

# BEHIND THE SCENES OF "YERUSHALAYIM SHEL ZAHAV"

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**F**ifty-seven years ago we returned to the Kotel. Our brave soldiers led the way, but they were not alone. Incredibly, a song, "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" by Naomi Shemer, had a hand in bringing our people back to the holy city.

A few weeks before the Six-Day War, as the State of Israel celebrated 19 years of independence, we did not know that we would soon be fighting a war that would change everything. The Mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, was asked to host a music festival to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut. He commissioned Naomi Shemer to write a song in honor of the city. Kollek said that there were no songs that expressed *Am Yisrael's* pain over the division of the city. Shemer said that it was hard to write under stress, but in the end the song was born, and it became a hit.

In every verse there are clues, layers of culture, identity, verses, *midrashim*, and countless echoes of Jewish tradition.

<b>The mountain air is clear as wine</b>	אֹוֹר-הָרִים צָלוּל כִּיּוֹ
<b>And the scent of pines</b>	וְרִיחַ אֲרָנִים
<b>Is carried on the breeze of twilight</b>	נִשָּׂא בְרוּחַ הָעֶרְבִים
<b>With the sound of bells.</b>	עִם קוֹל פְּעֻמוֹנִים.
<b>And in the slumber of tree and stone</b>	וּבְתַרְדֵּמַת אֵילָן וְאֶבֶן
<b>Captured in her dream</b>	שְׁבוּיָהּ בְּחִלּוּמָהּ
<b>The city sits alone</b>	הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר בְּדָד יוֹשֶׁבֶת
<b>And in its midst is a wall.</b>	וּבְלִבָּהּ חוֹמָה.

"In its midst is a wall." This city has a heart, and it is halved. These words remind us of *Megillat Eicha* which is read on Tisha B'Av. "The city sits alone" reminds us of the first verse, "How lonely sits the city that was full of people" (*Eicha* 1:1), words we read on the day of destruction of the *Beit HaMikdash*. Then the chorus comes for the first time:

<b>Jerusalem of Gold</b>	יְרוּשָׁלַיִם שֶׁל זָהָב
<b>And of copper, and of light</b>	וְשֶׁל נְחֹשֶׁת וְשֶׁל אוֹר
<b>For all your songs</b>	הֲלֹא לְכָל שִׁירֶיךָ
<b>I am a violin.</b>	אֲנִי כְנֹוֹר.

Where did Naomi Shemer take these three words, "Jerusalem of Gold" from? It comes from the Talmud:

"Rabbi Akiva married Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Savua who excluded her from all his possessions. In the winter they slept in a warehouse filled with hay, and he would take the straw out of her hair. He said to her: 'If I was able to, I would give you Jerusalem of Gold'" (*Nedarim* 50a).

This holy couple chose to live a life of poverty and destitution in order to live a life of Torah and substance. But from within this poverty, Rabbi Akiva promised her that one day he would bring her a gold jewel, Jerusalem of Gold.

And what is the meaning of "For all your songs I am a violin"? These words were written 900 years ago by the poet Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, in Spain:

"Zion, will you not ask after the welfare of your prisoners, Who seek your welfare, and are the remnant of your flock?... And when I dream of the return of your Shabbat - I am a violin to your songs."

Being a man of action, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was not satisfied with songs or writing. In 1141, he embarked on a dangerous journey to the Land of Israel. According to legend, he died in front of the Kotel in Jerusalem, the object of his longing, when the heels of a horse belonging to an Arab ran him over.

"For all your songs I am a violin" is a continuation of "I am a violin to your songs".

<b>How the cisterns have dried</b>	אֵיכָה יִבְשׂוּ בִּזְרוֹת הַמַּיִם
<b>The market square is empty</b>	כְּכַר-הַשּׁוּק רִיקָה
<b>And there is no one who goes to the Temple Mount</b>	וְאֵין פּוֹקֵד אֶת
<b>In the Old City.</b>	הַר-הַבַּיִת
<b>And in the caves in the mountains</b>	בְּעִיר הָעֵתִיקָה.
<b>Winds are howling</b>	וּבַמְעָרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּסַלְעַ
<b>And no one goes down to the Dead Sea</b>	מִלְּלוֹת רוּחוֹת
<b>From Jericho.</b>	וְאֵין יוֹרֵד אֶל יַם-הַמֶּלַח
	בְּדָרֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ.



