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Jerusalem then and now

Native son Rivlin talks to 'Post' for Jerusalem Day

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

By definition, the role of the president of Israel is apolitical and largely ceremonial, but that does not prevent him (or her) from defending the integrity and legitimacy of the state and its capital Jerusalem when talking to representatives of foreign countries, especially heads of state and government.

President Reuven Rivlin was not yet nine years old when the state came into being, but young as he was, he could understand the significance of that momentous turn of the tide in Jewish history – from a people almost exterminated during the Second World War to a nation reborn only three years after that war ended.

His mother, Rachel, had been an active member of the Irgun, one of the Jewish resistance movements that fought the British, and it was almost impossible for him and his siblings not to know something of her activities, and why she was involved.

Before the establishment of the state, Rivlin frequently accompanied his father, Prof. Yosef Yoel Rivlin, to meetings with academics – both Jewish and Arab, and from time to time they went to the Old City, especially for the concluding prayers on Yom Kippur, so that they could hear Rabbi Moshe Halevi Segal

blow the shofar by the Western Wall, even though such an act was frowned on by the British Mandate authorities who did not want to sanction any activity that would antagonize the Arab population.

After the reunification of Jerusalem in June 1967, Segal was the first former resident of the Old City to return there to live.

At that time much of the Old City was rubble, but for

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Segal who had been exiled from his home for 19 years, the rubble was a matter of little consequence.

Rivlin served with the Intelligence Corps in the Israel Defense Forces, and during the Six Day War, fought as a reservist with the Jerusalem Brigade and was also an intelligence officer in the Paratroop Brigade. He also escorted convoys traveling to Mount Scopus.

For as long as he can remember, Rivlin has been an unofficial spokesman for Jerusalem. Long before he became president, when he served as a member of the Jerusalem City Council, when he was the manager of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer team and later as a member of Knesset, communications minister and Knesset speaker, he unfailingly introduced Jerusalem into his conversations.

Even before he became the country's No. 1 citizen, Rivlin was a walking symbol of Jerusalem, always responding to greetings by radio or television interviewers with "Shalom from Jerusalem, the capital of Israel."

Since becoming president in July 2014, Rivlin appears to be saying this more frequently than ever before, mainly because of his packed work day.

After nearly four years in office in which he had given only one interview to *The Jerusalem Post*, at the start of his seven-year-term, he finally agreed to be interviewed for Jerusalem Day. The time that was set was half an hour.

The conversation was almost entirely about Jerusalem then and now, and the interview went on for an hour and a quarter. Rivlin was in his element talking about the city that he loves so much, and would have happily continued but for the fact that members of his staff were knocking at his door with urgent matters to which he had to attend.



REUVEN RIVLIN

(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

ary of the Jewish state.

"It was a mystic Zionism," he said, referring to a book, *Vision of Zion*, which was written by Rabbi Eliahu Ben Solomon Zalman, better known as the Gaon of Vilna.

A movement established by followers of the Gaon of Vilna in 1771 came to Jerusalem in 1809 hoping to greet the Messiah. The Hebrew calendar year was Tav Kuf Ayin, which the Gaon of Vilna interpreted as the blowing of the shofar to hail the arrival of the Messiah.

The Rivlin family was among those who came at that time. When the Messiah didn't come in 1809, it was thought that he might come in 1840, but again he failed to do so. Rivlin jokes that the descendants of the followers of the Gaon of Vilna have been going to bed with their shoes on ever since, so that if the Messiah does arrive they can run out to greet him.

At that time all the Jews in Jerusalem lived in the Old City. The Ashkenazim who came from Europe, said Rivlin, had long been preceded by Sephardim who came from Spain, Morocco and the Balkans as much as three centuries earlier.

Although initially under Turkish rule, and then under British rule, the Jewish population created a community infrastructure of hospitals, schools, synagogues, housing for the poor and even a facility for the mentally ill, long before the First Aliya that took place between

ALMOST EVERY Jew is aware of the aspiration "Next year in Jerusalem" that is part and parcel of Jewish liturgy. Rivlin noted that this attachment to Jerusalem was a form of Zionism that preceded the political Zionist movement that was initiated by Theodor Herzl, who is credited with being the vision-

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PRESIDENT REUVEN RIVLIN speaks at the Western Wall. (Facebook)

1882 and 1903.

Many of the people of the First Aliya were from North Africa and Yemen, although there were also some who had fled the Russian pogroms, he added.

For them, and others who came after them, it was Jerusalem more than the Land of Israel that they envisaged as their destination.

The Second Aliya, from 1904 to 1914, was made up for the most part of socialist Zionists from Eastern Europe, many of them well educated, who wanted to return to their ancestral calling and work the land.

Rivlin cited as an example Josef Trumpeldor, who though famed for his military activities was actually a law graduate who wanted to be a farmer.

Up until the time of Moses Montefiore, who built Mishkenot Sha'ananim - regarded as the first Jewish neighborhood outside the Old City - on a hill across from Mount Zion in 1860, all the Jews who lived in Jerusalem resided in the Old City, said Rivlin, and even after the first ones left to work as artisans in Mishkenot Sha'ananim, they did not stay there overnight, but returned to the Old City to sleep.

If the truth be told, he said, the first neighborhood was in the area of Mamilla, which was populated by Jews who had come from the Mughrabi Quarter in the Old City. They were not afraid to live beyond the walls, and they established their

own quarter, of which very little is left today. The North African Jewish Heritage Center, hidden behind King David and Agron streets, the main thoroughfares that border it, is virtually all that remains of the community that once was.

