

# Outside Perspectives

*Amber Taylor*

I think most of us are familiar with a recent trend in storytelling to revisit and tell a traditional tale from the perspective of the antagonist. The live-action Disney movie *Maleficent*, for example, provides an empathetic backstory to the terrifyingly evil, but otherwise flat, character of Maleficent in the iconic animated version of *Sleeping Beauty*. The popular musical *Wicked*, by Stephen Schwartz, does the same with the character Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. Even children's books have gotten in on the postmodern storytelling action. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, Alexander T. Wolf tells his side of the story, in which he explains that a simple sneeze and the need to borrow a cup of sugar to make Grannie a birthday cake have been misunderstood and blown way out of proportion, leading to the erroneous conclusion that he is the bad guy.

It is my aim here to do something similar: I hope to explore the story of the creation of the BYU Jerusalem Center from the perspective of those usually seen as the antagonists. But I also hope to bring out the voices of others, perhaps not antagonists so much as interested but confused onlookers and even firm supporters but, nonetheless, voices we don't hear from nearly as often.

I begin with some context. To talk about outside views of the Center's construction is to attempt to understand a controversy in Israeli society that burned hot and bright for a few years in the mid-1980s. Like many issues relating to religious versus state authority in Israeli society, the question of whether to allow a university affiliated with a non-Jewish, arguably Christian, passionately mission-oriented Church

to build a study and worship center in the very *heart* of Judaism, on one of the most coveted parcels of land in the world (one which overlooks Judaism's most holy sites), was a hotly debated issue.<sup>1</sup> And, as is generally the case in Israeli political controversies dealing with religion in a presumably democratic (albeit Jewish) state, it was the ultra-Orthodox fanning the flames, before the issue burned itself out and the activists moved on to other causes *du jour* demanding their attention.<sup>2</sup>

The public outcry that accompanied the Center's creation for most of its construction period was indeed loud and heated, even if it was relatively short-lived. Some context for that debate can help explain why it happened at all, and why it was so heated. Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, has become highly accustomed, perhaps even inured, to an almost constant stream of heated political debates about how *Jewish* Israel and its most sacred city should be, or even about what *Jewishness* is, and what *sacred* means in a city that houses some of the holiest sites of three of the world's largest religions.<sup>3</sup> Then, of course, how to *maintain* whatever sacredness one feels is crucial to Jerusalem's welfare—which, many feel, is central to the welfare of the entire world—takes the debate even further. Thus, the fate of Jerusalem and who or what belongs in it is an issue about which a great many of the world's people—nations

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1. For a more thorough treatment of the debate and its implications, see my dissertation, "Contest and Controversy in the Creation of the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center" (Brandeis University, 2019).

2. For a thorough treatment of ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) Jews and their political activism in Jerusalem, see Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht, *To Rule Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Note that although I refer to this group of fervently religious Jews as "ultra-Orthodox" here for the purpose of accessibility to readers less familiar with Israeli society, members of this group prefer the term *haredi*, a Hebrew term that indicates their anxiousness to fulfill the word of God.

3. These questions, and countless others relating to the nature of the Jewish state, are the subjects of a great deal of scholarly attention—much more than I can include here. But for some introductory reading, see the following. On attempts to define *Jewishness*, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On questions of Judaism in Israel, see Uzi Rebhun and Chaim I. Waxman, eds., *Jews in Israel: Contemporary Social and Cultural Patterns* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004). On contested narratives of Jerusalem and its meaning for differing groups of Jerusalemites, see Dana Hercbergs, *Overlooking the Border: Narratives of Divided Jerusalem* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018); and Hillel Cohen, "The Temple Mount/al-Aqsa in Zionist and Palestinian National Consciousness: A Comparative View," in *Israel Studies Review* 2, no. 1 (Summer 2017): 1–19. Finally, on the role protests play in Israeli political action, see Gadi Wolfsfeld, *The Politics of Provocation: Participation and Protest in Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).



Sign at the entrance of the Jerusalem Center. Photograph by Mark Phillbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.

and governments, communities and religious groups—have strong and disparate opinions. In Israel, these debates happen at every level—in neighborhoods between neighbors and friends and among various strands of Jewish and Palestinian society, not to mention others, such as Orthodox or Armenian Christian residents of Jerusalem, who also have a vested interest. And they are always prominent in Israeli politics, at the local level in Jerusalem’s municipal meetings between religious and nonreligious Jews, with a frequent splash of Palestinian frustration added to the mix, and at the level of national government as well. Those even moderately familiar with Israeli society and politics know that the list of issues being hotly debated is nearly endless, and their frequency in public discourse nearly constant.

