

# *Jerusalem: Holy City, Holy Story*

## **Study Session**

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**KOACH**  
on campus



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on your interests and the available time. This packet contains: background materials and a facilitator guide. The background materials and facilitator guide will help you build conversations around the text and create connections between the text and contemporary life.

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# Holy City, Holy Space

## Facilitator Guide

### Overview and Objective

In ancient times, Jews from all over the land of Israel would make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem during the festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot to offer tithes and sacrifices to the Holy Temple. Today, Jews from all over the world still make pilgrimages to the holy city of Jerusalem, although now they come to sightsee, study or visit relatives and friends.

No matter why one travels to Jerusalem, it is hard to visit the city and remain unmoved. Jerusalem is a place of religious depth, physical beauty, social intensity and political complexity. Even for those who have yet to visit Jerusalem, the city often serves as a powerful force in their lives. After all, the image of Jerusalem is continuously referenced in Jewish prayer and song. Additionally, newspaper articles and television news programs often write about and show images from the holy city.

This study packet offers you an opportunity to explore, in greater depth, your relationship to the city of Jerusalem as an individual and as a member of the Jewish people. The packet is comprised of two separate sections of texts and questions based on those texts. The first section looks at the image of Jerusalem presented in traditional Jewish texts. The second section explores Jerusalem and Israel from the vantage point of two modern authors.

Although this material is presented as a progression, you need not follow the format from beginning to end. Each section can stand on its own or be combined with other sections or additional texts. Perhaps you will want to use one of the texts as a basis for a *d'var torah*. Alternatively, you can use these for programs related to *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut*, Israeli Independence Day (May 3/5<sup>th</sup> of *Iyyar*), or *Yom Yerushalayim*, Jerusalem Day (May 26/28<sup>th</sup> of *Iyyar*). Be creative with the material and have fun!

## Definitions and Biographies

**Genesis Rabbah-** A book of stories and explanations (*midrash*) inspired by text of the Biblical book of Genesis. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E

**Shulhan Arukh-** Name means “prepared table.” A legal code composed in the mid-16th century by Rabbi Joseph Caro which serves as one of the main standards of Jewish law. The *Shulhan Arukh* contains four sections: *Orah Hayyim*, the laws of prayer, synagogue, and holidays; *Yoreh De’ah*, laws on such things as *kashrut* and charity; *Ezen HaEzer*, laws about marriage and divorce; and *Hoshen Mishpat*, Jewish civil law. The *Shulhan Arukh* also contains commentary by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (The Rema) describing how Ashkenazi law differs from Sephardi law.

**Yehuda Amichai-** 1924-2000. Celebrated Israeli poet who wrote about love, loss, everyday encounters and contemporary issues. Winner of the Israel Prize in 1982.

## Section One– Holy City

Texts:

**מדרש רבה בראשית פרשה נט:ה**

ירושלים אורו של עולם שנאמר (ישעיה ס) והלכו גוים לאורך ומי הוא אורה של ירושלים הקדוש ברוך הוא דכתיב והיה לך ה' לאור עולם:

Jerusalem is the light of the world as it says, “And the nations shall walk at your light” (Isaiah 60:3). And who is the light of Jerusalem? God, as it is written, “And God will be for you an everlasting light” (Isaiah 60:19).

**עמידה**

וְלִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִירְךָ בְּרַחֲמִים תָּשׁוּב. וְתִשָּׁפֵן בְּתוֹכָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ. וּבְנֵה אוֹתָהּ בְּקֶרֶב בְּיָמֵינוּ בְּנֵין עוֹלָם. וְכִסֵּא דָוִד מְהֵרָה לְתוֹכָהּ תִּכְיֵן: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה. בּוֹנֵה יְרוּשָׁלַיִם:

And to Your city Jerusalem, in mercy return. And dwell in it as you stated. And rebuild it soon, in our days, as an everlasting structure. And the throne of David speedily establish within it. Blessed are you, God, Builder of Jerusalem.

*From the Weekday Amidah*

**שו"ע אר"ח סימן צד סעיף א**

בקומו להתפלל, אם היה עומד בח"ל, יחזיר פניו כנגד ארץ ישראל ויכוין גם לירושלים ולמקדש ולבית קדשי הקדשים; היה עומד בא"י, יחזיר פניו כנגד ירושלים ויכוין גם למקדש ולבית קה"ק; היה עומד בירושלים, יחזיר פניו למקדש ויכוין ג"כ לבית קדשי הקדשים; היה עומד אחורי הכפורת, מחזיר פניו לכפורת.

In rising to pray the *Amidah*, if one is standing outside of the Land of Israel, one should turn to face the Land of Israel and focus his attention also on Jerusalem and on the Temple and on the home of the Holy of Holies. If one is standing in the Land of Israel, one should turn to face Jerusalem and also focus his attention on the Temple and the home of the Holy of Holies. If one is standing in Jerusalem, one should turn to face the Temple and also focus his attention on the home of the Holy of Holies. If one is standing [in the Temple] before the covering to the Ark, one should turn to face the covering on the Ark.

*Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 94:1*

## Discussion Questions:

1. Offer students a piece of a piece of paper and ask them to divide it into three sections. Ask them to title each section with the following headings: "Jerusalem in Prayer," "Jerusalem in the News" and "Jerusalem in My Heart and Mind." Have them write down all the descriptive words and phrases that they associate with these different images of Jerusalem. Ask students to share the different words they have written and the reasons, meaning, and memories behind the descriptions they have offered on each list.
2. Read excerpt from *Genesis Rabbah*. Discuss the image of "light" which is used in the passage. What emotions and associations do students have with the image of "light?" For example, what does the phrase "you are the light of my life" mean? Similarly, how do light and sun affect people's moods? Can students think of any examples of how the imagery of light is used in poetry or literature? Then, ask the students what it means to say that Jerusalem is the "light of the world?" Is this a description of Jerusalem from the past, Jerusalem of the present, or is it an ideal for which we strive?
3. What does the passage from *Genesis Rabbah* say about God's relationship with Jerusalem? How is God's relationship to Jerusalem different in the passage from the *Amidah*? (In the excerpt from *Genesis Rabbah*, God is the light of Jerusalem, while in the passage from the *Amidah*, God is assumed to be absent from Jerusalem). Why do you think the authors of the *Amidah* assume that God is gone from Jerusalem and needs to return? Do you agree that God is absent from the city? As Jews, what can *we* do to help ensure God's presence is felt in Jerusalem?
4. How often do you think about Jerusalem or Israel? Do your thoughts turn there just when you pray, when you hear a news story relating to the region, or do you daydream about past or future visits? Why do you think that the *Shulhan Arukh* calls for people to always pray their *Amidah* facing the direction of Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple? Have you ever been in synagogue and had to stand up and turn in a different direction to pray the *Amidah*? If so, to what extent did such movement add to or subtract from your prayer experience?

## Section Two– Holy Story

### **Texts:**

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.  
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,  
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall  
And they laugh behind heavy curtains  
In their hotels.  
They have their pictures taken  
Together with our famous dead  
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb  
And on Ammunition hill.  
They weep over our sweet boys  
And lust after our tough girls  
And hang up their underwear  
To dry quickly  
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I 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 right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!"

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

*"Tourists" by Yehuda Amichai*

For us, Israel is not just a place—it's a story. And it's not just any story—it's our story, your story, the story of where we've come from, and the story of where we are going. It's a story that our people have been telling for a long time, as we feel a need to be a part of it.

All of the chapters of our story point to this land. Just like you, Abraham came here with his family and left everything else behind. Remember how when we drive down to the Dead Sea, Ema always asks you which of those little sand dunes you think Abraham walked on? Of course you are right that the wind has blown that sand about many thousands of times, and that he didn't walk on any of them. But you know what? That doesn't matter. He was here. So were the Maccabees. So were the Rabbis of the Mishnah. And now, so are you.

*Home to Stay by Daniel Gordis*

### Discussion Questions:

1. Were you ever a tourist in Jerusalem? If so, what were your favorite memories? Were there any parts of your visit that were challenging or difficult? If you have not yet visited Jerusalem, what do you imagine your first trip to the city will be like? Do you have reservations about visiting Jerusalem or Israel? Do you have any hopes or dreams about your first visit that you would like to share?
2. Read the poem by Yehuda Amichai. For those who have visited Israel, are any of the images in the poem familiar? In this poem, what are Amichai's criticisms of tourists to Jerusalem and Israel? What do you think are the origins of his apparent disapproval? Do you think Amichai's view of tourists and their values are valid? How would you present a counterargument to his view (For example, do you think that Amichai is missing or negating some of the profound emotional and spiritual experiences that tourists have while visiting Israel)?
3. Read the excerpt from Home to Stay. This passage is taken from a letter that the author, Rabbi Daniel Gordis, writes to his children. In this letter, Gordis explains to his children the importance of the State of Israel for the Jewish people and why he and his wife have chosen to uproot their family from the United States and make Israel their home. According to this excerpt, why is Israel important to Gordis and his wife? Why does Gordis think that Israel is more than a place, but also a "story"?
4. If you have visited Israel, how did your trip add to your Jewish "story?" Similarly, how did you feel that you contributed to the "story" of the Jewish people?

# Additional Resources

- Divided Jerusalem: The Struggle for the Divided City by Bernard Wasserstein. Profile Books, 2002.
- A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time by Howard M. Sachar. Knoph, 1996.
- Israel, A Spiritual Travel Guide: A Companion for the Modern Jewish Pilgrim by Lawrence A. Hoffman. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005.
- Jerusalem in the Twentieth Century by Martin Gilbert. Wiley 1998.
- Jerusalem: Portrait of the City in the Second Temple Period (538-70 C.E.) by Lee I. Levine, JPS, 2003.
- The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai by Yehuda Amichai. University of California Press, 1996.