Beyond the Wall: Writing Conflict and History in Jerusalem

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Simultaneously a physical manifestation of a bitter ethno-national conflict and one of its powerful motivating forces, Jerusalem has understandably become a prime object of inquiry, offering a rich arena of analysis for scholars across the social sciences. Yet, writing the socio-political history of a city presents several methodological and conceptual challenges: To what extent is the city a contained unit of analysis? What is its relation to broader national and international geopolitics? How do millennia of violence and conflict shape the physical and cultural face of the city? Importantly, can scholars present rigorous accounts of critical historical chapters and geopolitical dynamics, without losing sight of the unspectacular places and unglamorous people who make up the city?

For centuries and more, the place called Jerusalem was razed, pillaged and ruined: The Book of Lamentations, begins with the dirge, “Oh how doth the city sit solitary, she that was full of people,” and over the course of the two-and-a-half millennia that followed, there was no lack of occasion for reading the text as if it were meant to describe the day’s events. Jerusalem has been conquered and conquered again, and was often ravaged in the process. These repeated conquests took their toll: In 1260, the population of Jerusalem, even then the most famous place/idea in the world, was fewer than 2,000. By the beginning of the 19th century, the population had climbed to about 10,000, most living in squalor. Jerusalem the place was, in sad fact, a slum.

But for millennia, there are actually two Jerusalems, not one. There’s *yerushalayim shel mala*, the celestial Jerusalem, an ideal city surrounded by a divine halo and whose streets are lined with gold. And then there’s *yerushalayim shel mata,* the earthly Jerusalem. In his epic novel *Just Yesterday*, the Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon described Jerusalem as a place where the sun burns like fire and the garbage stinks and sadness envelopes the city and at every corner there is either garbage and filth or a beard and earlocks.

For a long while, the challenge of Jerusalem was how to bring these two visions into closer touch with each other. A law instituted by the British during the period of their mandate for Palestine (1920-48) illustrates a material effort to wed the ideal city with the concrete urban space: All new construction in Jerusalem had to be fashioned of Jerusalem stone, the familiar stone of the hillsides. Jerusalem was meant to look as if it had grown organically out of the hills rather than having been built by sweating labourers.

In his highly ambitious *Jerusalem – The Biography,* Simon Sebag Montefiore recognises that Jerusalem is a place of just such contradictions. It is "the Holy City, yet it has always been a den of superstition, charlatanism and bigotry; the desire and prize of empires, yet of no strategic value; the cosmopolitan home of many sects, each of which believes the city belongs to them alone; a city of many names – yet each tradition is so sectarian it excludes any other." For all that, though, he claims that Jerusalem remains "the centre of the world" and a place that "seems to live more intensely than anywhere else."

Montefiore brings a historian's curiosity and a gift for storytelling to the impossible task of telling a 3,000 year history. He privileges clear plots and interesting characters over historical argument, a choice the general reader will appreciate. It's only when you pay attention to the copious and eclectic footnotes that you realise how much more complex the story really is.

Montefiore, the author of two books on Stalin and another on Prince Potemkin, has an eye for the salacious detail and he spreads these liberally through the narrative but devotes particular attention to them in the footnotes. He happily shares reports of sexual proclivities and open marriages, as well as ample details of the gruesome violence that has been a hallmark of Jerusalem throughout its history: Roman soldiers crucifying 500 Jews a day in the run-up to the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70; Alexander Jannaeus, a much-loathed Jewish king of the first century B.C., after slaughtering 50,000 of his own people, celebrates his victory "by cavorting with his concubines at a feast while watching 800 rebels being crucified around the hills." And when the Crusades eliminated much of the population of the city, you could always dash across the Jordan, like Baldwin the crusader king in 1115, and bring back "poverty-stricken Syrian and Armenian Christians, whom he invited to settle in Jerusalem, ancestors of today's Palestinian Christians." Montefiore is well aware of Jerusalem's dualities and is not put off by its Apocalyptic air. Disasters, he knows, make great reads.

But simultaneously, this urban biography – an allusion to the city as a living being that breaths, possesses agency and can be wounded and bled – makes a laudable attempt to present a historical chronology through "the lives of men and women – soldiers and prophets, poets and kings, peasants and musicians – and the families who made Jerusalem". Yet what Walter Benjamin called 'small histories' rarely result in epic tales or engrossing reads. Montefiore's book, as one critic rightly noted, is not an account of daily life or humble devotions. It's a little like learning about the American West by watching a John Wayne movie: everyone is a gunslinger or a sheriff with nameless extras diving under the bar when trouble starts.

