

# The Jerusalem Festival Project

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*Amy Horowitz*

Once, I was sitting on the steps by a gate at David's Tower. I had 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 to the right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period — just to the right of his head!"

"But he's moving, he's moving," I said to myself. Redemption will only come when their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important. But next to it, to the left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

Yehuda Amichai, 1987

I wonder, Leah, what would it take for two women ripened by age, experience, and heartache to build a bridge of peace rather than a fortress of war?

I do not stretch out my hand to you in strength. This kind of strength means victory at war and I do not wish for any more wars for either of us. Nor do I stretch it out in weakness, for weakness is succumbing to the status quo and I won't accept that. Let us both stretch out our hands in equality and acknowledge each other's humanity and rights.

I ask you to please extend a special salute to the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, The Street of Sorrow. It is a road that you and I have been traveling for a long time.

Can we take fate into our own hands and say, "Enough!"

What will it really take?

Hala Deeb Jabbour, 1986

For reasons that Mr. Amichai and Ms. Jabbour's words make clear, the Jerusalem Festival project — begun in the summer of 1992 by the Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies to produce a living exhibition at the Festival of American Folklife — has a complicated and difficult task. Its goal is to document and present the cultural expression of the people who live in this ancient city. And accomplishing this means resisting the magnetic pull of the historic sites and addressing the realities of the people themselves who dwell in Jerusalem in 1993. In the August heat, they pause to reflect and catch their breath in a city that has captured imaginations for millennia.

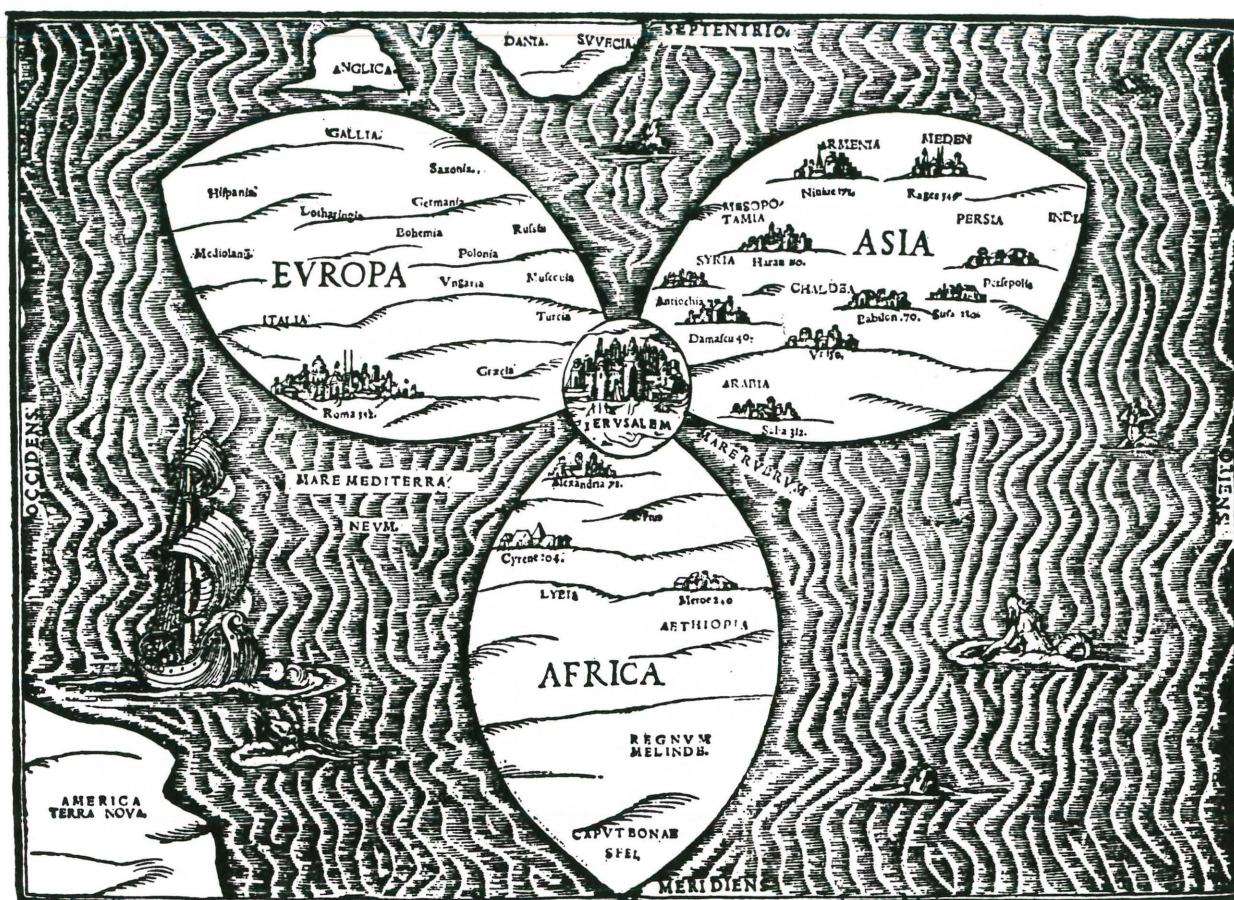
Like many urban centers, Jerusalem is a city of cities. Israelis, mainly Jews, live in West Jerusalem. Palestinians, with a Sunni Muslim majority and a sizable Christian minority, live in East Jerusalem. There are exceptions to these generalities, and as politics constantly reshape the socio-geographical landscape, lives are profoundly affected. You become aware of unmarked cleavages in the city by the color of the municipal buses, by the languages spoken on the street and written on signs, by the clothes people wear, and by the music spilling out of car radios. The boundaries between Jewish and Arab Jerusalem are never really forgotten in the course of daily life.

