

Hannah Griese

Jerusalem between Political Interests and Religious Promise

The Opening Ceremony of the New US Embassy as Media Ritual

Abstract

This article focuses on the opening ceremony for the new US embassy in Jerusalem, which took place on 14 May 2018. By analyzing a live transmission of the ceremony, it seeks to show how Jerusalem is constructed as a “holy city” through the ceremony and its medial representation. It thus aims to deepen our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East by focusing on the intersection of ritual, (sacred) space, conflict, and the media. More specifically, adopting a spatial approach to religion, drawing on this episode it looks at media rituals in the construction of holy space within the Middle East conflict.

Keywords

Middle East Conflict, Jerusalem, Holy Space, Religion and Media

Biography

Hannah Griese received both her Bachelor’s degree and her Master’s degree in the Study of Religion at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (LMU), where she is currently working on a doctoral thesis in the same field.

The Relocation of the US Embassy in the Midst of Middle East Conflict

Jerusalem is of utmost importance in the conflict in the Middle East above all because the city plays a key role for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for it is a “holy city” for all three faith traditions. But what is a “holy city”? Why does that character make Jerusalem so important in the conflict? And why do seemingly smaller epi-

sodes relating to Jerusalem have such great impact? Taking these questions as its starting point, this article focuses on a recent event, namely the opening ceremony for the new US embassy in Jerusalem, held on 14 May 2018. It explores the construction of Jerusalem as a holy city at the ceremony and via its medial representation.

President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017 and his announcement that the US embassy would be relocated there were highly controversial. While Israeli politicians and members of national-religious Jewish groups were joined by Evangelical Christians in the United States in welcoming his decision, Arab nations and the broader international community condemned it. Given the contested status of Jerusalem, they warned, such a step could seriously compromise the peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.¹ Nevertheless, less than half a year later, the new embassy was officially opened – on Israel's 70th Independence Day. The opening ceremony, which was broadcast on television and the Internet in Israel, the United States and all over the world used explicit and more subtle religious references on various levels.

This article analyzes the live transmission of the opening ceremony in the version available on the YouTube channel of *TIME*, the US news magazine (fig. 1).² It seeks to highlight references to religion – specifically to Christian and Jewish traditions – and their role within the ceremony. From a methodological point of view, the video is scrutinized on three levels. First, on the rhetorical level, I examine the speeches held during the ceremony and explore their religious references. Secondly, on the performative level, I analyze the structure of the ceremony, the music that accompanied it and formal aspects such as its timing and location. Finally, on the level of medial representation, I analyze technical aspects such as camera shots and camera work. The article will demonstrate the interweaving, even merging, of religion and politics in this event. Multiple references to Christian and Jewish traditions and links to current events, places and persons created a dense web of religious legitimization of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which helped portray the city a holy space, superelevate³ the participants and their co-operation and emphasize the value of the event. As a result, both city and participants acquire a power by association that bolsters their position in the Middle East conflict and, through the broadcast of the ceremony, is transmitted to a worldwide audience.

The article thus deepens our understanding of the relationship between religion and politics in the Middle East by focusing on the intersection of ritual, (sacred)

1 Collinson 2017.

2 *TIME* 2018.

3 The term “superelevate” is used in this article to indicate that someone or something is unduly elevated and overstated by idealizing and glorifying her/him/it.



Fig. 1: Beginning of the ceremony, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:01:32).

space, conflict and the media.⁴ More specifically, adopting a spatial approach to religion, it draws on this episode to consider media rituals in the construction of holy space within the Middle East conflict.

