

Historical Background of Yom Yerushalayim

"*Ke'ir shechubra la yachdav*"—"Built-up Jerusalem is like a city that was joined together" ([Psalm 122:3](#)).

While most Jewish holidays are biblically ordained, a few were added by rabbis to mark significant historical events in ancient times such as Chanukah and Purim. Yom Yerushalayim is the most recent holiday to join this group (after Yom Ha'atzmaut) to mark the reunification of Jerusalem. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel declared Yom Yerushalayim a minor religious holiday to thank G-d for our victory in the Six Day War and for answering our 2000 year old prayer of "Next year in Jerusalem."

Celebrated on the 28th day of Iyar, Yom Yerushalayim marks the third day of the Six Day War in June of 1967 when the paratroopers liberated the Old City (East Jerusalem). This was the first time in modern times that Jews (and all other non-Muslims) were granted free access to their holy sites. While Jerusalem has been considered our capital since King David conquered and established it as such in approximately 1000 BCE, June 1967 marked the first time in modern city we could access our capital city and the holiest of our religious sites.

Going back in time:

When the United Nations originally granted the Jewish people a homeland alongside the Arab countries under the Partition Plan of 1947, Jerusalem was defined as an international city belonging neither to the Jews or the Arabs for a period of 10 years. At the end of this time period, a referendum was supposed to be held by Jerusalem residents to determine whether it would ultimately belong to the Jews or the Arabs. While the Jewish leadership accepted this plan, the Arabs rejected it.

Once Israel declared its independence in 1948 and was immediately attacked by its Arab neighbors, Jordan took over the Old City. Despite valiant attempts by Israeli forces, we were unable to reverse this new reality and by the end of the War of Independence, Israel controlled West Jerusalem while Jordan governed East Jerusalem. Jewish residents who had lived in the Old City under whomever was in power, the Turks, Arabs and others, were suddenly forced out and that part of the city was off limits to Jewish residents until 1967. Under Jordanian rule, the Old City's 58 synagogues were destroyed (some of which had been standing for centuries); the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives was desecrated and its tombstones were used to pave roads and as building materials.

Although Israel sent a message to King Hussein of Jordan prior to the Six Day War promising not to attack East Jerusalem or Yehuda and Shomron if he wouldn't open up a third fighting front with Israel, Jordan began firing on Israeli civilian locations. In response, Israel opened up the eastern front on June 6th and captured the Old City the

following day. The famous words “Har habayit b’yadeinu – The Temple Mount is in our hands” are the famous words that spread like wildfire through the army and to the civilian population. Dani, a soldier later recalled the moment he and his men got the news: “Most of the men began dancing around, jumping on and off vehicles, under them, hugging one another. It was like being in exile and suddenly hearing that Jerusalem was ours.” Residents also reacted spontaneously to this news and broke out into singing and dancing in the streets as people of all ages began streaming towards the kotel.

For generations, people had prayed for this moment, and it was realized in our time. The blessing of Shehechyanu was recited and the shofar was blown. Later that day, then Defense Minister Moshe Dayan broadcast the following message:

“This morning, the Israel Defense Forces liberated Jerusalem. We have united Jerusalem, the divided capital of Israel. We have returned to the holiest of our holy places, never to part from it again. To our Arab neighbors we extend, also at this hour—and with added emphasis at this hour—our hand in peace. And to our Christian and Muslim fellow citizens, we solemnly promise full religious freedom and rights. We did not come to Jerusalem for the sake of other peoples' holy places, and not to interfere with the adherents of other faiths, but in order to safeguard its entirety, and to live there together with others, in unity.”

Soldiers' reminiscences after the battle for Jerusalem. ("The Jerusalem Anthology").

A Letter by Eliezer

I was lucky that I served with the paratroop brigade that liberated Jerusalem. I believe that the hand of God was in my participation in the battle for the liberation of and reunion of Jerusalem...

Fears, natural in the face of possible death, were replaced by a great pride. I felt jubilant, here I was about to fight - and perhaps to die - for Jerusalem. Do you know the significance of Jerusalem for a religious man who prays three times a day: "And return speedily to Jerusalem, The city, in mercy, and dwell within it as Thou hast spoken...?" The Western Wall was never an archeological site as far as I was concerned, not even a "holy place" as it is officially called. My education, my prayers and my longings transform Jerusalem in its entirety into an organic part of my very being, of my whole life....

I felt as if I had been granted the great privilege of acting as an agent of God, of Jewish history.... The atmosphere was full of a sense of greatness and holiness. We were in the Rockefeller Museum, just before we took the Temple Mount, and I asked a fellow soldier, a man born in Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha'amakim (a left wing, secular kibbutz), what he thought of it all. He answered me with a verse from the Bible: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet shall stand within Thy gates, O Jerusalem. Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together." He smiled as he spoke, perhaps because it's not "fitting" for a member of HaShomer Hatzair to talk this way. But I saw his eyes, and I knew that was how he really felt.

When we broke into the Old City, and I went up to the Temple Mount and later to the Western Wall, I looked searchingly at the officers and other soldiers. I saw their tears, their wordless prayers, and I knew they felt as I did: a deep feeling for the Temple Mount where the Temple once stood, and love for the Wall on whose stones so many generations have wept. I understood that it wasn't only I and my religious friends who sensed its greatness and sanctity; the others felt it too, no less deeply and strongly....

As I stood there weeping at the Wall, there wept with me my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather, all of them born in the Land of Israel where they needed Abdulla's permission to pray at the Wall. As I caressed its stones, I felt the warmth of those Jewish hearts which had warmed them with the a warmth that will forever endure.

I saw my friends, kibbutz-educated toward an attitude of scorn for traditional religious values, now overwhelmed by a feeling of holiness... Then I saw the proof of what I had previously assumed, that there is in all of us..., in the entire Jewish people, an intense quality of Jewishness that is neither destroyed by education nor blurred by foreign ideologies and values. The morning after the battle I said my morning prayers on the Temple Mount, and as the sun rose over liberated Jerusalem I lingered over the verse, "And may a new light dawn over Zion and may we speedily merit its radiance."

Moshe Amirav

It is with a smile that I remember how we looked for the Wall. We ran there, a group of panting soldiers, lost on the plaza of the Temple Mount, searching for a giant stone wall..... Suddenly we stopped, thunderstruck. There it was before our eyes! Gray and massive, silent and restrained. The Western Wall!

Slowly, slowly I began to approach the Wall in fear and trembling... I approached it as a messenger for my father and my grandfather. Of my great grandfather and of all generations in all exiles who had never merited seeing it and so they had sent me to represent them. Somebody recited the festive blessing: Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has kept me alive, and maintained us and brought us to this time," but I could not answer "Amen." I put my hand on the stone and the tears that started to flow were not my tears – they were the tears of all Israel, tears of hope and prayer, tears of Hasidic tunes, tears of Jewish dances, tears which scorched and burned the heavy stone.