

The Lead-up to the Dedication of the Jerusalem Center

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I've been asked to focus on the construction period of the Jerusalem Center rather than the student program that, at this point in time, is the heart and soul of the Center. My wife, Frieda, and I lived for twenty years in Israel, where we also raised our family of five children. We were blessed to witness some marvelous miracles while living there, but none more marvelous than those that were intimately linked to the Center. I had the great opportunity to be personally involved with the story of the Center that follows here.

First, an introduction of key players in the Center's origins and construction is required. In the late 1970s, an executive committee to oversee the establishment of the Jerusalem Center was appointed by President Spencer W. Kimball consisting of Elder Howard W. Hunter, Elder James E. Faust, BYU President Jeffrey R. Holland, and his special assistant for Jerusalem, Robert C. Taylor.

It is always interesting to recognize *firsts*, such as President Harold B. Lee coming with Elder Gordon B. Hinckley to Jerusalem in 1972. President Lee was possibly the first prophet, seer, and revelator to visit the Holy Land in nearly two thousand years. Many General Authorities followed who were more involved than President Lee with the developments in that land leading to the Jerusalem Center. It would take volumes to do justice to their respective contributions, but out of all of them, President Gordon B. Hinckley was more involved with recommendations, approvals, and final decisions than any other.

It was not just General Authorities, however, who played essential roles. A brief overview such as this does an injustice to the literally

hundreds of individuals who go unnamed and whose contributions to the establishment of the Center were crucial. For example, there was the “visionary” role of Robert and Kathy Taylor (Robert was the head of BYU Travel Study) and the contribution of two former BYU vice presidents, Fred S. Schwendiman and Robert J. Smith, who were, respectively, responsible for the Center’s construction and finances.

In October 1979, while en route to the Holy Land to dedicate the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden, Elder Howard W. Hunter, with President Spencer W. Kimball by his side, officially announced the Church’s intention to build a BYU Center in Jerusalem. In so doing, they emphasized that this was to be a First Presidency project, which, in effect, placed the Jerusalem project outside all normal Church channels dealing with construction. So, in a nutshell, this is how a small BYU study abroad program in Jerusalem under the direction of Robert C. Taylor grew, in a relatively short time, beyond anyone’s expectations and outgrew every physical facility available in East or West Jerusalem that could accommodate it. The rapidly growing interest in the Holy Land among Church members was reflected not only in the growth of the BYU study abroad program designed for our students but also in the cultural and spiritual experiences Latter-day Saint adults outside of the program were having. It was this combined growth that sparked the vision of a possible center of our own. President N. Eldon Tanner noted that the 1970s would be regarded as the decade the members of the Church discovered the Holy Land, and the 1980s would be the decade the Holy Land discovered the Church.¹

The 1979 announcement to build a center in Jerusalem was all the more interesting in that the building site had yet to be selected (although detailed plans for a future center were well underway). As for the site, it was hoped that President Kimball’s visit would solve that problem. In anticipation of this extraordinary visit, a number of possible building sites had been selected to show President Kimball, in the hope that he would be inspired to choose one. The best of the many different possible plots was saved for last. President Kimball and his party were taken to various sites with everyone watching for any sign of approval for a particular site. There didn’t seem to be a flicker of interest revealed by the prophet in any of them until the last one. Interestingly enough, this last one was on Mount Scopus, a northern extension of the Mount of

1. Personal communication with the author.

Olives. As impressive as this plot of ground was, it did not command a spectacular view of the Old City of Jerusalem because of an intervening hill. So President Kimball's whole party was encouraged to walk north over rocks, thorns, and thistles toward a large empty field. With each step, a panorama opened up with a magnificent view of the Old City, the Kidron Valley, the Temple Mount, East Jerusalem, and on the horizon, West Jerusalem. After a few minutes of visiting and admiring the view, President Tanner, a member of the First Presidency accompanying President Kimball, called for a vote. The first hand up was the Prophet's, followed by everyone else's, of course. There was, however, one minor drawback: the land was held by the Israel Lands Authority and was not for sale.

