



Castles in the Air

When I last visited Yerushalayim's Israel Museum, pre-Corona, I was struck by the magnificent oil on canvas *Castle of the Pyrenees*, painted in 1959 by Rene Magritte, in the museum's expansive art section. It depicts a massive rock floating in the clouds above the sea, upon which rests a medieval castle. It suggests there are fantastical places within our imagination which hover somewhere between Heaven and Earth, well within our mind's eye yet just beyond our touch. Disconnected as they are from the ground, floating above the waves, these castles represent that ideal home we yearn for; that splendid, safe and serenely spiritual haven we crave yet stays elusively beyond our grasp.

Yerushalayim, for millennia, was a Castle in the Air. An idea, an ideal; a far-off, majestic vision of a perfect, Divinely-inspired society where Man and G-d sublimely meet in religious harmony and bliss. A magical utopia where war and strife are unknown, where the great faiths sing their respective psalms in perfect pitch, where humanity's potential to become "only slightly lower than the angels" is finally realized.

Long before Yerushalayim was captured by David HaMelech and the Temple constructed by his son Shlomo, the Torah tantalizingly describes it as "the place where G-d's name will reside." And after its destruction and the exile of its Jewish population, the great religions lusted after it and held it up as the

planet's greatest prize.

For 2000 years, Diaspora's Jews turned to our eternal city in prayer, and we spoke of it with heartfelt longing at the deepest and most emotionally-charged moments of our lives: wedding ceremonies, britot, the Pesach Seder and the Yom Kippur liturgy. For centuries, Yerushalayim remained a fantasy, something more surreal than real. We designated various celebrated cities in our Exile – from the Rhineland to Vilna – as "little Jerusalems," never really daring to believe that we could someday actually restore and return to the real thing.

But then a miracle occurred. We did return! We took those ancient bones of our capital and put living flesh upon them. Like the Jewish people itself, Yerushalayim rose from the ashes and emerged as a living, breathing fact of history. Our renaissance was as shocking as it was spectacular; it was particularly challenging for the other religious denominations to accept. For Christians, it was an authentic event of Resurrection; for Moslems it interrupted their march to an all-Muslim Middle East.

And in many corners of the Jewish world, the notion of Yerushalayim as a concrete reality rather than an abstract concept was equally hard to accept. The adage of "be careful what you pray for" hit us smack between those same eyes that we "lifted to Zion." How could we live up to this awesome responsibility now placed squarely on our shoulders? How could we leave our homes and our ingrained routines and start life anew? Yes, we had begged to return, but now

that our wish had been granted, were we up to the task? Had we really meant to inhabit the palace, or were we more than content to gaze at it from afar?

There were – and perhaps still are – those who asked, in self-righteous tones, "Is this truly the Yerushalayim shel zahav we sought, or is it a tarnished version? Does it stand up to our preconceived, romanticized vision of what the Holy City should be?" By focusing primarily on the politics, the police presence and the traffic, we lost sight of the kedusha that imbues every street and stone.

The truth is that in so many ways, Yerushalayim is greater than it has ever been at any point in its history. Its population is booming, and so the city is expanding in every direction, with new and beautiful neighborhoods sprouting like wildflowers. It is a magnet, a "must-see" for all the world's travelers. More people are studying Torah here today than ever before, and the prophecy of *ki miTzion teitze Torah* is being literally fulfilled as Yerushalayim energizes Jewish learning worldwide.

Of course, there is one essential element still missing: we await the crowning achievement, the rebuilding of the third and final Beit HaMikdash. Surely that is coming. After G-d has blessed us with bringing down to earth a seemingly unreachable Castle in the Air, we are closer than ever before to reuniting our eternal capital with its heart and soul.

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