

# **Jerusalem: A Multicultural City of Mixed Neighborhoods**

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It is indeed a challenging task we are presented with – to imagine the city of Jerusalem 50 years from now. Heeding the warning of Manuel Castells, we, in our capacity as intellectuals, should be careful not to predict the future. “Each time,” he says, “an intellectual has tried to answer the question ‘What is to be done?’ and seriously implement the answer, catastrophe has ensued” (Castells 1998, 358). So the way I understand it, our task is to imagine the city of Jerusalem as we would like it to be. It is then an exercise of letting our wishes and aspirations roam free. We are even encouraged, as the guidelines of the conference stated, to “envision this city as transcending the constraints imposed by nation-states, especially those within which it has become historically embedded”.

But engaging in such a free speculation, we can not – I claim, or better yet we should not - transcend reality altogether. Otherwise we might end up imagining the city of our dream – any city, irrespective of its contingent but still very real social, cultural and political conditions. Instead, we should perform an act of transcendence but at the same time take on board some earthly baggage – that is, some general features of the real and concrete Jerusalem. Our futuristic voyage then should be similar to the Rawlsian journey beyond the veil of ignorance, which “abstract[s] from and not be affected by the contingencies of the social world” and yet takes on board “general facts about human

nature and human society” facts that remind us if not who we are at least what we basically are (Rawls 1993, 23, 87).

What are then the essentials that we should take on board with us? Addressing this question, Iris Young, who does not have much sympathy with Rawlsian-type journeys, says that “a normative ideal of city must begin with our given experience of cities, and look there for the virtues of this form of social relations” (Young 1990, 238). Susan Fainstein makes a similar argument. She tells us that the investigation of examples from which we may get some important tips about the nature of the ideal city - cannot “transcend the limits of what already exists” (Fainstein 1997, 31). But even this exercise remains highly abstract, since both Young and Fainstein are not engaging in an exercise of imagining how to transform a particular city into an ideal one, but engaging in an attempt to articulate the virtues that are worthy of being integrated in the ideal city –any city. We, however, want to transform Jerusalem into an ideal city. We want to imagine what Young describes as ‘the unrealized possibilities of the actual’, that is, the unrealized possibilities of the actual Jerusalem. The task then is to imagine the ideal Jerusalem, the city that can transcend its present reality but retains some basic features that renders it the distinct and unique urban entity that it is – the city of Jerusalem.

Thus our visionary exercise should feature a delicate interplay between the actual and the possible - not necessarily the predictable or the feasible. Thus the heuristic I recommend is the one that compels us to consider some concrete features of Jerusalem and speculate about how they can be transcended – that is, how they can be reshaped, redefined, refigured and rearticulated on the ground. Thus, for instance, despite the guidelines we received, I believe that we should not try to transcend (supposing it is

indeed possible) the “constraints imposed by nation-states” nor should we ignore those constraints imposed by the national aspirations of political leaders and lay-people. Given these constraints and aspirations, one should ask how they can be transcended without being completely diffused and eradicated.

Although we are all quite familiar with - and some of us are even dismayed by - these national aspirations, let us have a reminder, a glimpse, of them. In a report he wrote about Jerusalem 4 years ago, Craig Horowitz of the New York Magazine stated the following:

“The ideal of a united, indivisible Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel is one I've held, like most mainstream Jews, for as long as I can remember. The patent righteousness of this position was so clear to me that if someone suggested otherwise, my instinctive reaction was disdain - - which I barely bothered to conceal. Compromise was possible on Hebron. It was possible on the Golan Heights, if it meant real peace with Syria. It might even be possible -- someday, at least -- on the Palestinian-refugee question. But Jerusalem was not something to be bartered. Everything else is just business. It's a negotiation. I'll give you a little here, you give me something there. But the city, well, the city's something else entirely" (Horowitz 2001).

Now no doubt we can find plenty of similar but opposite perceptions concerning the unique significance and special standing of Jerusalem on part of Palestinians. Thus, assuming that Jews and Palestinians alike attach (and will continue to attach) utmost national and religious importance to Jerusalem, we want to speculate about how it can be transformed - nonetheless – into a multicultural, peaceful and vibrant city. That is, the fact that Jews and Palestinians perceive Jerusalem through exclusionary national

mythologies and narratives does not mean that the fate of Jerusalem ought to be decided according to exclusionary parameters. We do not have to wait for a jubilee to pass by to understand that these parameters must be transcended and overcome; their limits are already self-evident. Thus the fact that many Jews cling tenaciously to the “ideal of a united, indivisible Jerusalem as the eternal capital of Israel” does not mean that reality must comply with their exclusionary wishes, even when it is accompanied by official practices intending to transform these wishes into an irreversible reality.

