

# O JERUSALEM

## Rabbi Reuven Hammer

This week's celebration of Yom Yerushalayim is particularly significant because it is the 50th anniversary of the day on which Israel assumed control of the entire city of Jerusalem and Jews were permitted to enter the Old City and to pray at the Western Wall for the first time since 1948. That entire area had been cut off then from the newly emerging State of Israel when Jordanian troops conquered it, expelled the Jewish community from the Jewish Quarter and destroyed it, desecrating the many synagogues that existed there. When Jerusalem was reunited in 1967, it sent shock waves through the Jewish world. It seemed to symbolize for us the rebirth of the phoenix from the ashes of destruction. The cold stones of the ancient wall reverberated with the promise of redemption. Those of us who experienced the events of June 1967 will never forget them. We were moved to tears by the news that the Kotel - the Western Wall - was in Jewish hands, and even those of us who have not succumbed to what Yeshayahu Leibowitz called "kotelatro" still feel that this was a major turning point in Jewish history and in our personal lives. It may be difficult for the world to understand our feelings and our attachment to Jerusalem. After all, is not Jerusalem holy to others as well? Yes, it is - but with a difference. For Christians it is the scene of many incidents in the life of Jesus, but it is not their heart and soul, not even the seat of their church - the Vatican is elsewhere. For Muslims it is holy because of the story of Muhammad's visit and ascent to heaven, but it is not Mecca. We Jews, on the other hand, have no other city that compares with it. For us it is the heart and soul of the Jewish people, the symbol of our hopes of peace and fulfillment not only for ourselves, but also for all humanity.



From the moment that King David made the city his capital and brought the ark to Jerusalem, so that it became the religious center of Israel as well, the mountain of God, the city came to represent all the values and hopes of Judaism. The prophets spoke of it as the place from which instruction would go forth from God, after which nations would not take up arms against one another and would never know war again. Of course the irony of history is that this city - whose very name was interpreted as meaning "the city of peace" (shalom) - has been the seat of war time and time again. Destroyed twice, bitterly contested, it has been the center of Jewish prayer, yet was controlled by Jews for only some 600 years of its 3,000-year history of Jewish connection. But no matter what, Jews never forgot Jerusalem. The oath of the Levites in Babylonian exile - "If I forget you, O Jerusalem" - became our watchword, recited even at times of supreme joy. "Next year in Jerusalem" voiced the hope of return during the darkest days of exile. Jerusalem is more than a dream, however. It is also a real place where real people live.

I remember Jerusalem when it was a sleepy little town divided by barbed wire, concrete walls and tank barriers, extending no further than the hill opposite the Valley of the Cross, with no traffic lights and no traffic. In many ways it had a quiet charm that bigness has eradicated. Now it is large and sprawling, filled with modern buildings, museums, campuses, great hospitals and facing all the problems that beset modern cities. Traffic is terrible, housing is in short supply and unemployment and poverty are growing. It is not a city in heaven but a real place on this Earth and, as such, it faces a challenging future. Jerusalem must find housing for its people. It must find employment for them. It must find a way for Jews who differ so greatly from one another to live together and for Jews and Arabs to coexist.



Fifty years later we realize that redemption is still far away and that although Jerusalem may be physically united it still remains divided in significant ways. We also realize that we must be wary of the exaggerated dreams and expectations that this event may have spurred and that realism must guide our actions and temper our dreams. Nevertheless, the return of the Jewish people to the ancient city remains a reason for rejoicing. Jerusalem is a city in which ancient writings have new meanings, in which one can walk the streets and read the words of the prophets, the psalmists, the rabbis, the philosophers, the mystics and find meaning in them. Somehow this city that was "knit together" also binds together the entire past of Jewry with its future and with the entire people of Israel, wherever they may be. In the words of the psalmist, "May there be well-being within your ramparts, peace in your citadels."

**Rabbi Reuven Hammer** is the past head of the Rabbinical Court of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel and a former president of the International Rabbinical Assembly. A Jerusalemite and member of Kehilat Moreshet Avraham in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hammer will be receiving a LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD from the congregation at a Gala Evening on the eve Yom Yerushalyim.