The Ritual Production of (Sacred) Space and its Medial Representation

In this instance, a spatial approach to religion is particularly illuminating. Since space and religion are mutually formative, a focus on Jerusalem as space can help us understand how the city is constructed by religion and in turn shapes religion. Additionally, such an approach helps us uncover the entanglement of religion and space in Jerusalem and reveals related structures of power and control and their influence on the conflict in the Middle East. Above all, we can explore how power works in and through religious processes in relation to different levels, areas and conceptions of space.⁵

4 With “media”, I mean here primarily audiovisual news media such as newscasts on television or websites.

5 Knott 2005, 8; Kong/Woods 2017, 2–3.

This article follows a social-constructivist approach to both religion and (sacred) space. Accordingly, religion is considered “a creative mode of cultural meaning-making initiated by humans, not beings from an unseen world”.⁶ Religion is taken to be a socially constituted symbol system that interacts with political and economic powers as do other institutions and ideological systems. In turn, space is conceptualized as “claimed, produced and negotiated by groups advancing specific interests”.⁷ Consequently, sacred space is not thought holy in itself; the designation “sacred” reflects the presence of religion in the space, which is a product of human action. This perspective therefore focusses on socio-religious practices that transform spaces and make them sacred. In the course of sacralization, a distinction is created and maintained by drawing a dividing line between the holy and the profane.⁸

Yet space is dynamic and constantly changing, or “always becoming, never complete”, in the words of Lily Kong and Orlando Woods,⁹ as it is continually produced and reproduced. Similarly, they note, religion is “not a fixed set of elements but an ever-evolving web of shared meanings and understandings that is used in different ways by different people”.¹⁰ This conceptualization of both space and religion as dynamic categories also explains why holy space can never be definitively holy, for it is part of a repeated pattern of sacralization and desacralization.

Space is generated, shaped, used and perceived by human imaginations, memories, actions and speech. Specific forms of such spatial practice which combine all of these elements in a particular way are rituals. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, humans produce space – including holy space – through ritual, and thus ritual is a process through which meaning is attributed to space. Ritual, then, is not a reaction to something “holy”; rather, someone or something is made holy by ritual.¹¹

But how exactly does holy-making happen? And what is “holy”, if holiness is not a substantial but a situational category? Here the definition of ritual provided by Catherine Bell is illuminating. Rather than provide a new conception of ritual per se, Bell focuses on “ritualization”, which she understands as

the production of ritualized acts, [which] can be described, in part, as that way of acting that sets itself off from other ways of acting by virtue of the way in which it does what it does. Even more circularly, it can be described as the stra-

6 McAlister 2005, 250.

7 Kong/Woods 2017, 5.

8 With this approach, I am not denying the existence of the “holy”, but rather want to emphasize the necessity of a “methodological agnosticism” (see Smart 1973) within the study of religion.

9 Kong/Woods 2017, 6.

10 Kong/Woods 2017, 6.

11 Smith 1992, 105; Knott 2005, 35–43.

tegic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values.¹²

In other words, the environment structured through subjective symbol systems appears to be the origin of these values, which consequently naturalizes them. Furthermore, ritualization is always connected to power, since it endows social actors with the authority to reinterpret reality.¹³ Thus, Smith and Bell together provide us with an interpretation of how “holy space” is related to ritual and what constitutes “holy space”: by means of ritual, actors and their concepts are intertwined with a space and thereby legitimized and endowed with power. Sacralization, then, can be understood as a specific process of power attribution.

Where does this interpretation place “religion” and what is religion’s role within this theoretical framework? Religion is perceived as socially generated, and references to specific religious traditions and specific religious concepts have a purpose within the ceremony. As religious concepts can be understood as empowered by the process of sacralization, a space loaded with religious concepts reaps the rewards of those concepts’ privileged relationship to power. Sacralized concepts are sacralized again and thereby become even more powerful. Religion is produced through ritual, but it is also reiterated in ritual, which produces in turn new forms of religion. In this circular process of sacralization and resacralization, religion is generated and regenerated and power accumulated and bound to space. Consisting of religious concepts, religious traditions are thus powerful sources of legitimization.

