CITY of the GREAT KING

Jerusalem from David to the Present

Edited by NITZA ROsovsky
The Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE brought to an end the city’s reign as the center of the Jewish world. No longer would the biblical commandment to assemble in the city three times a year be observed or sacrifices be offered there. No longer would pilgrims arrive from all over the world bringing the half-shekel tax to the Temple or benefit from the wisdom of the city’s sages. For long periods Jews would be prevented from visiting, much less settling in, Jerusalem. Even when a Jewish community was re-established in the city, it would generally remain secondary to other such communities in Eretz Israel—Tiberias, Acre, or Safed. The country itself, in turn, became secondary to the major communities of the Diaspora—Babylonia, Egypt, Spain, and northern Europe. Nonetheless, Jerusalem always remained at the crossroads of the major trends in Jewish history. It never lost its sacred and secular importance.

For Jews, pilgrimage meant travel to the Holy Land for religious reasons. Some stayed for a short visit, others permanently. After the destruction of the Temple, no rabbinic law ever established a commandment to visit Jerusalem or Eretz Israel, and while some rabbinic authorities encouraged pilgrimage, others mistrusted the motive and value of travel. The main question had been whether Jews were required to settle in Eretz Israel, since many commandments can only be performed there, and in rabbinic Judaism it was the opportunity to observe those commandments which represented the acceptable rationale for aliyah—the term for “going up” to live there. The Tannaim of the Mishnah issued laws to prevent Jews from leaving the
country but did not require Diaspora Jews to settle there. Even Maimonides, the medieval codifier of Jewish law, did not include settlement in Eretz Israel in his list of 613 commandments. Nachmanides, in thirteenth-century Spain, was the first codifier to do so, but the question of aliya continued to be debated through the centuries, and the battle among rabbinic authorities is still being fought.¹

Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem, although often interrupted, never ceased. It changed significantly over time, reflecting developments in Jewish social and religious life. A major factor influencing pilgrimage was the existence and nature of a permanent Jewish community in Jerusalem, and that depended on the rulers of the city—Rome and Byzantium, the early Muslims, the Crusaders, Mamluks, and the Ottomans.

Under Rome and Byzantium (70–638)

After the destruction of Jerusalem, Yavneh became the nation’s spiritual center, and the history of the Jewish community in Jerusalem came to a halt. Yet Jews did not lose hope of regaining control over the city and rebuilding the Temple. In the second, fourth, and probably the seventh century as well, they tried to re-establish ritual sacrifice in Jerusalem (and perhaps even succeeded), although these attempts were little more than short-lived aberrations in the course of history.

Since there was as yet no ban on Jewish presence in the city, and there is some evidence that a small permanent settlement existed there as well, we may assume that pilgrimage continued between 70 and the Bar Kochba revolt (132–135), but records are scarce.² The futile revolt claimed an enormous number of dead and captives and was followed by severe restrictions imposed by Rome. Emperor Hadrian built a new Roman city over the ruins of Jerusalem and forbade Jews to enter it. He changed the name of the city to Aelia Capitolina, and the name of the province to Syria-Palestina.³ The center of Jewish life gradually shifted to the Galilee and the city Tiberias, and there would be no permanent Jewish community in Jerusalem for 500 years. Although few records exist of Jews visiting the city between the Bar Kochba revolt and the fourth century, they benefited from a de facto easing of Hadrian’s edicts in the latter part of the third century.⁴

After Constantine recognized the Christian religion, his mother,
Helena, came to Jerusalem in 324 and began the construction of churches in an effort to christianize the Holy City and the Holy Land. The position of the Jews then worsened. Until Helena’s intrusions, Judaism’s battles with pagan Rome—which accepted the existence of many religions—were political. The battles with the Church—which saw itself as the “true” Israel—were religious. Constantine enacted many anti-Jewish decrees, among them the renewal of the ban against pilgrimage to Jerusalem, except on the Ninth of Ab, when Jews were permitted to mourn the loss of the city on the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple—an annual testimony to the triumph of the Church. In 333, as the Bordeaux Pilgrim reported, not far from the statues of Hadrian—that is, on the Temple Mount—“there is a perforated stone, to which the Jews come every year and anoint it, bewail themselves with groans, rend their garments, and so depart.”