As a consequence, when the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in Jerusalem, and then more broadly throughout Israel, sounded an alarm over what quickly became known as the “Mormon University” on Mount Scopus, public opinion quickly settled along the usual lines of division. However, instead of simply describing Israeli society and politics (a feat that would require at least a semester and, for many, even years of study in a PhD program), I am going to attempt to let those with

a stake in the question of whether the “Mormon University” should be completed speak for themselves—at least as much as I am able to, not being a member of any of these communities.

Let me begin by telling the story from the perspective of those whose voices received little publicity during the controversy. The most obvious of these would be the local Palestinians living in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, where the Center resides.

A woman who lived in the neighborhood at the time, Malak Sharaf, spoke with me about her experience.<sup>4</sup> She and her neighbors had noticed the building going up and initially wondered if it was an Israeli institution. This worried them, since they had repeatedly lost land to the Israeli government since the 1948 war in which Jews acquired a state but Palestinians were notably left stateless. Malak’s family, for instance, had lost all their land in Haifa and Jaffa. Were her neighbors now going to lose this local land to the Jewish state as well?

However, soon she and her neighbors learned it was a foreign institution that was building, which eased their fears a bit and also piqued their curiosity. Were the Israelis really going to allow a non-Jewish institution to build in Jerusalem? Most had no idea which institution was constructing this building. But Malak’s neighbor, who was Christian, told her they were Mormons and that they were bad people. But Malak was curious, attributing the dislike of the Mormons to her friend’s religious zeal. Also, a family friend had connections with the Center, and before long she had been offered a job there, which she enjoyed for many years.

Most people in the local Arab community, she explained, were simply curious about this big, beautiful building going up in their neighborhood. To be sure, a few articles in local Arabic newspapers raised alarm, emphasizing the Latter-day Saint affinity for Jews and Jewish perspectives on the conflict.<sup>5</sup> These seem to have not been especially common. But, as Malak explained, as local residents got to know the staff and students affiliated with the Center, they began to like them more and more. The students were courteous and kind, and the Center employed Arabs as often as it did Jews. By the time the Center was in full operation, local Palestinians generally viewed the building and the students attending there quite favorably.

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4. Conversation with Malak Sharaf, January 1, 2018, used with permission.

5. See, for example, “Mormons Planing [*sic*] Church Center on Confiscated Land,” *Al-Fajr*, September 14, 1984, 9, accessed from the David Galbraith file, box 8, folder 2B, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

As noted earlier, local Christians—Arab and otherwise—*were* concerned, but in truth Christian sentiment was mixed. Local Arab Christians initially knew little about the church behind the building, but many of their leaders were in close contact with missionaries and other international Christian organizations who had some experience with the Latter-day Saints, and these warned their fellow religionists in Jerusalem to avoid the Mormons. They likely did not want Latter-day Saints to interfere with their own ongoing missionary work, and as part of this, they needed to be sure the Israeli public understood that they were not affiliated with the Mormons. Christian leaders from eight local denominations explained this in a press conference in July 1985, repeating a refrain with which Latter-day Saints were all too familiar: “Mormons,” they insisted, “are not Christians.”<sup>6</sup>

Although Christian perspectives are more difficult to find, I would speculate that their frustration was with more than simply Jewish confusion of Latter-day Saints with what they saw as true Christianity. Just a few years earlier, a historic building belonging to the Baptist Church in Jerusalem had been burned to the ground by arsonists opposed to their missionary efforts.<sup>7</sup> The next year, a hotel in Tiberias that was hosting Christian meetings was also set aflame.<sup>8</sup> The Baptist Church took more than ten years to rebuild, and other Christian efforts to build in Jerusalem had equally been thwarted to this point, including a hotel intended to provide accommodations for service volunteers and tourists. The building effort in Gilo, in the southern part of Jerusalem, was soundly crushed by ultra-Orthodox Jewish opposition to what they saw as efforts to create a missionary center.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for several years afterward, the empty shell of the uncompleted hotel stood as a testament to the power of Jewish opposition to any outside Christian efforts to gain a foothold in the city.

