



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Lech Lecha

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October 24, 2015

Lech Lecha

Why Jerusalem?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

According to Muslim oral tradition, the second caliph of Islam, Umar himself, cleaned the Temple Mount from the refuse accumulated during the times of Christian reign and allowed 70 Jewish families to return to their holy city.

That’s how great the respect of Muslims used to be for the place where the Jewish Temple once stood. As well, they used to demonstrate tolerance – if not respect – for Jews and for Judaism from which many of the tenants of Islam are taken.

So what has changed? Why are Muslims today attacking Jews throughout the holy city of Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land as a whole?

How can it be that Jerusalem of gold has turned into Jerusalem of blood, as Jewish innocents are slaughtered at the hands of an enemy? And what can we do about it. How can we usher in a time when the world will again see how holy Jerusalem truly is and that they must do everything in their power to protect it and its people?

The answer lies in the Torah, of course, actually in this week’s portion, which speaks of the King of Salem, and how he named this holy city; and of Abraham who gave the holy city a name of his own.

When we live up to the name *Yerushalayim*, “Jerusalem,” the world will stand in reverence and awe, and all of humanity will witness a complete and everlasting peace.

WHY JERUSALEM?

1. When Muslims Revered the Temple Mount

In the year 638, the second caliph of Islam, Umar himself, conquered Jerusalem and took it away from the Byzantine Christians. The Muslim oral tradition (called Hadith) reports:

When Umar bin al-Khattab conquered Jerusalem, he found a lot of garbage on the [Foundation] Rock that had been deposited by the Christians to vex the Jews. Umar spread out his cloak, collected the garbage and instructed the other Muslims to collect it with him.”

Of course, in the 11th century the Christian Crusaders took Jerusalem back, when the dumping apparently resumed. But then the Muslims returned. And some 500 years later, the story repeats itself (or so the legend goes).

When the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent came to Jerusalem in the 16th century, he saw that people were coming from as far away as Bethlehem to dump garbage near the Temple Mount. Suleiman responded by strewing gold coins amid the refuse. As people began to dig in search of the coins, the mound of detritus dwindled, the Western Wall gradually emerged from beneath it, and the sultan had it anointed with rose water.¹

2. Jerusalem Today

There was once a time when Muslims would use their own cloaks to clean the Temple Mount. That’s how great their respect used to be for the place where the Jewish Temple once stood. As well, they used to demonstrate tolerance – if not respect – for Jews and for Judaism from which many of the tenants of Islam are taken.

¹ <http://shma.com/2013/10/the-western-wall-an-arabian-gift/>

So what has changed? Why are Muslims today attacking Jews throughout the holy city of Jerusalem and throughout the Holy Land as a whole?

And what can we do about it? How can we usher in a time when the world will again see how holy Jerusalem truly is and that they must do everything in their power to protect it and its people?

Today, the holiest city in the world is bleeding. Jerusalem is under the knife. It has been the focus of anger and hatred ever since 1967, when – after being barred from the Temple Mount and the Western Wall for nineteen years – the Jews returned here once more.

In 1967, five Arab armies were preparing to attack the Land of Israel. Their stated objective was to push the Jewish country, and its inhabitants, into the Mediterranean Sea, to finish off what the Germans had started. Their plan utterly failed. After only six days of fighting – on the second day of the Hebrew month of Sivan (10 June), shortly before the festival of Shavuot – Israel proclaimed a miraculous victory over the Arabs.

And the holy city of Jerusalem – crowned by *Har Habayit*, the Temple Mount – was once again united under Jewish sovereignty. People who were there describe with tears running down their cheeks what it was like to pray at the Western Wall that Shavuot.

While to the Jews, the Six Day War was a miracle, to the Arabs it was a setback. In fact, that is what they call it, *an-Naksah*, “the Setback.”

Why do they call it “the Setback?” For it set back their stated objective of pushing the Jewish people into the Mediterranean Sea, and regaining control of the holy land and holiest place on earth, demonstrating the victory of Islam. Note that they don’t call it a “Catastrophe” (*al-Nakba*) which is how they refer to Israel’s War of Independence in 1948. Rather they call it a “Setback.”

Since then, the Arab world never changed its objective, neither explicitly nor implicitly. Though the key players have changed over time. (The enemies of old have problems of their own – Syria is disabled, Jordan is powerless, Egypt is recovering from its own struggles.)

Today, Jerusalem is under a different kind of attack. Our enemies – the Palestinians and their primary supporters in Iran – state their objectives clearly and unequivocally. They want us gone from Jerusalem, perhaps gone from this earth.