With much less fanfare, and little chance of making the New York Times Bestsellers List, Hillel Cohen's*The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem* truly lives up to the promise of an intimate history. As the book title suggests, this is a history of a political failure foretold. The book provides rare insights into the machinations of Arab-Palestinian politics in the city, the labyrinth of conflicting agendas, personalities and forces that have shaped Jerusalem from the early 20th century to the present. Though the Palestinian social, political and economic "aristocracy" – the Nashashibis, Khalidis, Husseinis and Nusseibehs – is far from absent, Cohen's book is exceptional for bringing to the fore those who would otherwise be condemned to historical oblivion.

As Cohen compellingly illustrates, Bassam Mashahare, a Palestinian man from the southern Jerusalem neighbourhood of Jabel Mukabber and an employee of the Egged bus company in West Jerusalem when the second Palestinian intifada broke out in October 2000, is just as worthy of the historian's attention than the (in)famous Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Husseini. Mashahare was one of the first Palestinian residents of Jerusalem to initiate military activity against Israel once the Intifada broke out. Cohen paints meticulously intimate portrait of Mashahare, from his primary school education to a visit to Jordan in 1995 during which "he amused himself with his relative's hunting rifle and tried hunting rabbits." Cohen weaves the formation of a small and actually unsuccessful militant cell of Jerusalem Palestinians to more familiar chapters of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the fate of Palestinian political action in the city. In a 2007 interview with Saed Kashua, a Palestinian citizen of Israel's whose sarcastic musings about the realities of Israeli-Arab split identity are a compulsory reading for anyone interested in Jerusalem life, Cohen explained the importance of such marginal episodes:

If you look at Israeli academia and research on the Palestinians, you find that, traditionally, the research examined different leaderships and documents. Documents about Palestinian land or about PLO decisions. And I always wanted to see where the people were in this story. What I've tried to do is to combine things, both in my earlier books and in this book. To look at the overall political system but also to see how it affects people.

Contrary to its balanced title, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem* is mostly a story of decline. It illuminates a political leadership plagued by passivity and internal conflict, torn by its impossible and perpetual "in-between-ness": Forced to share a single, predominantly Jewish city after the occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, the Arab-Palestinian community in the city is entitled to Israeli identity cards, freedom to travel and work in Israel and the right to vote in municipal elections. Yet they are entitled to Israeli citizenship like Palestinians who resided inside Israel after the 1948 War. This unique status also set Jerusalem Palestinian politics apart from the agendas that dominated the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Palestinian diaspora or the priorities of the Palestinian political leadership in Israel. Stuck between the rock of the territories and the hard place of Israel, Palestinian Jerusalemites face deep dilemmas that prevent any coherent political platform from taking root and being implemented in a meaningful sense.

The majority of Cohen's book focuses on Jerusalem from the Oslo years to the present. This is also the most depressing chapter for anyone still seriously contemplating the potential for a viable compromise in the city. Unlike the decades that preceded it, this is a period characterised by a resurgent political agency, primarily through the involvement of Jerusalem Palestinians in the struggle against Israel's occupation. Cohen recalls at length the creation of terror cells, and the methods of organisation of the various Palestinian factions – particularly Hamas, which launched most of the violent attacks in the city. Interestingly, and in contrast to Hamas, while Fatah took credit for many of the suicide bombings in Jerusalem, none of them were carried out by members of Jerusalem Fatah. The movement's members in Jerusalem apparently understood that suicide bombing of busses and cafes will only harden Israel's positions and provide a disincentive for any territorial compromise.

A scholar at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Cohen knows his subject matter up close. At 15, he left high school and spent three years walking around the occupied territories, learning Arabic through unmediated encounters. In 1991, when the first intifada was winding down, Cohen began working as the correspondent in the territories for the weekly Jerusalem newspaper Kol Ha'ir. Building on his journalistic style, Cohen's writing is factual, direct and uncluttered by adjectives that often populate accounts of Palestinian realities under Israeli occupation. To be sure, Israel's actions in the city – primarily the construction of large Jewish neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, the suppression of Palestinian political activity in the city and the construction of the separation barrier – receive ample attention. But Cohen refuses to replicate the narratives of passive victimisation. Though they are unable to match

Israel's military superiority, Palestinians still possess political agency and the ability to shape the realities of the city.

