



## **"You Shall Rejoice in Your Festival":**

### **Why the General Assembly is Holy Ground**

**By Irwin Kula and Brad Hirschfield**

"This year in Atlanta!"

That's the slogan that greets you on the official web site of the 1999 General Assembly, the annual gathering of the United Jewish Communities, being held November 17-21 in Atlanta, Georgia.

Chutzpah, isn't it, somehow equating this capital city of the New South with the holy city of Jerusalem? Or to imagine that a gathering of Diaspora Jews-even the world's largest such gathering, with as many as 4,000 delegates expected-is akin to the great gatherings that occurred at Pesach and other festival times when the Temple stood in Jerusalem?

Of course, nothing can replace in the hearts and minds of Jews the idea and the reality of Jerusalem, whether it's Jerusalem the capital of a reborn Israel, or Jerusalem the symbol of the Jews' aspirations for a perfected world.

But think back a bit--2,000, 2,800 years ago. It is festival time in Jerusalem-Pesach, Sukkot, Shavuot. Thousands of Jews are leaving their homes and their businesses to spend a week in Jerusalem. It will be a week of doing the people's business-of reflecting on their successes, questioning their failures, and planning their futures.

They pack the inns and hostleries and spill out in tents-booths-along the Temple Mount's southern wall. Some have come to give thanks, and bring a kurban todah, a thanksgiving offering. Others are feeling anxious, and bring a shlamim offering, a sacrifice meant to make them feel a sense of wholeness. And still others feel guilty about their shortcomings--as individuals, as parents, as leaders--and they bring asham, or guilt offerings.

Running the show, or trying to, are the priests and levites, the machers, sweating all the details and arguing, sometimes lovingly, sometimes violently, about the right way to do things. And then there are others simply there for a good time, eating and drinking and enjoying the music historians tell us was being played even on the holy days themselves.

After a few days of offering their sacrifices, their prayers, and their songs, these pilgrims began to file out of the holy city. But they take along with them their memories and a sense of kedushah, or holiness. They undoubtedly feel a sense of intensity and renewal, and a renewed commitment to each other. They remember what they may have forgotten the rest of the year: that life could be special.

That's what happened b'yamim hahem-in those days. But if you use your imagination just a bit, and forget for a moment the traffic along Peachtree Road, or the roar of the jets landing at Hartsfield Airport, what do you find? Jews from all over the world coming to spend five days, including a Shabbat, in Atlanta. Some come just to reconnect with other people. They don't bring sacrifices but they do bring offerings-of news, about a new baby or a child's marriage; of friendship, to those whom they see too seldom; of thanks, for the help they've gotten, for themselves or their communities.

Some come beating their breasts, worried that they and their communities are not doing enough. In the bars and hallways they come asking, "How do we do more?", and that's their guilt offering. And other people have anxiety about the future-and come for the experience of feeling a little more shalem, a little more whole.

And finally we have our own priests and levites. They feel a terrible responsibility that this assembly comes out right-that sessions begin and end on time, that the people have a chance to be heard, and that the business that needs to be done actually gets done.

A word about that business: In Temple times just as today, community-building depended on the support and energy of individuals. In the bible, there is the obligation to donate a set portion of one's income-a tithe, or ma'aser-to the needy. But Deuteronomy's definition of a tithe has little to do with charity or "gifts." Rather the tithe is part of a ritual obligation to celebrate in Jerusalem, publicly, the abundance with which an individual had been blessed during the year. Today, the North American Jewish community's unprecedented prosperity suggests that we develop a similar ethic of abundance. When the community comes to gatherings like the G.A., it is to ask how to celebrate its capacity to upgrade the lives of those who don't find themselves in similar circumstances.

Of course, the resources are finite, and there are infinite needs. People will come with competing needs, conflicting agendas. This may be a little messy and, as is inevitable when this many people come together from so many places, there may be the occasional argument over turf, and priorities. But imagine regarding this messiness as a blessing, as exactly what an ethic of abundance demands and celebrates. In the not-so-distant past, our Jewish priorities were about quantity: how many Jews can we save, how many communities can we resettle. Today, we are able to place a greater emphasis on issues of quality: how do we upgrade

the spiritual lives of Jewish individuals, how do we strengthen communities so that they reflect Jewish ethical ideals? Discussions over quality are by definition more complex than discussions over quantity. But if we regard the ability to focus on quality as a blessing, then we can appreciate how the sound of multiple voices is the sound of conversation, not conflict. And out of this deeply pluralist conversation will flow the expansiveness that will allow us to look around, to dream big, and to turn big dreams into an even bigger reality.

That's why, when we return to our local communities, even the ones who disagreed with one another will remember, at some level, that there was a common ground even within the conflicts-that as Jews they actually love one another, as fellow members of a covenant. Covenantal unity is not the same as uniformity. The covenant is big enough to allow us to experience our diversity while we seek cohesion, to appreciate the Other because of his or her difference. The Torah understood this when it commanded the people to make their pilgrimages. "They shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed, but each with one's own gift, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has bestowed on you." (Deuteronomy 16:17)

In recent years, no Jewish gathering of any size can happen without talk of, and anxiety over, continuity. But if we cannot see a gathering like this in light of our past, if we can't stretch our imaginations to see that those days are these days and these days are those days, there is no continuity. If we can't imagine that the Atlanta Marriott Marquis can serve a function similar to the holy Temple in Jerusalem, then our prayers have become mere nostalgia, and our dreams only wishful thinking.

"This year in Atlanta"? Yes. And next year in Chicago. Wherever Jews gather to share their bounty and their fellowship, it becomes holy ground.

