Why is Jerusalem the Capital of Israel?

YERUSHALAYIM, OUR CAPITAL CITY

A capital city of a nation is usually the location of that nation's government and where most of the nation's leaders and officials reside. One of the characteristics of a modern capital city is that it does not belong to any particular state or province. A capital city must be "federal," that is, for the entire nation, and should not be under the jurisdiction of any state or province. This is the case, for example, of Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Washington DC: a federal district not under the authority of any state. (Washington D.C. is not part of the state of Maryland, the geographic area where it is located.) This guarantees the impartiality of this city with respect to the other states, and justifies it being the seat of the national government and federal institutions.

The former monarchical State of Israel, in the times of the kings Shaul, David and Shelomo, was comprised of twelve tribes, each tribe having its own territory (or "nahala"), which had been partitioned to them in the times of Yehoshua bin Nun, Moshe's successor.

Now, while the Tora itself assumes the People of Israel will once have a "chosen" city ('□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□□), where the Bet haMiqdash and the Judicial Seat of Israel will be established, the official story of Yerushalayim begins with King David.

At first, David's own tribe, Yehuda (Judah, whose area was the region we know today as Judea), sided with him, while the rest of the nation remained loyal to King Shaul. When King Shaul and his heirs were killed in a campaign against the Pelishtim, representatives of the twelve tribes of Israel and the elders came to Hebron, a city in Judea, where David was already seen as the leader. There, these representatives anointed and declared David king over all Israel (Shemuel II Ch. 5). The very first thing David does as the new King of Israel is conquering Yerushalayim. At that time, Yerushalayim was in the hands of the Jebusites, the only Canaanite people that had not yet been conquered since the time of Yehoshua Bin Nun. David

offered the Jebusites to surrender the city peacefully. The Jebusites rejected the offer very defiantly, making fun of David. They told him that the city was impenetrable, and to demonstrate their confidence in the strength of their fortifications, the city was to be symbolically defended by blind and lame soldiers. The book of Shemuel tells us very briefly that the city was conquered by entering through an underground tunnel ("tsinor"). The new king of Israel established his court in that fortress and changed its name to 'Ir David (the City of David. Today, this place is the most excavated archaeological site in the world, and the remains of the impressive walls of the Jebusite fortress have already been discovered. See this beautiful website for more information, www.cityofdavid.org.il/en.)

THE CITY OF DAVID

There, in that fortress called Metsudat Zion, David established his court, the seat of his government and his palace, which was built with cedar wood imported from Lebanon. He then built an altar and brought there the Aron haBerit, the Ark of the Covenant, which some years later was brought to its permanent resting place in Bet haMiqdash (Temple of Yerushalayim). David reigned in Yerushalayim for 33 years. Yerushalayim was located on the border between the territory of the tribe of Binyamin and the territory of Yehuda, and politically belonged to neither of these tribes, given that it had not been conquered by Binyamin. This neutrality allowed this city to be the capital of Israel, and to belong in the same way to all the tribes.

Something more. In this Chapter, Shemuel II, 5: 6, the text writes an unusual word that is key to understand this point. When David went to conquer Yerushalayim he took "his own men." Each tribe had its own army. David, once appointed as king, could have let into battle the "state militia" of one of the tribes, for instance, Yehuda. However, David fought with his own men, who had not come from any particular tribe. These men were like his "Praetorian Guard," a "National Guard," a federal military force that would not represent any particular tribe or state. Yeruhalayim having been deliberately conquered by a national military force, meant no tribe could claim possession over it.

MOUNT MORIA

Finally, a few years later, and by divine command, King David made a move for the land of Aravna the Jebusite, a property sharing borders with the City of David. This land was Mount Moria, where Abraham had taken his son Itzhaq for the ‘aqeda, and where King Solomon later erected the Temple of Yerushalayim. This area is now known as Har HaBayit (Temple Mount)—the site where once stood the Bet HaMiqdash, one of its walls being the Kotel (Western Wall), adjacent to the old city.

Aravna offered King David this property for free. But David insisted he wanted to purchase it. The Sages explained 2,000 years ago that Temple Mount is one of the three places in Israel that the descendants of the Canaanite people (now disappeared) could never dispute their possession, since these sites were not conquered by force but were bought legally. The most interesting thing about this, relating to the “federal” aspect of Yerushalayim, is that two different sums of money are mentioned in two parallel texts. The book of Shemuel says that it cost David 50 sheqalim to acquire that land, but the book of Chronicles (dibre hayamaim) writes: 600 sheqalim. The commentators explain that the price was 600 sheqalim, and that the 50 sheqalim was what each of the 12 tribes paid. In other words, Yerushalayim was purchased not by one but by all the tribes of Israel.

Jerusalem is the symbol of a united Israel: one People, despite comprising twelve tribes. From the moment of its foundation, Yerushalayim was meant to be a federal city and not a tribal one. It is the capital city because it does not belong to any particular tribe, but to all the members of the people of Israel.

To be continued