In the 1860s, Yosef Rivlin and Yoel Moshe Salomon, who according to the president were soul mates, built Nahlat Shiva, and to this day their descendants are arguing as to which of the two built the first house in the neighborhood.

After that, other neighborhoods such as Mea She'arim, Batei Ungarim and Even Israel - all of them haredi quarters, sprang up. There is a common belief that the first word in the Even Israel neighborhood is an acronym for Av Ben Neched, which translates as father son grandson - and a sign of the faith in continuity, but Rivlin's explanation is that Even in gematria stands for 53, and the neighborhood was originally settled by 53 families.

Sukkat Shalom, a neighborhood adjacent to Nahlaot, was the first neighborhood in Jerusalem with indoor toilets, said Rivlin.

When the Rehavia neighborhood, where Rivlin was born, was built in the 1920s, it was designed by a German architect, Richard Kaufman, and its inhabitants, many of them from Germany, were academics and public servants

The Gymnasia Rehavia high school was attended by many well-known figures such as author A.B. Yehoshua, who was Rivlin's scout leader, Rivlin himself, future minister Dan Meridor and future MK Nachman Shai, to name but a few.

Although Rehavia is and was an upscale neighborhood, Rivlin said that most of the Ashkenazim who lived there did not own their apartments, but paid key money. However, affluent Sephardim such as the Kukiya, Eliachar and Valero families who also lived there did own their houses.

While the Jewish intellectuals lived primarily in Rehavia, the Arab elite built an upscale neighborhood in Katamon, said Rivlin.

During the period in which Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie lived in exile, he also lived in Rehavia, and left in the year that Rivlin was born.

Among other residents of Rehavia, whether permanently or temporarily, were all the prime ministers of Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has both his private and his official residence in the area. Today, said Rivlin, there are many roads that lead to Jerusalem, but for a long time entry to and exit from the city was via the Jerusalem corridor, which was under siege during the War of Independence.

MANY PEOPLE ask why Jerusalem is so important, he said. Aside from its historic and religious significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims, it has to be remembered that the United Nations tried to declare Jerusalem as an international city in order to neutralize the Arab contention that sovereignty can be only under an Islamic administration.

"In the early years of the state, immigrants wanted to come only to Jerusalem, and when the boat or the truck brought them to transit camps and development towns, they protested and asked where they had been taken to."

When Herzl proposed the Uganda Scheme as an alternative to the Holy Land at the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in August 1903, said Rivlin, many people walked out of the hall.

When Herzl wondered why, he was told that they hadn't left, but were outside in the lobby. He went out to ask what they were doing there and found them sitting on the floor like mourners, some of them wearing sackcloth and weeping, Rivlin related. "They told him that if they had to go to Uganda instead of Jerusalem, they may as well stay in Europe."

Over the years, the families of the mystic Zionists merged with the political Zionists, said Rivlin. "Anyone who wanted higher education went to the Hebrew University which is in Jerusalem. Admittedly the Haifa Technion and the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot are older, but whoever wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer came to Jerusalem to study at the Hebrew University."

Rivlin himself is a law graduate of the Hebrew University.

Jerusalem was known as a city of learning, whether it was Torah study or secular academics, whereas Tel Aviv had all the major cultural institutions, said Rivlin. "But the big stars such as Shaike Ophir, Yossi Banai and Rivka Michaeli were Jerusalemites who moved to Tel Aviv."

The character of Jerusalem changed with its demographic growth, said Rivlin.

There were many neighborhoods that, in the immediate aftermath of the Six Day War, were not under Israeli rule. He remembers sitting with Teddy Kollek, Moshe Dayan and Uzi Narkiss to determine how far reaching Israeli rule should be. Someone else at the meeting commented that Jerusalem is a cul-de-sac surrounded by a sea of Arab neighborhoods, with an isolated Jewish community, and that it should become a sea of Jewish neighborhoods. These areas include Gilo, French Hill, Ramat Eshkol, Pisgat Ze'ev and Ramot, and the Jewish population in these areas now numbers in excess of 300,000.

Dayan wanted to include Kalandiya and a-Ram, but Rivlin had disagreed at the time, saying that there were too many Arabs living in those villages to turn them into Jewish neighborhoods. Aside from which, Kalandiya and a-Ram lead to Ramallah, and should therefore not be under Israeli sovereignty.

But Kalandiya had an airport that Dayan wanted to put at the disposal of Jerusalem. At that time, Dayan was already speaking of a two-state solution, and Rivlin had told him that you can't have an airport with two international borders.

EVERY FOREIGN DIGNITARY who comes to the President's Residence is told by Rivlin that UNESCO cannot issue political decrees about Jerusalem that defy history or today's reality. If their ambassadors want to live in Herzliya Pituah, that is their prerogative, he tells them, but if they want to present their credentials to the president, to meet the prime minister, or visit other government ministries or the Knesset, they have to come to Jerusalem, "because Jerusalem is the eternal capital of Israel and the Jewish people."

This week, Rivlin will attend several Jerusalem Day events, including a memorial for Ethiopian Jews who died while walking across the desert toward Jerusalem; a state memorial ceremony in memory of those died in the Six Day War, and a ceremony marking the reunification of the city.

He will also attend Monday's ceremony for the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and will welcome two state presidents to the capital: Juan Carlos Varela of Panama and Jimmy Morales of Guatemala, who will be returning his embassy to Jerusalem.

Rivlin hopes to be able to welcome a lot more presidents and prime ministers who are coming to Jerusalem for the relocation of their embassies.