The curious thing was that President Tanner, who knew that this piece of land was not a candidate because its ownership had been explained to him the day before, called for the vote. Despite this, since the vote was unanimous, for all intents and purposes the site on which everyone was standing had been chosen as the site for the Center, and we could all get on with our work. But there remained one tiny omission: no one had asked the owner! Every contractor and real estate agent in Jerusalem had their eyes on that property, and there had been many attempts to acquire it from the Lands Authority, but to no avail. In addition to being held by the Lands Authority, the land was green zoned, meaning that no construction would be permitted on the site. So at the time, we felt that President Kimball's choice was really no closer to identifying a site than before he had arrived. As everyone left town it was decided to keep looking for an alternative site. We did, of course, raise the matter of the site selected by President Kimball with officials in the mayor's office and the Jerusalem municipality, but they all warned us away from *any site* on the Mount of Olives, with the observation that ever since the land in question had been expropriated many years ago, not a single application to have the zoning laws changed had been honored.

Then along comes a Christian organization—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—naively, guilelessly asking for an exception to build on the Mount of Olives where all others had failed. And can you even imagine, we got it! How? In April 1980, Elder Hunter and Elder Faust asked Robert P. Thorn and Arthur H. Nielsen, Salt Lake City attorneys who had assisted the Church in real estate matters, to act as consultants in the acquisition of property for the proposed Center. Thorn was a fast learner, and that's a necessary characteristic to master

the complexities of engaging in business transactions in the Near East, where bargaining and haggling are a fine art, and an individual's stature and prestige matter little if he cannot successfully negotiate to his advantage in the marketplace, be it for chickens, camels, or real estate. Thorn's instructions were to pursue the site that was voted on, while still looking for alternative sites. It seemed that the General Authorities were determined to get the chosen site. Thorn hit the ground running, and from the moment he arrived in Israel, he initiated plans to approach the Israel Lands Authority (which is the first and most important hurdle in acquiring land in Israel) with an offer they could *not* refuse.

It was recognized that if the Israel Lands Authority turned down our application for this site, there was little possibility of a successful appeal. After months of negotiation for this choice plot of ground, we received a very interesting challenge from the Lands Authority: namely, if we could demonstrate that what we wanted to build on the site was worthy of such a prestigious location, they would consider our request.

We found two architectural firms to help meet the challenge and retained Frank Ferguson in Salt Lake and David Reznik in Jerusalem. The two firms bonded into one and created one of the finest structures in Jerusalem and beyond. The cooperation, the harmony, the spiritually symbiotic relationship of these two firms led to the design of a magnificent edifice that was so compelling and so structurally powerful that it could take its place among the ancient and the modern structures in Jerusalem; and with the architectural renderings, we succeeded in convincing the Lands Authority that what we wanted to build on the site was indeed worthy of the site.

The next thing we needed was a prominent attorney to represent us in Israel—an individual who was known and respected in government and Jerusalem municipal circles. Of all the candidates we considered, Joseph Kokia stood out. It was felt he would command the greatest respect and enjoy a better standing before official bodies than any of the other candidates. Kokia had served as the Israeli director general of the Ministry of Justice for sixteen years and, to his professional credit, had survived four changes of government in Israel in the process. Can anyone doubt the divine assistance we received in retaining such a prominent lawyer? And heaven knew how desperately we would need him.

With everything falling into place, we now needed another miracle to help change the zoning of the site. There had been an enormous investment of money, time, and professional skills, and yet our whole project

appeared doomed to fail. From their own experiences, no Israeli held out any hope for our success in getting the zoning changed. Some even suggested that we had been allowed to come this far by various government agencies because each knew that the government would never change the green-zone designation and, hence, that our whole project would die on the vine. What they didn't know, and what they couldn't possibly understand, was that the project was a *First Presidency project* headed by two Apostles, Elders Hunter and Faust, and by BYU President Holland and, even more importantly, that it was the Lord's will.

In seeking a change in Jerusalem's zoning for the site so that we could build our proposed building, we were working with a number of unknowns, including these:

1. Public opinion regarding a Christian institution building on one of the most prominent sites in all Jerusalem.
2. The propriety of awarding property that had been expropriated by the Israeli government to a non-Jewish entity.
3. The controversial aspect of allowing space that had been green zoned for no construction to be converted to a zone not only for construction, but for the construction of an educational institution that could just as easily have been built elsewhere on less controversial land.
4. The nagging question in the minds of many Israelis as to whether or not this major controversial Christian project was in the Jewish public interest.

