



A Letter to the World from Jerusalem

by Eliezer Ben Yisrael



I am not a creature from another planet, as you seem to believe. I am a Jerusalemite - like yourselves, a man of flesh and blood. I am a citizen of my city, an integral part of my people.

I have a few things to get off my chest. Because I am not a diplomat, I do not have to mince words. I do not have to please you, or even persuade you. I owe you nothing. You did not build this city; you did not live in it; you did not defend it when they came to destroy it. And we will be damned if we will let you take it away.

There was a Jerusalem before there was a New York. When Berlin, Moscow, London, and Paris were miasmal forest and swamp, there was a thriving Jewish community here. It gave something to the world which you nations have rejected ever since you established yourselves - a humane moral code.

Here the prophets walked, their words flashing like forked lightning. Here a people who wanted nothing more than to be left alone, fought off waves of heathen would-be conquerors, bled and died on the battlements, hurled themselves into the flames of their burning Temple rather than surrender, and when finally overwhelmed by sheer numbers and led away into captivity, swore that before they forgot Jerusalem, they would see their tongues cleave to their palates, their right arms wither.

For two pain-filled millennia, while we were your unwelcome guests, we prayed daily to return to this city. Three times a day we petitioned the Almighty: "Gather us from the four corners of the world, bring us upright to our land; return in mercy to Jerusalem, Your city, and dwell in it as You promised." On every Yom Kippur and Passover, we fervently voice the hope that next year would find us in Jerusalem.

Your inquisitions, pogroms, expulsions, the ghettos into which you jammed us, your forced baptisms, your quota systems, your genteel anti-Semitism, and the final unspeakable horror, the holocaust (and worse, your terrifying disinterest in it) - all these have not broken us. They may have sapped what little moral strength you still possessed, but they forged us into steel. Do you think that you can break us now after all we have been through? Do you really believe that after Dachau and Auschwitz we are frightened by your threats of blockades and sanctions? We have been to Hell and back - a Hell of your making. What more could you possibly have in your arsenal that could scare us?

I have watched this city bombarded twice by nations calling themselves civilized. In 1948, while you looked on apathetically, I saw women and children blown to smithereens, after we agreed to your request to internationalize the city. It was a deadly combination that did the job. British officers, Arab gunners, and American-made cannons. And then the savage sacking

of the Old City; the willful slaughter, the wanton destruction of every synagogue and religious school; the desecration of Jewish cemeteries; the sale by a ghoulish government of tombstones for building materials, for poultry runs, army camps – even latrines.

And you never said a word.

You never breathed the slightest protest when the Jordanians shut off the holiest of our places, the Western Wall, in violation of the pledges they had made after the war – a war they waged, incidentally, against the decision of the UN. Not a murmur came from you whenever the legionaries in their spiked helmets casually opened fire upon our citizens from behind the walls.

Your hearts bled when Berlin came under siege. You rushed your airlift "to save the gallant Berliners". But you did not send one ounce of food when Jews starved in besieged Jerusalem. You thundered against the wall which the East Germans ran through the middle of the German capital – but not one peep out of you about that other wall, the one that tore through the heart of Jerusalem.

And when that same thing happened 20 years later, and the Arabs unleashed a savage, unprovoked bombardment of the Holy City again, did any of you do anything?

The only time you came to life was when the city was at last reunited. Then you wrung your hands and spoke loftily of "justice" and need for the "Christian" quality of turning the other cheek.

The truth is – and you know it deep inside your gut – you would prefer the city to be destroyed rather than have it governed by Jews. No matter how diplomatically you phrase it, the age old prejudices seep out of every word.

If our return to the city has tied your theology in knots, perhaps you had better reexamine your catechisms. After what we have been through, we are not passively going to accommodate ourselves to the twisted idea that we are to suffer eternal homelessness until we accept your savior.

For the first time since the year 70 there is now complete religious freedom for all in Jerusalem. For the first time since the Romans put a torch to the Temple, everyone has equal rights. (You prefer to have some more equal than others.) We loathe the sword – but it was you who forced us to take it up. We crave peace – but we are not going back to the peace of 1948 as you would like us to.

We are home. It has a lovely sound for a nation you have willed to wander over the face of the globe. We are not leaving. We are redeeming the pledge made by our forefathers: Jerusalem is being rebuilt. "Next year" and the year after, and after, and after, until the end of time – "in Jerusalem!"

This "letter", written by Eliezer Whartman, first appeared as an editorial in the summer of 1969 in (the now long-defunct newspaper) the Times of Israel. Some of the sentences may not fit today's situation perfectly, but the point of the letter and its passion are as on the mark now as they were over 50 years ago.