

Jerusalem: A Microcosm of Jewish Rights

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Winston Churchill's official biographer; a leading historian of the modern world

Throughout almost two thousand years of Jewish exile, the image of Jerusalem served as a focal point for the dreams and hopes of the Jews. Today, in the light of current disputes, it may at times seem that non-Jews ignore or fail to understand the deep, emotional connection between the Jews and Jerusalem. Yet historical evidence points to a long-founded and deeply ingrained comprehension, especially on the part of British Christians, of the Jewish love and longing for Jerusalem.

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It was not only the British who understood the Jewish attachment to Jerusalem. In 1799 while advancing with his army through Palestine towards Syria, Napoleon declared that his aim in conquering Palestine from the Turks was “to give back to the Jews their Jerusalem” “*pour rendre aux Juifs leur Jérusalem.*”

One of the first to give the statistics of Jerusalem as a Jewish city was Karl Marx. In an article published in the *New York Daily News* on 15 April 1854, Marx wrote that “the sedentary population of Jerusalem numbered around 15,000 souls, of whom 4,000 were Muslim and 8,000 were Jews.”

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was fashionable for Britons and Americans to visit Palestine, and in particular Jerusalem. Many of these travelers wrote accounts of their journey, impressions, and experiences, often stressing the Jewish character of the city. They also emphasized and described the extent to which the Jews of Jerusalem were persecuted by the Muslims.

Even though the majority of the population of Jerusalem was Jewish, power lay with the Ottoman Sultan in Constantinople; the city authorities were Muslim, and the repression of the Jewish majority by the Muslims was common. The American bishop John Vincent, in his book *Earthly Footsteps of the Man of Galilee*, published in 1894, wrote: “One cannot help but observe in Jerusalem today the devotion of the Jews to the city. All the years of change and war and bloodshed and fire and persecution have not been able to destroy the affection which this ancient people of God have for their Holy City. They have been scattered all over the world but continue to love Jerusalem, the city of the great king.”

One visitor to Jerusalem, Miss A. Goodrich-Freer, wrote a book, *Inner Jerusalem*, that serves as an excellent source for understanding the situation

of Jerusalem at the beginning of the twentieth century. She too was struck by the number of Jews in Jerusalem and by the central belief of the Jews that Jerusalem is their home. As she wrote in 1904, “We are so accustomed to think of the modern Jew as a recent immigrant to Palestine that it is somewhat surprising to find that Jerusalem is virtually a Jewish city. Out of about 60,000 inhabitants today some 40,000 are Jews. Not only have they overflowed in all directions in their own quarter within the walls, but they have established themselves in various suburbs amounting to some half dozen villages all within a mile or so of the city gates.”

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Miss Goodrich-Freer was more excited by the Jewish villages and Jewish suburbs of Jerusalem than was Theodor Herzl, who had visited the city nine years before her. He saw only the Old City and was somewhat disgusted by its filth and squalor.

Miss Goodrich-Freer’s book puts the Jewish situation of Jerusalem in more than just a spiritual context. It also has a territorial aspect. In her words, “If numerical superiority be a criterion of possession and if achievement be a measure of power, if the higher civilization be that of the more effective philanthropy, and true part and lot in the soil be that of him who restores it to cultivation, then mysterious it may seem to us the workings of God’s providence and the deep tragedy of the Jewish existence, the dark problem of their destiny. The approaching solution: Jerusalem is for the Jews.”

In 1955, just before his retirement from public life, Winston Churchill, Britain’s wartime and post-war prime minister (1940-1945 and 1951-1955), told a senior British civil servant: “You ought to let the Jews have Jerusalem. It is they who have made it famous.”

The sources that I have chosen show the long historical tradition of understanding within the Christian world, and in Britain in particular, not only of the importance and extent of the Jewish presence in Jerusalem, but also the natural and deep attachment of the Jews themselves to “their Jerusalem.”