And now these Christian leaders watched as the Latter-day Saints faced the same concerted opposition. On the one hand, if the Center was successfully completed, perhaps it demonstrated an opening for other outside groups to build. This would be significant, because no

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6. Haim Shapiro, “Jerusalem Official Dismisses Mormon ‘Bribe Hint,’” *Jerusalem Post*, July 10, 1985; see also “Letter to the Editor” from Rev. Charles M. Kopp, United Christian Council in Jerusalem, *Jerusalem Post*, August 3, 1985.

7. Robert Rosenberg, “Jerusalem Authorities Concerned by Mounting Attacks on Christians,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 23, 1981, 3.

8. Haim Shapiro and Menachem Horowitz, “Two Men Arrested in Tiberias Hotel Fire,” *Jerusalem Post*, December 27, 1983.

9. See Taylor, “Contest and Controversy,” 90–91.

Christian structure had been built in Jerusalem since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. On the other hand, Christian groups who disliked the Latter-day Saints almost certainly chafed at the idea that they might be the ones to do what Christians with more history in the city had been unable to. Articles in Christian newspapers and periodicals reporting on events in Jerusalem and the Holy Land in this period offered both perspectives, although mention of the BYU Center was actually fairly infrequent.<sup>10</sup>

The real energy came from Jewish citizens of Israel—both those who favored the BYU project and those who passionately opposed it. To understand why some firmly supported the creation of the BYU Jerusalem Center and others so ardently opposed it, some history is required. For the most part, the Center's opponents were Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews, although they were joined by a few secular but nationalist Jewish Israelis. Those supporting the Center's creation, or at least the right of the Latter-day Saints, as much as anyone else, to build in the Holy City tended to be secular and from a more liberal Jewish tradition.

This divide is centuries old and particularly bitter in Israel. Keep in mind that in explaining this divide, I am greatly simplifying what is a rich and diverse Jewish history. Orthodox, who often refer to themselves as *datim*, or religious, and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who refer to themselves as *haredim*, or those who fear God's word, believe that preserving Jerusalem's holiness, as they see it, is not only their manifest duty to God but is vital to warding off calamity if that holiness is lost. Unholy people and actions in this holiest of cities threaten to bring the wrath of God upon the entire world. Thus, the ultra-Orthodox *haredim*, who see themselves as the protectors of God's holy word in the Torah and of the Holy City itself, rally to any call to protect the holy city against unholy influences. *Haredim* are only a small fraction of Israel's population (although their percentages are much higher in Jerusalem), yet their political influence vastly outweighs their numbers, for a whole host of reasons impossible to delve into here.

Secular Jews, or *hilonim*, as well as more liberal religious Jews in Israel generally come from a very different Jewish tradition. This tradition is every bit as Jewish but leads them to view the world and their

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10. See Taylor, "Contest and Controversy," 184–85. For an example of the kinds of Christian publications on the controversy over the BYU Jerusalem Center, see Thomas Idinopulos, "Mormon-Jewish Turmoil in Zion," *Christian Century* 102 (December 1985), 123–26.



own place in it differently from the *datim and haredim*. For them (and remember this is a simplification), Judaism's contribution to the world is not so much in preserving holiness but in helping to heal a broken world through positive action. Thus, this tradition tends to be more progressively oriented and to favor a plurality of religious experience, rather than keeping out threatening, unholy influences.

Two key figures in Jerusalem during this period essentially epitomize these two perspectives and how they interact in Israel. Rabbi Menachem Porush came from one of the most prominent religious families in Jerusalem. He was among the most powerful religious figures in the *haredi* community and likewise wielded a great deal of political influence.<sup>11</sup> He almost certainly considered Jerusalem's secular, pluralistic mayor, Teddy Kollek, to be his archnemesis. Kollek was raised in Vienna in a family that, although secular, maintained a strong Jewish identity. He envisioned Jerusalem as a cosmopolitan, pluralistic city. He wanted all religions to have a place there, as he saw this essential to ensuring that the world's powers would be inclined to support Israel and its claim to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

Both men had occasion to talk with Latter-day Saint leaders, and the conversations were telling of how they viewed the Church, the BYU Center it was working to build, and the role this all played in the ongoing battle over the character of Jerusalem. In 1972, President Harold B. Lee visited Jerusalem, and while there he met with Mayor Kollek. Having learned of the mission of Orson Hyde in 1841 to dedicate Palestine for the return of the Jewish people and being an expert in forging relations with potential allies, Mayor Kollek joked with President Lee, "You know, we Jews wouldn't be here if it weren't for Mr. Orson Hyde and his prayer on the Mount of Olives."<sup>13</sup> Twenty years later, speaking on a more serious note to BYU Jerusalem students at a function in 1992, Kollek commented on the difficult struggle he had waged to overcome the opposition to the Center and allow the Church to complete the building, a struggle which

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11. For more on Porush and his influence in Jerusalem politics, see Friedland and Hecht, *To Rule Jerusalem*.