Constantine’s laws remained in place for the balance of the Byzantine era, with a short-lived respite during the reign of Emperor Julian (360–363), who opposed Christianity and sought to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Jews were admitted back into the city and even established a synagogue near the site of the Temple. They may even have begun the construction of a temple, but an earthquake on May 27, 363 (some sources cite a suspicious fire), destroyed the building materials; all hope disappeared when Julian was killed shortly thereafter.

Jewish pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the Roman and Byzantine eras was an individual act, although Jews may have occasionally gathered there in numbers. While there is no detailed description of the pilgrimage in Jewish sources, it was essentially a looking backward to the past, mourning the loss of the Temple. There are references in the Palestinian Talmud, compiled in the second half of the fourth century, and in the Babylonian Talmud, compiled one hundred years later, regarding pilgrimages to Jerusalem, about how many times one should rend one’s garment—a sign of mourning—and pray on seeing the different levels of destruction of Judea, Jerusalem, and the Temple.

The Early Arab Period (638–1099)

Soon after Jerusalem fell to the Muslims, the site of the Temple Mount was cleaned, apparently by the order of Caliph Umar. Jews were said
to be involved in the project, and, according to tenth-century Jewish sources, Umar allowed seventy Jewish families to settle in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter the talmudic academy moved from Tiberias, and it became known as the Jerusalem Yeshivah or the Great Council. It was composed of learned men who made decisions regarding law, religious beliefs, and rituals such as the annual calendar and synagogue liturgy. Yet the Jerusalem community could not wrest away from the Babylonians the leadership role for world Jewry. Several waves of aliya occurred during the Early Arab period, frequently motivated by economic and political hardships in other lands, rather than by faith.

In the first half of the ninth century, Karaites began to arrive in Jerusalem. A Jewish sect which developed in Persia in the eighth century, the Karaites posed a serious challenge to rabbinic Judaism during the Middle Ages as they rejected the Talmud and its interpretations of the Torah. They identified themselves with the Mourners of Zion—a group which existed in Jerusalem between the seventh and eleventh century—and took on many of their ascetic practices, such as mourning the destruction of the city, fasting and praying, and refraining from eating meat and drinking wine while anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. The Karaites frequently appealed to their brethren in the Diaspora to come and join them. One of their leaders, Daniel al-Kumisi, called for at least five men from every city to come to Jerusalem, and the tenth-century missionary Saul ben Masliyah invoked the language of Jeremiah to call for “one from every city and two from a family” to return to Zion. The Karaites established a new quarter outside the city wall, apart from the ongoing community of the Rabbanite Jews. Karaite students from Byzantium would come to study at the Bakhtawi academy in Jerusalem, and their stay in the city would strengthen the Karaite center there and train scholars who would assume positions of leadership upon their return to their communities. The correspondence of Tobias ben Moses, a Karaite of Constantinople, reflects the life of one who came to Jerusalem in the mid-eleventh century to study Karaite law, biblical exegesis, and philosophy, and who may have stayed for as long as a decade among the Mourners of Zion.

There is ample evidence of pilgrimages to Jerusalem made by Jews from many countries during the Early Arab period, even though the journey was hazardous—whether by land or by sea. Pilgrims arrived for the annual assembly which took place on the seventh day of the
Feast of Tabernacles, Hoshanah Rabah, when a procession would go through the city, around the gates of the Temple Mount, and up the Mount of Olives. The pilgrims circled the Mount of Olives seven times, in song and prayer, centering around a stone from which the Divine Presence is supposed to have ascended to heaven. The assembly was conducted by the Jerusalem Yeshivah as an exercise of communal authority and leadership. In a sense the assembly was a re-enactment of Temple rituals, including a special role for the priests. Jews paid the rulers handsomely for the privilege of holding the assembly on the Mount of Olives.