Little wonder that our friends held out absolutely no hope for our success and urged us to consider building elsewhere. The challenge of getting a change in the zoning included a provision in the law requiring that notice of the project be published in a government gazette and major newspapers to the effect that "any person interested in the land, the proposed building, or any other aspect of the planning, who considers himself aggrieved by the modification of the scheme . . . may within two months from the date of publication . . . lodge their objections thereto." This was the time when the Adversary could have stopped us cold in our tracks. There could have been literally dozens of objections, which would have taken us months to resolve, if ever. So where was the Adversary? Was he sleeping? I asked this facetiously, because beginning a few months after the deadline had passed, there were thousands

of objections to our Center, but they all came too late legally. So how many objections were there within the two-month period? Only two, and they were quickly resolved.

On March 31, 1982, Amnon Niv, the Jerusalem city engineer, a powerful and influential individual in the Jerusalem city government, called a meeting of the municipal town planners to deal with the matter of the green zone as it related to our proposed project. A huge colored map of the Mount of Olives, prepared by our architect David Reznik with our project superimposed on top of it, was unfolded. The town planners in the meeting argued back and forth regarding alternative sites. Niv listened with growing impatience to the arguments and then called for a colored felt pen. Sizing up the proposed project with his eye and taking into consideration the contours of the steep hill, he freehanded a colored line across the map and announced, "This is the building line." Those of us in attendance looked on with amazement and could hardly believe what had just happened before our very eyes. And then with a voice of authority, he loudly and firmly concluded his act and the discussion with the statement, "That's it," and walked out of the meeting. And that was it! Almost.

In January 1984, after months of negotiations to change the zoning, a Mr. Blank, an underling in the district committee but one who was feared by contractors and real-estate people alike because of his ability to hold up any project with which he took umbrage, surprised us with a pleasant official letter that read, "I am honored to advise you that your application for change of the town plan is officially approved and now has the status of law." We had beaten the odds, both in terms of obtaining one of the most prestigious, priceless sites in the city and also in an unheard-of short period of time, at least in Israel, in obtaining zoning that would permit construction of a building on the site.

About this time, concern arose in other government ministries that antiquities would almost certainly be uncovered in the excavation for the seven floors of the Center in the mountainside. This was a surprise for which we were not prepared. The details came in the form of a letter from the District Archeology Authority advising us that the area on which we proposed to build had been designated an *antique site*. That meant that if in the process of excavation any ancient tombs or antiquities of any kind were discovered, all work, by law, must come to a stop until the Department of Antiquities could carry out a thorough investigation and decide on whether the site must be preserved. Because the site where the Center was to be built received the designation of an "antique site," it also meant

that an expert from the Department of Antiquities had to be on hand at all times during excavations to ensure that no antiquities were harmed or destroyed. Given the fact that many tombs had been found nearby during the building of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the experts believed that our site might well have been a Second Temple cemetery. If so, it would be deemed a *national treasure*, which would have trumped any construction on the site. One can imagine our relief that no tombs or antiquities of any kind came to light during the excavation phase of construction.

In spite of our progress, all was not well. We were running into trouble with those who were opposed to us. By December 1985, the opposition to the Center had become so politically (and socially) powerful that the government of Israel was about to fall from a vote of no confidence. It was then that we decided we needed an Israeli public relations firm to represent us. We chose a prestigious firm, headed by a Mr. Moshe Theumim. Only after we had retained him did we learn that he was an unpaid public relations advisor to the prime minister of Israel, Shimon Peres, and that it was his firm which had played a major role in helping Mr. Peres get elected.

You must be thinking, “Just a minute, are you saying that you not only found a public relations firm with a CEO who was willing to take on such a controversial project, but one who also, coincidentally, had the ear of the prime minister and met with him weekly to keep him abreast of his political standing in the state of Israel? Now, that is a miracle!” Perhaps we should have recognized it as a sign from heaven in keeping with the incredible opposition awaiting us just around the corner. Not only was the Center becoming a major political issue, threatening the Israeli government, but also there was no one on either side of the aisle who was willing to commit political suicide by supporting the “Mormon” project. We desperately needed a public relations expert who could direct us through that political labyrinth. And we got it.

Prime Minister Peres, in the face of incredible opposition, pursued a plan to avoid a vote of no confidence against him and his government: a committee would be established, made up of eight government ministers who were some of the most polished, politically influential men in all the country. The committee would consist of four ministers in favor of the center and four ministers who were opposed. The brilliance of the plan was that the net effect of the equal division between supporters and opponents was that the committee was deadlocked on day one and stayed deadlocked until construction of the Center was nearly finished.

