

Letter from Jerusalem to an American Friend

By Emanuel Feldman

Dear _____,

You ask me why a normal person, one who has the option of living either in the United States or in Israel, would choose to live in Jerusalem at such a time of conflict and danger. After all, you ask, does it not make more sense to live in the US, at least until the danger recedes?

This is a legitimate question, and curious Israelis ask me the same thing. It is not easy to respond to it without being glib or facile, and yet it needs to be addressed in a serious way.

The truth is that sometimes I ask the same question of myself. Why bother living in a country that can be very frustrating; where the bureaucracy is suffocating; where drivers are aggressive; where the government is imposing new tax burdens on immigrants like me; where garbage strikes and airline strikes and transportation, teacher and municipal-worker strikes are commonplace; where—despite the surface normality in which we live—every terrorist attack is a source of national tension and mourning; where I find myself looking carefully at those who board the bus to make certain they are not carrying anything suspicious.

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Who in his right mind would put up with all this when he has a choice to live in a calmer and saner environment?

I will try to avoid the usual platitudes about Israel. Yes, it is true that we have sun most of the year, and Jerusalem is breathtaking in its stark beauty, and the Land is filled with an endless variety of people and cultures, and we have mountains and deserts and ocean. But all that is beside the point in the present situation. Nor will I discuss with you the religious imperatives of dwelling in the Land that, according to some decisors, actually have the force of a mitzvah.

Firstly, I must tell you that although it is not something one would deliberately seek out, it is stirring to be on the front lines of yet another struggle against those who want to destroy us. At the very least, we are not sitting passively in the grandstand while history is being played out before us. Here we have an acute sense of being part of our ancient people, a sense of revisiting the days of yore when once again our enemies, in the words of the Haggadah, “rise up against us to destroy us.”

I would like, however, to take you beyond the surface facts of daily life in Israel. When we do that, what emerges is a different reality, one that points to Eretz Yisrael as the only place in which the Jewish soul can be wholly at peace.

I say soul advisedly, because we are both body and soul. The body requires certain things that are unavailable in the

Land; the soul, the *neshamah*, requires certain things that are not available outside the Land. The body requires comfort, security, serenity, quiet. But the soul has different needs, and these can only be fulfilled in the Land.

What are these soul-needs? One of them is holiness, *kedushah*. Holiness is a term that is not in widespread use these days because it is intangible and indefinable. But more than any other quality it characterizes Israel, in general, and Jerusalem, in particular. Fully cognizant of Rav Kook's comment at the beginning of his *sefer, Orot*, that “it is impossible to appreciate the content of the holiness of Eretz Yisrael...by some rational human understanding,” I will touch upon only the surface of holiness in Jerusalem.

Kedushah is endemic in Jerusalem even in the twenty-first century. Let me, ever so briefly, count the ways:

In the synagogues, where *davening* is of a sincerity and ardor that is not found anywhere; in the study halls, where Torah at all levels is studied by men and women of all intellectual and economic strata, seven days a week, morning, noon and night; in the acts of *chesed* that are the hallmarks of the Orthodox community—the welcoming of strangers to one's home for Shabbat; the many free-loan societies; the organizations that supply the homebound, the sick and the infirm with food, friendship and encouragement; the care with which religious Jews observe the restrictions against making unfavorable

comments about others; the high percentage of their incomes that religious Jews give to *tzedakah*—in all this, the sense of *kedushah* is pervasive. While such things are found in most Orthodox communities, the quantity, quality and intensity with which it is manifested in Jerusalem is unmatched anywhere. The neighborhood of Bayit Vegan, for example, with a population of less than six thousand families, offers—in addition to its fifty *chesed* groups and sixty synagogues—almost 200 *shiurim* for adults per week.

One does not have to visit the Western Wall to sense this feeling of *kedushah*; one can feel it in his own neighborhood in a hundred different ways. Even non-religious Jews sense it. My secular taxi driver, rounding a curve that reveals the rolling hills in the distance, exclaims: “*Ein kemo Yerushalayim*” (There is nothing like Jerusalem). Jerusalem is breathtaking physically; spiritually, it is even more striking.

