

A New York Story

By Steve Greenberg

I have always thought of Jerusalem as the holy city and New York as its profane sister. While both are international Meccas, Jerusalem has always been the place where a chance meeting feels like a fateful encounter. New York thrives instead on luck and opportunity rather than on fate. If New York is populated with hungry day traders and starving actors, Jerusalem is populated with worn out angels. I have lived many years in Jerusalem and I miss the accidental providence that follows one around. However, my regular trek home from the CLAL office yesterday introduced me to the Jerusalem in my own backyard.

I was walking west on 30th Street toward the 7th Avenue subway station when an unshaven, unkempt man caught my eye. He had a paper cup in his hand. My custom is that when panhandlers ask, I generally give. This practice comes from a teacher of mine who taught me that one should cultivate "open-handedness" in oneself as a personal quality, no matter how limited the effect upon the recipient. I usually drop a quarter, smile and go on my way.

At first I passed the man, not quite certain if he was begging. But then I heard a muffled sound and turned around. He reeked of alcohol and had a poorly healing gash above his eye. I decided not to get involved. I turned toward my destination and he shuffled toward me. Again I heard him mumble, this time more audibly, "Nuntileycomere." At this point, I took whatever he was saying for a request and put a quarter in his cup. He was not interested in my quarter. "Nuntileycomere!" he said, not able to look me in the eye, but wanting my acknowledgment.

I got ready to walk away. "You're drunk," I said, as an explanation for my misunderstanding. He again was not very interested either in my lame excuses or in the implicit rebuke. "No until eycom ere 'm I goin' gin!" All at once everything came together. "You fought in Vietnam?" I said. He nodded. "Not until they come here?" I said, looking for confirmation. He nodded again. I had understood. He had been sent to fight a war on foreign soil, a war that brutalized him and countless others and brought honor to no one. If he was going to fight in a war and suffer again, the enemy would have to come here. "Not until they come here" was shorthand for his anger, pain and humiliation. He was telling me that he would fight honorably and bravely if ever called upon again, but only in a war that mattered with an enemy upon American soil. He turned back toward his corner and was gone.

I paused for a moment and then turned back toward 7th Avenue, and four steps along my path was bowled over. I cannot quite explain why, but I felt an emotion so strong that tears came to my eyes. The effect of being a momentary witness to this man's life, to the legacy of Vietnam upon his body and spirit, stopped me in my tracks. It dawned on me that my tradition of dropping quarters in cups

could be just as disconnecting as blindly walking by. The duty is not to throw coins at people, but to hear them when they call for help. To respond. For this man, the cup was essentially a prop. He was at that moment begging for a witness to how he was robbed of honor.

I composed myself and continued to walk toward the subway. Passing a stationery store, I remembered that I needed a pen or two. When I was paying for my purchase, the owner of the store noted my yarmulke and started up a conversation. In two sentences I was nabbed.

Three months ago, this fifty-year-old secular Jew had lost his father. He now goes to minyan twice a day if he can, or at least once a day every day. He bought himself a prayer book with Hebrew, English and transliteration so that he could say the Kaddish properly. But the Ashkenazic transliteration was not always helpful and he felt as if he was making mistakes. Could I look over the Kaddish with him? In the middle of the store on 30th Street, customers mulling about, we went over the words of the Kaddish. No attempt was made to be hushed about it. "Yisgadal v'yiskadash shemay rabbah" was read in full voice. The whole store could hear him. I wondered what listening to Kaddish read publicly might do to someone shopping for envelopes and rubber erasers. I wondered what effect it had on the owner's son, who was there behind the counter looking puzzled at his father's newly found religious zeal. Before we said goodbye, he assured me that I should not think that he was really religious. He had just become aware of things that had passed him by before.

I got on the subway eager for the comfort of my apartment and its predictable familiarity. The car was crowded, so I moved all the way to the right to find a spot in which to stand comfortably. A fellow in a hat was sitting on the seat in front of me working on a laptop computer. He finished his work and put the machine away. I noticed a small Hebrew book in the case and smiled at him. He smiled back. The train was nearing a station and he was obviously getting out. He said to me, "So, are you ready?" "Excuse me?" I said. "Are you ready for Moshiach?" "What?" I asked. "Are you ready for Moshiach?" All I needed was another crazy in this loopy day. "I don't know," I said. "The Rebbe teaches that the Moshiach could come at any moment. It could be any time now. It's time to get ready!" The car doors opened and he was gone.

My stop came soon enough. I climbed the stairs of the station into the night air. While Lubavitch Hasidim have been saying such things for many years, the strangeness of being pressed at just this moment with Messiah questions was disturbing. What did "get ready!" mean anyway? And then I knew.

Just be ready for anything. Not "get ready!" -- which is about planning, but "be ready!" - which is about staying open and awake to possibilities, about listening and about being ready to feel and respond. The sages say that when the Messiah comes, Jerusalem will be everywhere. Until then, the holy city has

apparently loaned New York a few million of her worn out angels to help us prepare. And once in New York, like a boat load of Jewish immigrants, they have scattered to every corner of the world, reminding us that while every stone is not yet holy, every human encounter is.