The assembly was a joyous assertion of community and of living in the present, different from past rituals which centered around mourning the destruction of the city, and also from the eschatological nature of future pilgrimage rituals. The many “fellows of the Academy” from Syria, Egypt, and other Mediterranean lands arrived in Jerusalem early, to decide on religious and communal issues. Ibn Daud writes in Sefer ha-Qabbalah that “when the Jews used to celebrate at the Festival of Tabernacles on the Mount of Olives, they would encamp on the mountain in groups and greet each other warmly.” The head of the Yeshivah would announce the fixing of the festival calendar for the coming year, appoint new members to the religious courts, and bestow honors upon those who had contributed to the Yeshivah. Ibn Daud continues: “The heretics would encamp before them like little flocks of goats. Then the rabbis would take out a scroll of the Torah and pronounce a ban on the heretics right in their faces, while the latter remained silent like dumb dogs.” The “heretics” were the Karaites with whom the Rabbanites continued to feud. Both communities enjoyed a special status in the eyes of their brethren in the Diaspora because of the virtue attached to living in the city, even though they were poor and often had to appeal to the Diaspora for support.

After the 970 Fatimid conquest, Jerusalem and the rest of the country entered a period of slow decline brought on by the upheavals which recurred during the tumultuous eleventh century. The Jews of Fustat in Egypt, the seat of government, assumed the role of leadership in the area which lasted until the sixteenth century. The last evidence of the annual Hoshanah Rabah pilgrimage is from 1062, by which time it had lost much of its relevance as a religious and political
event, and as a mode of pilgrimage. The Yeshivah moved to Tyre in 1073, as did many of the Rabbanites, leaving behind a Jewish Jerusalem that was just a shell of its former self. Indeed, in 1081 the Hoshanah Rabah assembly was held in Tyre.23

The Crusader and Mamluk Periods (1099–1517)

On Friday, July 15, 1099, the victorious Crusaders massacred the Muslim and Jewish population of Jerusalem. Many Jews were burnt in their synagogue, while others were sold into slavery.24 As in Byzantine times, Jews were forbidden to live in the Holy City, although it appears that they were allowed once again to mourn the destruction of the city on the Ninth of Ab, perhaps to satisfy Christian triumphalism. Unlike the Rabbanites, most Karaites, who emphasized the importance of living in Jerusalem, had not left the city in the 1070s and were there until the Crusaders’ arrival. A document from the Genizah records the redemption of 300 Karite holy books from the hands of the Crusaders.25 An inscription found on a Karite Torah scroll mentions that holy Karite books were redeemed in Jerusalem on the tenth of Ab in the year 1095, so it is possible that the Karaites had been allowed back into the city to observe the day of mourning there.26

One consequence of the Crusaders’ rule was the discontinuation of easy access to Eretz Israel by Jews who lived in countries under Islam, and, at the same time, better maritime connections for Jews in European countries. Pilgrims began to arrive from the lands of the Crusaders—France, Spain, and Germany. For some the goal was pilgrimage to Eretz Israel alone, while others combined it with travel to other lands. Since Jews were not allowed to live in Jerusalem, Acre, the flourishing Crusader port with its small community of Jewish merchants, became their main stop.

While pilgrims visited tombs of sages throughout the country, the main purpose of pilgrimage was to pray in Jerusalem. But, in the absence of a Jewish community there, compact itineraries were established which individuals could follow in a short time. As in earlier days, upon seeing the “ruined city” pilgrims rent their garments and said special prayers for the city and for the destroyed Temple, pleading that both be rebuilt. Prayers were apparently said near one of the Temple Mount’s gates, or on the Mount of Olives.27
Pilgrims’ accounts contribute to our knowledge about life under the Crusaders. One distinguished pilgrim was Maimonides, in 1165, who stayed in Acre for five months, and in Jerusalem for five days only. Two other travelers in the second half of the twelfth century left detailed accounts: Benjamin of Tudela and Petahiah of Regensburg. Benjamin recorded that only four Jews lived in Jerusalem, and they were dyers, a Jewish craft. A decade later Petahiah noted only one dyer.28