In response, we too must state our objective clearly and unequivocally. But before we do, we must answer this important question:

Why do we cherish, and today, rule Jerusalem and how is it best for the world that we do?

The answer lies in the Torah, of course, and in the history of the naming of Jerusalem that we are about to discover.

3. Salem

As far back as 4,000 years ago, Jerusalem was known as Salem.

I know, Salem makes you think of the Salem witch trials, which took place in Salem, Massachusetts.

The original Salem, however, was not in the United States but in the Middle East. Indeed, in this week's Torah portion, we meet the king of the original Salem:

And Melchizedek the king of Salem [in Hebrew: Shalem] brought out bread and wine, and he was a priest to God, the Most High²

Where exactly was this place Salem/Shalem, and who exactly was this king, Melchizedek?

Moreover, what relevance does this 4,000-year-old reference have to us today? And does it have anything to do with why Jerusalem is under attack now?

² Genesis 14:18.

4. Midrash

According to the Midrash, two famous biblical figures gave the city of Jerusalem two very different names. God then combined these two names into one and thus was born the name Jerusalem – *Yerushalayim* in Hebrew.

As the Midrash relates the story:

Abraham called it *Yirah* ('will see,') as it says, *And Abraham named that place, The Lord Will See* (Hashem Yireh).³ Shem called it *Shalem* ('Peace'), as it says, *And Malchizedek the king of Shalem*. Said the Holy Blessed One, "If I call it Yireh as Abraham called it, then Shem, a righteous man, would be disconnected; if I call it Shalem, as Shem called it, then Abraham, a righteous man, would be disconnected. I will therefore call it *Yerushalayim*, as they have both called it – Yireh, Shalem: *Yerushalayim*.

Said Rav Brachya in the name of Rav Chelbo: From when it was *Shalem*,⁴ the Holy Blessed One built a *Sukkah* and would pray within it, as it states, *In Shalem was His Sukkah, and His dwelling place in Zion*.⁵ And what did He say? "May it be the Will that we will see the building of My home."⁶

Now three questions arise, which we must answer to understand the profundity and importance of Jerusalem:

- What is *Yireh*?
- What is *Shalem*?
- What is the sanctuary that God built?

³ Genesis 22:14.

⁴ I.e. even before the Jews got there and it was called Jerusalem (Matnot Kehunah, Eitz Yosef).

⁵ Psalms 76:3.

⁶ Genesis Rabbah 56:16.

5. Shalem – Peace & Completion

The Midrash teaches that Malchizedek, the king of Shalem/Salem, was in fact another name for Shem, the son of Noah who originally named the city.⁷ Shem was a highly righteous individual who established the first religious academy – yeshiva,⁸ if you will – in the city of Shalem, later to be known as Jerusalem.

Later, Shem's grandson, Ever, joined the family business and this yeshiva was immortalized as the Academy of Shem and Ever.

The word Shalem has two meanings: 1) completion⁹ and 2) peace.¹⁰

Shem, that righteous man and ancestor of Abraham (and of us all as Jews), captured the essence of this city as peace and completion. Shem, who was complete himself, realized that this city represents the completion and peace of the world. Naturally, he named it Shalem.

Nine generations after Shem, Abraham came onto the scene, and he named the city something entirely different.

6. Yireh – Vision & Awe

Toward the end of the famous Torah narrative which relates how Abraham brought his son Isaac up on the mountain in order to sacrifice him to God, we read that God forbid this sacrifice and, on the altar built for his son, Abraham offered up a ram instead. All this took place on today's Temple Mount, and looking around, Abraham was inspired to name the city:

⁷ C.f. Genesis Rabbah 43:7.

⁸ See Megillah 17a and Maharsha ad loc.

⁹ The Midrash (ibid.) interprets Shalem homiletically to refer to the king Malchizedek himself, i.e. Malchizedek himself was Shalem, complete. In what way? He was complete in that he was born circumcised.

¹⁰ See Likkutei Torah, Pikudei 4a.

And Abraham named that place Yireh, the Lord will see, as it is said to this day: On this mountain, the Lord will be seen.¹¹

Yireh, like Shalem, has two meanings: 1) vision and 2) awe.¹² Why did Abraham choose to name the holiest place on earth Yireh? Because Abraham saw that this was a city of vision – a vision of what the world and its inhabitants could be. Jerusalem was the chosen city by God to serve as the “gate to heaven”¹³ – the bridge between spirit and matter, the interface between the divine and the mundane. This would later materialize with the building of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem.

