



Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Bechukotai / פרשת בחקתי / 5779

The Two Versions of Ramban's Prayer for Yerushalayim

The Ramban was a great lover of the Land of Israel. Towards the end of his life, in the wake of the controversy over his success at his disputation with Pablo Christiani, the Ramban left Spain and emigrated to Israel. He traveled to Yerushalayim and, for a period of time, lived in the city. There, he took an earlier passage that he wrote about the city earlier in his life in Spain, edited it, added to it and transformed it into a powerful prayer. Recently, Professor Oded Yisraeli of Ben Gurion University, carefully compared the earlier and final versions of the text, allowing us to see precisely what Ramban added upon seeing the city.¹ Embedded in these edits are powerful lessons for us and our relationship with Yerushalayim.

One difference between the Spanish and Yerushalmi version of the texts are Ramban's positive descriptions of the city. They are simply more elaborate in the second version. For example, when writing in Spain, Ramban sufficed with just mentioning the words "Even Shetiyah" (foundation stone). In the later version, however, he adds a full length description: "For there is the Even Shetiyah From which the world was founded and from which extended the bases of the world and their boundaries."² Other terse phrases are similarly expanded upon and intensified.

While it is impossible to be certain, it seems that Ramban experienced the notion of "hearing is not comparable to seeing."³ When Ramban entered Yerushalayim and saw the city first hand, he was overcome with feeling and felt compelled to emotionally elaborate on the city's centrality significance.

A parallel difference can be discerned regarding the current abject state of the city. In both versions the Ramban transitions from these beautiful and soul stirring descriptions to elaborate on the

¹ Oded Yisraeli, "Jerusalem in Nahmanides' Thought: The Evolution of 'The Prayer Over the Ruins of Jerusalem,'" *AJS Review* 41:2, 409-453. This dvar torah was inspired by the following shiur by Rabbi Dr. Jefferey Woolf - <https://www.yutorah.org/sidebar/lecture.cfm/925427/rabbi-dr-jeffrey-woolf/from-above-the-mount-of-olives-ramban-meets-jerusalem/>.

² Oded Yisraeli, 432.

³ Mechilta, parshat Yitro to 19:9.



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city's desolation and then pray for its rebirth. However, the prayer offered when in Yerushalayim is tangibly more personal and emotional. This is perhaps expressed most powerfully by the heart-wrenching conclusion of the Yerushalmi version which is understandably absent from the earlier version:

From Your servant's house comes this Moshe ben Nahman, to see Your city and sanctuary and their ruins, and when he rent his garment and tunic, crying and lamenting, he bowed unto You and made supplication unto You, that he should merit and behold. Your inner holiness and sanctuary, Your posts and arches rebuilt. Our eyes shall see Jerusalem a peaceful habitation and the cities of Judah in their restoration.

One can feel the Ramban's pain arising from the text.

Ramban's elated and beautiful descriptions of the ancient Yerushalayim and his sense of mourning and prayer over the current state of the city changed indelibly upon his entry into the city. One can hear about Yerushalayim, learn about Yerushalayim and even understand the conceptual importance of Yerushalayim, as the Ramban surely did while in Spain. However, one's sense of the city's significance and yet unrealized potential simply grows dramatically when walking through the city's streets and taking in its smells and sights.

The next time we visit Yerushalayim let us take a moment to ponder this idea. God has granted us the great gift of a united Yerushalayim, capital of the State of Israel. Let us use the experience of being present in the city to further our appreciation of the city's significance and pray for its full blossoming.