



Jerusalem is a real city with real problems. Last month, workers in the tourism industry were out in force protesting economic proposals that could hit them hard. Photo: Isranet

The Jerusalem of the Earth

The Israeli capital is not simply the spiritual centre of various faiths, it is a real city with real issues and real problems that need to be, and are being, addressed.

Viewpoint



MARK SOFER

DURING a recent event in London to celebrate Jerusalem Day, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and renowned historian Simon Sebag Montefiore discussed their feelings about the ancient city.

When asked of their first memories of Jerusalem, both described pastoral scenes. The chief rabbi recalled his exhilaration at visiting Mount Scopus as a teenager with his father and looking over the Old City as the sun was setting. Sebag Montefiore described a visit to Montefiore's Windmill at Mishkenot Sha'ananim and his sense of family and belonging as he did so.

We all recognise that feeling. Just the word "Jerusalem" conjures up images of beauty and spiritual depth, almost beyond human comprehension. Not only in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people, but for billions around the globe. The imagination is drawn to the Jerusalem described by the psalmist as the "Jerusalem of the Heavens".

But what of the other Jerusalem mentioned in the same verse? The "Jerusalem of the Earth"? The everyday, mundane Jerusalem. For many, the connotations could not be more different.

Jerusalem is perhaps the most complex city in the world. On the one hand, it is the centre of mankind, labouring under a permanent global microscope. Whatever happens there are ramifications around the globe. It is also the epicentre and microcosm of one of the world's most seemingly intractable conflicts. It is Israel's largest city, yet one of its poorest.

Its social make-up of approximately 25 per cent ultra-Orthodox

Charedim, one-third Arab and the remainder secular and Modern Orthodox means one section of the society will not simply blend into another.

Yet the creation of an overriding will for the city's stability among all the diverse sections of the population is far from a pipe dream. No one wants a volatile city. But just because of the social, political and economic pressures, only a proactive approach will bring the results we all seek.

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In the post-1967 euphoria, it seemed the diversities were reconcilable, or at least able to coexist. Teddy Kollek, the legendary former mayor, was able, through the creation of the Jerusalem Foundation, to turn the city into a world-class capital, a shared city where the religious mosaic only seemed to add to its mystique.

In the decades following Kollek's leadership, political pressure from without and within, demographic changes, and a concomitant downturn in the city's educational and cultural life began to lead to feelings of dejection and rejection of the city as the centre of Jewish life.

And yet, those who have visited Jerusalem recently will have noticed a change in the air. During an evening

stroll, you are likely to encounter a plethora of cultural events, whether at the magnificent new musical fountain at Teddy Park, or a myriad of concerts and festivals.

The coffee shops and bars are full of young adults for whom Jerusalem is home.

Despite the political situation, new initiatives to make sure that every resident of the city receives the public services they deserve are in place and are making a remarkable impact on the everyday lives of residents, particularly in East Jerusalem. This seems to have created the environment that has led to the beginning of a reversal of the demographic trend.

Over the past two years there has been an increase in the number of secular and Modern Orthodox children in Jerusalem's schools. That would have been unthinkable five years ago.

Jerusalem still suffers from a myriad of problems that need addressing. The current impasse of peace talks continues to impact on the inter-relationships between Jew and Arab. Poverty is still all too prevalent and culture is still often equated with mass entertainment.

In short, the direction is truly encouraging, but its pace sadly frustrating.

Jerusalem will always occupy the centre of our hearts, minds, souls and prayers. Its stability and development – not as an outdoor museum, but as a vibrant pluralistic city in which economic empowerment of all its residents is the only recipe for the aversion of disaster.

None of us, in Israel or abroad, has the luxury of sitting idly by in the hope that things will work out. The stakes are too high. Indifference is not an option.

Mark Sofer is the president of The Jerusalem Foundation. He has served as Israel's ambassador to India and is a former deputy director-general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Progressive progress in the Holy Land

Recalling a memorable and meaningful trip to the Holy Land.

