

Reviving the Prophetic Imagination, Sharing the Temple Mount

By Brad Hirschfield

When I first read the details of President Clinton's Middle East peace plan, with its proposal to establish Palestinian sovereignty over Temple Mount together with Israeli sovereignty over the remains of our two sacred temples buried below, I thought immediately of the words of Isaiah (56:7) in which God declares, "My house will be a house of prayer for all peoples." My second thought was "Am I crazy or what?"

After all, I happen to be a rabbi and a religious Zionist. At an earlier stage of my life, I was one of those "crazy settlers" to whom the news media routinely refer as "obstacles to peace." True, I have moved some distance since those days. Yet I retain today, every bit as strongly as when I lived in Hebron two decades ago, an abiding belief in the profound spiritual and ethical significance of the Jewish people's having finally assumed power and created a state after 2000 years of dispersion. So how could I, coming from such an intensely Jewish moral construct, feel anything short of apoplexy and anticipatory grief over a proposal by my own president stipulating that a Palestinian flag should fly over a mosque located directly above the holy of holies of my people?

Yet might not the vision of that flag and mosque, standing on a crust of land labeled Palestine which in turn lies on a hill grounded in the State of Israel, be a modern day fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic verse? After all, what do we mean by "all peoples" anyway? Do not "all peoples" include our neighbors, the Palestinians, with whom our own destiny has become inextricably linked? Do not "all peoples" include the one billion Muslims of the world, with whom Jews share a spiritual passion for the rocky hilltop on which both believe our common father, Abraham, nearly sacrificed his son, although we disagree whether it was Isaac or Ishmael?

For Jews, the creation of the State of Israel 50 years ago and our ongoing efforts to ensure its survival and nurture its growth represent a process that has redemptive/messianic implications not only for the Jewish people, but for all of humankind. Yet we need to continually examine the moral implications of our actions and imagine together what the fulfillment of our messianic vision would look like. If those redemptive aspirations and messianic vision amount to nothing more than window dressing for the status quo, for assuring our own power and increasing our level of comfort without demanding from ourselves heightened ethical awareness, then they are really not so messianic after all.

For my part, I simply refuse to accept the premise that we as a people must choose between our religious conviction that by building the Jewish state we are making a precious contribution to humanity's collective movement toward

redemption, and a hard-bitten realpolitik assessment that in order to secure Israel's survival, we must harden our hearts to our Palestinian neighbors, thereby cutting our connection to those redemptive aspirations. It can not be that we must decide between remaining faithful to a wisdom tradition that has defined our sense of peoplehood, and safeguarding the children of Israel by limiting our understanding of or willingness to wrestle with that resplendent tradition, which has nurtured the three great monotheistic faiths.

I believe that there is an alternative to that terrible choice - namely, using that wisdom tradition in a way that fuels our moral and political imagination. We did so in the first part of the 20th century in order to accomplish our return to Jerusalem when the opportunity presented itself. In the process, we turned into living, breathing technicolor reality a whole host of prayers that we had prayed for thousands of years. Now we must ask ourselves if we should remain committed to those prayers, including Isaiah's prophetic words that imagined a Jerusalem that was for all people. And if we do remain faithful to that vision, how must we act on our commitment?

I caution that I am not offering a specific policy prescription here, but rather exploring whether accepting the sovereignty of another people over our most holy site might not be consonant with our deepest moral and spiritual aspirations. I must also point out that it is particularly difficult for any Jew to advocate sharing the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif with our Palestinian and Muslim brothers and sisters as long as they continue to insist that the Temple Mount is exclusively Muslim, and that, indeed, the First and Second Temples never actually stood there.

I fully understand that what I am saying will upset many of my fellow religious Zionists, with whom I share an abiding connection to and spiritual passion for Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. Certainly, the people who say we must hold tight to the Temple Mount and to all of Jerusalem at all costs are expressing a part of the truth at the core of our peoplehood, and it is good and essential that they speak that truth out loud. But that piece of the truth is not and never can be, by itself, fully expressive of our people's prophetic vision.

It is imperative at this fateful moment, when the connection of the Jewish people to its land, capital and holiest site is being decided, that we utilize our wisdom tradition to unleash new and imaginative thinking that proves as radically redemptive as was Isaiah's thinking twenty-five centuries ago. The present set of options - essentially, to reflexively rally around the Temple Mount and dismiss the Muslim claim as irrelevant on one hand or to give up our own 3000 year connection to the place in the interests of humanism and universalist morality on the other -- is simply not broad enough. Ironically, on this and other critical issues facing us as a people, the best way to reinvigorate our connection to our deepest roots, symbolized so palpably by the Temple Mount itself, is to expand the range of options considered to be authentically Jewish.