



Jerusalem at prayer: Hasidic Jews gather at ancient tombs on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city and the Dome of the Rock. Below left: Orthodox Greek Catholics at the Melkite Church. Below: Pilgrims at the Wailing Wall.

Jerusalem

CITY OF FAITH

A city that has survived millennia of conflict to be the complex and fascinating place it is today, Jerusalem is like no other place on earth, writes **David Leser**.





An Arab observes an Orthodox Catholic procession. Above: The Damascus Gate in the wall of the old city. Above right: A Jewish man at prayer. Below: The Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, where Christ is reputed to have been crucified.



Jerusalem is 45 minutes drive and 3000 years from Tel Aviv. In Tel Aviv, thousands of carefree Israelis dance till dawn in nightclubs overlooking the Mediterranean, arms in the air, the words to the songs falling easily from their pretty young lips: Sex, sex, sex on the beach ...

In Jerusalem, there is no sex on any beach, only prayers, lamentations and messianic yearnings stretching back over the centuries, behind the medieval limestone walls and towers of this desert city.

To say that there is no place on earth like Jerusalem is to indulge in massive understatement. No place has been more revered and ravaged, more conquered and re-conquered, more subject to the competing claims of hostile faiths and creeds than this small city at the end of a corridor of pale, broken hills.

Jerusalem is where history piles in on geography, squeezing it for space and air to breathe. You name the army, you name the civilisation or empire, you name the religious or national grouping and they have all been here. They have all come to conquer and lay waste, and to lay claim to its holy treasures – Canaanites, Israelites, Moabites, Hittites, Nabatites, Byzantines, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Crusaders, Saracens, Turks, Ottomans, Egyptians, British, Jordanians, Israelis again ...

Jerusalem is as much a sacred site as a place where people live and work and pray, a “psychic empire”, according to the Israeli writer, Amos Elon, that has seized – and kept hold of – the imagination of Jews, Christians and Muslims for two millennia.

This is Abraham’s city. This is King David and King Solomon’s city. This is the place of Christ’s passion, crucifixion and resurrection. This is the city of the Via Dolorosa and Mary’s Tomb and David’s citadel. This is where Mohammed stopped on his night voyage to heaven because, **continued on page 359**

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Jerusalem

as one Jerusalem professor quipped – obviously he was a Jew! – “there are no direct flights from Mecca to heaven. You have to make a stopover in Jerusalem”.

This is the city that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed and that mad King Herod rebuilt. This is where Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus and where the Last Supper was held, and where a crown of thorns was placed on this all-loving Jewish sectarian’s head. This is where the Crusaders arrived, waist-deep in the blood of their enemies, Muslims and Jews alike, and from where Saladin eventually sent them packing in 1187 AD.

This is where Israel’s legendary one-eyed general, Moshe Dayan, arrived nearly 800 years later, through the same gate that Jesus first entered on a donkey – to reclaim the city for the Jewish people after nearly 2000 years of exile. What irony. What perverse symmetry. The Nazarene peacemaker and the Jewish general. The Christian saint and the Israeli soldier.

To understand the power that Jerusalem holds over the collective imagination you only need to visit and contemplate one small patch of this ancient, blood-soaked town. Then you will begin to appreciate why it is said that even the jackals cry their biblical injunctions at night.

The place is known as the Temple Mount and you can reach it from various directions, through the narrow, cobbled, spice-filled alleyways of the Old City. (On this visit, I came at it via the Via Dolorosa, from the Stations of the Cross, where Jesus was once flagellated and scourged, and sent mockingly on his way to Golgotha.)

The Temple Mount is where you feel history, religion,

for fear of walking on the “Holy of Holies”. When King David seized the city from the Jebusites in 1000BC, he bought this site for 50 shekels and it was there his son, Solomon, built the first Hebrew temple – the very same temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC and then a second time by the Romans in 70AD.

When the Jews cry out at the end of every Passover or Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur): “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth ...” it is this spot they are referring to.

What is left of this Hebrew temple is a wall, referred to as the Western or Wailing Wall because it is here Jews come to lament the destruction of their temple and to pray for the return of the Messiah. You can see the notes that the pious have stuck into the crevices of the wall – petitions to their Almighty God for His favour, large and small.

It is here, at the south-eastern end, where Jesus threw out the money lenders from the temple and it is here that Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians alike hold to the belief that through the Golden Gate, on the eastern side of the Temple Mount, the messiah will eventually return. Christians, of course, refer to this event as the Second Coming and, over the years, there have been various attempts to expedite it.

In 1969, a deranged young Australian tourist torched the mosque because he assumed that he would be helping to bring about the third Jewish temple and, thus, the return of Christ. In 1985, a plot by Jewish extremists to blow up the Dome of the Rock was foiled by Israeli intelligence. Again, these extremists

“THIS IS WHERE PONTIUS PILATE CONDEMNED JESUS AND WHERE THE LAST SUPPER WAS HELD.”

nationalism, politics, fanaticism and biblical prophecy all colliding as one, and where you fear that if ever there were to be another Middle Eastern conflagration, it would be over this hallowed, contested spot. In the flat-earth cosmology of the Middle Ages, this was the centre of the universe. It still might be.

