

In full page advertisements in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on April 16, Eli Wiesel published a letter to President Obama stating that “Jerusalem belongs to the Jewish people and is much more than a city,” urging that the U.S. halt pressure on Israel over settlements in East Jerusalem and postpone dealing with Jerusalem until Israelis and Palestinians “find ways to live together in an atmosphere of security.”

In response, 100 Jerusalemites, including many distinguished figures, signed a letter to Wiesel expressing “frustration, even outrage” and protesting his “sentimental abstractions,” “factual errors,” and “false representations.” The letter called Wiesel’s claim that Jerusalem is above politics as “doubly outrageous” and that the Israeli government’s settlement building in East Jerusalem and manipulation of the Jerusalem issues at the expense of human beings who live there are “an attempt to obviate any approaching chance for peace.”

Texts of Eli Wiesel letter and the Jerusalemites’ response follow:

***Letter from Eli Wiesel to President Obama, April 16, 2010***

It was inevitable: Jerusalem once again is at the center of political debates and international storms. New and old tensions surface at a disturbing pace. Seventeen times destroyed and seventeen times rebuilt, it is still in the middle of diplomatic confrontations that could lead to armed conflict. Neither Athens nor Rome has aroused that many passions.

For me, the Jew that I am, **Jerusalem is above politics. It is mentioned more than six hundred times in Scripture-and not a single time in the Koran. Its presence in Jewish history is overwhelming. There is no more moving prayer in Jewish history than the one expressing our yearning to return to Jerusalem. To many theologians, it IS Jewish history, to many poets, a source of inspiration. It belongs to the Jewish people and is much more than a city, it is what binds one Jew to another in a way that remains hard to explain. When a Jew visits Jerusalem for the first time, it is not the first time; it is a homecoming.** The first song I heard was my mother’s lullaby about and for Jerusalem. Its sadness and its joy are part of our collective memory.

Since King David took Jerusalem as his capital, Jews have dwelled inside its walls with only two interruptions; when Roman invaders forbade them access to the city and again, when under Jordanian occupation. Jews, regardless of nationality, were refused entry into the old Jewish quarter to meditate and pray at the Wall, the last vestige of Solomon’s temple. It is important to remember: had Jordan not joined Egypt and Syria in the 1967 war against Israel, the old city of Jerusalem would still be Arab. Clearly, while Jews were ready to die for Jerusalem they would not kill for Jerusalem.

Today, for the first time in history, Jews, Christians and Muslims all may freely worship at their shrines. And, contrary to certain media reports, Jews, Christians and Muslims ARE allowed to build their homes anywhere in the city. The anguish over Jerusalem is not about real estate but about memory.

What is the solution? Pressure will not produce a solution. Is there a solution? There must be, there will be. Why tackle the most complex and sensitive problem prematurely? Why not first take steps which will allow the Israeli and Palestinian communities to find ways to live together in an atmosphere of security. Why not leave the most difficult, the most sensitive issue, for such a time?

Jerusalem must remain the world's Jewish spiritual capital, not a symbol of anguish and bitterness, but a symbol of trust and hope. As the Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav said, "Everything in this world has a heart; the heart itself has its own heart."

Jerusalem is the heart of our heart, the soul of our soul.

— Elie Wiesel

### ***100 Israeli Jerusalemites Protest Wiesel Letter to Obama***

"Dear Mr. Wiesel,

We write to you from Jerusalem to convey our frustration, even outrage, at your recently published letter on Jerusalem. We are Jewish Jerusalemites – residents by choice of a battered city, a city used and abused, ransacked time and again first by foreign conquerors and now by its own politicians. We cannot recognize our city in the sentimental abstraction you call by its name.

Our Jerusalem is concrete, its hills covered with limestone houses and pine trees; its streets lined with synagogues, mosques and churches. Your Jerusalem is an ideal, an object of prayers and a bearer of the collective memory of a people whose members actually bear many individual memories. Our Jerusalem is populated with people, young and old, women and men, who wish their city to be a symbol of dignity - not of hubris, inequality and discrimination. You speak of the celestial Jerusalem; we live in the earthly one.

For more than a generation now the earthly city we call home has been crumbling under the weight of its own idealization. Your letter troubles us, not simply because it is replete with factual errors and false representations, but because it upholds an attachment to some other-worldly city which purports to supersede the interests of those who live in the this-worldly one. For every Jew, you say, a visit to Jerusalem is a homecoming, yet it is our commitment that makes your homecoming possible. We

prefer the hardship of realizing citizenship in this city to the convenience of merely yearning for it.