But there is more. The Jewish soul is attached to the Holy Land by an umbilical cord that extends back to the Patriarchs and to God's promise to them to give us the Land as an inheritance. Upon its every grain of sand rests the imprint of God. “The eyes of God are upon it [Israel] from the beginning of the year until the end of the year,” says the Torah in Devarim 11:12. Israel is thus unlike any other land. This is the dwelling place of the Shechinah, the Presence of God. This is why in this place alone the Jewish soul is fully nourished and at peace.

Perhaps this is because outside of Israel, the soul feels itself in exile, *galut*. *Galut* is cognate to the word *galui*, which means open or exposed. Away from the Land, the soul feels exposed, unprotected, vulnerable; these are the essential characteristics of exile.

It is a paradox, but a time of crisis offers the opportunity to do the soul's work, an open window through which we can reach out to God and grow closer to Him through the performance of *mitzvot*, *chesed*, the intensification of prayer and the adherence to

study of Torah. Where else in the world can one engage in these things more effectively?

The Talmud in *Taanit* 11a presents a vivid discussion about those who distance themselves from the suffering and sorrow of the Jewish community (*zeman sheYisrael sheruyin betza'ar*), versus those who participate with the community in its suffering. The discussion concludes with this declaration of the Sages: “Whosoever suffers with the community will be deemed worthy to see her salvation.” This is surely a time of *tza'ar* for Israel. We share that *tza'ar* now; some day we will also share her joy.

There is also the sense of insecurity and vulnerability that engenders the questions about living here. Would that Israel were allowed to live in peace, and that we did not have to think twice about boarding a bus or entering a shopping center. But in the profoundest sense, this feeling of vulnerability is in itself conducive to the religious life. “*Ashrei adam mefached tamid...*,” says King Solomon in Proverbs 28:14 (Happy is the man who fears always...). King Solomon is referring to the fear of transgressing the will of our Creator. But perhaps he is also saying that a sense of vulnerability is not necessarily bad, because for the sensitive Jew it inevitably must lead to a greater reliance and dependence on the Creator. In Devarim 8:17, the Torah decries the human tendency to rely on “*kochi v'otzem yadi*” (my power and my strength). The common illusions that we are here forever and that we are indestructible are anathema to the full service of God. The core of Judaism is the realization that life is impermanent. That realization leads to a fuller acceptance of the ultimate religious truth expressed by the Sages in *Sotah* 49b: “*Ein lanu lehisha'en ela al Avinu she-bashamayim*” (We can rely only upon our Father in heaven). Once this channeled vulnerability is internalized, we can reach up to God with a heart so enlarged that faith and holiness can more easily enter.

Channeled vulnerability of this kind is a key element in rebuilding

our spiritual selves, and—paradoxically—in entering a deeper level of inner tranquility. For the Jew, the most effective place in which to internalize this essential component of the religious life—to reach out to our Creator and to strive to come closer to Him—would naturally be Jerusalem. For only of Jerusalem do the Sages tell us that “He who prays in Jerusalem it is as if he prayed before God's Holy Throne,” and only of the Temple site do they declare that this is Jacob's *sha'ar hashamayim*, the gateway to heaven (Genesis 28:17). This is the gateway that is always open to the prayers of the Jewish people. (See Nachmanides on Genesis 28:17.)

There are, of course, other considerations as well. For one, there is no guarantee of security anywhere in the world: not in Oklahoma City, or in the suburbs of Washington, DC, or in the middle of Manhattan, or in Bali or in Kenya. For another, one does not abandon a friend—or a spiritual homeland—in a time of need. Beside which, where else in the world can one hear Birkat Kohanim every single day of the year, or be at the Western Wall within twenty minutes? And bear in mind that when the Messiah finally comes, only those who live here will be spared the long trip from the Galut to Jerusalem.

I am not suggesting, by the way, that anyone living outside of Israel is somehow derelict and is placing the needs of his body before the needs of his soul. There are many legitimate reasons that keep people from moving to Israel. In this note I am referring to those who, like me, are already residents of Israel, as well as to those in the Galut who are seriously contemplating a move here. For such people, the questions “Why remain here?” or “Why come here?” are constant ones. And it is to respond to these questions that I am writing to you.

Be well, pray for the peace of Jerusalem and do pay a visit soon to this bedrock of holiness. **JA**