Over 40 Jewish ethnic groups live in West Jerusalem; in East Jerusalem Muslims live together with Christian neighbors belonging to some of more than 15 Orthodox and Western churches represented throughout the city. In both East and West Jerusalem, residents with roots in Asia,

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*Field research for the Jerusalem Festival project has been made possible by the generous support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Ruth Mott Foundation, Microsoft Corporation, and David Schoenbach.*





In this map (1580), the world is seen as a clover leaf, and Jerusalem is its center, surrounded by Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Africa, Europe, and America interact with people who can trace their roots for generations in this city.

Who are the women, men, and children of Jerusalem? How do they earn the money it takes to rent an apartment, buy winter olives, and pay taxes? How do they stitch together the traditions that they learned from their parents with the demands and tensions of contemporary life in Jerusalem? How do they hand this cultural legacy over to their children?

Each Jerusalemite has his or her own reasons for living in the city. For some, it is where their forbears have always lived; for others where their forbears have always prayed to live. Still others

came because of a job, a spouse, a college education. For those arriving from war and oppression elsewhere Jerusalem is a refuge, for those unable to return she is a longing.

The Jerusalem Festival project has asked these people to share their knowledge with us and with the American people. In response they invited us into their homes and taught us about the way they live their lives, the problems they face, the traditions they teach their children, the songs they sing, the fabrics they embroider, the stories they heard from their grandparents, the prayers they know by heart, the foods they eat, the jobs they do, the jokes they tell, the rituals that accompany birth, adulthood, and death.

In July of 1992, two parallel research teams, one Israeli and one Palestinian, agreed to participate with our Center in a research project directed by Dr. Galit Hasan Rokem, a folklorist from Hebrew University, and Dr. Suad Amiry, an architect from Bir Zeit University. Together we designed a plan by which 40 Palestinian and Israeli scholars, students, and community members would help us explore the diversity of cultur-

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Local community members and scholars jointly carried out research for the Jerusalem Festival project. Serene Hleleh interviews a Palestinian oud player, Abu Ghram at his home. *Photo by Yacub Arefheh*

al life in Jerusalem with an eye to presenting a selection of the findings at the Festival of American Folklife.

The two research teams worked over the past year on different terrains and under different conditions to discover and document their contemporary cultural traditions. Like any road to Jerusalem, their journeys were filled with unexpected twists and turns and constant negotiations to overcome obstacles. These scholars dug beneath the CNN soundbites and their own preconceived notions. They confronted their own feelings about their ancient heritages and uncertain futures as they walked between sunbaked stones. They recorded tales and memories of local residents colored by time and by re-telling across generations and continents. They gathered accounts of pilgrims who made the journey to Jewish, Christian, and Moslem holy places for thousands of years, and they documented present-day tourists who walk those paths today. They examined cultural aspects of headlines, punch lines, demonstration lines, and bus lines. They looked at holidays, soccer games, and the sounds of sellers in the market. They recorded

calls to prayer and the calls to action.

As we listened we began to understand something about how people try to live ordinary lives under extraordinary conditions. Daily existence in Jerusalem is framed by war and conflict, heroic devotion and unquestioning conviction, checkpoints and strikes, and the relentless cameras, expectations, assumptions, and interruptions of outsiders who claim to have the answers to support their version of the truth about Jerusalem.