Viewpoint



HELEN SHARDY

EARLIER this year, I joined the leadership of Progressive Judaism Victoria (PJV), with a focus on communication for the movement, as part of PJV's 2020 Vision. I therefore decided to attend the World Union for Progressive Judaism conference in Jerusalem, to further my knowledge and understanding of Progressive Judaism religiously and its place in the world today.

Although, this was to be my fifth visit to Israel, I was part of one of the largest delegations to ever go from Australia to the World Union. It turned out to be the most exciting and enthralling experience of my Judaism journey. Progressive Jews from all over the world meeting to not only get to know one another, but to share their vision, their passion and their thoughts about tikkun olam, and, importantly, to examine the place and the future of Progressive Judaism in Israel and the Diaspora and the relationship between Israel and the Diaspora.

On the first day, I attended a session for first-time attendees, including a group from Indonesia. We were addressed and had an informal discussion with two of the most iconic, knowledgeable and inspiring people in the movement – Rabbi Richard Hirsch, who is recognised as a prominent leader of Progressive Judaism worldwide, and Professor Paul Liptz, a historian who lectures at the Hebrew Union College and Tel Aviv University. Professor Liptz was one of Rabbi Kim Etlinger's teachers during her rabbinic studies in Israel.

They traced the history of Progressive Judaism both in the US and in Israel. Rabbi Hirsch, though now retired, has a sparkling personality and, along with Professor Liptz, displays an extraordinary level of intelligence, wit and personal empathy. They made us feel so welcome and discussed with us some of the burning issues and challenges for Progressive Judaism in Israel today.

I attended a series of highly informative workshops led by some of the most knowledgeable and interesting people, who have a high level of involvement in the Reform movement, World Zionist Organisations and other important institutions in Israel today. They furthered my understanding of the importance of the relationship of the Diaspora with Israel, and helped me recognise that Israel, as the birthplace of Judaism, should be nurtured by all of us and retained as the Jewish homeland for all eternity.

On the Friday evening I attended a kabbalat Shabbat service at Kibbutz Gezer, led by Rabbi Miri Gold. As it was a warm evening, the service was held in an outdoor setting. A natural bush environment with the sound of birds throughout the service surrounded us.

After the service we walked a short distance to the home of Rabbi Steve Burnstein to have a

Shabbat meal on the balcony with his family. Others in our group went to other families. The entire evening was so pleasant and relaxing, in the true spirit of Shabbat.

Rabbi Gold is the first non-Orthodox rabbi to be recognised and have her salary paid by the Israeli government, the same as all Orthodox rabbis in Israel today. I sincerely hope that she is the first of many Progressive rabbis to be recognised this way, and to eventually be able to perform life-cycle services such as conversions, marriages, divorces and funerals for the Progressive community in Israel. This would give non-Orthodox and secular Israelis a choice about those issues which effect individuals and families so deeply.

The meeting called upon the Israeli government to recognise the authority of Reform and Conservative rabbis and grant equality to the Progressive streams of Judaism.

The International Assembly meeting of the World Union for Progressive Judaism was a gathering of the conference delegates to discuss a number of important resolutions. The meeting called upon the Israeli government to recognise the authority of Reform and Conservative rabbis and grant equality to the Progressive streams of Judaism. It supported the principle of gender equality, with an end to gender segregation in all facets of public life in Israel and a resolution to the issues of access to the Kotel for women wishing to pray.

The assembly also offered the opportunity for Progressive congregations from all over the world to come together and outline their activities and achievements. It was indeed a rare event for the exchange of views and ideas as was the case during the entire conference. Quite an amazing achievement.

However, the most memorable event for me was the Shabbat morning service held in the Blaustein Hall, a mostly glass pyramid-like structure on the top floor of Beit Shmuel, overlooking the Old City. The voice of our international congregation loudly rang out across Jerusalem led by the beautiful voice of Cantor Zoe Jacobs, along with Rabbis Maya Leibovich (head of Council of Reform Rabbis, Israel) and Daniel Frelander (vice-president of the Union for Reform Judaism, USA).

Tears of joy were on the faces of many and I knew I was experiencing something I would never forget, and that I had come to a place I would return to.

Helen Shardy is the former Liberal member for Caulfield.