

Rabbi Lewis' message for September 2004

This week, I opened up the paper and saw a photo I thought I would never see: Chris Noth (“Mr. Big” for those of you who didn’t watch “Sex and the City”) wearing a yarmulke and praying at the Western Wall. He was on a ten-day Israeli Ministry of Tourism-sponsored tour of Israel and said he wanted to show that Israel, like New York, is a safe place to visit despite the violence. Is it possible that true fans of Sex and the City will visit Israel because of Chris Noth’s example? I suppose stranger things have happened.

That wall is all that is left of the outer walls that surrounded the second Temple. This part of the wall supported the sacred Temple Mount but, oddly enough to us, the rabbis of the rabbinic period that followed the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. never considered the wall to be sacred or to have any special status.

Not until the Byzantine period do we find a recorded example of an ancient traveler’s being excited to be at the Western Wall. He inscribed on the wall a quotation from the end of Isaiah (“and you shall see and your heart shall rejoice.”). “But that’s it,” claims a colleague of mine (I apologize for the lack of attribution but I can’t remember which colleague): “No Jew in Jerusalem ever saw or thought of or valued or described the Wall for the next thousand years. (Some Muslim writers did.) Nahmanides, the Ramban, was in Jerusalem, as was Benjamin of Tudela, Meshullam of Volterra, and Estori Ha-Parhi. So was Ovadiah of Bartenura, important men all. Not a word from any of them about the Wall, although a reference in Benjamin of Tudela could refer to the Wall, or could not.”

And yet there Chris Noth prays, at a wall that has become a symbol of Israel to the world (we Jews do not use the term “wailing wall,” by the way, since that bestowed upon us by strangers who thought that Jewish chanting sounded like wailing). For some, the wall represents the hope of actually rebuilding a third Temple on that spot; for others, it is a symbol of the modern state of Israel; for yet others, it is a symbol of the enduring nature of the Jewish people; and for still others, most notably an Israeli feminist group called Women at the Wall, the Western Wall represents a fortress in whose shadow they are not allowed to read Torah.

Despite the controversy I would much rather write about this wall than the security wall presently being erected between Israel and the Palestinians. That wall, intended to bring comfort to Israelis, also brings a large share of discomfort to Jews everywhere, no matter our politics. We live in a time where we believe that walls, like the Berlin wall, should be torn down.

We know what it is to be walled in and walled out. We wish to cause no suffering to others and yet, if we ourselves don’t defend Israel’s right to exist in safety, who will? When Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall...” and continued, “Good fences make good neighbors,” he was using irony at its best. He knew that walls were not the ideal way to live in peace with neighbors.

In these weeks after Tisha B’Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, we read haftarot of consolation for our loss. Those prophetic words always end on a note of hope that some day, we will live in a world free of fear and destruction, a world free of walls, where

we will all come to live in peace and to worship the one God of the universe. Who knows?
Maybe Chris Noth will start the beginning of that new age.

With prayers for a good summer and a fall filled with rejuvenation and inspiration.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis
September 2004