



Temple Beth Sholom

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Reflections from Israel

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"The Walls of Jerusalem"

by Rabbi Shelton J. Donnell



Jerusalem is a city with high walls. Circling the Old City, Suleiman the Magnificent built the fortified walls that form the familiar backdrop for so many postcard views of the holy city. It is also the view that I see daily from my bedroom window. Now, how much is that worth in real estate terms...location, location, location. I feel sorry for the engineers who designed Suleiman's fortifications. It seems that they left Mount Zion outside the protective walls, a fatal mistake - for them. You can still see their tombs just inside the Jaffa gate, if you know where to look.

In building their walls, the engineers utilized stones from other periods, and you can see remnants of Herodian, Byzantine and Crusader masonry salvaged from older walls and recycled by Suleiman's builders. Walls are nothing new in Jerusalem.

Today, the most talked about wall is the one built most recently separating the Palestinian areas of the West Bank from Jewish population centers. Most of the barrier - which Israelis refer to as the security barrier - is made up of electrically monitored fencing. In densely populated areas (such as Jerusalem) the fence becomes a high cement structure with occasional secured crossing points. Ask most Israelis and the purpose of the barrier is to prevent terrorist attacks (and, objectively, it can be verified that the barrier has been very successful in thwarting attacks), but, if you ask most Palestinians the intent of the barrier is to impose de facto borders for any final settlement (with the Palestinians losing much of their claimed territory), and creating an ethnically segregated Bantustan for the Palestinians. The truth is no one likes the wall, even those who see it as a necessary evil. Some walls exist because they are necessary even if not desirable.

Jerusalem has many walls but not all of them are made of stone or concrete. We Jerusalemites live in a city divided along religious and ethnic lines as well. Certainly those divides separate Jews and Muslims, and Muslims and Christians (of various confessions), and Jews and Christians in the complex and ancient logorhythms that have defined their often stormy interrelations through the ages and under the hegemony of various rulers, empires and governments. But, religious barriers exist as well within the faiths. Among the various Christians represented in the Holy Land, disputes theological and jurisdictional have existed for centuries. Within the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, each of the non-Protestant churches has its particular rights and claims in a complex patchwork held together by the gossamer of a status quo that is always on the verge of breaking apart. Even today, arguments and even fistfights are known to breakout over matters of rights to a storage room or who may restore or remodel what ancient room. As for the Protestants, they avoid such disputes by denying the claims that the Church marks the spot where the tomb that contained the remains of Jesus prior to the Easter miracle, looking to one of two other locations outside of the Old City walls for that reverential honor. And Muslims, too, are divided. Not so much the Sunni/Shiite divide, as Palestinian Muslims are by-and-large Sunnis. But, Sunnis are not all alike! Some are more open to modernity than others. There are also some half-million Sufis in Israel, many residing in Jerusalem. And then there are the Jews...

Most Israelis divide the Jewish population between "religious" and "secular." Nice and neat but, where does that leave me, or my whole congregation, Kol Haneshamah, or the Conservative congregation that I just joined, Mayanot? We are observant liberal Jews. Are we included on the "religious" or "secular" side of the great Jewish divide? In the popular mind, we could not possibly be part of the religious side, the side with the ultra-orthodox haredim and the settler-supporting National Religious whose religious messianism drives a whole political movement now dominating the Israeli political Right. But, we are religious - even though we are diametrically opposed to the entrenched Israeli religious establishment who disenfranchise us at every opportunity. We do

consider ourselves observant Jews, despite the fact that Rabbi Joseph Shalom Elyashiv ruled that observant Jews should not use Shabbat elevators (elevators that stop automatically on every floor, so that they do not require riders to push electronic buttons to activate the mechanism) because they are not really kosher. By the way, in another significant Shabbat ruling, the learned sage opined that it is permissible to pick your nose on Shabbat even if in so doing you inadvertently break off a hair (a forbidden action on Shabbat) - I don't know, maybe it has to do with the concept of pleasure on Shabbat - just don't do it on an elevator! This is the same rabbinic leader with a commanding influence religiously and politically who called for the shutting down of the Government's Conversion Authority back in July, 2006, because it brought together Orthodox, Conservative and Reform conversion candidates for tuition and eventual conversion under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate. The problem was not the halakhic (legal) status of the eventual conversions but that the Authority would be giving de facto recognition to the Conservative and Reform movements. The walls of Jerusalem can be pretty high.