With the stroke of a pen, Peres had shifted this burdensome matter from his office to a moribund committee.

Even so, the opposition was far beyond our expectations in many ways. And in the course of it, one person stood out in his support for us: Abba Eban, who in the course of his distinguished career had served as Israel's foreign affairs minister, education minister, deputy prime minister, and ambassador to the United States and to the United Nations. He wrote an article in the *Jerusalem Post* in response to a harangue signed by ninety-six Israeli university faculty members who warned Israelis of the danger of a permanent Latter-day Saint presence in Israel. I deem it as something of a miracle because of the timing and because of the irrefutable logic that caught the attention of so many in Israel. He wrote,

If ever there was a prize for the most ludicrous document ever published since the invention of writing this one would be a hopeful candidate. The Jewish people, which preserved its identity against the conquering empires of antiquity, against the allurements of Hellenism, against the arrogance of classical Rome, against the conversionary triumphs of Christianity, against the proselyting fervor of Islam, against the savage torments of the Inquisition, against the seductions of emancipation and assimilation, is now about to disappear in its own country under the irresistible magnetism of the late Joseph Smith and the late Brigham Young. The sheer silliness of it all invites a tear for the departing glory of Israeli scholarship. The issue is not Mormon theology, but the principle of free exercise of conscience and dissent in a democratic society.²

Many Israelis were either laughing at Abba Eban's response to the so-called danger posed by the Mormons, as Latter-day Saints were then called, or they were moved upon to solemnly contemplate his logic.

On April 1, 1986, Arthur Nielsen was appointed "special counsel" for the Jerusalem Center to deal with proposed changes to the lease agreement between BYU and the Israeli government. The problem was that the demand for changes came from the Ultra-Orthodox who wanted more reassurances that the Center would not become a base for missionary work. Legally speaking, at this point, the lease document, which had already been agreed upon, was sacrosanct, but in the interest of community peace and harmony, Nielsen, a master wordsmith, reached an agreement with government attorneys for a "lease addendum" that we could live with, and one that satisfied almost all concerned. Nielsen

2. Abba Eban, *Jerusalem Post*, December 10, 1985.

was the right man at the right time, and, given the opposition he faced, his accomplishments were nothing short of a miracle.

There were four additional consequential events I want to at least mention. First, the United States Congress intervened on our behalf with a letter to the Israeli government signed by 154 Congresspeople on both sides of the aisle. We made 120 copies and sent them to each member of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) to ensure that they received their own personal letter to peruse.³ Additionally, we placed a copy of the letter in every newspaper in the country. That really got Israel's attention and went a long way in persuading all interested parties, especially fence sitters, of our bona fides in establishing a center in Jerusalem. Second, the Israeli attorney general, in a fifty-four-page document, refuted all the legal and political allegations made against us. This legal finding, which was an announcement to both friend and foe, was that we were a new and perfectly legal entity in their midst. Third, Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek publicly thanked us on several occasions for sticking with him in his struggle for tolerance in Jerusalem, a city that, he said, should be an example of tolerance to the whole world. For example, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performed in Jerusalem in January 1993.⁴ On that occasion, Mayor Kollek took the opportunity to reflect on his relationship with "the Mormons," on the construction of BYU's Jerusalem Center and on religious tolerance. He remarked, in part,

Of all the struggles during my 25 years as mayor of Jerusalem, the one concerning the BYU–Mount Scopus campus was perhaps the most difficult and certainly among the most important. This was not a struggle for the Mormons but rather a struggle for tolerance in a city that should set an example to the world—a city in which everyone may pray to his God in his way without restriction. How could we Jews, who were cut off from our holy places for centuries, refuse the right of others to establish a legitimate educational institution and place of worship in Jerusalem?⁵

Lastly, Mayor Kollek was with us, or ahead of us, all the way from finding the land on which to build the Center to its dedication. It seems

3. For the text of the letter, see David B. Galbraith, D. Kelly Ogden, and Andrew C. Skinner, *Jerusalem: The Eternal City* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 465–66.

4. "Tabernacle Choir to Sing in Israel," *News of the Church*, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1992/08/news-of-the-church/tabernacle-choir-to-sing-in-israel?lang=eng>.

