Jerusalem as a Metaphor for Jewish Peoplehood

By Elan Ezrachi

In 1952 Izhak Ben-Zvi was elected as Israel's second president. Israel was a four-year-old country struggling to get its systems running amidst a huge wave of immigration of refugees from Europe and the Islamic world. At the time, the Presidency was in the process of formation. Ben-Zvi and his wife Rachel Yanait, decided to put a very strong emphasis on what they called: **The unity of the tribes of Israel**. They perceived the return of Jews from all corners of the world to Israel as a challenge for the new State. The so-called "tribes" that made up the new Israeli society spoke different languages, reflected different cultural backgrounds and performed different Jewish rituals. The Ben-Zvis believed that a key to unity was to get to know each one of these groups and from this diversity unity would arise. To advance this cause they initiated a monthly event in the President's House. Every Rosh Chodesh, they hosted a gathering in the presidential reception hall in Jerusalem, each one dedicated to a different "tribe." The goal of each gathering was to learn about the core story of the particular group (tribe), in order to determine what needed to be preserved and how the group could integrate into the emerging Israeli society. All in all, there were 18 events that took place during the 1950's. In each event, representatives of the group, from all walks of life, would tell the history of the tribe, describe its spiritual assets and outline its prospective contribution to Israeli society. When the Ben-Zvis announced this initiative they referred to an ancient custom of pilgrimage to Jerusalem during every first of the month.

This wonderful, if somewhat naïve, story reflects the optimistic vision that prevailed in Israel in the early years. The Ben-Zvis believed that the Presidency and the symbolism of Jerusalem as the new capital would be the glue that holds together the various groups. In the years that followed, we learned that Israel's ethnic diversity would also a source of social and economic gaps, political and religious tensions, and at times, outright animosity and bias. Sixty years later, Israel has found ways to balance these diversities and social analysts do not consider the ethnic divides as obstacles to the creation of a cohesive Israeli culture and society. Israeli society today knows how to manage diversity and as a matter

of fact it has turned into a multicultural society with a fair amount of tolerance and acceptance of otherness.

This brings us back to Jerusalem as the symbol of Jewish unity. As Israel established its national character, as expected, Jerusalem was declared the new-old capital. Jerusalem holds a deep meaning which transcends the formal definition of an official state capital. Jerusalem is the location of the ancient Jewish State, as well as the center of our religious consciousness. The return of a Jewish polity to Jerusalem as the new capital stands firmly on these ancient layers.

Jerusalem holds a special meaning to Jews around the world, far beyond Israeli citizenry. In some ways we can say that Jerusalem is the capital city of the entire Jewish people. What does this status mean? Diaspora Jews are not citizens of Israel, yet they relate to Jerusalem and regard this city as an essential part of their consciousness. There are several expressions that exemplify this sentiment. First, Jews who visit Israel spend a significant amount of time in Jerusalem connecting to its historical and religious sites. Second, Jerusalem is the location of many international Jewish institutions and plays host to many international Jewish events, including 2008 General Assembly.

This is not enough. As we are working towards conceptualizing the term Jewish Peoplehood, we need to determine the role of Jerusalem as a metaphor for Jewish unity and diversity. How can Jerusalem serve as a meeting place for Jews from around the world? How can Jerusalem facilitate the creation of a world-wide Jewish consciousness? What institutions need to be created to ensure that Jewish Peoplehood is managed with Jerusalem being a hub of this global project?

Jerusalem, with its symbolism, history and current reality can become the center of Jewish Peoplehood. Just like Izhak Ben-Zvi who gathered the “tribes” in the 1950’s to create the message of Israeli Jewish unity, so are we today required to bring together Jewish communities from the entire world to appreciate their uniqueness through the story of Jerusalem.

Dr. Elan Ezrachi, is the director of the International School for Jerusalem Studies at Yad Ben-Zvi