And, what about the political walls? After all, Jerusalem is the capitol of the State of Israel. Last week, the buzz was about Prime Minister Netanyahu's attempt to persuade (some say strong-arm) Kadima chair, Tzipi Livni to bring the Kadima party into his coalition. The reasons that he gave for the move - and its timing - were the present security threats posed by Iran, the delicate stage of the negotiations being conducted with Hamas for the release of kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit, and the push for renewed negotiations with the Palestinians (now stalemated). Livni (and the majority in her party) saw in Netanyahu's overtures an attempt to break up Kadima and neutralize the opposition to further his own political ambitions. Livni and the Kadima governing council categorically rejected the Prime Minister's offer. But, given that Netanyahu's partial settlement freeze and agreement to continue negotiations with the Palestinians has raised the ire and even condemnation from his erstwhile cohorts on the Right, perhaps the Prime Minister is sincere in looking towards Kadima and the Center to strengthen his coalition the effect an ambitious policy shift. For now though, the walls between Kadima and Likud and between Netanyahu and Livni remain as high and as insurmountable as ever.

It is true, Jerusalem has many walls. And what do all these walls have in common? They keep out and they keep in. The problem with walls is that while they may truly protect from the enemies outside, they also keep us from seeing what is going on outside the confines of our own enclosure. That is not to discount the benefit or the necessity of walls; just ask anyone who had to live outside Suleiman's walls when the first settlements were built beyond the Old City in the 19th century. You could die out there - and many did at the hands of brigands and cutthroats. But relying on walls too much can also be harmful and confining spiritually as well as physically. We can be harmed as much by what we don't know about what is on the other side of the wall as what we are sure about.

Yet, that does not mean that the walls cannot be breached. I read an article in the International Herald Tribune today that inspired this reflection. It was about two families from different sides of one of the many walls that divide us here. And it was right here in Jerusalem that their part of the wall came down, or at least had a significant hole made in it. The story by Ethan Bonner featured two eight year old children and their families. Orel is from Beer Sheva and Marya is from Gaza, both, for now, reside at Jerusalem's Alyn Hospital for pediatric and adolescent rehabilitation.

Marya was paralyzed from the neck down when a missile targeting militant leader Ahmad Duhduh caused collateral damage to the car carrying her family killing her mother, grandmother and brother and leaving Marya critically injured. Because of the public outcry in Israel, pressure was brought to bear and Marya was brought to Alyn (one of the world's best hospitals for pediatric rehabilitation) for treatment and her father, Hamdi Aman and her brother, Mouman were allowed to accompany her.

Orel was injured in a Hamas rocket attack on Beer Sheva. It was two weeks into last year's Gaza War, and after spending endless days in the shelter his mother took Orel out in the car. When they heard the siren they stopped and she pushed Orel to the ground, shielding him with her body. When she heard the rocket explode in the distance she got up, only just before a second hit. When she looked, she saw that Orel's head was bleeding. Rushing him to the hospital, she learned that almost half his brain was gone, survival seemed hopeless but miraculously he lived.

Together at Alyn, the mischievous Orel and the bright, vivacious Marya became friends. So, too, did their families; one from Gaza the other from Beer Sheva. According to the article, many of the volunteers who work at Alyn are National Religious women performing national service. They ask Mr. Aman how he can live among people whose army destroyed his family. This is what he said:

"I have never felt there was a difference among people - Jews, Muslims, Christians - we are all human beings," he said, "I worked in Israel for years and so did my father. We know that it is not about what you are but who you are. And that is what I taught my children."

It is about both sides getting to see beyond the confines of their own enclosure - even before the walls come down; maybe to make the walls to come down and that is the hard part. People tend to see things only from the perspective of their own enclosures - enclosures that are all too often of their own making. That is why people "out there" don't know what it is like living here. And we

don't understand what it is to live "over there." And "outsiders" (no matter how well meaning) all too often just don't get it at all and take one side or the other and support or condemn because they live within the confines of the walls that they, too, have made.

There are many walls in Jerusalem. But just like the walls that came before Suleiman's structure they don't last forever. Sometimes war will bring a wall down, sometimes a force of nature. I would like to think that goodness can also bring down the wrong kinds of walls. The story in the Tribune proved that to be true - in a small way. So it will take a lot of people creating understanding by trying themselves to understand the other, to make enough holes in the walls to bring them down - because there are many walls in Jerusalem.

For those of you who celebrate, I wish you all a happy (secular) New Year of 2010, the last year of the first decade of the twenty-first century of the Common Era as seen from this side of the Jewish wall. As for me, I'll probably just pour myself a glass of very good old bourbon, turn on the TV and settle in for the night. Tomorrow we have a full house for Shabbat including visiting Muslims and Christians from England here to see what it is really like beyond the news (the BBC and the Guardian???). Like I said, we try to create mutual understanding and tear down walls.

Shalom from Jerusalem.

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