Kim Knott suggests that religious traditions have a privileged relationship to power because historically they were both institutionally and ideologically dominant. I propose we reverse that dynamic: religious traditions’ dominance was a product of their privileged relationship to power, which stemmed from their generation through sacralization. Even though, as Knott notes, this dominance is currently questioned in many societies, religion still plays a key role in many conflicts about space, often in a supporting role.¹⁴ Furthermore, for many groups, religious conceptions of space are more important than secular ones, which can lead to tensions or (violent) conflicts. Religion can be used to legitimize claims to space, which can be especially significant in the case of territorial conflicts. Permeated by religion, sacred spaces share the power of religion – and whoever has the ability to perform a ritual also has the power to define, and thus claim, space. However, no appro-

12 Bell 1992, 140.

13 Bell 1992, 141.

14 Knott 2005, 27–28.

priation is final. The struggle for sacred space goes on and on.¹⁵ Sacred space is an instrument of power in conflict, providing the actor who has the resources to claim that sacred space with an advantage.

In this article, I take the opening ceremony for the new US embassy as a ritual, which will allow us to understand how the ceremony functions. The ceremony, or ritual action, took place in Jerusalem and was about Jerusalem. It therefore contributes, I suggest, to the construction of Jerusalem, which is loaded with a subjective reality which however appears to be objective.

The ritual of the ceremony was and is broadcast by media and therefore it must also be conceptualized as media ritual. As rituals, like all aspects of human life, are subject to processes of digitalization and medialization, ritual and media must be seen not as two distinct categories but as interacting and overlapping processes.¹⁶ The relationship between ritual and media is multidimensional, for media represent rituals, and rituals are subject to medialization, meaning that media are integrated into rituals, and rituals are adjusted to the logics of the media.¹⁷

Moreover, media do not just document rituals; they also modify them. On the screen the audience sees not the event itself but a representation of the event, and representations are always selective, providing a certain point of view on the event. Media events are constructions, not expressions of a reality.¹⁸ Additionally, media are not simple institutions of information transfer, but rather social actors with their own ideas, values and norms. Through their selectivity, which determines which events and actors are perceived and how, media produce conceptualizations of the world and interpretative cultural models. Media claim to present “reality”, but they are constructing selective images of reality while professing authenticity and participation in extra-medial happenings, especially in the case of live broadcasts.¹⁹

Jerusalem between Political and Religious Interests

Jerusalem is constructed as a “sacred space” by actors who in performing their (religious) concepts connect those concepts to the city. In the case of the opening ceremony, actors from Israel and the United States advanced religious concepts derived from Christian and Jewish traditions. The existing conceptualizations of Jerusalem

15 Chidester/Linenthal 1995, 19.

16 Grimes 2011, 20.

17 Couldry 2004, 57; Sumiala 2014, 943.

18 Couldry 2004, 57; Grimes 2011, 5; 20.

19 Couldry 2004, 95–97; Bartsch/Brück/Fahlenbach 2008, 11–18.

within these traditions shaped the actors' images of Jerusalem and were therefore reiterated in the ritual of the ceremony.

Both Judaism and Christianity contain discrete conceptualizations of Jerusalem, with the utopic "heavenly Jerusalem" a spiritual and symbolic center and the "earthly Jerusalem" an actual geographical-historical city. Through history and up to today, these two clearly distinguishable concepts have been interwoven in various ways, including politically.²⁰ The entanglement of these two versions of Jerusalem is performed within the city itself, as we see in the example of the ritual of the opening ceremony. Through such actions Jerusalem is loaded with religious concepts and constructed as a holy city, as "heavenly Jerusalem". Moreover, throughout history Jerusalem has been variously charged as sacred space by claims and rituals, and as a result many levels of sacralization have accumulated within cultural memory. The repeated connection of religious concepts to the city has entangled its earthly and heavenly histories. In a circular process, actors through the time have constructed and still construct Jerusalem by loading it with their concepts; these constructions shape conceptualizations of Jerusalem within religious traditions that are reused to reconstruct Jerusalem. The many layers of accumulated sacralization and legitimized concepts form a bulwark around the space.