The refusal of social reality to comply with these wishes is constantly and ubiquitously evident. I lived in Jerusalem for 8 years (1987- 1995). I moved there at the beginning of a tumultuous time – September 1987 – just at the beginning of the first Intifada. I lived in a rented apartment in Ramat Ashkol, a Jewish neighborhood build on Palestinian territories expropriated by Israel after the 1967 war. I chose to live there because it is located close by the Mount Scopus where the Hebrew University – or part of it - is located. At the time I held a teaching position there. My main memories of this time have to do with a deep sense of claustrophobia that I had – especially during weekends. Being a stranger to the city, I had to know my way around. On the one hand, fearing for my life, I had to be careful not to enter Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. On the other hand, I had to avoid entering Jewish ultra-orthodox neighborhoods so that I did not violate the sanctity of the Sabbath, and consequently face the possibility of encountering violent reactions from its inhabitants. So I felt that I should be able to maneuver between the neighborhoods of Jerusalem – where I was not wanted and very much resented. Moustafa Bayoumi describes this impossible situation as follows, emphasizing however, the Jewish/Palestinian aspect of this distressing and unsettling

experience: “The seeming ease of the Jewish population to travel the city, but constantly on watch, afraid of what will turn up around the corner. A single eggplant slipping off a rickety hand-pulled cart could upset this delicate balance” (Bayoumi 2002, 33).

The destiny of Palestinians, residing in Jerusalem is even worse than this of Jews: being constantly subjected to institutional harassment and discrimination and to the danger of dislocation, motivated by never satiated Jewish expansionist passion in the metropolitan area of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was then and continues to be, as we all know, a deeply divided city. “In the normative ideal of the city,” says Iris Young, “borders are open and undecidable” (1990, 239). However, in Jerusalem they are not. The borders are actually rigidly closed.

I go now very often to Jerusalem – actually twice a week – as I hold there a research position in the Van Leer Institute of Jerusalem. And yet when I go there I still do so under the lingering claustrophobic feeling of the time that I used to live there. So I do not stay there after working hours – I return immediately to Tel Aviv – where I live (I definitely do not want either to idealize or to romanticize the city of Tel Aviv – it has its exclusionary and marginalizing ethos too. But this is another story.) In my mind, however, Jerusalem is not only a deeply divided and segregated city, it has also too much of a symbolic presence. Actually, it is this exhaustive and all encompassing symbolic presence that accounts for much of the violence we have witnessed for so long and for deep segregations. As Eyal Weizman writes, “Jerusalem was always perceived as an idea rather than as concrete and earthly reality” (Weizman 2002, 132). As such, Jerusalem seems to be a city very much detached from daily life and daily concerns of ordinary people. Although we are rightly implored to remember that “this city is also a place in

which people live, work, shop, worship, and play”, it seems that this mundane aspect of daily life of the city – any city - does not receive due attention in Jerusalem.

This one-dimensional – and actually distorted and limited - approach towards the city is particularly operative in the mind and practices of politicians and policy makers. As they diligently carry out their posts, Jerusalem constantly is cast by them as a city where past and present are intermingled while creating an insecure yet arrogant display of nationalism. Challenging Anthony Smith’s contested understanding of nationalism as “surrogate religion,” Jerusalem becomes a major site where Jewish nationalism (as well as Palestinian nationalism, I presume) has long forsaken its hollow pretension to transcend religion. Such a natio-religious frame of mind resonates among Jews and Arabs alike. “It is not a political conflict,” says MK, Rabbi Moti Alon, one of the most vociferous religious leaders of Jewish settlers. “It is a confessional conflict”, he adds, “a struggle over our Jewishness and our very existence here. We have tried, after all, to do our best to transform it into a political conflict. But the Palestinians keep reminding us that they never perceived it as a mere political conflict” (Idioth Ahronot, 2002, 20).