The aesthetic cultural expressions that emerge in contemporary Jerusalem are as complexly layered as those of any heterogeneous urban environment in which people create an artistic dialogue between traditional repertoires. Unlikely combinations of aesthetics and cultural ideas are brought together by modern technologies like cassettes, faxes, 747's, and microwaves. The result is folklore in motion; Hebrew prayers vocalized in Greek and Turkish melodies change to Quranic recitations amplified in Arabic from local minarets and then again to Armenian folk poetry sung to a western rock beat. The result is contact culture; French croissants laced with a local herb called *zatar*, Eastern European gefilte





School girls stop for a moment from play in the Nachlaot neighborhood. West Jerusalem is made up of over 40 Jewish ethnic groups including communities from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Photo by Amy Horowitz

fish served next to Middle Eastern dumplings called *kubbeh*.

Cultural expression in Jerusalem is often a discourse of conflict: jokes about the Hebrew or Arabic dialects spoken by various ethnic or urban groups, songs about the 1967 war as a victory and about the same war as the beginning of occupation. Kurdish Jews in Jerusalem sing ballads to their old friends in Iraq. Palestinian Christians combine lyrics about Christ and the *intifada* in Palm Sunday hymns.

The Jerusalem Festival project searched amidst the monuments and ancient inscriptions for the human beings inhabiting the city today. In our research, we tried to guard against developing a romantic picture of ancient stone and olive tree that omits the daily conflicts, television antennas, laundry lines, and soda bottles sharing the landscape with holy sites. We encouraged ourselves to record the scene complete with laundry flapping and women scrubbing walkways clean of relentless Jerusalem dust. We also tried to avoid romanticizing our approach, our scholarly clarity, and our own attempts at deconstruction lest our cultural vocabulary be taken as a new icon or an authority in itself. Ours is to be *a* picture, not *the* picture.

### Cultural Sketches from a Work in Progress

Zalatimo's small pastry shop is a renowned landmark in Jerusalem's Old City for local Palestinians and Arabs throughout the Middle East. The store is tucked slightly back from one of the main streets, Bab Khan Ezzeit, crowded with every kind of small market shop. As we duck into the shop we can hear the bells chiming nearby in the Holy Sepulchre.

Zalatimo is bending over little balls of dough which he swiftly rolls out into circles. He pauses and welcomes us in Arabic, *Salam Aleikum*, (peace be with you). Then he tosses the dough in the air, stretches and lays it out, and fills it with nuts. In an instant the pastry is ready to be baked in the old stone oven.

Zalatimo's father, Daoud Zalatimo, came to Jerusalem from Beirut in 1860 and opened up a family business. Today, his sons and grandsons help him prepare the traditional pastry called *mutabak*. The family tradition is so renowned that people often say "let's go to the Old City and have a Zalatimo."

Zalatimo works almost without pause. Soon trays of pastry sit cooling in the back room



It takes Bashir more than a month to complete a window. He carves designs manually using hand tools and occasionally an electric drill, carefully slanting the angle to allow light to pass through. *Photo by Joan Wolbier*

between ancient pillars that have stood there since the Roman period.

In 1917 ten Armenian craftsmen were brought from Turkey to Jerusalem to help restore the ceramic tiles in the Dome of the Rock. Armenians were enduring persecution and Stefan and Berge Karkashian's father was chosen and took refuge in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City. In Jerusalem, they established a thriving ceramic industry and became integrated into the cultural life of the Palestinian community.

Today pottery adorned with exquisite regional designs — symmetrical Islamic patterns, floral arabesques, and Armenian Christian and Persian themes — is displayed in their shop on Via Dolorosa along with plaques designed by Palestinian artist Kamal Boulatta and others inscribed with Jewish prayers and astrological signs. All the painted brush work is hand done by Palestinian women each with a special style. Their artistry helps to make this pottery unique amongst the crafts of the Old City. Stefan says that he feels his father's shadow and memory behind each ceramic piece in the shop.

We find Bashir Musa Al Muaswis, the only local craftsman of plaster-carved stained-glass windows, intensely focused in his studio in the Haram (the Muslim Holy Shrine which includes the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque). Working in a tradition practiced in the Muslim world since the 12th century, he is helping to restore the stained-glass windows of these holy monuments. The windows create a diffused and spiritual light that reflects on the richly colored 7th century floral mosaic inside the Mosque. These designs decorate the interior space since human and animal imagery is forbidden by the traditions of Islam. The task of carving the plaster is painstakingly slow. The angle of the cut has to be just right in order to catch the light correctly.