For our interpretation of the ceremony, we need also consider the Palestinian claim to Jerusalem although – indeed, precisely because – it does not appear in the ceremony. This claim is primarily fueled by the significance of Jerusalem in Muslim tradition. Called "al-Quds" ("the Holy") by Muslims, Jerusalem is the third holiest city after Mecca and Medina and al-Aqsa mosque is considered the place from which the prophet Muhammad started his journey to heaven.²¹ The Palestinian claim is absent from the ceremony, which thus works not only by performing a certain version of Jerusalem, but also by excluding another. From this perspective, the struggle for Jerusalem can be understood as a struggle between conflicting claims to sacred space.

The modern debate over Jerusalem, with the city a central bone of contention in the Middle East conflict, is part of this struggle. Even though, as Jan Stetter and Stephan Busse suggest, the concrete premises of the current conflict over Jerusalem are modern, the legitimacy patterns that characterize the conflict come from much older religious narratives. The modern conflict, however modern it may be, has dimensions that reach back far into history.²²

Today religious narratives about Jerusalem serve as powerful sources of legitimization, and references to the "heavenly Jerusalem" justify claims to the "earthly

20 Kristianssen 2015, 2.

21 Wasserstein 2007, 27–28.

22 Busse/Stetter 2018, 23.

Jerusalem”. But why do the actors want to possess the “earthly Jerusalem” in the first place? I argue that Jerusalem is a variously loaded sacred space and that because of its privileged position of power, it can grant a power and legitimacy that will prove an advantage in conflict. In sum, I suggest, religious concepts are used to gain control of the “heavenly Jerusalem” and thereby own the “earthly Jerusalem”.

Israeli Politics between “Heavenly” and “Earthly” Jerusalem

This morning, the Israel Defense Forces liberated Jerusalem. We have united Jerusalem, the divided capital of Israel. We have returned to the holiest of our Holy Places, never to part from it again.

– Moshe Dayan, 6 June 1967²³

The entanglement of the heavenly and earthly Jerusalems is evident in Jewish tradition: Jews yearn for the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the focus of their messianic hopes, and thus for centuries have turned to the earthly Jerusalem as a site of prayer or as a pilgrimage destination.²⁴ Thus, the hope for the heavenly Jerusalem is projected onto the earthly Jerusalem. The restoration of Jewish sovereignty is, however, Bernard Wasserstein contends, a relatively new idea. The religious veneration of the city did not entail, he argues, concrete obligations regarding the earthly Jerusalem, and indeed, when the idea of a political restoration emerged in the 19th century, it was rejected by the majority of orthodox Jews, who were skeptical of Zionism, which they held to be a blasphemy that sought to anticipate God’s own plan for salvation. Consequently, Zionism long remained a decidedly secular movement, at least in terms of the (non-)participation of religious actors.²⁵

The Zionists’ relationship with Jerusalem has been ambivalent. For a long time, Jerusalem was not a focus of their interests. Indeed for the early Zionists, Jerusalem represented the old world that they wanted to leave behind, for they associated Jerusalem and its citizens with religious zealotry, dirt and parasitism, and consequently they contemptuously neglected the city. At the beginning of the First World War, however, the Zionists revised their strategy for reaching their goal of sovereignty in Palestine and a homeland for the Jewish people, with Jerusalem now part of what was in effect a cultural struggle in which the city functioned as a national symbol of a glorious Jewish past.²⁶ Here again, we see both the distinction between and intertwining of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalems.

23 Speech of Moshe Dayan, 6 June 1967, cited in Kristianssen 2015, 23.

24 Wasserstein 2007, 22; Reiter 2013, 120–121.

25 Wasserstein 2007, 19–22; Baumgart-Ochse 2010, 32.

26 Katz 1995, 279–283; 287; Wasserstein 2007, 22–23; Mayer 2008, 224–225.

Jerusalem became a singular focus for Zionists after 1967, when, after Israel's victory in the Six Day War, the previously marginal group of religious Zionists gained more power in Israeli politics, accompanying a shift to the right. The nationalistic-messianic wave within Israel saw the influence of the religious Zionists increase greatly, along with the Settler movement, and become more mainstream. Drawing on their religious-messianic interpretation of events, which saw Israel's remarkable victory as the direct intervention of God, the religious Zionists superelevated the State of Israel, strongly emphasizing Jewish particularism and their natural and unique claim to the land of Israel.²⁷ Since 1967 the fusion of Jewish elements and Zionism has created a distinct religious-national ethos. Israeli Judaism turned from the religion of a nation to a national religion.²⁸ To legitimize that process, the Zionists sought a construct of Jerusalem that merged religious conceptualizations of the heavenly Jerusalem with the earthly city.