Dismissing the insincere bickering concerning the question of who was the first to infuse religious elements into the Arab/Israeli conflict, we cannot indeed ignore how Jerusalem has turned into a city where secularized symbols of Jewish sovereignty - the Israeli parliament, Governmental institutions, the Supreme Court, the Israel public broadcasting services (the Israel TV) are closely intermingled with religious sites of national significance, like the old city and especially the Western Wall. I have to admit, I particularly do not like to visit the Western Wall’s compound, since I perceive it as a place fully appropriated or high-jacked by nationalistic and chauvinistic interpretations of

Jewish existence in the region. It is also a place displaying an arrogance of military and economic might – especially when it is juxtaposed to the underdeveloped and neglected Palestinian quarters of the Old City and Palestinian neighborhoods in general.

This Juxtaposition – figuring fervent and frenzied augmentation of Jewish presence in Jerusalem, as opposed to systematic attempts made by Israeli authorities to shrink Palestinian presence in the city – provides a striking example to how cultural and national misrecognition is intimately embedded in an extremely unequal distribution of material resources. As Benvenisti shows, the unequal treatment of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem were cynically promoted in the name of high universal values and ideals. Ironically, however, prominent among these values are these of coexistence, tolerance and diversity. These values were inspired allegedly by the implementation of the “mosaic theory”, intending to redesign metropolitan Jerusalem following the occupation of east Jerusalem in 1967 and its annexation to Israel. This is how Teddy Kollek, the legendary mayor of Jerusalem, envisioned this theory – which we may call, after our conference here, “Jerusalem visionary 2005”:

This part of the traditional character of Jerusalem and the new neighborhoods will certainly not change this... the model of the Old City divided into religious and ethnic quarters – Jewish, Christian, Armenian and Muslim – is preserved as a successful means for creating coexistence based on separate, undisturbed cultural and ethnic development of its constituent communities. According to the mosaic theory, the pattern of homogenous neighborhoods diminishes the tensions that arise when people of differing cultural backgrounds live side by side (Benvenisti 1996, 164).

As Benvenisti and others - among them Samira Haj (2003) and Oren Yiftachel () show, the mosaic theory was nothing but “an aggressive intrusion into Arab areas via the construction of Jewish neighborhoods on expropriated land” (ibid). If the multicultural depiction of the ideal city requires, as Young stipulates, “social differentiation without exclusion,” we must say that this condition has been aggressively violated by the “mosaic theory”, for its implementation deliberately – if not maliciously - prompted and enhanced extreme inequalities in infrastructure, in social services, in economic opportunities and in the general quality of life between Jewish and Arab communities.

It is this reality, then, that we want to transcend when we come to envision the city of Jerusalem in 2050. We do not leave behind, as I previously stated, recalcitrant social facts – the religious and cultural diversity of the city. Thus we do not aspire to transform Jerusalem into a homogenous community in which all members become interconnected limbs of a single organic whole. We have gathered by now enough evidence showing that the attempts to cultivate such an ideal community have sometimes resulted in ruthless practices of social exclusion and marginalization.

But then again one must be cautious not to go to the other extreme. That is, the ideal city of Jerusalem does not lie in the prospect of urban multiculturalism seeking to ensure “separate but equal neighborhoods”. Although such an arrangement is compatible with a commonly envisioned ideal of urban multiculturalism, it is not the only arrangement compatible with this ideal. We should envision the possibility of mixed neighborhoods, where city dwellers of different religious denominations and of different cultural backgrounds can share common spaces – not to be located exclusively in “neutral

zones” existing outside the respective neighborhoods in which they live but to be integrated within their own immediate surroundings.

This prospect of Arab/Jewish urban integrated existence took place not too long ago in the past in many Arab regions, including Ottoman Palestine. It also took place in the first half of the previous century in the city of Ramadi, Iraq, where my mother came from. The city of Ramadi, north/west of Baghdad - or part of what it’s called now “the Sunni Triangle” - was an urban environment in which Sunni Muslims and Jews dwelled next to each other in mixed neighborhoods. Muslim and Jewish houses were scattered randomly across the city, separated, as my Mother says, “only by small distances of 10 to 15 yards. Next to our house lived the family of Hussein, and then next to them the Jewish family of Salah al-Mualem, and on the opposite direction there was the house of the Muslim family of Diab Al-Rahmo, and next to them there was the house of the Jewish Habush family, and then the Muslim family of Isamel al Bna and then there was the house of the Jewish family of Saleh al Basal, and so on and so on. And then my mother provides her reminiscing – not necessarily about grand events and crucial moments in the life of her family - but about trifles and snippets extracted from daily life. These recollections – salvaged from my mother’s oblivion at my request - may not be important, as you may judge, in their own right – they assume significance because they capture something important that was lost and may be retrieved in the future - in the ideal city of Jerusalem and elsewhere. They assume significance since they point at a reality that no longer exists but may nonetheless resurface in the future.

