

Rabbis' Letter on Jerusalem to Prime Minister Sharon and President Bush

March 2001

There can be no question about the centrality of Jerusalem in Jewish religious and national consciousness. The rightfulness of the Jewish presence in Jerusalem is evident to all fair-minded people. That Israel should have sovereignty in Jerusalem should not be in dispute.

The real issue is about exclusivity. Is all of Jerusalem rightfully the exclusive domain of the Jewish people and the sovereign territory of the State of Israel? Or are there not Palestinian rights which are also deserving of national expression? We believe that there are.

For almost the entire history of Islam, with the exception of the Crusader era and certain periods of the 20th century, Jerusalem was under the rule of Muslims. It was towards Jerusalem that Muslims first prayed, and it is from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem that Mohammed is believed to have ascended to Heaven to receive his final revelation. For over a thousand years, the Haram al-Sharif has been an active site of Islamic worship.

Today there are some 200,000 Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem. Though eligible, these Palestinians have refused to become Israeli citizens. And when a Palestinian state emerges, there is no doubt that they will become Palestinian citizens.

Until the middle of the Nineteenth Century the Old City constituted all of Jerusalem. Today, though most highly contested, the Old City constitutes only 1% of Jerusalem. Within it, some 90% of the population is Palestinian.

It is both natural and right that Palestinians view Jerusalem as their city. If there is to be lasting peace, the legitimate claims of both peoples will have to be reflected in a peace agreement.

Former Prime Minister Barak was quite right in his appraisal that sharing Jerusalem is the price that the Jewish people must pay for lasting peace. There is no shortage of creative ideas for how to share Jerusalem, and we hold no brief for any particular set of arrangements, except to state our opposition to the claim of exclusive sovereignty. This is incompatible with both peace and justice.

In the coming months, the issue of Jerusalem may again be put off. Rather than seeking to resolve all the issue to the conflict, the negotiators may decide to seek a new interim agreement. If such efforts are to succeed, then neither side must use its power to unilaterally foreclose solutions to those issues that are postponed. The determination to take such unilateral steps will make even a limited agreement on non-belligerency impossible.

Thus, we call on you, Prime Minister Sharon, to refrain from undertaking any expansion of Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. And we call on you President Bush, to vigorously express American opposition to any such unilateral steps. Only on such a basis will it be possible to ultimately achieve a lasting peace.