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The Temple Mount is where the gilded Dome of the Rock looms over the walled city, a spectacular gold-encrusted mosque built by Syrian masons to commemorate the place where Mohammed, their prophet, tied up his white steed, al-Buraq, before embarking on his celestial voyage to Paradise. After Mecca and Medina, it is the third holiest site in Islam.

And it is also the same spot where Cain is said to have killed Abel, the first capital offence in biblical history.

This is where, according to the Jews, the world was created, where Adam was born from dust, where Abraham offered up his son, Isaac, to God as a testament to his all-consuming love and devotion.

(And never let it be forgotten that Abraham was not just the patriarch of the Jewish people. He was also father figure to the Muslim people, owing to the fact that he had two wives, Sarah, a Hebrew, and Hagar, an Egyptian, and from these two wives he bore two sons – Isaac, a Jew, and Ishmael, an Arab. That’s right. The Arabs and Jews have always been cousins.)

Yet there is more to it than just this. Under the gilded mosque is a rock which the Jews believe once housed the tablets, the Ark of the Covenant, that Moses brought with him down from Mount Sinai. No Jew is supposed to enter this area

hoped to accelerate the coming of the Messiah, no matter its cost in human life. This place is, after all, only 100 kilometres south-east of the Megiddo Valley, otherwise known as Armageddon, which is where the Final Judgement, the End of Days, is predicted to take place.

On the day I arrived here, there were skirmishes on the Temple Mount. It was the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, and rumours had been sweeping the Old City all afternoon that Israeli soldiers had killed as many as 17 Palestinians or nine Palestinians, or just wounded a few, or none at all, depending on whose view you decided to accept. It was like trying to determine whether the doorway or arch you’d been standing under – so as to better take in the biblical scene of hawkers, pilgrims, monks and would-be messiahs – had been built by Byzantines, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Persians, Arabs or all of the above.

I have visited this city many times during the past 30 years and, every time I come here, I am seized by the same fascination and awe for how an ancient, intractable conflict gets played out, and for what this says about the human condition.

I was here in 1977 when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat crossed the Suez Canal on his historic mission of peace. “Tell them,” he told the hushed Israeli parliament, “that those wars were the last wars and the end of sorrows. Tell them we are entering upon a new beginning, a new life, a love of life, prosperity, freedom and peace.” Four years later, Sadat was dead, the victim of Muslim assassins’ bullets.

I was here in 1982, when the Israelis invaded southern Lebanon to try and snuff out Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organisation. I went into southern Lebanon to >>>

see the Israelis being greeted with flowers and sweets, only for the population to turn against their “liberators” when they overstayed their welcome.

I was here five years later, in 1987, for the birth of the first Palestinian uprising or intifada against Israeli occupation. I’d been silly enough to drive into the Gaza Strip, into the middle of a Palestinian demonstration, where they’d mistaken me and my partner – now my wife – for Israelis and destroyed the car windows with bricks and rocks. For a few grim seconds, I thought this was the end.

This was the place, too, where we decided to get married – a decision taken soon after that Gaza incident because of what it suggested to me about the fragility of life and love, and how we all should try to nurture both as best we can.

Seven years later, I came back for the Oslo peace process to find Palestinian national flags fluttering brightly through the old walled city, the first time I’d ever seen such flagrant displays of Palestinian nationalism. A year later, Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, was dead – victim of a Jewish assassin’s bullet – and so, too, the peace process with him.

Two years later, I returned once more, this time to visit a place called Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam (Oasis of Peace), where Arabs and Israelis had been attempting to live together in peace and mutual understanding.

What had I been looking for all these years? Some sign that this city of haunting beauty, this city of unbearable sadness and sorrow, could also live up to its name as the “City of Peace”, that it could become the New Jerusalem of our highest ideals, rather than the Old Jerusalem of treachery, suspicion and holy murder.

I’d never felt this at the Temple Mount, nor at the Church

of the Holy Sepulchre a few hundred metres away, where the various Christian faiths and sects – Greeks, Armenians, Latin, Copts, Syrians and Ethiopians alike – had been waging their own bitter struggle for centuries for the right to control access to the place where Jesus was crucified.

I’d never felt it at prayer time, either – not when the call from the minarets and the chanting of the rabbis and the ringing of church bells had all competed with one another for supremacy. A titanic battle of the sounds.

In this place of war, siege, pilgrimage, desolation, reconstruction, faith and prophecy, I had only felt such peace when the silence of the desert and the pale pink light of dusk and dawn had melted into the walls and flagstones. It was then that all those who had ever died for their faith or their misplaced zeal and had been laid to rest in the valleys below had begun to whisper prayers of forgiveness. Prayers for an end to this never-ending tragedy.

Now, at Christmas time, you can hear the church bells pealing from Bethlehem to Nazareth, all the way back to Jerusalem again. For 500 years, there was no ringing of the bells in this city. It was forbidden by the Muslims, just as when the Crusaders had taken the city in the 13th century, they’d turned the Dome of the Rock into a urinal or pissoir.

So many extremes, so much clamouring to be heard by a single, invisible, wrathful, merciful God. Yet, at sunset, above the Garden of Gethsemane, on the famed Mount of Olives, all you can hear now is the hush and divine melody of the desert.

And it is then that you might thank your God, or your talisman, or your lucky star, that you were ever able to see it for yourself. ■