The US, its Evangelical Christians and Jerusalem

If a line has to be drawn, then let it be drawn around both of us – Christians and Jews, Americans and Israelis. We are one. We are united. And we will not be discouraged, and we will not be defeated. In the end, when the last battle has been fought, the flag of Israel will still be flying over the ancient walls of Jerusalem. Israel will prevail.

– Pastor John Hagee²⁹

In Lindsey's³⁰ framework, Israel will have the misfortune of hosting the battle of Armageddon, with all its attendant destruction, but Jews can take heart in the knowledge that, if they survive, they will be saved by converting to Christianity.

– Paul Miller³¹

Evangelical Christians and their conceptualizations of Jerusalem played an important role in the opening ceremony for the US embassy. Protestantism has had a centuries-long influence on US politics, and today Evangelical Christians are at the forefront of that symbiosis.³² In the 1980s and 1990s, aided by the rise of neo-conservatism, Evangelical Christians developed into a powerful lobby group with a de-

27 Hellinger 2008, 534–535; Mayer 2008, 240; Baumgart-Ochse 2010, 34–36; Reiter 2013, 116.

28 Javadikouchaksaraei 2017, 43.

29 Pastor John Hagee, cited in Durbin 2013, 325.

30 Hal Lindsey is an American Christian writer and conservative commentator who – in his books as well as in his television show – offers an interpretation of “global developments through the theological framework of dispensationalism” (Miller 2014, 12).

31 Miller 2014, 13.

32 Newman 2007, 583–585.

cisive influence on American (foreign) politics. One of the principal agendas of the Christian Right was to lobby for Israel. Vital to maintaining Republicans in Congress, it advocates the military dominance of America and unlimited support for Israel.³³ Christian Zionists form a sub-group within the Christian Right that focuses on that support for Israel.

Since its foundation, the State of Israel has been a central concern of US foreign policy, and today the most vociferous advocates are found not necessarily in the American Jewish community but rather amongst Evangelical Christians. The involvement of the latter is based on a particular reading of the Old Testament as well as a unique eschatology in which Israel plays a decisive role.³⁴ Within Dispensationalism, a biblical interpretative method that developed in England in the 19th century, the return of the Jews to Palestine is a necessary stage in the progression towards the Second Coming of Christ.³⁵ With the foundation of the State of Israel, the Dispensationalists gained credibility, reached the American mainstream and established themselves as a political force. New organizations were founded, including Christians United for Israel, which rejects a two-state solution or any territorial concessions to the Palestinians.³⁶ Today the Christian Right insists that the survival of Israel must be a priority for American foreign policy, whatever the financial or political implications.³⁷

Christian Zionists' attitude towards Jews is, however, very ambivalent. While they believe Israel is protected by God, the fate of the Jews is uncertain: only that small part who convert to Christianity will be saved, while the majority will join the forces of the anti-Christ and will be destroyed during the battle of Armageddon.³⁸ Although Jewish groups in the United States and Israel vehemently opposed the alliance of Israel and the Christian Zionists, they accepted the political coalition because it serves Israeli interests in the United States.³⁹ Thus the American approach to Israel in general and to Jerusalem in particular is markedly influenced by an understanding of the Bible and a conceptualization of the United States that are both profoundly shaped by Evangelical ideas.

