How is it possible for the Arabs to hold such an outlandish position? And what is Britain's problem? And it's not just Britain's problem ... it's America's problem as well. Do you know that if an American child is born in Jerusalem - in West Jerusalem, on Ben Yehuda Street - on documents issued by the American consulate it will say "place of birth, Jerusalem" – not Jerusalem, Israel – just Jerusalem! What's the problem? Why do all Western countries refuse to recognize any part of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, instead having their embassies in Tel Aviv?

Well, there are a lot of reasons why. For America to move its Embassy to where it belongs would be to say to the world: we are tired of playing games, we are going to accept the facts and tell the rest of the world to accept facts. Israel is here, not just by military power but by right, and like any other country it chooses its own capital and its capital is Jerusalem! Let's admit it, let's recognize it, let's say it and let's mean it. And let's go on to other things. And you know who said that? Vice President Joseph Biden, when he was a Senator, was the co-sponsor of

the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which stated that, “Jerusalem should remain an undivided city and ... should be recognized as the capital of the state of Israel.” Do you know who else said that? Barack Obama said that! The same Barack Obama who, now as President, insists that Israel cease all construction in East Jerusalem. When he was campaigning Obama called for an undivided Jerusalem. But I have no complaints to him ... Clinton did the same, and Bush did the same ... they all did the same when they were campaigning. But as we have discovered all too often, when push comes to shove, the Western world does not want to upset the Arab world.

Arabs find it impossible to accept Israel’s right to Jerusalem because in so doing, they would have to accept Israel’s right to exist. You see, Arabs claim that Israel is a foreign element shoved down their throats by the Western powers. They claim that feeling guilt after the Holocaust, the Western governments took this homeless, displaced people and put them on a land that they really had no claim on. Now, Arabs can say that if those Jews are living in Tel Aviv. But if Jews are in Jerusalem, a city to which they’ve been connected for 3000 years, then they aren’t strangers or visitors or invaders. They have come home again. If the Arabs accept the Jewish claim to Jerusalem, they will be saying, “You and I are cousins, we are kinsmen, we are both descendants of Abraham, we were both born here and so we have to make peace.” And they just can’t get themselves to say it! Not after Madrid. Not after Oslo. Not after Camp David. Not after handshakes on the White House lawn. Not after all the signed agreements. They just can’t get themselves to accept Israel as their legitimate, rightful neighbor!

But you know what? It’s not just the Western world and it’s not just the Arab world that has a problem with Jerusalem. It is elements of the Jewish world as well. Some of you may find this hard to believe, but Elie Wiesel’s advertisement on Jerusalem was criticized by some Jewish organizations. Americans for Peace Now issued a statement criticizing it, saying that Jerusalem is not only holy to Jews but to Christians and Muslims. Some leading left-wing leaders in Israel held a public protest against the letter with former Knesset speaker Avraham Burg saying they wanted to express their “frustration, even outrage” at Wiesel’s letter, and saying that “Jerusalem must be shared by the people of the two nations residing in it.” J Street claims to be an alternate to AIPAC, it claims to be pro-Israel but coming from a more leftist, dovish position. But you tell me how J Street can claim to be pro-Israel when it publishes a full page ad saying that the Kotel – the holiest shrine for the Jewish people – should be placed under international control. Would any Muslim say that Mecca should be placed under international control?

You tell me: how can any self-respecting Jew criticize Wiesel's letter?

- The fact that for 2000 years Jews in every generation pledged, "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither . . ."
- The fact that Jerusalem is mentioned 750 times in our Bible and not once in the Koran . . .
- The fact that Christians have the Vatican, Muslims have Medinah and Mecca, but for Jews there is only Jerusalem . . .
- The fact that when it was ruled by Byzantines and Arabs and Romans and Syrians and Crusader and Greeks and Kurds and Mongols and Tartars and Turks – none of them made it their capital. Only to the Jew was this land sacred . . .
- The fact that before 1967 when it was under Arab rule, not one leader of a single Arab country, not one Foreign Minister, ever came to Jerusalem to pray – and when Muslims do pray they turn their backs on Jerusalem . . .
- And the fact that at the end of every Yom Kippur and at the end of every Pesach Seder, only we as Jews proclaim, "Next year in Jerusalem . . ."