After Saladin’s victory over the Crusaders in 1187, Jews were again permitted, in fact encouraged, to settle in Jerusalem, as reported by Yehuda al-Harizi, a pilgrim from Spain who stayed in the city for a month in 1218. In Sefer Tahkemoni, written in rhyming prose, he expressed the ambivalence of the pilgrim: the joy experienced upon reaching the goal of Zion and the mourning evoked by its destruction.29 Al-Harizi also mentioned a group of French Jews who settled in Jerusalem. This is the earliest known case of a group of scholars following their teacher with the goal of settling in the Holy Land.30

In the first half of the thirteenth century, several other groups arrived from France, when life for Jews there became nearly impossible; other Jews came from Europe, Yemen, and North Africa.

The clash between giants—between Islam and Christianity—focused the world’s attention on the Holy Land, wrote Joshua Prawer. Jews saw a deeper, hidden meaning in the destruction of the land, believing that no one could settle there except Jews, and that brought a surge of pilgrims and settlers after the Crusaders were defeated.31

One of the events which influenced pilgrimage during the thirteenth century was the return of Jerusalem to the Crusaders, from 1229 to 1244, followed by a renewed ban on Jews’ entering the city.32 Another was the invasion of the country by Mongol hordes in 1260, which caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to flee the city. When Nachmanides—the Spanish codifier of Jewish law who included settlement of Eretz Israel as one of the 613 commandments—arrived in 1267, he visited Jerusalem and found only 2,000 people in it, including 300 Christians and 2 Jewish dyers. Nachmanides helped the dyers establish a synagogue in the city, to which pilgrims from Damascus and other places in the East would come as well. He left Jerusalem after about one month and settled in Acre.33

In the thirteenth century there was a re-evaluation of religious laws
concerning living in Eretz Israel, since more people were settling there, not waiting for the arrival of the Messiah. In midcentury, for example, the Maharam of Rutenberg ruled that a wife must accompany a husband going to settle permanently in Eretz Israel, while a wife of someone just planning to visit could refuse to accompany her husband without defaulting on her obligations under the marriage contract. The rabbinic concept of an ideal pilgrim was of a mature scholar who would go to Eretz Israel to settle with his family and his wealth (since the country was poor and it was difficult to make a living there), and lead a life of learning. This ideal was the opposite of the spiritualist view of pilgrimage for the sake of penance, which involved poverty and asceticism—a view related to trends of pietism among Jews and to the mendicant spiritualists in Europe. In general, Western aliyah in the Mamluk period was essentially elitist, as those who came were mostly scholars and intellectuals. The end of Crusader rule also meant that fewer ships arrived from Europe, making it harder for Western Jews to make a pilgrimage.

A different pattern was common among Jews from Muslim lands during the Mamluk era, a pattern known as 

ziyara, an Arabic word used to describe visits to holy shrines. It was a communal pattern with roots in popular religion, and perhaps folklore, but nonetheless one in which all levels of Eastern Jewish society participated. They would come to holy sites—mostly tombs of sages—at particular times, usually on one of the three festivals when pilgrimages had been performed while the Temple stood. At first, sources describe pilgrimages to Jerusalem during the Feast of the Tabernacles, as in the earlier Muslim era; but in the fifteenth century, Passover and Pentecost appeared as the time of the 

ziyara, influenced perhaps by Christians from the East and by Muslim pilgrims coming in the spring to celebrate Easter and the Feast of Nebi Musa, the “Prophet Moses.” In the fifteenth century, the 

ziyara involved a circuit which included Meron, the site of the tombs of the Tannaim Hillel and Shammai, and Ramah, where the Prophet Samuel is said to be buried. It culminated in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. (The 

ziyara had a later European version among the Hasidim of Eastern Europe, and may be said to continue in the Lag ba-Omer celebrations at Meron in our time.)

