

## A Holy Place

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Beth Shir Sholom

My colleagues, Rabbis Arthur and Phyllis Ocean Berman ["When Messiah Builds a Temple" © by Waskow & Berman, 1995 in *Tales of Tikkun: New Jewish Stories to Heal the Wounded World* (Jason Aronson, 1995)] tell the story of a Chasidic rebbe who is painting an image of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, on the ceiling over the *bimah* in his synagogue because of a vision he has. The Dome of the Rock is that Jerusalem skyline-dominating canopy built over the rock upon which, some traditions say, Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac and from which Mohammed ascended for a night's encounter in heaven. Also, the Dome is built *directly* over the place where our Holy Temple once stood. Explaining what he is doing to a confused student, the rebbe says:

"...I have seen...At the foot of the Western Wall, the Wall where God's Own Presence weeps and hides in exile, I have seen hundreds of thousands of Jews gathered...

"Messiah has come!...They are singing, dancing..."I see [the] stream of Jews flow up the stairway that rises to the Temple Mount.

"The crowd cascades from the stairway onto the great stone pavement of the Temple Mount...They look toward the other end of the Mount — toward the great golden Dome...

"Surrounding the Dome are thousands of these children of Ishmael, these Muslims. They are not singing. They are shouting, furious, stubborn. 'Not here!' they shout in unison, 'Not here!'

"You will not tear down our Holy Mosque to build your Jewish Temple!"

"But I can hear the crowd of Jews — muttering, whispering, 'Right there, yes! — That is the place... No doubt, no doubt... that it is the place.'"

Messiah gazes at the Dome and whispers "So beautiful!"  
Messiah lifts a hand and points to the Dome. Both crowds gasp and hold tightly to the weapons they have brought. Messiah says:

"This green, this blue, this gold, this Dome — This is the Holy Temple!"

A Muslim shouts:

“No! No! You will not steal our Holy Mosque to make your Jewish Temple!”

The man throws a knife that falls short of Messiah’s body. Then the attacker is consumed by and into the crowd of Muslims whose mood and understanding appears to have shifted. A Jew leaps out from the crowd wielding an ax and cries out:

“You must not do this. You must not use their dirty place to be our Holy Temple. Tear it down!”

Another Jew steps out of the crowd and takes the ax from the offender’s hand and places it beside the fallen knife. Then both Muslims and Jews step forward to drop their weapons and someone lights them afire and the flames leap up – like a sacrifice – to Heaven.

Since we gathered last High Holy Days, I have been to Israel two times. As most of the members of this congregation know, my first recent journey was in October of last year. This was an interfaith journey of Jews, Muslims and Christians. I was the Jewish leader along with two Christian clergy and the Director of Religious Affairs of the Islamic Center of Southern California, Jihad Turk. The beginning of the trip could not foretell the strong bonds that would ultimately form. Soon after we landed in Israel our fledgling interfaith bonding was put to the test. As you might imagine, Ben Gurion airport has layers of security. It seems like everyone who is even quasi-official wants to, and has the authority to, see your passport. All seemed to be going well until two of our number, Jihad and a young woman of Arab-Swiss lineage, were detained – for two hours. Every authority I approached during that time was impervious to any influence from the word “Rabbi” in front of my name and my righteous, interreligious indignation. It was a strange position: I know full well why Israel needs to be so cautious, but, at that moment, my only thoughts were for the insult to the basic humanity of my fellow-travelers. After they withstood the final affront of having their baggage opened, every item removed and then jammed back in, we realized that their experience of adversity was but the first of many that would define our mission as Muslims, Christians and Jews, arm-in-arm, heart-in-heart on a journey in Israel. Our new purpose was to be ambassadors of

responsibility, 39 children of Abraham demonstrating that we all must journey together in Israel – and everywhere.

My most recent trip to Israel was with a wonderful group of members of our Beth Shir Sholom community. We all got through security just fine. Only one or two of us had been to Israel before so, essentially, we were there for an introductory tour. There came a time, on this journey, as well, when a new purpose became clear. In particular it was to experience the strength of the Beth Shir Sholom expression of being Jewish and to see how it translated into an Israeli context. We were proud and ultimately not too surprised to see how well our Beth Shir Sholom-ness worked in particular in two places, early in the day on the outskirts of the breathtaking Bahá'í gardens in Haifa and in my hotel room overlooking Jerusalem as we welcomed Shabbat.

Reflecting on both journeys, I see unmistakably that Jews seek to feel something different than do Christians and Muslims visiting Israel. Christians and Muslims come to visit the Holy Land. It is a glorious, soul-expanding, theological and spiritual journey, coupling belief with place and replacing imagination with personal experience. For Jewish-Americans, being in Israel is about peoplehood; it's about identifying with our history and touching our present, all the while being fully aware of how, some four years before modern Israel's founding, our people was within a hair's breadth of extinction. Muslims and Christians come to Israel to be in places with sacred significance. For Jews, every *person* we meet there, Jew and non-Jew, is sacred. On the interfaith trip, we visited many sites some holy to Islam, others holy to Christianity, some holy to both. We Jews don't have holy sites in the same way. Of course there is the Western Wall in Jerusalem and the underground cave at Hebron where all of our founding Matriarchs and Patriarchs are buried except Rachel. There are the graves of famous rabbis, founders of the modern Zionist movement and leaders of the state of Israel. Perhaps more holy than these are the graves of Israel's citizen soldiers, and the burnt out vehicles on the steep road up to Jerusalem that represent, as poet Natan Alterman said, the "silver platter upon which the Jewish state was given." The holiest of all places, is Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum, whose inner displays chronicle the undeniable link between the destruction of European Jewry and Israel's reality and whose exit door, overlooking a beautiful valley on

the outskirts of Jerusalem, is the most powerful statement of Jewish survival in the world.