Indeed, your claim that Jerusalem is above politics is doubly outrageous. First, because contemporary Jerusalem was created by a political decision and politics alone keeps it formally unified. The tortuous municipal boundaries of today's Jerusalem were drawn by Israeli generals and politicians shortly after the 1967 war. Feigning to unify an ancient city, they created an unwieldy behemoth, encircling dozens of Palestinian villages which were never part of Jerusalem. Stretching from the outskirts of Ramallah in the north to the edge of Bethlehem in the south, the Jerusalem the Israeli government foolishly concocted is larger than Paris. Its historical core, the nexus of memories and religious significance often called "the Holy Basin", comprises a mere one percent of its area. Now they call this artificial fabrication 'Jerusalem' in order to obviate any approaching chance for peace.

Second, your attempt to keep Jerusalem above politics means divesting us of a future. For being above politics is being devoid of the power to shape the reality of one's life. As true Jerusalemites, we cannot stand by and watch our beloved city, parts of which are utterly neglected, being used as a springboard for crafty politicians and sentimental populists who claim Jerusalem is above politics and negotiation. All the while, they frantically "Judaize" Eastern Jerusalem in order to transform its geopolitics beyond recognition.

We invite you to our city to view with your own eyes the catastrophic effects of the frenzy of construction. You will witness that, contrary to some media reports, Arabs are *not* allowed to build their homes anywhere in Jerusalem. You discover see the gross inequality in allocation of municipal resources and services between east and west. We will take you to Sheikh Jarrah, where Palestinian families are being evicted from their homes to make room for a new Jewish neighborhood, and to Silwan, where dozens of houses face demolition because of the Jerusalem Municipality's refusal to issue building permits to Palestinians.

We, the people of Jerusalem, can no longer be sacrificed for the fantasies of those who love our city from afar. This-worldly Jerusalem must be shared by the people of the two nations residing in it. Only a shared city will live up to the prophet's vision: "Zion shall be redeemed with justice". As we chant weekly in our vigils in Sheikh Jarrah: "Nothing can be holy in an occupied city!"

Respectfully,

Just Jerusalem (Sheikh Jarrah) Activists

Ada Bilu; Alon Harel; Amiel Vardi; Amit Lavi; Amit Miller; Amos Goldberg; Ariela Brin; Assaf Sharon; Avichay Sharon; Avishai Margalit; Avital Abudi; Avital Sharon; Avner Inbar; Avrum Burg; Barbara Spectre; Bernard Avishai; Carlo Strenger; Daniella Gordon; Dani Schrire; Daniel Argo; Danny Felsteiner; Daphna Stroumsa;

David Grossman; David Shulman; Diana Steigler; Dolev Rahat; Dorit Gat; Dorit Argo; Edna Ulman-Margalit; Eitan Buchvall; Eli Sharon; Freddie Rokem; Galit Hasan-Rokem; Gideon Freudenthal; Gil Gutglick; Guga Kogan; Guy Feldman; Hagit Benbaji; Hagit Keysar; Haya Ofek; Hillel Ben Sasson; Ishay Rosen-Zvi; Itamar Shappira; Jonathan Yaari; Judy Labensohn; Judy Labensohn; Julia Alfandari; Levi Spectre; Liran Razinsky; Maya Wind; Mical Raz; Michael Ritov; Miriam Farhi-Rodrig; Mirit Barashi; Mirit Barashi; Moshe Halbertal; Naama Baumgarten-Sharon; Naama Hochstein; Nadav Sharon; Neria Biala; Nili Sharon; Noa Lamm-Shalem; Oded Erez; Oded Na'aman; Ofer Neiman; Omri Metzger; Paul Mendes-Flohr; Peter Lehahn; Phil Spectre; Ra'anana Alexandrowicz; Ram Rahat; Ray Schrire; Reuven Kaminer; Roe Metzger; Ronen Mandelkern; Roni Hammerman; Sahar Vardi; Sara Benninga; Sharon Casper; Shir Aloni Yaari; Shir Sternberg; Shlomi Segall; Silan Dallal; Silvia Piterman; Tal Shapira; Tamar Lehahn; Tamar Rappaport; Uri Bitan; Yafa Tarlowski; Yaron Gal; Yaron Wolf; Yehuda Agus; Yonatan Haimovich; Yoram Gordon; Yotam Wolfe; Yuval Drier Shilo; Zehava Galon; Zeev Sternhell; Zvi Benninga; Zvi Mazeh; Zvi Schuldiner”

(press inquiries and other questions about the open letter to Elie Wiesel can be sent to: [sheikhjarrah@gmail.com](mailto:sheikhjarrah@gmail.com))