All this means nothing! It means nothing to the Arabs who go on insisting that it was never ours. And even worse, it seems to mean nothing to those Jews who are willing to give Jerusalem back. How do you explain it? I think the problem is that we are dealing with a new generation of Israelis – of Jews – who have become detached from their Jewish moorings. The secular Zionists who helped establish the state of Israel had a connection to the Bible and that connection automatically connected them to Zion and Jerusalem. In 1937, David Ben Gurion, addressing the 21st Zionist Congress in Switzerland, said, "No Jew has the right to give up the right of the Jewish nation to flourish in the land of Israel . . . even all of the Jews alive today do not have the authority to give up even a single plot of land . . . our right to this land in its entirety is valid and operative for all time and until the final redemption we shall not budge from this historic right." Ben Gurion, as you know, was a secular non-observant Jew, but he was never detached from his Jewish moorings. Now, you have a Yael Dayan whose father liberated Jerusalem complaining that in Israel there are no good restaurants open on Tisha B'av.

And so if we don't take our Judaism seriously – then why take Jerusalem seriously? You know who understands this problem? It might come as a surprise for me to tell you, but it is a man named Benjamin Netanyahu, the Prime Minister of the state of Israel. Every year there is a conference held in Herzlyia bringing together the top political and military people of Israel for discussions about what to expect in the future. In the past, it has been the platform for important initiatives that Israel was to take. But everyone was shocked by Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech this year, where he dwelt only in passing on Israel's security and even on Israel's economy ... both of which he is considered an expert on. Instead, he dwelt on the importance of education in Israel and these were his words: "Tonight I refer to something even more basic. I am talking about educating children about the values connected to our identity and heritage; teaching children to know our peoples' history, educating young people and adults to deepen our ties to another and to this place. I believe that this education starts first and foremost in the Book of Books ... in the Bible ... a people must know its past in order to insure its future ... in other words, our existence depends not only on a weapons system, our military strength, the strength of our economy, our innovation, our exports, or on all these forces that are indeed essential. It depends first and foremost on the knowledge and national sentiment that we as parents bestow on our children ... and as a state, to its education system ... it depends on our ability to explain the justness of our path and demonstrate our affinity for our land – first to ourselves and then to others."

43 years ago Jerusalem was reunited. It was once again ours; the eternal, undivided capital of Israel and the Jewish people. Well do I know that in the future Arab interests will have to be taken into consideration in regard to Jerusalem. And I also know that we Jews, unlike them, do not attempt to obliterate their links to Jerusalem. But this too I know: when Jerusalem was divided the Arabs destroyed the entire Jewish quarter of the Old City - including 24 synagogues, used tombstones from the Mount of Olives to build latrines, and prohibited Jews from visiting the Western Wall – our most sacred shrine. And through it all, the world remained silent. Only now has the world found its voice and calls out for Jerusalem to once again be re-divided. Think about it ... this is only said when it comes to Israel and Jerusalem! The world calls for the day when North Korea and South Korea will be reunited. The world applauded when North Yemen and South Yemen were reunited. The world looks to the day when Turkish Cypress and Greek Cypress will be reunited. The world rejoiced when Germany was reunited ... when Berlin was reunited. Is it really asking too much of the world to applaud a Jerusalem that has been reunited?

And if the world can't applaud it, then at least let us as Jews rejoice in it, pray for it, visit it, and cherish it.

Let me echo the words of the Psalmist in saying, "*Yevorechecha Hashem m'tzion u'reeh b'tuv Yerushalayim kol yemai chyecha U'reeh vanim l'vanacha shalom al Yisroel* – May the Lord bless thee out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life, and may we see children's children peace be upon Israel." Amen.

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