And there is a new holy site, holy to both Jews and Muslims and theologically challenging to Christians and many others. On the Israeli side it's referred to as the Security Fence or just The Fence. On the other side, as an Israeli cab driver told me, "The Wall is really a wall!" At its most extreme points, the wall is immense. The grey concrete is overwhelmingly high. It looks like the beginning of a building, but that is not its purpose. The Fence builds a thin sense of security for Israelis. Most know it cannot stand forever and it is not the kind of ongoing security Israel needs. On the Palestinian side the Wall builds resentment. As our Palestinian guide for the interfaith tour, who lives on the "other side of the wall," in Bethlehem said, "It's like living in a prison when you know you've done nothing wrong, like being guilty without a trial. My children," he said, "wake up in prison every day." And yet because I am a Jew and Yad Vashem is my holiest place in Israel, I know the value of the Security Fence. Suicide bombings and other acts of violence have been enormously reduced. When my daughter was in London three years ago when bombs were exploding and she, fortunately, got off a bus just before it blew up, if I could have put a wall around her that day to protect her and it would have inconvenienced anyone else, if it would have caused someone else's child to feel like they were in prison, I would not have cared. And then again, I can easily invert my perspective to know that it is only a tiny minority of Palestinians who would not do the same for their children and instead turn them into human bombs.

This tension, this dissonance, this gapping chasm of credibility and understanding is starkly symbolized by the fact that on the Beth Shir Sholom tour, we were purposefully steered away from the Wall and, on the interfaith tour, going to Yad Vashem was added as a last minute option to the itinerary when we were already there. All the Jews chose to go, along with two Christians. It was not lost on any of us who went to Yad Vashem that for Christians and Muslims to remain ignorant of the place of layers of persecution and the Holocaust in the Jewish psyche will always disable them from walking with the Jewish people and Israelis toward peace and reconciliation. On the interfaith tour, when we went across the wall to visit Bethlehem and Hebron, the Jews responded to the experience in pretty much the same way. Although none of us had ever experienced the ghettos of our Jewish past, we knew a ghetto when

we were in one and we could not get over the bitter irony that we have now put others behind a ghetto wall. It didn't take long for those of us on our Beth Shir Sholom trip to realize that we never saw the Security Fence and never dealt with how it did indeed make us secure on our journey and also how it screams anger, dismissal and indifference to those on the other side. Obviously, the best tour of Israel would combine both agendas and both itineraries and I intend that the next trip sponsored by Beth Shir Sholom will be precisely that. It is my hope that a tour like that, for members of Beth Shir Sholom along with our Christian and Muslim friends, will bring Messiah a little closer.

In the vision about Messiah with which we began, no description of Messiah is ever given. That's because most of us now understand Messiah is not a personage, but rather a state-of-being, an experience. In one way, I began a Messiah experience on our interfaith tour when I was introduced to one of the many uncles of my friend and colleague Jihad Turk. His name is Abu Chalid. Jihad arranged for us to have dinner at his home. We were hosted by his family with an abundance of delicious food, friendly conversation, cute children and huge smiles. After dinner we adjourned to the roof for cookies and tea. Here the conversation, still friendly, turned more earnest. Abu Chalid shared with me the fragility of his circumstances, how his house was built illegally so that he could provide a home for two of his sons and their families, how he hated the Israeli government and did not trust the Palestinian Authority and was sympathetic to Hamas, how frustrating it was for him to build homes for Israelis knowing that his pay sustained him and his family and yet each building squeezed him and other Palestinians out of land their families had owned for centuries. His candor was unsettling. The warmth of the way in which we were hosted combined with his support of those who hate me, hate us, confused my heart. As we left his home for the ride back to the hotel, I felt as if I made a lifelong friend and yet he was also someone whom I could not completely trust.

As it turns out this was not meant to be an isolated Messiah experience. One of the ways Abu Chalid earns money is by selling souvenir picture-postcards on the Temple Mount, near the Dome of the Rock. When I returned to Israel this past summer with our group from Beth Shir Sholom, we visited the Temple Mount and were climbing the steps toward the Dome of the Rock when Abu Chalid

appeared, as if on cue. We approached each other and embraced. With the same sincerity and warmth I had felt from him nearly a year prior, he greeted and welcomed our whole group. He got on his cell phone instructing one of his sons to bring tea. His son arrived minutes later with a complete tea set on a tray, as if we were expected. And there we were, a group of Jews, being served tea by a Palestinian Muslim near the Dome of the Rock – or was it our Jewish Temple – or both? I know that this Messiah experience is not over and there is much to learn, much honest revelation of feelings and history, much building of trust and joint vision to come. I have a feeling this Muslim Dome and Jewish Temple, will somehow be involved in generating those experiences. I suppose that makes it a holy place. But, I don't believe in holy places, or do I? Amen.