12. Kollek described his vision and his reasoning on dozens of occasions, recorded in various places. For an example, see his book, co-authored with Shulamith Eisner, *My Jerusalem: Twelve Walks in the World's Holiest City* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 128. He also gives a clear account of his effort to prevent division or internationalization of the city in "Jerusalem," *Foreign Affairs* 55, no. 4 (1977): 701–16.

13. LaMar C. Berrett and Blair G. Van Dyke, *Holy Lands: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Near East* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 370–72.

he described as “perhaps the most difficult and certainly among the most important” in his “25 years as mayor.”<sup>14</sup> To the students he explained that it “was not a struggle for the Mormons, but rather . . . for tolerance in a city that should set an example to the world . . . in which everyone may pray to his God in his way without restriction.”<sup>15</sup>

Rabbi Porush’s vision of both the city and the BYU Jerusalem Center differed starkly from Kollek’s. In an effort to halt construction of the Center, Porush joined with other Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox leaders in calling for a campaign of opposition—a campaign which, as I noted at the beginning, was merely one in a steady stream of ultra-Orthodox efforts to protect Jerusalem and Judaism from what they view as harmful influences. On several occasions between 1984 and 1987, tens of thousands of *haredi* Jews flocked to sites in Jerusalem that had been designated for protest. In July 1985, the Western Wall was flooded with men in black who arrived to participate in a sit-in rally in which they prayed and heard speeches condemning the building of the Center.<sup>16</sup> Added to these large rallies was the almost constant presence of a small group of protestors at the building site itself as well as personal threats to Latter-day Saints living in Jerusalem, such as David Galbraith and D. Kelly Ogden, who were helping to coordinate the building effort.<sup>17</sup> They, more than anyone else, bore the direct brunt of the often virulent opposition.

While the perceived Mormon threat served as a useful political tool uniting religious Jews behind a clear and simple cause, the concerns of the *haredi* leaders were, I think, genuine and based on a history and worldview that most non-Jews simply do not understand. It came from a Jewish collective memory, two thousand years in the making, of Christian persecution and abuse. In this history, when Christians failed to convert Jews, they often simply killed them or drove them from their homes.<sup>18</sup> And for Jews, conversion amounted to death anyhow, since

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14. D. Kelly Ogden, *Pioneering the East* (self-published, 2002), 293. Kollek also expressed his gratefulness that the Church had not given up on the project and “desert[ed him]” when it became so difficult. “I am grateful that you stood with us.” Ogden, *Pioneering the East*, 294.

15. Ogden, *Pioneering the East*, 293.

16. Friedland and Hecht, *To Rule Jerusalem*, 485. These protests often made international news. See, for example, “Mormon Center Opposed: Chief Rabbis Want Construction Halted on Mount of Olives,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 1985.

17. For more on this, see Taylor, “Contest and Controversy,” chap. 4: “Politics, as Usual.”

18. Israeli relations with the outside Christian world are a subject greatly underresearched, particularly in English publications. However, for a treatment of Israeli-Vatican



either way it meant the loss of a Jew, even if that loss was, to the Christian mind, not a loss at all but the ultimate gain.<sup>19</sup> Whereas in the view of most Christian authorities throughout history, a converted Jew was still a Jew (a reality painfully highlighted when many Jewish Christians joined their nonconverted kinsfolk in Nazi concentration camps), for Jews, conversion removes one from Judaism—religion and community—altogether. What is more, this was taking place in 1985, a mere forty years after the end of World War II and the slaughter of a third of world Jewry. The memory of this incomprehensible loss was still very fresh, and the idea of losing more Jews, even if it was only to conversion, elicited, and still elicits, a visceral fight-or-flight reaction to a distinct threat—perceived or real.