When one realizes this vision, one trembles in reverence – one is humbled by the sheer awe of it. It means coming face-to-face with reality, with the purpose of creation itself – how can one not tremble in reverence and submit to the awesomeness?

Abraham understood what this place was all about, a place where the vision of the Creator was clear for all to see, and thus a place of awe. So Abraham captured the spirit of the place by naming it Yireh.

7. Reconciling the Two

God said that both Shem and Abraham were correct in how they named the place. They are both righteous, and they both captured an eternal and essential element of the city.

So what did God do?

God combined both names, Yireh and Shalem, into one.¹⁴ The result: *Yerushalayim* – Jerusalem.

This is how Jerusalem got its name. And when we live up to this name, all the enemies of Israel are rendered null and void.

¹¹ Genesis 22:14.

¹² See Likkutei Torah *ibid*.

¹³ Genesis 28:17.

¹⁴ See Tosafot to Taanit 16a, s.v. Har.

8. Sanctuary

The conclusion of the Midrash states:

Said Rav Brachya in the name of Rav Chelbo: From when it was Shalem, the Holy Blessed One built a Sukkah and would pray within it, as it states, *In Shalem was His Sukkah, and His dwelling place in Zion.* And what did He say? “May it be the Will that we will see the building of My home.”

Even from the earliest times, when the city was still called Salem/Shalem, God had built His sanctuary, His tabernacle, there.

Even before the Nation of Israel was born, and before the Land of Israel was settled by the Nation of Israel, God had already established there the foundation and vision for what Jerusalem would ultimately become.¹⁵

Back then it was a temporary place, which would eventually become a permanent home for the Divine with the building of the Temple on the site.

And this is what God would pray for there: “May it be that we will see the building of My home [here].”

How do we make the building permanent? How do we build an indestructible home for God?

By conjoining Yireh and Shalem.

9. Message For Us Today: Building Jerusalem

Shalem should be relatively easy. Everyone wants peace (or at least everyone *says* so). What’s difficult is deciding on what that peace means and what type of peace we are talking about.

¹⁵ See commentaries Matnot Kehunah and Etz Yosef to the Midrash.

An obvious question asked by the commentaries on the Midrash I cited: Why is the city not called *Shalemyireh*, why *Yerushalayim*? Did not Shem, who named it Shalem, come before Abraham, who named it Yireh? Should not Shalem come before Yireh? And, even if we disregard chronology, is not Shalem (completion, peace) a greater ideal than Yireh (awe, vision)? Why then, in constructing the name *Yerushalayim*, did God put Yireh before Shalem?

The Anaf Yosef explains that peace, Shalem, is the beautiful edifice that is built *upon* a solid foundation. Yireh is that foundation. Without awe of heaven and a vision for what a holy, peaceful city looks like, there is no way to have the completion of that peace.

Shem may have come first chronologically, and he may have named the city for peace and completion, but only Abraham, the first Jew, understood the vision – the will of God – that one day there would be an awesome home on the Temple Mount. He knew that, only when there is awe, can one begin to achieve peace.

10. Bless Those Who Bless You (Conclusion)

Earlier in our Torah reading, before we meet Malchitzedek and the city of Shalem/Salem, the Torah shares with us one sentence that needs very little interpretation:

*And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you.*¹⁶

Whenever Israel stands tall and proud, exclaiming with humility its blessedness before its Creator, the world also stands in awe and reverence. *All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you* – these words God told to Abraham, the man who named Jerusalem Yireh – *On this mountain, the Lord will be seen.*

¹⁶ Genesis 12:3.

The surest way to bring peace to the Holy Land, the one thing that you and I and all of us can do is cause God to be seen in this world.

How do we do that?

Through our good deeds, and through the good deeds that we inspire others to do. That's how we will show the world the vision of the Divine.

Today, right now – we must do everything in our power to reveal the Yireh, the vision of God in this world.

This is how we bless the nations and the families of the earth. When we Jews stand proud and tall and confident in our purpose as Jews, when we reveal and share and teach the meaning of Jerusalem to the world – both the Yireh/awe/vision and the Shalem/peace/completion. When we do this – when we live up to and personify *Yerusholayim* – the world is mesmerized.

Every effort we make in this direction will surely bring lasting peace to Jerusalem and to all of Israel, and will lead to the fulfillment of God's prayer in God's sanctuary: "May it be that we will see the building of My home [here]."

Immediately as we speak! Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!