5. Yair Rosenberg, "The Mormons on Mount Scopus," *Tablet*, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/190863/byu-jerusalem-campus>.

highly unlikely that we could have succeeded without his vigorous and open assistance. Undoubtedly raised up by the hand of the Lord “for such a time as this” (Esth. 4:14), this powerful man carefully guided us through a totally unfamiliar and, at times, unfriendly bureaucracy and led the charge, as it were, against the opposition. Everyone involved on the Church and university side recognized Kollek’s essential role. In acknowledging the assistance of Mayor Teddy Kollek, Elder James E. Faust declared that he was “one of the wisest, most durable politicians in the world.”⁶ And in August 2005, BYU President Rex E. Lee bestowed on Teddy an honorary doctorate “in recognition of his untiring and courageous service to his city, Jerusalem, to his country, and to the world, and for his steadfast support of the university and the church’s interests in Jerusalem.”⁷

Mayor Kollek saw in us not only an enduring friend of the state of Israel, but also a powerful partner with him in his goal to make Jerusalem an open city to Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The fact that we stuck with *him* through all the opposition was the very expression of appreciation we held for *his* efforts and, in the end, we won—together we won!

I conclude with the dedication of the Center by President Howard W. Hunter (then President of the Quorum of the Twelve). It was a quiet and intimate dedicatory service held on May 16, 1989, in the upper auditorium of the newly completed Center, with its breathtaking, sweeping panoramic view of Jerusalem. Participating in the program were President Hunter, Elder Thomas S. Monson, Elder Boyd K. Packer, President Holland, Robert C. Taylor, Robert J. Smith, Fred A. Schwendiman, Daniel H. Ludlow, and David B. Galbraith. Those who spoke praised those who had sacrificed so much, in a multitude of ways, to bring this miraculous building to fruition. Although a portion of the dedicatory prayer was specifically reserved for the building itself, the greater part was an outpouring of love and appreciation for the God of heaven and earth, for life itself, for the privilege of being born in this last dispensation of the fulness of times, and for the gift of his Son and his atoning sacrifice. Concerning the Center, President Hunter prayed,

6. James P. Bell, *In the Strength of the Lord: The Life and Teachings of James E. Faust* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 204.

7. Quoted in Carrie A. Moore, “Israel’s Kollek, a Friend to BYU, Dies,” *Deseret News*, January 3, 2007, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.deseret.com/2007/1/3/19994209/israel-s-kollek-a-friend-to-byu-dies>.

This building wherein we are seated has been constructed for the housing of those who would love Thee and seek to learn of Thee and follow in the footsteps of Thy Son, our Savior and Redeemer. It is beautiful in every respect, complying with all the beauty it represents. Oh, Father, we thank Thee for the privilege of building this house to those who will come here and be here for the benefit and learning of Thy sons and daughters. We pray, Father, that Thou wilt bless this house in every way. Bless the land on which it rests and the beautiful grounds. Bless its foundations. Bless the walls and roof and all its details.

We pray that it will be kept from damage or destruction from the hands of man or the ravages of nature and will remain beautiful and representative of that which is sacred and that which pertains to Thee. We, Thy children, therefore dedicate to Thee, Father, that which has been built by our hands in love, this beautiful building, the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, and all of its appurtenances, praying that it will be acceptable in every respect to Thee. May all who enter herein to teach, to learn, or for whatever purpose be blessed of Thee and feel Thy Spirit. This is our prayer and our dedication to Thee in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.⁸

Who can know the full purpose for which this magnificent Center was built? No doubt President Hunter was blessed with that vision.

David B. Galbraith, who with his family lived in the Holy Land for twenty years (1969–1989), was hired by BYU’s Department of Continuing Education as the resident director of its Holy Land study abroad programs. He later led the search for land on which the Jerusalem Center was built. He was an integral part of the team that designed and monitored the construction of the Center. David was appointed as the Jerusalem Center’s first director when it opened to students in 1987. In 1989, he returned to BYU, where he taught political science and international relations until he retired in 2000.

8. As recorded in Fred A. Schwendiman, “The Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies,” compiled by Daryl Tichy, 1991; see also <http://fred-schwendiman.tripod.com/jerusalem-center/>.



View from the interior of the upper auditorium. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.



LRC gallery. Photograph by Mark Philbrick. Courtesy BYU Jerusalem Center.