Rabbi Porush attempted to communicate the basis of this reactionary fear to Latter-day Saint leadership. In July 1985, he met with Elders Howard W. Hunter and James E. Faust in Jerusalem, and both parties hoped to convince the other to retreat. Porush, leaning into the Jewish collective memory noted above, was unable or unwilling to believe that the Latter-day Saints held no secret missionary intentions. He had become familiar with Latter-day Saint missionary training manuals oriented specifically for missionaries who might teach Jewish investigators as well as early documents discussing the possibility of the Center as a visitors' center that might serve indirect missionary purposes. Even more, he had been assured by ex-Mormon activists such as Ed Decker that Latter-day Saints could never be trusted not to proselytize. With this at the forefront of his conversation, he pled with the Apostles, "Please have mercy and stop the construction!" He was equally distressed about the location of the building itself. "The Mormons had chosen 'to build on such a sacred place—Mount Scopus.'" Porush claimed that this was "'the heart and soul of the Jewish people.' They simply '[could] not tolerate [the Mormon] Center on this sacred ground overlooking the Temple Mount.'"<sup>20</sup>

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relations in Israel's early history, see Uri Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948–1967* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

19. For more on historic Jewish-Christian relations more generally, see Stanley E. Porter and Brook W. R. Pearson, eds., *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

20. Taylor, "Contest and Controversy," chap. 3: "Persuasion, Prayer, and War." Notes taken at the meeting by David Galbraith, from his personal notes. I accessed a copy of the transcript in the Truman G. Madsen files. Some of the conversation was also

These concerns, widely publicized and amplified in ultra-Orthodox media and political discourse, were the basis for the passionate opposition. They were exemplified in a pop song that contributed to the rise to stardom of a young Hassidic singer, Mordechai Ben-David, in the Orthodox Jewish world.<sup>21</sup> The catchy song, first sung in 1986 at the last of the major opposition rallies, has now, strangely enough, become commonplace in religious Jewish celebrations, such as bar mitzvahs and weddings. Yet most forget the song's origins, despite the fact that the lyrics are rather pointed in their meaning. Note that they illustrate the perspective almost point by point—the fear of missionary activity, the sense of the threat to Jerusalem's sacredness this supposedly idolatrous building represented, and the fight-or-flight (in this case, strongly fight) reaction to these fears.

Consider then Ben-David's "Yerushalaim Is Not for Sale."<sup>22</sup> The most striking lyrics come at the beginning of the song:

Overnight—a massive construction  
Atop our Jerusalem mountains.  
A campus luring innocent souls,  
To drink from the forbidden fountains.  
Like many before,  
They've come here for war,  
We're warning them now; it won't pay.

Jerusalem; her holiness crying  
Defiling her dearest location,  
Politics blinding sense of pride.  
Are we not the Chosen Nation?  
Together as one,  
We will overcome,  
Bringing her freedom today.

CHORUS:

Yerushalaim is not for sale  
Voices crying,  
Thundering throughout the cities.  
You better run for your life,  
Back to Utah overnight,  
Before the mountain tops open wide

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recorded in an Orthodox newspaper, Menachem Porush, "No Results from Meetings with Mormons," *Jewish Press*, September 12, 1985.

21. Taylor, "Contest and Controversy," 227.

22. The song can be heard and viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XiUREOUGpw>.

And swallow you inside.  
 Yerushalaim your foes will fail  
 Senseless trying  
 He's guarding His holy city,  
 He's punished all its intruders so awfully.  
 They have perished, their names are history.

The lyrics seem almost comical some thirty years after the release of the song, but they express with real sincerity the deep sense of threat and the need for these zealously religious protectors of Judaism's Jerusalem to rise up in its defense.

For both Kollek and Porush (and the communities and legacies they represent), the fight was not, as both pointed out in their conversations with Latter-day Saint leaders, simply about the Mormons. It was a heated battle in the long war in Jewish Israeli society over the meaning of Jerusalem and its place in the Jewish tradition and in the world. In the end, the ultra-Orthodox lost their campaign when their legal and political appeals found insufficient grounds on which to force BYU to abandon the nearly complete structure. In the spring of 1987, students quietly moved into the building, and in 1989, a small dedication ceremony marked the Center's completion and BYU's final victory.

Still, the ultra-Orthodox Jews and their campaign did win a small victory of their own. Latter-day Saint and BYU leadership, as part of the lease agreement, signed a "non-proselytization" agreement. This committed all students, faculty, and staff—anyone associated with the Center—to refrain from missionary efforts of any kind. And to my knowledge, as well as the knowledge of my friends and associates (Jewish, Palestinian, and others), this commitment has been kept admirably. To be sure, among the Latter-day Saints in Israel the agreement remains a sore point of their own intracommunal controversy. But that is a story for another conference.

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Eighth-floor hallway. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.



The Jerusalem Center with Christmas lights. Photograph by Nassif Asfour. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.