

Ora Limor

Space and Polemics



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I came to Berlin to write a book about Jerusalem. It was my innermost hope that the geographical and cultural distance would provide me with a more suitable angle of vision, an insight perhaps difficult to obtain when one is within touching distance of things themselves. That, of course, was not the main reason I came to Berlin, but it was an appropriate answer to the vexing question which people asked me, and I asked myself, what is it about Berlin which makes it a suitable place for research on the Holy Places of Jerusalem. As expected, the difference in landscape, colour and atmosphere between Berlin — a green city immersed in lakes (at least for those who had the good fortune to spend their time in Grunewald) — and Jerusalem — a city of white stone on the edge of the desert — was quite extraordinary. Beyond that, however, the two cities had a surprising similarity: Both are cities overwhelmed by the weight of an old-new history, both are full of whole or ruined buildings and monuments, each of which tells a story. They are loaded cities. Beyond the sense of strangeness known to the tourist, I immediately felt a strange familiarity with the burden of history and emotion. Like Jerusalem, Berlin is a good city for contemplation, a particularly suitable city to spend an unusual year in, to be a stranger in, or in which to indulge in introspection.

The title of the book I began to write is *Space and Polemics*, and it deals with the evolution of the Holy Places, particularly in Jerusalem, against the background of the perpetual dialogue between Christianity and Judaism, with their rival polemics and interpretations. The Christians inherited from the Jews the Holy Land, the Bible and the idea of election, giving

all these their own interpretation — an interpretation which engaged in a perpetual dialogue with the Jewish presence (physical or spiritual, actual or historical). When the Jews were able to return to Jerusalem and to practice their religion there, they had to respond to this Christian interpretation, and to develop their own conceptions against the background of this interpretation or in reaction to it. The book has six chapters, three of which are general, and three which illustrate the general themes through an examination of specific Holy Places. The first chapter deals with the *Judaica Veritas* (the "Jewish truth"), that is, the Christian attempt to provide their Holy Places and objects with legitimation through the authority of the Jews. Underlying this attempt is the belief that the Jew preserves for the Christian an ancient memory — a memory older than the historical existence of Christianity and which justifies its claims. The task of the Christian is to retrieve this memory from the Jew. The second chapter looks at the map of the Holy Sites and the processes of remembering and forgetting which influenced its development. The third chapter deals with the liturgy — the organization of time around sites through the use of texts common to the two religions, transforming the city in general and the various sites in particular into a stage of a didactic theatre, and recreating each year at fixed periods the founding narrative of the faith. The fourth chapter compares the Jewish Temple and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, as two sites competing for the illustrious title of "navel of the earth" with its various significances. The fifth chapter deals with Mount Zion and the foundation-myth associated with it: the founding of the Christian Church ("The Mother of the Churches"), and the founding of the Messianic genealogy. The last chapter deals with the Mount of Olives, and the organisation of its eschatological geography in both religions (and in Islam as well). Most of the material for the six chapters has now been collected, but so far the writing of only three chapters has been completed.

The time which was meant to be set aside mainly for writing the book had to be allocated to other projects, old and new, which took its place. Two books I wrote in recent years had now reached various stages of completion and suddenly appeared on my table. The first, *Die Disputation zu Ceuta 1179 and zu Mallorca 1286. Zwei antijüdische Schriften aus dem mittelalterlichen Genua*, which will be published in the coming months in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, was sent to me for the preparation of the indexes — one of quotations, another of names, places and subjects, and a third — a *Wortregister*. This was an exhausting technical task which took up a great deal of time and excluded any other activities. The other book was *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, about to appear in Jerusalem, which came back from the editors, and I had to prepare its final ver-

sion. And, in addition, I had to produce a few articles which I had committed myself to writing:

The article "Christian Sacred Space and the Jew", which constitutes the first chapter of the book mentioned above, examines various traditions - stories and legends — all concerned with a single theme: "The Knowing Jew", the Christian image of the Jew who willingly or unwillingly identifies and preserves the holy things of Christianity, thus granting it legitimacy.

"Egeria and Paula Read the Holy Places" is about the way in which two women-pilgrims at the end of the fourth century related to the Holy Sites, the way in which they understood the relationship between the Scriptures and the places mentioned in them, and the evidence they provide concerning the beginnings of Christian pilgrimage. This article deals with the reading and the writing of two fascinating women, and I thought about it for some time. The thought took flesh in Berlin, partly because of the preoccupation of some of us with matters of gender. This preoccupation became intense, not only because of the inspiring presence of Catharine MacKinnon amongst us, but especially because we were only five women out of a group of forty fellows, a minority whose small number proved to be a problem from the beginning, even if there was no real reason for it to be a problem.

"Religionsgespräche. Jud. Chr." is an article on the public religious disputations between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages which I wrote for the *Theologische Realencyclopaedie*.

And, in addition to these, there were a few book-reviews, especially of books dealing with inter-religious polemics.

Berlin was a good place to reflect on polemics and dialogues, and a good place to carry on polemics and dialogues. Although there was no *Schwerpunkt* dealing with mediaeval matters, it was easy to find an attentive ear and to obtain assistance from other historians, and especially from Klaus Schreiner, whose deep interest in tolerance in the middle ages and in inter-religious relations made him a faithful collaborator and partner in dialogue. And, in general, our class, as Tony Grafton put it, was perhaps not the most successful one and perhaps not the brightest one, but it was undoubtedly the nicest one. The wonderful harmony which reigned amongst us right from the beginning became an established fact by the second half of the year and turned our leave-taking into an unforgettable sentimental scene. As a result, if the seminars were somewhat tepid, the parties were wonderfully warm. It seemed that even the staff of the Kolleg was washed by the tides of mutual affection, and the congenial personalities of Barbara Sanders, Hans-Georg Lindenberg and their colleagues will not quickly be forgotten. The German lessons became an occasion for learning German history and culture, and a few of us made great efforts to

prattle a little in the local tongue, even if we stammered. If only the most outstanding amongst us had outstanding achievement to their credit, we all derived some benefit and enjoyment, especially because of Eva Hund, who for some of us embodied all the attractiveness of our Berlin hosts.

German history and culture, for those who looked for them and wanted to penetrate their secrets, were elsewhere, and each of us discovered his own Berlin. One cannot mention everything, and it seems almost superfluous to say that the *Philharmonie*, the *Komische Oper*, the concerts of Alan Marks, the museums, and of course the many remains of the glorious past of the German Jewish community, which a few of us sought out enthusiastically — all these became a central and influential part of our lives and work.

The book *Space and Polemics* will hopefully be concluded in Jerusalem. Berlin will remain another space and another time, which will have its influence on this book, and probably on many other things I shall do in the future.