One of the most intriguing processes Cohen notes is the rise of the Islamic politics in the city, primarily under the auspices of the Israeli Islamic movement. Making use of the Al Aqsa mosque's sanctity for Muslims in Palestine and around the world, Islamic leaders have led a campaign to save Al Aqsa from Israeli (real or conspiratorially perceived) actions to undermine the iconic Muslim site. Though demonstrations "in defence of Al Aqsa" attracted only a few hundred people and were far from igniting serious instability, they signify the political vacuum in the city. The decline of centralised political forces like the PLO leaves the stage clear for more other elements whose political agenda rejects any compromise in the city. Given the increased settlement activity of Jewish elements operating at the heart of Palestinian East Jerusalem, this trend suggests that a political compromise in the city is as remote as ever.

This is Cohen's fourth book and the second to be translated to English after the 2009 *Army of Shadows*, which tells the story of Arabs who, from the very beginning of the Arab-Israeli encounter, sided with the Zionists and aided them politically, economically, and in security matters. With his book on Jerusalem, Cohen sets himself apart from most historians of Palestine and Israel, making exquisite use of interview material, blogs and ground level familiarity with his subject. Sadly, this exceptional and enlightening piece of scholarship is unlikely to attract the attention it deserves as long as the public debate about the Jerusalem continues to be dominated by shallow vitriol or fantasies of a heavily city perched in the clouds.

It is a mistake to assume, however, that the decline of Arab politics in Jerusalem means a victory for Jewish-Zionist policies. Cities are not a zero-sum game, and the disenfranchisement of a large minority inevitably returns to haunt the city as a whole.

The separation barrier in Jerusalem, with its tall concrete slabs, has become an icon of the contemporary state of the city: on the one hand reflecting Israeli efforts to curb suicide attacks in the city and on the other, significantly obstructing the lives of East Jerusalem's Palestinian population. In their recent comparative exploration of five cities that have experience (and continue to experience) different forms of physical divisions and segregation, John Calame and Esther Charlesworth remind us that walls have been a hallmark of cities from their very beginning two and a half millennia ago. The walls that surrounded cities guaranteed security for this inside, and developed a sense of shared identity and solidarity. In return for safety, residents submitted to taxation, gave their allegiance to abstract political systems based on indirect representation, provided labour to the city and lived in often squalid and crowded spaces. This exchange is the basis of the 'urban contract'. The changing nature of conflict and the response of urban managers are gradually eroding this age-long contract, throwing cities into an unknown future of perpetual insecurity and diminishing sense of communal cohesion.

In *Divided Cities*, Calame and Charlesworth approach the challenge of partitioned and conflicted urban spaces with an urban planner's toolkit. For anyone familiar with the increasingly partisan tone of contemporary architectural and urban theory, this is a welcome contribution. Its prime interest is the wellbeing of urban communities and the viability of city management rather than moralising or passing judgment on complex ethnic and national conflicts.

Nonetheless, their analysis does not bode well for Jerusalem. The authors recognise that at times of ethnic and national conflict "partitions are sometimes embraced by rival communities and urban managers as a practical alternative to chronic violence." But the price paid for the temporary stabilisation is significant: partitions reinforce social difference and erode traditional solidarity while multiplying the ills and rewards of insular behaviour. The impact of never ending fortification may be undermining the very nature of the city, as Louis Mumford observed more than half a century ago:

The city arose as a special kind of environment, favorable to co-operative association, favorable to nurture and education, because it was a protected environment … Plainly, a civilization that terminated in a cult of barbarism has disintegrated as civilization; and the war-metropolis, as an expression of these institutions, is an anti-civilizing agent: a non-city.

Today, West Jerusalem is a far safer place than it was a decade ago. Residents and visitors board busses and sit in cafes without the dread that overshadowed daily life throughout the second Intifada. The same cannot be said about Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem. They have bore the brunt of the city's re-division: neighbourhoods have been sliced apart, access to the El Makassed hospital, to schools and amenities has become significantly more difficult and resources are rapidly redirected to other urban areas in the West Bank. Increased settlement activity in the heart of Palestinian neighbourhoods exacerbates these trends and increases frustration.

But taking Calame and Charlesworth argument seriously also invites a deeper reflection on the impact re-division has had on the Jewish population in Jerusalem. The assaults on Arab workers in the Malha shopping centre in March and the attempted lynch of Arab youths in Zion square are stark reminders that the erosion of the urban contract – the ghettoisation and insularity of different communities – can lead to indifference and intolerance toward those on "the other side". The few urban spaces that facilitated the daily, mundane encounter between Jews and Arab-Palestinians in Jerusalem are quickly disappearing and with them the ability to humanise rather than stereotype and vilify.

The human dimension is all too easily brushed aside for grand histories and grandiose visions. Yehuda Amichai, one of the great modern Hebrew poets, offers a vivid illustration of an alternative:

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower,
I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists
was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see
that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch
from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!"
I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them,
"You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it,
left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

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