33 Haynes 2012, 37–38; Braml 2005, 19; 24.

34 Miller 2014, 7–8.

35 Mearsheimer/Walt 2007, 188–189; Miller 2014, 8–11.

36 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 154; Mearsheimer/Walt 2007, 190–191.

37 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 155.

38 Salleh/Abu-Hussin 2013, 159–161.

39 Haija 2006, 85.

The Opening Ceremony of the New US Embassy as Media Ritual

With the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem, President Donald Trump made real one of his promises made during the 2016 election campaign – a promise made by presidents and candidates before him, but never previously realized.⁴⁰ Trump has also spoken of a new approach to negotiations to create a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians. That new approach was, at the time of the opening ceremony, yet to be explained and certainly the decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv was not greeted peacefully.⁴¹

The relocation of the embassy infuriated Israel's Arabic neighbors, especially the Palestinian National Authority, which claims East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state. The wave of violence that the Palestinian leadership announced in December 2017 did not occur, but tensions rose. The weeks before the opening ceremony saw mass protests in the Gaza Strip, with many deaths, and during the opening ceremony itself, there were protests and violent clashes, again especially along the border with the Gaza Strip.⁴²

The ceremony lasted about 80 minutes. It included speeches given by American and Israeli politicians and by two Evangelical pastors and a rabbi as well as ceremonial elements (fig. 2) and two musical interludes.⁴³ The video analyzed here is of a live broadcast by the US news portal *TIME*, but the ceremony was broadcast by many news channels, especially in Israel and the United States, in the same form, as far as I can establish. People around the world could experience the event live or watch it subsequently. Since the ceremony was held in English, it is easily accessed by an international audience.

As noted, I analyze the video on three levels: rhetorical, performative and in terms of medial representation. My focus is on the speeches, which formed the core of the ceremony. The rhetorical level is therefore pre-eminent, supported by the other two levels, which frame the speeches and influence their reception worldwide.

40 Amerika Dienst 2017.

41 Amerika Dienst 2017; Borger/Beaumont 2017. In January 2020, President Trump has finally unveiled his Middle East peace plan, containing a kind of Two-State-Solution. Given the many concessions made to Israel at expense of Palestinian claims, the Palestinian Authority rejected it (Holmes/Taha/Balousha/McGreal 2020).

42 Anon 2018a; Anon 2018b; Reimann 2018; Underwood 2018.

43 The speakers were, in order, US-Ambassador David Friedman, Pastor Robert Jeffress, Rabbi Zalman Wolowik, US-Secretary of State John J. Sullivan, Donald Trump (via video-message), Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, Senior Advisor Jared Kushner, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Pastor John Hagee.



Fig. 2: Unveiling the seal, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:29:01).

Rhetorical Level

The speeches given during the ceremony contain religious references of various types. First, there are obvious allusions to Jewish and Christian traditions: for example, almost all the speakers ask for God's blessing or make use of quotations from the Bible. The speeches also contain, on a deeper level, narratives and motifs that refer to Jewish and/or Christian traditions. The religious references in these argumentation patterns at the base of the text are of greatest interest to me. The references to religion within the text can be divided across three (interconnected) lines of argument: first, the construction of Jerusalem as space; secondly, the staging of Israel and the United States individually and of their alliance; thirdly, the presentation of the relocation of the embassy.

In the speeches, Jerusalem is conceptualized as “religious space” and as a modern city, as “profane space”. The religious concept is dominant, with Jerusalem shaped in almost all speeches as religious space, irrespective of whether the speaker is a religious leader or politician. In first place, the terminology makes this case: Jerusalem is often called a “holy city” or “city of God” or described as the “eternal capital of the Jewish people” (or with variants of that phrase). Behind these terms lie conceptualizations of space drawn from or entangled with religious traditions. Thus, Jerusalem is super-elevated; no longer a purely earthly city, it has the higher status of a heavenly city.



Fig. 3: Netanyahu, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trumps Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:57:47).