Today, the month-long Muslim celebration of Ramadan is drawing to a close. In the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims fast during the daylight hours to commemorate the divine gifts of the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad. Soon Musa will join with thousands of neighbors as the Haram fills with daily prayers.

Musa learned this craft from a family friend,



Workers prepare the traditional challah dough on Thursday at Motti Lendner's bakery in Beit Yisrael. Photo by Pete Reiniger



Dawoud Abdeen, who had carved some of the earlier plaster windows at Al Aqsa Mosque. When the Mosque was damaged by arson fire in 1969, the Waqf (Muslim Endowment) searched for artisans who could assist in the restoration. They located Abdeen when they noticed that he had signed his name in 1920 on one of the windows that had been burned in the fire. By now an old man, he asked Musa's father for assistance. Musa, then a young boy, accompanied his father and soon began helping out. He tells us that he "stole the secrets of the craft with his eyes."

**Y**iddish speech and Hasidic dress dominate the narrow streets in Beit Israel, the neighborhood where Motti Lendner's grandfather, having arrived from Rumania, started a bakery at the turn of the century. Motti, a third generation baker, says that today the Orthodox Jewish residents come on Thursday afternoons to buy the challah that is his trademark. In his rolled up shirtsleeves he labors every day alongside his workers. His bakery produces only specially braided challah bread eaten as part of the Friday night Sabbath ritual. Motti explains that there

are secrets to braiding the dough, special touches that insure that the loaves will be *knackedig* (Yiddish for crispy), making a cracking noise when you bite into it.

Motti and the other bakers talk with us amidst mounds of dough: "The verse in Genesis: 'thou shalt earn your bread with your own sweat' is said exactly about this bakery," Motti declares. "This is truly hard work . . . the neighbors here pray for my health and hope I'll keep their supply of challahs until the Messiah will come."

**S**hmuel Shmueli is a Jewish healer who was born in Jerusalem. For generations his family passed down the mystical wisdom of Kabbalah (a tradition that originated in the Middle Ages). Shmueli draws on this spiritual knowledge when he prays at the *Kotel* (the "Western" or "Wailing Wall"), the most sacred of Jewish sites, and leads special pilgrimages to the tombs of holy sages. And he incorporates his family's healing and mystical traditions when he builds and decorates his *sukkah*, a festive booth where people gather every autumn to celebrate the holiday of Sukkot (Festival of the Tabernacles). According to one

Kabbalistic belief, *Ushpizin*, guests seated in the sukkah are joined by Biblical patriarchs who each represent a different quality of the divine spirit. A special chair and candle are placed in their honor.

Shmueli decorates his sukkah walls with special blessings and pictures of sages from different generations. The picture of his own spiritual leader, the Rav Sharabi, hangs next to the medieval philosopher and physician Maimonides, whose medicinal system he uses in his own healing work.

**T**housands of Kurdish Jews came to Jerusalem in 1951 after living for generations in Kurdistan. Their journey to Jerusalem was one of greater cultural distance than aeronautic miles. At home they kept their ancient traditions of praying in Aramaic, cooking Kurdish foods, and observing special rituals like *Saharana* — a celebration of the Torah. At the same time they raised their children as Hebrew-speaking Israelis.

In the 1970s an ethnic revival movement inspired some of the old-timers to formalize their weekly song and dance get-togethers into an ensemble called Sheva Ahayot. Yaacov Yaakov, a community leader, explains:

The 1950s were years of cultural denial and great shame. We took off our famil-

iar garb and tried to say “I am not Kurdi!” But there were those who wept secretly. Then a few began somewhat embarrassedly to dance the old Kurdish dances again.

Their repertoire is sung in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic and accompanied by the *zorneh*, a traditional double reed instrument with a piercing and captivating voice. Group member Miriam Yehoshua is out of breath after the last song:

Only we the elders who came from Kurdistan know what to dance when the *zorneh* plays. If they ask me how, I’ll say the same way you understand Tchaikovsky, my feet understand the *zorneh*.

When people weave art and food, song and prayer in a conflicted city their expressions are loomed on the intricate and tense realities of their daily lives, the weight of history and the longing for a more secure future. The cultural creations of Jerusalem’s people present a precious opening through which to see and appreciate the human faces of this enigmatic city. We hope to provide future Festival goers with a unique opportunity to enter this doorway and listen and talk to Jerusalemites on the National Mall in Washington.