The Song that Won the War

On the eve of Yom Yerushalayim, come take a fascinating journey with me of the poet Naomi Shemer’s celebrated song, “Jerusalem of Gold,” and let’s explore the wealth of Jewish sources from which Shemer drew her inspiration.

Please keep in mind that this song was first released at the Yom HaAtzmaut celebrations that year, some three weeks before the Six-Day War, a time of great anxiety for the people living in Israel. Am Yisrael was genuinely fearful of Abdul Nasser who had closed the Straits of Tiran and threatened to wipe out Israel.

With that, when you closely examine Shemer’s lyrics, one cannot but feel that this song was prophetically inspired, drawing from Biblical sources and envisioning Jerusalem’s reunification as promised by our prophets.
I was first exposed to this educational exercise when I participated in a father-son learning session at my youngest son’s school. We were instructed to look up these sources, and identify these hints within the song. It was a very exciting educational experience. I invite you to engage in the same exercise – you’ll find it exhilarating and renew your own connection with Jerusalem. To add depth to your educational experience, I suggest that you and your child/children look up the actual sources as they appear in the footnotes.

The song contains an endearing expression of love for Israel and for Jerusalem, with a burning desire to renew the connection of the nation and its history, to Jerusalem, its capital city.

The same message is brought home in a wonderful Chassidic tale, which tells of a chassid who made aliyah to Eretz Yisrael and made his home in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, he was unable to acclimate to the difficult living conditions and decided to return to Poland. Before returning though, he went to seek a blessing from the tzaddik, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Vorka, who lived in Jerusalem.

The chassid explained to Rabbi Simcha Bunim his reasons for leaving the Land. The tzaddik sighed deeply and said, “I pity you. It seems you did not find favor in the eyes of Yerushalayim, for if you had found favor in her eyes, she would have found favor in yours.” The message found its mark, and the chassid changed his mind and remained in Yerushalayim.

Similarly, Rav Yehuda Halevi writes at the end of his epic work, HaKuzari:

*The redemption for the city will come when they desire it with a full heart and yearn for it. When that complete yearning finally comes, the Land will want the people and the stones will ask for the people to settle within them, as it is written “You will arise and have compassion on Zion (Jerusalem), for it is time to show favor to her; the appointed time has come. For your people love every stone in her walls and cherish even the dust in her streets” (Psalms 102:13-14).*

When speaking of those amazing six days 53 years ago, we sometimes get caught up in the stories of the brave soldiers. But if we ask those soldiers, they would tell us they cannot explain the military success and in retrospect, they see the war was already won before they even stepped onto the battlefield. The war was won in the hearts of the Jewish people, and the soldiers just sealed the deal.

By studying the song, the timing of its launch and its aftermath, we can really see how Yerushalayim’s unification was a result of this reciprocal relationship of love.

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1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijw5yNe1-U
2 Tehillim 126:1.
3 Eicha 1:1.
4 Nedarim 50a.
5 Yeshayahu 60:17.
6 Yeshayahu 60:1.
7 Yechezkel 26:13.
8 A verse from Rabbi Yehuda Halevi’s piyut “ציון הלא תשאלו”
9 Eicha 1:1.
10 Yirmiyahu 26:18.
11 Shir HaShirim 2:14.
12 Shabbat 88a, from Pirkei Avot.
13 Menachot 29b, from Pirkei Avot.
14 Bereishit 32:11.
15 Bereishit 25:23.
16 Divrei HaYamim 1, 15:19-25.
17 Yeshayahu 6:6-7.
18 Tehillim 137:6.
19 Nechemia 4:14.
20 Yeshayahu 54:12.

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