

The Road to Jerusalem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Passover is a pilgrim festival. For thousands of years Jewish pilgrims have been making their way up to Jerusalem. It is a very special route. After a recent short visit, I turned up a piece I wrote home to my parents over forty years ago after the very first time I went "up" to Jerusalem:

The Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv was a dusty, messy marketplace of hustlers and hawkers and foul smells. Casually dressed, perspiring men and women were pressed into what looked like cattle pens in English county markets, pushing and shouting to get onto the buses as if their noise and shoving would make the queues go quicker. The brusque driver sold pretty little colored ticket tabs according to different destinations (I wonder if anyone collected them) from a metal display box at his side. More and more people were crammed in and soon the gangway was completely full with bodies and bundles.

The dilapidated Egged bus pulled away from the quay and started to crawl through slums and crumbling buildings of downtown Tel Aviv. We passed through the orchards and half Arab half modern prefab towns of the coastal plain interspersed with military camps, light industrial zones, junk and scrap yards, giving way to cultivated settlements and kibbutzim and gorgeously smelling citrus orchards until we reached Ramle where the bus turned into the dirty yellow station and some passengers got off and on. Arab kids were selling bagels and drinks through the windows of the bus. After a short break we set off again and out of town, over the railway tracks and past the huge cement factory and gently up to Beth Shemesh along a poorly maintained road shaded by eucalyptus trees.

On either side of the narrow road (B country road by English standards) large dusty green cypresses and pines covered the rising hills and shaded the valleys. The Jordanian side was totally barren. Browns and yellows spattered with dry scrub and an occasional tree. One could see Arab villages in the distance, the stone buildings camouflaged against the rocky hillsides, occasionally highlighted by a dash of blue paint or a minaret. Winding up the road one passed the burnt-out wrecks of lorries and armored cars left as memorials to those who died trying to maintain contact with besieged Jerusalem in the war of Independence.

The very air spoke of conflict. "Our" side of the border tended and cared for. "Their" side was abandoned, neglected, primitive. "Our" losses in the burnt, bombed convoys, remembered but not dwelt upon. "Theirs" enshrined in a permanent bitterness. "We" were looking forward. "They" were looking back. We passed through the Arab town

of Abu Tor, to my eyes quaint and oriental. Then the road began to rise and fall much more steeply and hills became larger and higher. The trees fell away and now only occasional ones dotted the hills. The hills themselves looked like upturned potters' jars, crudely ridged in ochres, browns and pinks. Then way ahead in between the overlapping curves of brown pink-ridged hills appeared Jerusalem. All its buildings in yellowy rose Jerusalem stone spreading across several peaks interspersed with pine and cedar.

The city that Jews, Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, all kinds of travelers had been drawn to. The city that recurred in every prayer, every service, every celebration of Jewish life, of my life and imagination. Except that I had imagined it a green, watered Cotswold village with greens and water and oak trees, Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land. But it was not like that at all. It was a dry, dusty, smelly, exotic yellow brown pink oriental town out of which new modern blocks of Jerusalem stone and Bauhaus styles were spreading away under canopies of pines from the old, worn caravan routes that led into Jaffa Street and down and on towards the crude concrete barriers that divided the city between the warring armies.

Yes, I know! Please forgive the simplicities of youth, the naiveties of an innocent perspective. All blacks and whites. Grays seep in later.

Every time I go to Jerusalem the road changes. It is a permanent "work in progress". This time I drove up to Jerusalem not in a hot, smelly, rickety bus, but an air-conditioned limousine. I commented to the driver that the first time I went up to Jerusalem, it was a single track via Bet Shemesh and you could almost touch the blackened hulks of the armored cars that had been destroyed by the Arab Legion.

Then they made it two lanes.

Then after 1967 there was quicker route via Latrun that cut out Bet Shemesh altogether, and they moved the wrecks and painted them.

Then the road was widened to four lanes. And they moved the wrecks farther back and, for some reason, there were fewer of them.

Now its six lanes, the wrecks are even further back and there are even fewer.

"Yes," said the driver, "they get stolen for scrap!"

Sign of the times?

It's a sign of the times, too, that one passes a spanking new Toll Motorway, the new railway link to Modiin that will extend to Jerusalem. And Jerusalem has spread out virtually halfway down towards the plain, and tower blocks rise up everywhere, and bloody McDonald's arches herald the approach to the Holy City!

The road, like the country, is constantly changing and reshaping itself, ever dynamic. Not always in a good way, of course. Only imagine the possibilities of a Middle Eastern Common Market. But coming out from stuffy, stifling Anglo-Jewry into the bright hot sunlight of Israel is to feel part of something alive.

Yes, I miss the pioneering innocence of years gone by, the mood of togetherness on the old Egged buses. Yes, I fear the potential explosiveness of the political situation. But then, when was Israel not caught up in conflict and war? Perhaps that's the way we are meant to be?

As George Bernard Shaw once said of Switzerland, "Five hundred years of peace and all they've produced is the cuckoo clock." While we—we archaic, confrontational, argumentative, neurotic Jews—we, according to our enemies, rule the world!

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