**The Messages of Jerusalem**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein**  
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The Gemara (Bava Kama 82b) lists ten rituals that were not performed in Jerusalem, including the *egla arufa* (decapitated heifer), declaration of an *ir ha-nidachat* (idolatrous city), etc. The reason for this unique status was that Jerusalem, unlike all other portions of Eretz Yisrael, was not given to any of the tribes.

The most obvious reason for this state of affairs was in order to avoid jealousy among the tribes – to prevent them from arguing over the privilege of having Jerusalem in their portion (like the stones which, according to the Midrash, fought for the honor of having Yaakov lay his head upon them to rest). However, it would seem that had this been the only problem, a different solution could have been found – for instance, each tribe could have been given a small portion of Jerusalem. Hence, it appears that a deeper reason is involved, rather than merely the pragmatic wish to avoid conflict.

We may say that the law defining Jerusalem’s special status is comprised of three separate components.

**1.** The Gemara (Yoma 12a) teaches that houses may not be rented out in Jerusalem because “it (Jerusalem) is not theirs.” In other words, the halakha that Jerusalem was not divided among the tribes means, in practical terms, that Jerusalem does not belong to its inhabitants. Jerusalem is not the private property or personal acquisition of any person in Israel.

**2.** By virtue of the fact that Jerusalem was not divided among the tribes, it is the city of *Klal Yisrael* – it is given to all the tribes collectively. When the Torah describes the tribes – in the blessings bestowed by both Yaakov and Moshe – it emphasizes the special character of each tribe. The idea of the uniqueness of each tribe also finds expression in the stones of the breastplate, with each of the twelve different stones representing a separate tribe. The fact that Jerusalem was not given to any one specific tribe lends it a dimension of completeness and unity. The unity of Jerusalem is a result not of a negation and nullification of differences but rather of a complex combination of the different tribes.

In the closing verses of Sefer Yechezkel the gates surrounding Jerusalem are named – one for each tribe. All of the tribes together contribute to the make-up of the city and together create her completion. Sefer Yechezkel concludes with the words, “And the name of the city from that day [shall be], ‘God is there.’” Rashi explains that this refers to the ancient name dating from the days of Malki-Tzedek: Shalem. This name expresses the wholeness and perfection of the city which stems from its not having been divided among the tribes.

**3.** Yoma (ibid.) also teaches that Jerusalem can never have the status of an *ir nidachat* because the Torah, in teaching this law, uses the word “*arekha*” (your cities) – and Jerusalem is not included in this collective term since it was not given to any of the tribes. Although Jerusalem belongs to *Klal Yisrael*, it is nevertheless not altogether and completely theirs: it has a special status and is not part of “*arekha*,” the collection of cities. Jerusalem is God’s city, the dwelling place of the *Shekhina*: “This is My resting place for ever and ever” (Tehillim 132:14).

We are used to the everyday reality of Jerusalem as a national capital, a cultural center, a city reflecting our political reality – in short, a city which belongs to us. Nevertheless, we need to examine closely the halakha that Jerusalem was not divided among the tribes; no matter how much it may seem to be in our possession, we need to perceive it as God’s city.

The three characteristics described above convey a three-fold message.

**a.** The fact that Jerusalem belongs to no individual issues to us a call to elevate ourselves above the egotism symbolized by private acquisitiveness. We need to rise above the prevailing idea that “What is mine, is mine; and what is yours, is yours” – which, as we remember, is termed in Avot (5:10) as “the philosophy of Sodom.” Thus, one aspect of Jerusalem is elevation above considerations of promoting our own personal interests, both material and spiritual.

**b.** We need to rise above tribal differences, sectarianism. Lest any particular group wish to claim exclusive rights to Jerusalem, we need to declare in response: Jerusalem was not given to any of the tribes. We need to rise above spiritual imperialism that comes to impose one model only. Each stone of the breastplate emphasizes a different aspect, a different tribe, and only a breastplate with all twelve stones in place is fit for use. All twelve gates surrounding the city collectively provide a fortified wall, a complete city!

**c.** It is true that the government is located in Jerusalem; Jerusalem is the heart of the nation. But at the same time, Jerusalem was not given over completely to mortal rule. We live in the earthly Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim shel mata*), but we need to remember that this physical city faces the parallel heavenly Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim shel ma’ala*). We need to rise above the human and national plane and reach for the plane of Divine service; we must attempt to recognize the Divine Presence in the city.

To our sorrow, today we are far from receiving the messages which Jerusalem transmits. It is true that even the most distant Jew feels something in his heart at the mere mention of the name “Jerusalem,” but this is not sufficient. The feeling of unity and completeness, of elevation above egotism driven by a value system based on kindness and uprightness, is lacking in the public consciousness. In such a reality, we, who through the study of Torah can absorb these messages and try to realize them, are obligated to rise above egotism, sectarianism and divisiveness; we must strive to attain a level of sanctity, thereby spreading the message of Jerusalem further afield.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, will return in mercy to Jerusalem when we return to Jerusalem in our hearts and souls.

(This sicha was originally delivered on Yom Yerushalayim 5750 [1990].)