

Jerusalem – the Albatross city

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Jerusalem – it is one of the most hotly disputed areas of land in the world, holding significance to humans around the entire world, and central to Judaism – from biblical times thru to our diaspora dwelling and into the ingathering of the exiles and the development of the State of Israel.

Jacob our forefather in his leaving and return (in this week's Parasha) to the land of Israel stops by Beth El – which will become Jerusalem. Both times he communes with God, both times he establishes a *matzevah*, a pillar, acknowledging God's presence, a signpost to the holiest place on earth¹. The Ramban explains that the repeat of calling the place Beth El informs us that it will truthfully and properly be a house of God – almost as if the repetition qualifies the original sentiment².

The Radak tells us that Beth El was so called three times, and that the impact of Jacob's repetition was spreading not just to the specific location where God would one day dwell, but rather to the city around³. The spiritual shadow cast by Jacob's original conversation, Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac, and the cornerstone of God's creation, was growing and growing, but it only became fully established as Jacob marks the place a further time – as if cementing the reality that this was a place to take notice of.

God takes heed and in the Book of Kings we read that God establishes Jerusalem not only as a place where he wants to dwell in a house (the Temple), but also wants to establish His heart there⁴. The sentiment is almost the godly mimic of Yehudah haLevi's poem *libi ba'mizrach*, that my heart is in the east.

However, while both God and the Jewish people have settled their hearts there, it remains a place of conflict, a place divided. It contradicts its name – both as a beth el, the house of God, but also Yerushalayim, a place of awe and peace. Yehudah Amichai writes that it is always described as two, one up, one below, a place that is unsettling⁵.

Even the Talmud agrees, with God not wanting to return to His heavenly Jerusalem until His earthly one is rebuilt⁶ – not only physically but also spiritually and communally – a place where one can rest their head as Jacob did in his fleeing, and a place of constructive conversation as in his return. We often think of the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967 as the beginning of a near divine era, of course the sentiment was right as we had not had autonomy and control of Jerusalem in nearly two thousand years. But at the same time, we missed the very point of Jerusalem. It was never meant to be a place of solitude, refuge, and connection just for the Jewish people – but for all of humanity.

Jerusalem really is the city of dreams – of ladders, angels, and divine conversations, but it is also the city of big dreamers – those who want peace. Stuart Schoffman posits that Jerusalem is currently the albatross, burdensome, volatile, and prone to strife – but with big dreamers and big dreams, it can become Baudelaire's version of the Albatross – the monarch of the clouds⁷.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**