



MIDEI CHODESH

B'CHODSHO

BY RABBI SHMUEL GOLDIN

Faculty, OU Israel

Rabbi Emeritus, Congregation Ahavath  
Torah, Englewood NJ

# What's in a Name?

## *A Yom Yerushalayim Contemplation*

What is the origin of the name *Yerushalayim*, Jerusalem? How did the name of Judaism's holiest city come to be?

An intriguing answer is proposed by the Midrash...

The name *Yerushalayim*, the Rabbis claim, traces to two biblical figures who intersect briefly in the Torah text, Avraham and Malchi-tzedek.

Malchi-tzedek, who appears in the Torah only once, is described in the Torah as "the king of *Shalem*" and as a "priest of God, the Most High." Apparently a righteous spiritual leader, Malchi-tzedek lives in Avraham's time, but outside of the Patriarch's immediate orbit and influence.<sup>1</sup> The rabbis identify *Shalem*, the location of Malchi-tzedek's rule, as the city of *Yerushalayim*.

Years after his encounter with

1 The Midrash identifies Malchi-tzedek as Shem, the son of Noah.

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Malchi-tzedek, Avraham finds himself on the summit of Mount Moriah, following Akeidat Yitzchak, the aborted sacrifice of Yitzchak. Looking out from the mountain-top, Avraham declares the name of the site to be *Hashem Yireh*, "HaShem Will See." The rabbis maintain that Mount Moriah will ultimately become the Temple Mount, again in *Yerushalayim*.

God, the rabbis explain, is therefore confronted with a dilemma:

*What shall the name of this city be? If I call the city Shalem, as did Malchi-tzedek, I will slight Avraham. If I choose the name that Avraham suggests, HaShem Yireh, I will slight Malchi-tzedek.*

The Divinely ordained solution?

*To honor both righteous men, I will combine the names. The city will be called Yireh-Shalem, Yerushalayim.*

As is always the case, powerfully significant and complex ideas course beneath the surface of a seemingly simple rabbinic tale...



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The first point we immediately discern is that *HaShem's relationship with the Jewish people is unique, but not exclusive*. Our God is a universal God. While He relates to His "Chosen Nation" in singular ways, He is accessible and near to righteous individuals and peoples of all origins and backgrounds.

One might have thought that a "contest" between Avraham, the towering progenitor of the Jewish nation, and Malchi-tzedek, a non-Jewish priest who appears once, glancingly, in the Torah, would be no "contest" at all. Such, however, is not the case. HaShem will consider Malchi-tzedek's rights equally, alongside those of Avraham, in the naming of the Holy city of Jerusalem.

The messages that emerge from this Midrash, however, strike even deeper, in surprisingly prescient ways. Each of the two names originally chosen for Jerusalem mirrors a specific vision for that holy city.

To Malchi-tzedek, Jerusalem is *Shalem*, "whole." This is a city that will speak to all of mankind, Jew and Non-Jew alike. From its walls will emanate spiritual ideas designed to raise man's sights and transform his vision. Malchi-tzedek sees Jerusalem as a holy city for all, a city that is universal in scope.

In contrast to Malchi-tzedek's universal vision for Jerusalem, Avraham's dream is specific. The city is "*HaShem Yireh*," a place of pilgrimage for the Jewish people, a place where they will "be seen." Here the nation will come together thrice yearly, on their festive occasions, to connect with their God, with each other, and with their own spiritual potential. To Avraham, Jerusalem



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is a uniquely “Jewish” location, a place that concretely signifies the singular bond between God and the Jew.

The Midrash could hardly have been more prophetic...

As we look back upon the centuries that have passed since the “naming” of Jerusalem, we clearly see the realization of both visions for the city.

On the one hand, is there any other location on earth that has captured the attention, and continues to capture the attention, of the world more completely than Jerusalem? Holy to the three major Western religions, Jerusalem has shaped the religious outlook of so much of the world. Every inch of its space has been hotly contested, and continues to be contested in our day. More headlines, news reports, books and more have been written about this city than any other location in the world.

Malchi-tzedek’s universal vision of the city as “*Shalem*” has certainly been realized and will apparently be realized until the end of days.

On the other hand, the connection between the Jewish Nation and the city of Jerusalem is singular in its strength and significance. No other people has dreamt of a return to this city as we have; no other nation has exclaimed “Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem,” as we have exclaimed, over and over again, for centuries. It is the center that draws us, the magnet that pulls

us back from all corners of the globe.

Avraham’s vision of the city has also been realized, the vision of “*Har Yireh*,” the place where God and His people will ultimately come together “to be seen.”

And there is, of course, one additional message emerging from the Midrash, equally prescient and powerful as those above...

For both visions of Jerusalem, the universal and the particular, to truly take hold, one of these visions must take precedence.

*The only time in centuries when all have had freedom of access and worship at Jerusalem’s holy sights has been when the city has been in Jewish hands.*

*HaShem Yireh* enables *Shalem*; the realization of Avraham’s vision allows Malchi-tzedek’s to take hold, as well. This is a truth easily ignored by the world that we must loudly proclaim. Our return to Jerusalem in our day has resulted in an open city, allowing others to realize their dreams, even as we realize our own...

Yerushalayim, the city of visions and dreams, once again in our hands. As we celebrate its unification each year on Yom Yerushalayim, we pray that it will forever remain ours... For our sake, and for the sake of others, as well. ■

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