Thus my mother remembers washing and exchanging cloth with her Arab woman friends. She also remembers a time when one of her older sisters borrowed from her Arab

friend the wedding gown for her own wedding night. And then she recounts the story about the especially close neighbors of her family, a childless couple – Halil and Nagia - who has practically raised one of my mother's sisters - Aziza. "They loved her and treated her," she said, "as if she was their own daughter. After my sister got pregnant," she continued," my mother informed Halil and Nagia about it: she told them 'your daughter Aziza is pregnant. You know'", my mother tells me, "we attended each other's events (weddings, births and - God forbids – also funerals). Well, what can I say, we sang and laughed together and we also cried and bewailed together. This is how close Arabs and Jews were back then in Iraq". However, my mother points out that social interactions between Jews and Arabs in Iraq – like in the rest of Arab societies - had nonetheless their limits: religion was a formidable barrier. Thus, Arab/Jewish intermarriage, for instance, was an unheard of phenomenon.

She continues to say that "when the time came and we left for Israel, many of our Arab neighbors were deeply saddened". She remembers, amused, what one of her neighbors told her family in this regard: "AMI DAHAI – WANA ASH AIYA – meaning my uncle got married, what this has got to do with me. She meant to say, the Jews in Palestine have established their own state, what this got to do with you – the Jews of Iraq.

It ought to be stated that by shedding light on this aspect of social reality in the Arab world, I do not perceive it as an ideal to be uncritically implemented in the future city of Jerusalem. Although exhibiting a considerable degree of religious tolerance and allowing for the development of auspicious multifarious social interactions, Arab societies did not accord politically equal status to Jews and Christians and also harassed

them occasionally. The purpose, then, in highlighting this aspect of social life in the Arab world is to challenge the “neo Lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history,” a conception that perceives this history as “a long chain of persecution and suffering” inflicted upon the Jews (Cohen 1991, 55). Challenging this conception, we are able to retrieve from oblivion possibilities that are censored by national dictates that tailors the past according to present needs. We are able to retrieve, in particular, a vision of urban multiculturalism that once existed and disappeared due to the advent of modern nationalism and especially to the emergence of ethnic nationalism in the Middle East. Drawing on the past, we are able to bring to our attention the possibility of urban multiculturalism displayed in the establishment of mixed neighborhoods.

If we proceed then to imagine the ideal urban multiculturalism in mixed Arab/Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem, we should entertain the option of bi-lingual communities inhabiting the same apartment buildings using the same social services and the enrollment of Arab and Jewish their children in the same common schools that may, by the way, develop curriculums attempting to accommodate the conflicting national narratives of both sides.

Now some may find this prospect unacceptable, arguing that one cannot import the past and insert it uncritically into the present. One ought, they may continue, to recognize the contextual variations in political and social reality. While inhabiting the same neighborhoods and partaking in the cultivation of common cultural heritage, members belonging to different religious denominations in Arab societies knew and internalized quite effectively the limits of social interactions. Religion then was a

formidable tool ensuring a delicate balance between, on the one hand, a considerable level of integration and equally on the other, clearly drawn boundaries

However, my mother's experience in Ramadi is neither an isolated quality of the city in which she grew up nor a unique quality of Muslim/Jewish interaction in Iraq. Such interactions have existed in other societies of the Arab world. Thus, for instance, describing the Syrian city of Aleppo in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century - a city in which, by the way, my father's sister and her extended family lived until 1982 - Abraham Marcus writes the following: "The confessional boundaries were so clearly drawn and religious beliefs so open to debate that people could associate freely in various spheres without compromise. Sharing a common cultural heritage, Muslims, Christians, and Jews were hardly strangers to each other." (Marcus 1989, 43)

The prominent role that religion played in organizing social life, facilitated then a tightly knit community made of different religious groups. But the relative secularization ensued by modern nationalism put **an end to this** community and it required therefore a different tool to safeguard social boundaries. Autonomous communities and segregated neighborhoods is the solution that nationalism supplies to accomplish this task. And indeed, each time when this solution is seemingly challenged, it provokes strong reactions from those beholding the ideal of a separate national community.

