

The Old City of Jerusalem As An International Museum

By Seymour Melman

Until now no proposed agreement has carried the promise of resolving Israeli and Palestinian nationalist/religious claims to disputed territories. The city of Jerusalem, and the Old City in particular, affords a demonstration of competing and unresolvable claims for sovereignty. Christian claims have been limited to well-marked sites referring to the birth, life and death of Jesus. Jewish claims in Jerusalem have focused on the Western Wall identified as part of a Temple and Temple Mount built by Solomon. Moslem tradition identifies the top of the Temple Mount as the site of Mohammed's departure from the earth to heaven.

Now, in the 21st century, Jewish and Moslem religious traditions play a key role in the political-nationalist struggle for sovereignty, strongly fueled by latter day religious Fundamentalists of both the Israeli and Palestinian camps. Apart from secular considerations - political, cultural, historical - the Moslem/Jewish Fundamentalist claims for exclusive control over inseparable sites (the Western Wall is not separable from the Temple Mount) frustrate attempts to define boundaries of separate political sovereignties, Israeli and Palestinian. That inability has left the religious Fundamentalists of both camps no recourse but to declare "superior" claims for exclusive control in each case.

At Beit El (literally "God's House"), a settlement-in-the-making near Ramallah, one of the settlers is fully aware of the Book of Genesis' account describing Jacob's dream of an angel's ladder to heaven at that very site, with God saying: "The land on which thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed." On this same site, so identified, the Fundamentalist settler states his claim: "This place we took from nobody. This was our land. Here was Jacob's ladder. How can we take from somebody something that was already ours?"

But large populations of Israelis and Palestinians are not in the Fundamentalist's camps. The non-Fundamentalists are the people to whom I address the following proposal.

I propose a formal change in the sovereignty over the Old City of Jerusalem. For the Old City is an embodiment of major and diverse religious, cultural, historic and political histories and aspirations, a target for unresolvable competing claims of sovereignty, and a prime focus for diverse ambitions of exclusivity. Control over the Old City of Jerusalem, bounded by the Ancient Wall, must be transformed in a way that guarantees access to the cultural and religious sites for all people.

To achieve that result, I propose that the Old City be declared an International Museum, administered under a United Nations Charter. That Charter must provide for a rotating group of, say seven, International Trustees, designated by the United Nations General Assembly, each serving five-year terms. Three of the seven Trustees must be drawn from Israeli, Palestinian and Christian communities.

The Trustee group will set the rules of internal administration for the Museum. Administrative costs for the Museum will come from taxes on the income of individuals and organizations quartered within the Old City. Titles to land or facilities may only be transferred, with the Trustees' approval, to other people of the community of the title holder. The administrative arm of the Trustees will be responsible for providing power, water, waste disposal, public safety, public health facilities, and for ensuring public access to and from the facilities of the Museum area.

By these essential means I propose that the Old City of Jerusalem be taken out of political play. An international charter, assuring equal access of all to the Old City, would signal the possibility of fresh initiatives for peaceful co-existence in Israel/Palestine.

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