

This month's study with
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



Jerusalem: God's Holy City



*Great is the LORD,
and most worthy
of praise,
in the city of our
God, his holy
mountain.
Beautiful in its
loftiness,
the joy of the
whole earth,
like the heights
of Zaphon is
Mount Zion,
the city of the
Great King.*

— Psalm 48:1–2

One of the most spectacular modern-day miracles is the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967. It marked the first time in two millennia that Jewish sovereignty returned, not just to the land of Israel, but to the city of Jerusalem. Roughly 3,000 years earlier, King David had captured the city and declared it the eternal capital of Israel. From that time onward, Jerusalem has remained a focal point for the Jews.

On the day that Jerusalem was liberated, June 7, 1967, young soldiers suddenly found themselves in front of the Western Wall, the last remaining relic of what was part of the Holy Temple. As the soldiers beheld the miracle before their eyes, the famous words were sent over radio by their commander: “The Temple Mount is in our hands.”

Observant and non-observant Jews alike all began to cry. A well-known story recalls how one traditionally observant soldier turned to his secular comrade and said, “I know why I am crying, but why are you crying?” To that the soldier responded, “I am crying because I do not know what I am supposed to be crying about.”

Jerusalem is the most sacred city on earth, chosen by God to be the site of His dwelling place in our world. Whether we know its history and significance or not, everyone feels connected to this holy city. For the Jewish people, Jerusalem remains the most important city on earth. For 2,000 years, the Jews never forgot Jerusalem. It is mentioned three times a day in prayer, and Jews are the only people in the world who face Jerusalem when praying, no matter where they might be. Every year during Passover we exclaim the hopeful words “Next year in Jerusalem.” God’s holy city was, is, and always will be the place Jews yearn for.

According to Jewish tradition, Jerusalem was the place where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice and where Jacob had his dream

about a ladder spanning heaven and earth. Jerusalem was the city where King Solomon built the Temple on land his father David had purchased from Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24:18–25). As the centre of Jewish worship as commanded in the Bible, Jerusalem was the place where the Israelites would stream on the three biblical festivals (Passover, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*) to worship God.

Jerusalem represents the golden age of the Jewish people, when we were strong militarily, economically, and most importantly, spiritually. In Psalm 48:2, Jerusalem is called “*the joy of the whole earth*.” At its height, Jerusalem was a beacon of light and a source of joy for the whole world. After the city fell and the bitter exile began, Jerusalem became a source of mourning and longing. Yet, Jerusalem has also held our hope for the future, for a time when its glory will be fully restored once again.

For Christians, Jerusalem holds great spiritual significance as well. Jesus spent time there, teaching and worshipping at the Temple. When he was a baby, Mary and Joseph presented him to the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is where Jesus made his triumphal entry, where he was crucified, where the Christian church was birthed, and where today Christian pilgrims follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Paralleling Jewish theology, Christian scriptures refer to the future kingdom as the New Jerusalem.

In this month’s *Limmud* we will learn about what that soldier in 1967 didn’t know he was crying for. We will explore the deep significance of Jerusalem and its relevance to Jews, Christians, and the entire world. Join us as we explore her secrets and anticipate her eternity.

Rabbi Eckstein
President and Founder



A City of Unity and Love

*Jerusalem – built as a city
that is bound firmly together*

— Psalm 122:3 (ESV)

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu once said, "Jerusalem is the heart of the nation. We'll never divide our heart." The depth of this statement goes far beyond the political implications. It underscores one of the key elements of the Holy City – it is a source of unity and love.

Thousands of years ago, King David called Jerusalem "*a city that is bound firmly together.*" The Jewish sages explained that this description is not about the physical structure of the city, but about the nature of its inhabitants. From its beginning, Jerusalem was intended to be a city that connects people and brings strangers together.

Today, one can literally witness this apt description. Jews from all four corners of the world have come home to Jerusalem to form one nation. Others, Jewish and Christian, come from around the globe on pilgrimages to Jerusalem and find that they leave different than they were before. Christians encounter the Jewish people and their roots in a way not possible anywhere else in the world. For Jews, thousands of years of history and exile come together in one great story.

Moreover, more than three million people of different faiths make their way to Jerusalem each year where they sing and pray – in different languages, in different ways, but bound together by their love for God. In Jerusalem, strangers become friends, different types of people find common ground, and deep connections are made between individuals who might otherwise have never met.

In ancient times people connected in Jerusalem for a very practical reason: Three times a year, on the appointed festivals of *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (the Festival of Weeks), and *Sukkot* (the Festival of Tabernacles), the Israelites would make their pilgrimages to Jerusalem as instructed by the Bible. That meant that three times a year Jerusalem was the place where people could see each other, reconnect, or meet for the first time. Jerusalem united the people while enabling them to bond with God.