Moreover, almost all the speakers refer to the history of Jerusalem, including its biblical origins. They look back over 3,000 years and stress that King David established Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish people. On this point Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech (fig. 3) is exemplary:

What a difference, what a difference. So, for me this spot brings back personal memories, but for our people, it evokes profound collective memories of the greatest moments we have known on this City on a Hill. In Jerusalem/ In Jerusalem, Abraham passed the greatest test of faith and the right to be the father of our nation. In Jerusalem, King David established our capital three thousand years ago. In Jerusalem, King Solomon built our Temple, which stood for many centuries. In Jerusalem, Jewish exiles from Babylon rebuilt the Temple, which stood for many more centuries. In Jerusalem, the Maccabees rededicated that Temple and restored Jewish sovereignty in this land. And it was here in Jerusalem some two thousand years later that the soldiers of Israel spoke three immortal words, "Har ha'bayit be'yadeinu", "The Temple Mount is in our hands", [Applause] words that lifted the spirit of the entire nation. We are in Jerusalem and we are here to stay.⁴⁴

44 TIME 2018, (01:01:50–01:03:10).



Fig. 4: Kushner, *U.S. Opens New Embassy In Jerusalem After Trump's Decision To Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:43:43).

Netanyahu draws a clear connection between biblical history and current events and ascribes them the same status. The religious reference here consists in the first place of an allusion to biblical history. The Bible and its authority are deployed to load Jerusalem in a certain way; the aligning of current events with the biblical Jerusalem endows them with the same authority. The eternal connection of the Jews with Jerusalem is emphasized, legitimizing their possession of the city. That “Jerusalem” is not necessarily the earthly Jerusalem, for the archaeological evidence casts doubt on the linkage, but rather the heavenly Jerusalem, which is a central longing in Judaism. The equation of the earthly Jerusalem with that heavenly Jerusalem ensures the latter becomes the rightful object of desire, and a rightful possession, in turn.

We turn to the portrayal of the United States, Israel and the alliance between them. The United States is explicitly presented as powerful and its position at Israel’s side is emphasized, as we see in the speech given by Jared Kushner, President Trump’s representative in the Middle East (fig. 4),

presidents before him have backed down from their pledge to move the American embassy, once in office, this president delivered, because when President Trump makes a promise, he keeps it. But today also demonstrates American

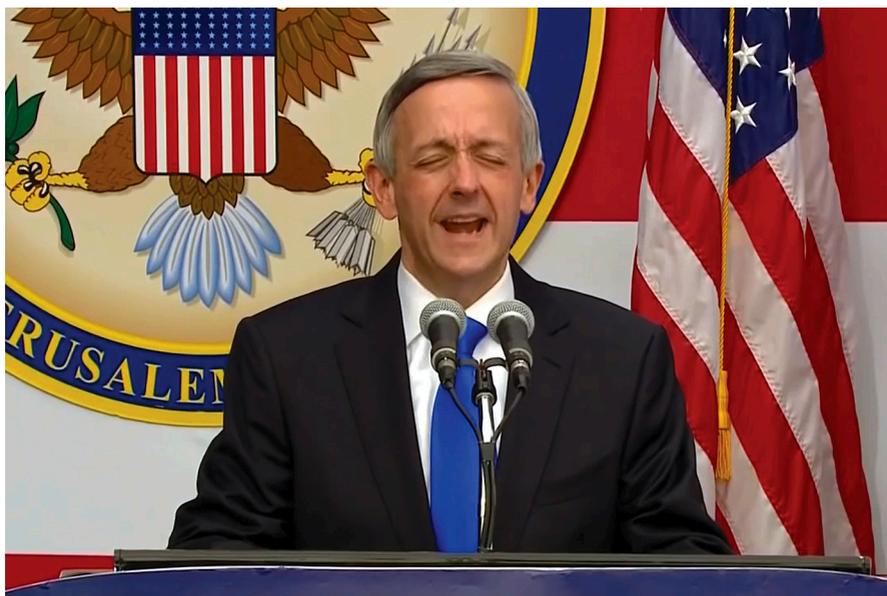


Fig. 5: Robert Jeffress, *U.S. Opens New Embassy In Jerusalem After Trump's Decision To Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:14:24).

leadership. By moving our Embassy to Jerusalem, we have shown the world once again that the United States can be trusted. We stand with our friends and our allies and above all else, we have shown that the United States of America will do what's right and so we have.⁴⁵

Here the United States is presented as a trustworthy nation that stands with its allies and does “what’s right”, language that claims moral superiority for the United States. For Kushner, peace is made possible by a strong America that recognizes and effects the truth, which is, in this case, that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. The United States is tasked with doing good, with the responsibility to do “what’s right”.

