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The Power of Myths in Israeli Society: Historical Realities and Political Dogmatizing

by
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Practically all peoples, nations and societies have recourse to a treasury of legends, tales or poetic fictions stemming from their more or less remote antiquity. These are mostly enacted by supernatural beings or by human heroes, expressing in terms of fable or story, interpretations of the world and idealized conceptions of life, and sometimes serve, as well, as models and examples. Such myth formations have their roots, often, in animism, survive through the various pre-rational stages of cultures, and become, in modern societies, metaphors and other meta-rational forms for expressing ideas which are conceptually hard to formulate. Sometimes, actual historical events as well, because of their traumatic effect, solidify into formative concepts with mythical characteristics.

The Overstated Myth of Jerusalem

Also in Switzerland: the figure of William Tell, for example, would stand as the unyielding will-to-freedom-and-independence personified. The crossbow as mark of virtue; Gessler's hat as emblem of an unendurable oppression; the Tell Chapel as a site of strength and courage; the Rütli meadow as tableau of ideally like-minded and resolute men: symbols of a specifically Swiss identity. And it simply does not matter if the historian denies the authenticity of these legends. We are dealing with ideal-concepts of a predominantly rational-acting society.

In Israel, the dominating influence of myth on politics, on the sense of identity, on historical consciousness, on culture as expressed in behavior, and on other aspects of society, is particularly strong and obvious. At the same time, it is less the timelessly valid messages of tradition that occupy the foreground than the verbal formulas, in which they are bound up, and which are taken literally. Thus are their meanings so alienated, that myths often serve to justify and to support unproductive attitudes and measures. The historical, psycho-social, religio-historical and cultural origins of this

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phenomenon cannot be properly dealt with here. We must content ourselves here with two examples.

The Myth of Jerusalem has established itself deeply in the consciousness of a broad section of Israeli society as the “holy” city of the glorious days of King David and King Solomon, as the fountainhead of a continuous Jewish existence in that land, as God’s locus, as the focal point of religious practice, where the first and second Temples stood, and where ultra-orthodox and nationalist groups hope a third will be established soon. In the cultic poetry of the Psalms and in the writings of the prophets, is Jerusalem sung over and again. The city appears innumerable times in prayers, finding entrance as the “golden” or the “eternal” in songs and sayings, and it is the object of theurgic yearnings and oaths.

Impediments to a Compromise

OFFICIAL CIRCLES UNRELENTINGLY PUMP UP THIS MYTH to justify their demand that Jerusalem remain the “eternal” and “undivided” capital of Israel and of the Jewish people. The right wing nationalists successfully fought against Shimon Peres’ candidacy for the post of Prime Minister in 1996 with the assertion that he wished to divide Jerusalem. In the summer of 2000, when former Prime Minister Ehud Barak flew to Camp David for negotiations with the Palestinian leader Arafat, the cry went up that he wanted to divide and bargain away Jerusalem. Through just this compound of religious, ideological and nationalistic charges has Jerusalem grown into what it remains: a chief impediment to compromise with the Palestinians that stands in the way of the pacification of the Near East, which the whole civilized world is longing for. Thus has a myth intervened fatefully in contemporary history; it does not serve, rationally, a productive ideal, but, rather, it has degenerated into the dogma of an irrational policy.

Already was Theodore Herzl shaken, on his visit to Jerusalem in 1898, by the discrepancy between fiction and the reality of the city. Thus, he confided to his diary: “The dull precipitation of two millennia full of barbarity, intolerance and uncleanness lie in the evil-smelling alleys.” But when a myth, in this case Jerusalem, hardens into the official dictum and doctrine of the country’s leadership, historical truth, frequently misrepresented by leading Israeli politicians, must face the challenge. Thus in 1998, a “Three Thousand Year Celebration” made it seem that the city had been founded as

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the religious center of the Israelites in 998 B.C. Then-mayor Olmert erroneously invoked King David in a speech as star witness to the continuous Jewish history of the city. Prime Minister Sharon, as well, in an interview with the French newspaper "Le Figaro," advanced the counterfactual proposition that Jerusalem has been "the capital of the Jewish people for precisely 3004 years." In reality, the spot which David conquered from the Jebusites (Judges, e.g., 19:10), was south of present-day Jerusalem, and it had been itself already inhabited for at least 2,000 years. On this, all archeologists, historians and other scientists are agreed (for example, see the compilation of research findings in the "Biblical Archeology Review" Washington, August 1998). The original, agrarian, inhabitants called it "Urusalim"; the cuneiform writing on a Babylonian clay tablet of the early Bronze Age, unearthed in 1975 in Ebla (in northern Syria) unambiguously shows this. The Hebrew "ir" ("city") derives from "uru," and the Hebrew word "shalem" ("whole," "perfect"), deriving from "salim" has the same root as "shalom" ("peace.")

"Jerushalayim," the spiritualized Hebrew designation for Jerusalem as "Holy City" or "City of Peace," is as little the creation of the Jews as the place itself, which, after its conquest by the Hebrews, was inhabited by Jebusites, Phoenicians, Philistines, Cretans, Canaanites, and others.