Consider this example. On the second of March 2000 Yossi Sarid, the minister of education in Ehud Bark's coalition government held a press conference in which he announced the initiation of a new school curriculum in the subject of literature that includes poems by the Palestinians poets Mahmud Darwish and Siham Daud. Explaining

the rationale of his initiative, Sarid argued that it may signal the beginning of an historical reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians. His initiative triggered a fierce public outcry, causing the prime minister to denounce it. One of the main charges made against the initiative was that it conceals a secret plan on part of the minister of Education to encourage – God forbid – the formation of an inseparable Jewish/Arab community:

I want to tell you members of Parliament, stated, for instance, Michael Kliener, an M.K of Herut – the National Party, “Mahmud Darwish is only a swallow. He is only an indication that Yossi Sarid is surreptitiously and diligently promoting his great plan, which is to establish a network of mixed Jewish/Arab schools. In these schools the children will come to know each other intimately, will learn to stop hating each other, love and fall in love with each other, maybe to marry each other and beget children, and while passionately in love with each other – they will bring an end to the Jewish/Arab conflict. The national danger embedded in a mixed educational system... threatens the Jewish identity of each child and the state in its entirety (Knesset 2000).

Considering this pervasive anxiety – which may exist also in some Palestinian circles - we may begin to understand the adverse role that ethnic nationalism played in the case of Zionist ideology in forestalling the emergence of mixed Jewish/Arab neighborhoods. As Lev Grinberg writes, for instance, “the Zionist labor parties [which possessed most political power in pre-state Israel] sought to create a society that would be politically and economically separated from the Arab population” (Grinberg, 2003, 373) He adds the observation that “the Zionist Labor leadership... sought to prevent the consolidation of a Joint Jewish-Arab civil society,” fearing that the emergence of a viable and a robust civil society would have undermined the “creation of a separate state for the

Jews” (ibid). According to Grinberg, then, the idea of civil society – especially in the context of Arab/Jewish urban surroundings suggested the possibility that Jews and Arabs together could break loose from the grip of the national community – either Jewish or Palestinian.

But must the consolidation of a vigorous civil society entail the negation of nationalism? Not necessarily. As Michael Walzer argues, civil society and nationalism often go hand in hand (Walzer 1991). Thus if we want to nonetheless extract the valid point from Grinberg’s argument we should maybe read it differently. It may go like this: had a vigorous civil society emerged in pre-state Israel, this could have facilitated the appearance of an alternative form of nationalism. This alternative – civic nationalism - could have been far more inclusive than the ethnic nationalism that has since increasingly permeated the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is then a kind of nationalism that would not have been so appalled by the prospect of a community in which Jewish and Arab children may “love and fall in love with each other.”

This discussion brings us to the starting point of my paper. We were encouraged, as I mentioned, to envision the city of Jerusalem as “transcending the constraints imposed by nation-states, especially those within which it has become historically embedded.” The question now becomes whether the prospect of Jewish/Arab mixed neighborhoods can really transcend these constraints? And if it can, how does it exactly do it? We may consider two main options in this regard: a top down option and a bottom up option.

According to the top down option, it will be up to state and city officials to establish these mixed neighborhoods. I do not want to speculate whether this is a likely

scenario but I do want to speculate about what it takes for such a scenario to become a reality. Well, I believe that for this scenario to become a reality, the sway of ethnic nationalism and its Jewdizing ethos must diminish. Jerusalem need not – and maybe should not - lose its symbolic significance, but this significance should not be perceived as an integral part of exclusive national mythologies and narratives.

The bottom up option assumes that no major change is to occur in this regard. According to this option the emergence of mixed neighborhoods may be the unintended consequences of deliberate plans to achieve the opposite results. That is, the continuous and concentrated efforts to reinforce Jewish a presence in Jerusalem – featuring the broadening of the limits of Metropolitan Jerusalem, severing the connection between Palestinian populated areas from the West Bank, the establishment of new Jewish neighborhoods and the systematic neglect of Palestinian neighborhoods – will inevitably usher an influx of Palestinians into Jewish neighborhoods. This dynamics already exists, by the way, within Israel's 67' borders in some cities such as Nazareth, Haifa, Acre and Beer Sheva. We are unable to say that these cities have turned into multicultural and peaceful cities. But they do indicate the proclivity of cities to behave in ways that defy the logic of ethnic nationalism and to escape its designs and dictates.

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