

## Keeping Jerusalem Ours

By Stephen J. Savitsky



As I write this column, I am thinking about a Jewish historian, not yet born, who years from now will be looking through copies of *Jewish Action* to determine the issues that were relevant to the Jewish community at the beginning of the twenty-first century. If by some chance he reads this article, he will realize that the future of the city of Jerusalem was a significant topic in the spring of 2008. Will this historian believe that the government of Israel was actually considering giving our holy city to the Palestinians?

I pray it never comes to pass that this future historian will have cause to lament that during this period of Jewish history, the Jewish people decided Jerusalem is expendable.

On September 11, 2007, Haim Ramon, Israel's deputy prime minister, suggested that ceding all the Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem to the Palestinian Authority could be on the agenda of the November 2007 Annapolis peace talks. This announcement was a trial balloon sent up by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government to test the reaction of the Jewish community, both in Israel and in the Diaspora.

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At the last Orthodox Union (OU) convention in Jerusalem, held in November 2006, the following resolution was unanimously approved:

*Yerushalayim must forever remain the spiritual, cultural and political center of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and the Orthodox Union is mandated to undertake all efforts that are necessary to secure and maintain Yerushalayim as the eternal and undivided capital of the State of Israel. The Orthodox Union is further mandated to oppose any proposal or plan to relinquish any part of Yerushalayim to any foreign authority.*

Thus, our position regarding Olmert's trial balloon was clear. Moreover, convention delegates had also determined that the OU can oppose a policy of the government of Israel that relates to security matters in "exceptional circumstances."

After Ramon's statement was released, we immediately sent a letter to Prime Minister Olmert reaffirming our position on Jerusalem. On October 16, we received a letter from him stating that "the issue of Jerusalem is currently not under negotiations with the Palestinians." The letter went on to say that "in any future settlement the Prime Minister will strengthen the Jewish character of Jerusalem, enhance its Jewish majority, and keep Jerusalem as the eternal, united and internationally recognized capital of the Jewish people and the State of Israel."

While I personally thanked the prime minister for his response in a subsequent letter, I asked once again that he be more explicit about his intentions and his commitment to keep Jerusalem as the united capital of the Jewish people. Since then, we have been working feverishly at the OU to make certain that our city of Jerusalem remains undivided and under Jewish control.

As part of a multi-faceted campaign to ensure the unity of Jerusalem, we organized a special "Shabbat Yerushalayim," observed by hundreds of



synagogues throughout North America with prayer, learning and *divrei Torah* that centered on the significance of Jerusalem, and the dangers of dividing the city. We provided materials for our shuls including pamphlets, a model sermon, talking points on the religious significance of Jerusalem and a poster with the slogan, “Jerusalem: Keep it one, Keep it ours.” Additionally, the OU’s Washington-based Institute for Public Affairs distributed materials to all members of Congress explaining the importance of Jerusalem in Judaism. As the peace conference in Annapolis approached, the OU prepared editorials, one written by OU Director of Public Policy Nathan Diament and another by OU Executive Vice President Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb and me. In these articles, which appeared in *The Baltimore Sun* and the *Forward* respectively, we emphasized the rationale behind keeping Jerusalem undivided and the OU’s firm commitment to do so.

At a meeting held on the eve of Annapolis, when an Israeli reporter asked Prime Minister Olmert whether any Diaspora Jewish organization—specifically mentioning the OU—should have a say in this core issue, the prime minister replied, “The government of Israel has a sovereign right to negotiate anything on behalf of Israel.” I responded immediately, “The OU, however, seeks to express its heartfelt and strong view that all Jews around the

world have a stake in the holy city of Jerusalem, and that to cede portions of the city which has been the spiritual and political capital of the Jewish people for millennia is a step the government of Israel should not take.”

I reminded Prime Minister Olmert that when he spoke at our convention in 2006, he had voiced approval of Diaspora Jews expressing their disagreements and strong opinions on Israeli policy. Since that time, Prime Minister Olmert has consistently acknowledged the role of Diaspora Jewry in voicing opinions about Israel. As a matter of fact, during a recent conference call, he stated, “You can’t have your cake and eat it too,” in reference to the fact that Israel has an obligation to listen to the voice of Diaspora Jews as long as the State continues to ask for their support morally, politically and financially.

On the day of the Annapolis meeting, at a private session with the prime minister and selected Jewish leaders, I asked the prime minister about Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’ opening remarks in which he stated clearly that the capital of the Palestinian state would be East Jerusalem. Prime Minister Olmert’s remarks implied that there would have to be painful concessions if Israel were to achieve peace. When I asserted that he should have stated that Jerusalem was not on the table, he replied,

“Although the Palestinians may want Jerusalem, it is not up for discussion at this time.” This is a position that he has reiterated publicly on numerous occasions. It appears to me that while Jerusalem may not be on the table today, it certainly will be on the table one day soon if peace talks progress.

The OU is once again planning for its biennial convention, which will be held over Thanksgiving weekend. Although we had originally planned to have it the United States, in light of the threat to our holy city we instead determined to host our biggest and best convention ever in Jerusalem, *ir hakodesh*.

By bringing our convention to Jerusalem we are making a statement to the government of Israel and to world Jewry that Jerusalem, a gift we have been given, will remain our undivided and eternal city until the coming of the Messiah. We are currently planning extraordinary trips, meetings (including travel to East Jerusalem) and programming to strengthen the resolve of world Jewry about our undisputed claim to Jerusalem.

I am particularly proud that the OU strives to reflect the opinion of the vast majority of Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora. The uniqueness of our organization is that our hundreds of delegates, from shuls throughout North America, help shape our policies. At the Thanksgiving convention we therefore will continue with the resolutions process that we established at our last convention, and have our delegates decide the positions of our organization—not only regarding Israel, but also regarding domestic issues.

I hope that all of you readers will join us for this historic gathering. We must do all we can, at the convention and in the months leading up to it, to make certain that my hypothetical historian reading this article will say that in 2008 the Jews rose up to defend and protect their most holy city. I look forward to greeting each of you personally at our convention, where together we will go from strength to strength on behalf of *ir hakodesh*. 