In contrast, the Western pattern of pilgrimage to Jerusalem was not based on participation in communal events at specific sites at

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appointed times. Even when the Western pilgrim traveled as part of a group, the experience was an individual one, not tied to any date or season. The ritual did not look to the past, to invoke the power of an ancient sage or saint, but toward the ultimate messianic future. This future was to be represented by the rebuilt Temple, the return of the Divine Presence, and the re-establishment of Jewish sovereignty. In the thirteenth century we find the first mention of the tombs of David and Solomon as part of the pilgrim’s path.37

Under the Mamluks, many Islamic schools and other religious institutions were built in Jerusalem, and in an increasingly orthodox atmosphere Jews were frequently harassed. Yet in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, several waves of refugees from Europe came there...
nevertheless: Jews from Germany arrived in 1349 as a result of the Black Plague, followed by Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, escaping the harsh measures issued in Spain in 1391, followed by the Expulsion in 1492 and the forced conversions in Portugal in 1497. The European Jews were not always accepted by the local Jews, who were known as Musta'arbs—non-Arabs who took on the language and manners of the Arabs. Jews from Germany complained that the local Jerusalem Jews were “wicked” and bothered the Western Jews, who were pious and “kept the Torah.” On the other hand, the local Jews were suspicious of the arrivals from Spain, some of whom had been forced to live as Christians prior to the Expulsion. The elders of the Musta'arbs, who represented the Jewish community to the Mamluk authorities and were responsible for collecting taxes, were often blamed for making life miserable for other Jews living in Jerusalem. Rabbi Ovadiah of Bertinoro (Italy), for example, who immigrated to Jerusalem in 1488, stated that out of the 4,000 families in Jerusalem, only 70 were Jewish, down from 300, because of the high taxes and the high-handedness of the elders. By 1521, four years after the Turks conquered Jerusalem, Moshe Basola, an Italian Jew, reported that of the 300 Jewish families in the city, Spanish Jews were the majority—as a result of the Expulsion; only 15 families were Ashkenazim, or Western Jews, and the rest were local and North African Jews. He also noted that many widows lived in Jerusalem.

The Spanish exiles brought with them mysticism and messianism. Safed, which enjoyed better economic conditions than Jerusalem, emerged as the center of kabbalistic study, led by Rabbi Moses Cordovero and Rabbi Isaac Luria. (Gershom Scholem has described the Lurianic Kabbalah of Safed as the last great religious trend in Judaism to spread throughout the entire Jewish world.)

Pilgrimage was thus overshadowed as the primary motivation for Jews going to Eretz Israel, and Jerusalem was overshadowed as the primary destination. The primary motivation had become to escape from persecution. Both the refugees and those drawn to the Kabbalah went to the Galilee, and especially to Safed.

As we have seen, the forms of Jewish pilgrimage changed over time, reflecting trends in Jewish life and depending on the existence and
nature of the permanent community in the Holy City. Pilgrimages could be individual or communal, elitist or popular, within the religious mainstream or outside it. Until the Enlightenment and the emergence of Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century, there was no trend in Jewish religious life that bypassed Jerusalem, or its pilgrims.

Jewish pilgrimage has been influenced by Christian and Muslim forms of pilgrimage, but it differs from them in a very fundamental way. The Christian pilgrim to Jerusalem seeks to retrace the final footsteps of Jesus, formalized as the stations of the Cross. The Muslim on the Hajj reenacts the historical journey of the Prophet to Mecca. Jewish pilgrimage is not tied to historical events, nor does the pilgrim follow a set path. Instead, the pilgrim looks back at the remains of the past in order to strengthen his faith in the redemption to come. From the Temple Mount he goes across the Valley of Jehoshaphat to the Mount of Olives, a symbol of eschatological import both for individual resurrection and national rebirth. The Jewish pilgrim ultimately believes in the words written by Nachmanides to his son in 1267, that “he who merits to see Jerusalem in her ruins will merit to see her rebuilt and repaired when the Divine Presence returns to her.”

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THE HEAVENLY CITY