Interestingly, according to Jewish tradition, there were

no signs to Jerusalem in Temple times. While it was common for signs to be placed leading to other cities, Jerusalem was intentionally left unmarked. This was done so that one had to ask directions from strangers, leading to conversation and connection between people. Moreover, the sages teach that in spite of the entire

country converging on one city, there was never a shortage of lodging. This was because of the incredible hospitality offered by the people of Jerusalem.

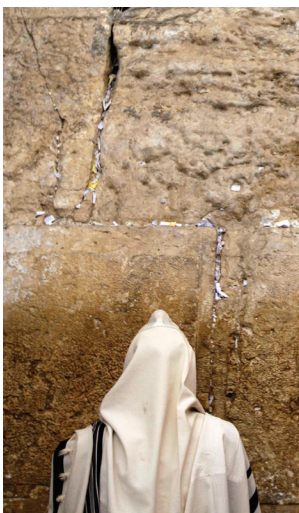
Christians will find it meaningful that Jesus and his family travelled to Jerusalem for these festivals as well. In fact, it was when they had travelled to the Temple for Passover that Mary and Joseph inadvertently left him behind. They were an entire day's journey back toward home before they realized the then-12-year-old Jesus wasn't with them. After returning to Jerusalem and searching for three days, they eventually found Jesus in the Temple, listening to the teaching of the rabbis and asking them questions.

Likewise, at Pentecost, the Christian Bible (Acts 2:5) says, "*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.*" It was during this gathering that God's spirit descended on Jesus' followers and the Christian church was born.

Jerusalem was a place to gather, learn, and exchange ideas. Thankfully, it still is. Today you can find Jews and Christians alike on spiritual pilgrimage, moved by the place where their spiritual forefathers trod, where events from the Bible unfolded, and where the Western Wall – the only remaining structure of the Holy Temple – offers sacred ground to gather for prayer.

Even during the exile, Jerusalem continued to serve as a unifying factor for the Jewish people. While Jews were scattered around the world, our hearts united around Jerusalem – which we prayed for, longed for, and pledged never to forget. Today, Jews and Christians alike believe that people of faith will be gathered to Jerusalem in the last days, united in this city by our love for God and our joy as the messianic era begins.

Past and present, Jerusalem has always been the heart of the nation of Israel, bringing about love and fostering unity. This is our strength, and Jerusalem is its source.





Where Heaven Meets Earth

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

— Genesis 28:16–17

Since the beginning of time, Jerusalem has been the meeting place of heaven and earth. Jewish tradition teaches that Creation began in Jerusalem and that Adam was created from the dust of the earth in Jerusalem. It was the place where Abraham took his son Isaac to be sacrificed. David later purchased that same site to build an altar to God. Eventually David’s land would later become the Temple Mount, and the Temple would officially serve as the connection between God and man for nearly 1,000 years.

Jerusalem is like no other city in the world. According to the Bible, there are many commandments that could only be fulfilled within the walls of God’s city. The special status of Jerusalem was derived from the Holy Temple. And yet, the holiness of Jerusalem existed before the construction of the Temple and remains after its destruction. This is why thousands of years after the destruction of the Temple, all Jews face Jerusalem when they pray.

The Patriarch Jacob expressed it best after he awoke from his famous dream of a ladder that spanned heaven and earth. Upon awakening, Jacob exclaimed: *“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven”* (Genesis 28:17).

The sages explain that Jacob had fallen asleep in the place where Jerusalem one day would be built, specifically, at the very location where the world began and the Temple would stand. He had stumbled upon the very *“gate of heaven.”*

Under the leadership of Moses, the people were first instructed to build a sanctuary in which God would dwell (Exodus 25:8), but this structure (the tabernacle, a moveable tent) would only be temporary. The ultimate plan was to build a permanent structure in a place that God would choose. The chosen place was revealed to King David as Mount Moriah in Jerusalem and the Temple was built by his son King Solomon.

Solomon prayed these words at the Temple dedication ceremony: *“May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, ‘My Name shall be there,’ so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place”* (2 Chronicles 6:20). To this very day, Judaism maintains that all prayers ascend to heaven through Jerusalem. Similarly, all blessings pass through Jerusalem to the rest of the world.

In the messianic era, the third and final Temple is prophesied to be built in Jerusalem. In the extensive vision of the new Temple given to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 40–48), which

includes detailed descriptions of the restoration of the Temple, the altar, the priesthood, and the land of Israel, he is told that the name of the new city from then on will be *“the LORD is there.”*

Isaiah 56:7 tells us it will be *“a house of prayer for all nations”* and the direct connection between heaven and earth will be established once again. Jewish people long for this day. In the *Amidah* prayer, which observant Jews pray three times daily, they ask God to rebuild Jerusalem and to restore the Temple worship.