This verse was not the original version. Naomi sang the song for Rivka Michaeli, and because of her, this verse was added. Rivka once explained that “Naomi sang me the song and I was excited. But I said to her: ‘You must mention the Old City. My father was born in the Old City, as well as my mother. My father would stand and look towards it through the portholes in the protective wall.’ Naomi responded: ‘Rivka, I already wrote “and in her midst there is a wall.” But I said, ‘That is not enough.’ So Naomi added ‘How the cisterns have dried.’” We are again reminded of *Megillat Eicha*, of the emptiness, desolation, and wasteland.

Now we are brought to the personal, human experience of the individual who sang to her, the one who stands before the great city, before eternity:

**But when I come today to sing to you** אף בְּבֹאֵי הַיּוֹם לְשִׁיר לְךָ  
**And to you to tie crowns** וְלְךָ לְקַשֵּׁר כְּתָרִים  
**I am less than the youngest of your sons** קִטְנָתִי מִצְעִיר בְּנֶיךָ  
**And the last of the poets.** וּמֵאַחֲרָיון הַמְשׁוֹרְרִים.

The expression “to tie crowns” is once again related to Rabbi Akiva. It is said that he used to tie crowns to all the letters in the Torah, that is, he studied them in depth, delved into them, and discovered their meaning. There is also a sense of smallness here, like Ya’akov, our forefather who declares “I am small” in the book of Bereishit. I am not worthy.

**Because your name burns my lips** כִּי שְׁמֶךָ צוֹרֵב אֶת הַשְּׁפָתַיִם  
**Like a kiss of resin** כְּנִשְׁקֵת-שָׁרֵף  
**If I forget you Jerusalem** אִם אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם  
**Which is all gold.** אֲשֶׁר כָּלָה זָהָב.

This is a phrase that requires no explanation of its source: “If I forget you, O’ Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten. May my tongue cling to my palate, if I do not remember you, if I do not bring up Jerusalem at the beginning of my joy” (Tehillim 137:5–6).

This is the historical oath taken at every *chuppah*, because every house that is built in Israel is part of this great story, the story of Jerusalem.

This is where the original song ended, with the addition of Rivka Michaeli. “If I forget you, Jerusalem, which is all gold.” Three weeks after the song was played for the first time, the Six-Day War broke out. The longing described in the song ended, for we returned.

Is there a connection between the song and the liberation of Jerusalem? Between consciousness and reality, between dreams and their realization? Many argue that the song liberated the city. As playwright Dan Almagor said:

“Unwillingly, and without being able to dream about it, this song changed not only her life, but also the life of the country, the region, and to some extent, the life of the entire world. Yes, one song, which was played repeatedly on the radio for the two weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War, and suddenly the entire nation, its leaders and champions, felt the guilt that for 19 years, since the fall of the Old City at the hands of Jordan,

no-one seriously bothered to change the situation. Testimonies I personally heard from army generals who served in the General Staff at that time point to evidence that the IDF’s Central Command had no serious plan related to the liberation of the Old City.

It is a fact that in the 19 years since 5708, not a single hymn was composed and sung by any Hebrew singer which mentioned the loss of the Old City. The enormous popularity of the song, which was undoubtedly one of the prominent motives that spurred the leadership and the army to respond to the bombardment of King Hussein even when entering an impromptu campaign, which had a heavy cost. In a short time, it transformed the author of the song into a kind of ‘high priestess’ or ‘Devorah the prophet.’”

After the war, Naomi received a request from Teddy Kollek, to add another verse to the song, and she hurried to do so:

**We returned to the cisterns,** חֲזַרְנוּ אֶל בּוֹרוֹת-הַמַּיִם  
**The market and the square.** לְשׁוּק וְלִכְפֹּר  
**A shofar calls on the Temple Mount,** שׁוֹפָר קוֹרָא בְּהַר-הַבַּיִת  
**In the Old City.** בְּעִיר הָעֵתִיקָה.  
**And in the caves where** וּבְמַעְרוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּסֻלַּע  
**Thousands of suns shine in the rock,** אֲלֵפֵי שֶׁמֶשׁוֹת זוֹרְחוֹת,  
**We will return to the Dead Sea** נָשׁוּב נִרְד אֶל יַם-הַמֶּלַח  
**By way of Jericho.** בְּדֶרֶךְ יְרִיחוֹ.

The song that played a part in pushing us back to the Kotel now describes the new reality. This story teaches us the power of culture and how much it influences us, the importance of the songs we hear, and how our playlist shapes reality. We see how deep and ancient our story is, how layers upon layers of culture and history await us, and how much there is for us to create. We must be the ones to write the next stanzas about Jerusalem.

Happy Yom Yerushalayim.



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