As the Book of Samuel (7:12,13) shows, only when David's son Solomon built the Temple on Mount Moriah, was this extremely tiny portion of present-day Jerusalem incorporated within the city. After his death, however, the political and religious independence of the Jews disintegrated, in the Temple, the old gods were worshiped again, and those of the oriental powers, Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, were allowed to be honored there. In 587 B.C., the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and abducted the elite of the Jews to his Mesopotamian country. And after the rebuilding of the Temple some 50 years later, the Persians, the Greeks, the Seleucids, the Romans (who destroyed the Second Temple), the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Turkish Seldshuks, the Crusaders, the Kurds, the Mamelukes, the Osmanian Turks, and finally, the English displaced one another as rulers.

Jerusalem was under Jewish sovereignty only during the relatively obscure era of the Maccabees, as the ruling dynasty of the Hasmoneans is called. The latter liberated the country in 142 B.C. from the Seleucid Antiochus

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Epiphanes IV, and established a fundamentalist regime, which, already by 63 B.C., the Romans brought to an end.

What “Holiness”?

With the exception, perhaps, of the 300 years following the beginning of the rule of Omayyeden-Calif Abd al-Malik, who built the Dome of the Rock, i.e., from roughly 700 to 1000 A.D., Jerusalem was for most of its history, a place of intolerance, inhumanity and bloodiness. Untold times, it was conquered, re-conquered, destroyed, depopulated. Instead of celebrating a city with such a tragic history, one would much better ask what sort of “holiness” is it that would permit such barbarities, or provoke them. And yet “Jerusalem” has become a verbal incitement that immediately conjures up the holy sites in the Old City. Together with the Palestinian-inhabited East Jerusalem, these sections together comprise an area of only 6 square kilometers. The Jewish western section, before the Six Day War of June 1967, encompassed 38 square kilometers. Since that passage of arms, however, Israel has annexed an additional 70 square kilometers of land in the West Bank, declared it to be urban area, and applied to this thus-augmented Greater Jerusalem, the dogma of mystical and religious Indivisibility and Holiness. By far, the greater part of the city today has simply no relation, therefore, to the history and culture of the Jews.

Jerusalem is, in point of fact, and also in the consciousness of the Israelis and the Palestinians, a divided city, in which the two populations live separated, each holding onto its own national and religious identity. Nearly a third of the roughly 680,000 inhabitants are Palestinians. They have the status of permanent residents with no Israeli citizenship, and live crowded into the officially-neglected eastern section of the city, which Israeli Jews have no difficulty in avoiding.

The prayers and mystical longings scarcely have reference to the brutalities in Jerusalem’s history, nor to the unedifying conditions of today, but, rather, to a thus-far unfulfilled image of a “holy” place, and a messianic condition of peace and human dignity. Many Israeli politicians and representatives of the religious elites, however, have affixed this image onto a specific place and have bound it up in the asserted claim to the “eternal” possession of a greater Jerusalem. Thus do they alienate a productive model, which they claim to live by; for the “idea” of the “Jerusalem” of their devotions is not bounded to

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these or those city limits, and unites not parcels of property, but human beings.

The Temple Mount: More Important Than Peace?

And the Temple Myth, also, has grown into a dominant element of policy. Israel wants sovereignty over the hill upon which stood the First and Second Temples, even at the cost of having peace with the entire Islamic world, although the golden Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aksa Mosque have risen there for many hundreds of years. Natan Scharansky, Minister for Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs in the Israeli government, just recently wrote an article in the newspaper *Ha'aretz* with the title: "The Temple Mount is More Important than Peace."

This kind of dogmatizing and exploitation of myth raises up a further obstacle in the way of a reconciliation with the Palestinians, so vitally essential for the country. Thus we see, after the January 28, 2003 elections, on placards, in advertisements, and over the radio, the declaration that the Temple Mount is "the heart of the nation" and the "identity of the Jewish people." The office of the Chief Rabbi has it announced that a relinquishment of sovereignty would be, "according to Jewish law," forbidden. Groups of fanatics are already wanting to lay the cornerstone for the Third Temple to replace the Muslim sanctuaries.

The Temple Myth finds no support in historical truth. In the much-sung "glory days of King David," there was actually no Temple. When strange gods were not being worshiped in the First and Second Temples—and that by the Jews, as well—their worship consisted, in the main, of a sacrificial cult, described in the Old Testament, but scarcely to be desired today. It was a hotbed of corruption, intrigues, commercialism and religious power politics. Various passages in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 21:12,13 and John 2:14,17), contemporary witnesses, and even certain passages in the Talmud, describe these conditions in explicit terms.

Only after the destruction of the Second Temple and the expulsion of the Jews nearly two millennia ago, could the Jewish religion develop those universal values, grounded in the ancient scriptures, which themselves,

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significantly, came into being, essentially, during the Babylonian exile, unencumbered by a Temple cult, and not tied to a specific place or center of power. This Judaism had no connection to the Temple Mount. Affixing “holiness” to a specific location through the building of the Temple was of a piece with the *Zeitgeist* of idolatry, and served as an inducement for the Crusades of the Middle Ages, which was a Christian variant of the same syndrome. More modern religious thinking holds that “holy” places are merely symbols or models for a transcendence that can be lived and practiced anyplace. In this sense, the role assigned to the Temple Myth in Israel is not only politically dubious, it represents, from the standpoint of philosophy of religion, a grave relapse. Thus, tragically, a mythological, site-bound “holiness” stands in the way of the universal holiness of peace.

Ernest Goldberger grew up in Switzerland, where he was active as an entrepreneur. He has lived in Israel for twelve years. His book, entitled *Die Seele Israels* (The Soul of Israel), will appear early this year from NZZ-Verlag.