Many Christians also believe the Third Temple will either precede or coincide with the arrival of the Messiah. The Christian Scriptures, specifically the book of Revelation, contain a description of the end times, including more than one mention of *“the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God”* (Revelation 3:12).

Based on the prophecies in Ezekiel 44, many also believe the Messiah will enter through the Eastern Gate, also known as the “Golden Gate.” One of 11 gates into the city, it is believed to be the one Jesus entered during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Think About It

1. Read 1 Chronicles 15:11–28, 1 Kings 8:1–13, Isaiah 31:5, and Psalm 132:13–18. What do these verses tell you about God’s attitudes and intent for Jerusalem?
2. Read Psalm 122 and 137. What else do you learn about Jerusalem and its significance from these passages?
3. Read Genesis 14:17–24, Jeremiah 22:3, Matthew 25:35, and Hebrews 13:2. How do these verses shape your attitude toward strangers?
4. Read Luke 2:41–45, Mark 11:15–17, Matthew 21:1–10, and Acts 2:1–15. How do these events that transpired in Jerusalem lend it significance for Christians?
5. Everyone has their own “Jerusalem,” their own ideal of peace and wholeness. What is your “Jerusalem”? What steps can you take toward this place of wholeness?
6. In what ways have your impressions of Jerusalem changed after this study. What actions can you take in light of this new knowledge?



Customs and Rituals Observed Today

*If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy. — Psalm 137:5–6*

Today, since the destruction of the Temple, most customs associated with Jerusalem revolve around remembering and praying for God’s Holy City. As the psalmist wrote: *“If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.”*

After the Temples were destroyed, a major concern was that the Jewish people would forget that they ever existed. There was speculation that Jews would stop praying for and yearning for their return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. In order to keep the Jewish people focused on their homeland and true destiny as long as the exile might last, a number of customs were instituted.

For example, many Jews leave a portion of our homes unfinished or decorated with Jerusalem-themed artwork to indicate that we are not complete until Jerusalem is restored. Jerusalem is a main theme in Jewish prayer, and we pray for our return to Jerusalem three times each day. In addition we constantly *“pray for the peace of Jerusalem”* (Psalm 122:6) in our daily prayers and on special occasions. Upon seeing Jerusalem for the first time, many tear clothing as a sign of mourning.

The most intense Jewish ritual in remembrance of Jerusalem is the observance of *Tisha B’Av*, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of *Av*, on which both Temples were destroyed hundreds of years apart. Mourning extends to the three weeks preceding the 9th of *Av* when a siege was formed against the city. This time period of mourning begins and ends with days of fasting, and we observe other Jewish mourning customs in the time between.

Other customs practiced today are not associated with mourning, but rather celebrating and honouring Jerusalem. These include a preference to be buried in Jerusalem even if the deceased never lived in Israel. Moreover, Jews never stopped praying toward Jerusalem and in Jerusalem, toward the Temple Mount, in recognition of its special status.

Today, after Jerusalem was reunited in 1967, we have additional customs. Since we now have access to Jerusalem and the Western Wall, on the three pilgrim holidays of *Passover*, *Shavuot*, and *Sukkot*, thousands gather at the Western Wall to receive the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24–26). In addition, the rabbis officially instituted a minor holiday for our modern times, *Jerusalem Day*, which is observed on the anniversary of the city’s liberation and

reunification under Jewish rule, celebrated with special prayers, parades of thanksgiving, and songs of praise.

Motivated by Psalm 122:6, *“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem,”* many Christians regularly lift the Holy City in prayer, and some even participate in groups that meet regularly to ask God to protect the Holy City and the Jewish State. Others read Isaiah 49:22, *“Thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold I will lift up mine hand to the Gentiles, and set up my standard to the people: and they shall bring thy sons in their arms, and thy daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders”* (KJV), and are motivated to support the *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) of Jewish people living in other countries, especially those Jews experiencing the growing tide of anti-Semitism.

The Fellowship provides an avenue for Christians wishing to support the root from which their Christian branches have grown (Romans 11:11–24). For more information on *The Fellowship’s* programs, visit our website at ifcj.ca.

Apply It

- 1. JOURNEY TOWARD GOD.** Just as the ancient Israelites made a special pilgrimage to bond with God, consider how you, too, can strengthen your bond with God by going on a personal retreat or visiting a unique place of worship.
- 2. CONNECT WITH STRANGERS.** One of the special qualities of Jerusalem is bringing people from all countries, cultures, and religions together. Make it a point to befriend someone who is different from you and learn from them.
- 3. REMEMBER JERUSALEM.** Incorporate ways that you can remember Jerusalem throughout the day.
- 4. PRAY FOR THE PEACE OF JERUSALEM.** Voice your prayer for Jerusalem and the Jewish people by calling our prayer hotline at 888-241-IFCJ (4325). Or join *The Fellowship* prayer team at ifcj.ca/pray.