Several times Israel is presented as a “blessing to the world”. The first occasion comes in the words of Pastor Jeffress, of First Baptist Church in Dallas (fig. 5), who conflates the ancient and modern Israels:

Four thousand years ago, you said to your servant Abraham that you would make him the father of a great nation, a nation, through whom the whole world would be blessed. And now, as we look back, we see how Israel has been that

45 TIME 2018, (00:45:30–00:46:10).

blessing to the entire world through her innovations in medicine, technology and energy. But most of all, Israel has blessed this world by pointing us to you, the one true God through the message of her prophets, the scriptures and the messiah.⁴⁶

The nation of Israel in the Bible is equated here with the contemporary state of Israel, and the “blessing” that the ancient Israel would be to the world is put on a level with the technical innovations of the modern Israel. The Israel of today is presented as God-given and beneficial, and thus legitimized.

Kushner in turn describes Israel as a blessing:

Israel proves every day the boundless power of freedom. This land is the only land in the Middle East in which Jews, Muslims and Christians and people of all faiths participate and worship freely according to their beliefs. Israel protects women’s rights, freedom of speech and the right of every individual to reach their God-given potential. These are the same values that the United States cherishes. These are the values that bind us together. These are also the values that have made Israel one of the most vibrant nations in the world. This tiny population has spurred advancements in technology, medicine and agriculture, making the world a healthier, safer and more prosperous place. These are the blessings we hope Israel can one day share with its neighbors.⁴⁷

Kushner points to liberal-democratic values like religious freedom, women’s rights and freedom of speech, which make Israel an island of freedom in the dark seas of the Middle East, a land that prospers because God loves it. The United States must support Israel as part of its own mission from God, evident in their similar values.

Finally, we turn to the representation of the relocation itself. Almost all the speakers emphasize that Jerusalem is undoubtedly the capital of Israel and that consequently the relocation of the embassy is a recognition of general truth and a reality. “Truth” is a repeated theme across these speeches. For example, Zalman Wolowik, an Orthodox rabbi from Long Island (fig. 6), draws a picture of the unchanging truth that is the eternal connection of Jews with Jerusalem. In a next step, this “truth” is connected to a hope for peace:

Peace is ingrained in the marrow of Jerusalem, but the prophet Zachariah said: “You must love truth and peace” Peace, Shalom, is the inseparable sister of

46 TIME 2018, (00:14:17–00:14:52).

47 TIME 2018, (00:47:19–00:48:06).



Fig. 6: Zalman Wolowik, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:17:32).

truth. I pray that from today's exalting of truth, there flow to Jerusalem, her neighbors, and to the entire world a true and perfect peace. May that day, visualized by the prophets swiftly arrive. When nation shall not take up its sword against nation. When there will be harmony, not war, respect, not envy, love, not hate. In the words of the psalmist who sang his longing for peace not far from right here, pray for the peace of Jerusalem. May those who love you be at peace. Amen.⁴⁸

Drawing from the Bible, in this passage Wolowik declare that truth and peace go hand in hand. Recognition of the truth is a precondition for peace. He draws a vision of the future that begins with the relocation of the embassy, which thus becomes the starting point of, or a station in, an eschatological process. Netanyahu also calls the event the beginning of peace and then connects this peace to truth:

But I believe it's also a great day for peace. I want to thank Jared, Jason and David for your tireless efforts to advance peace, and for your tireless efforts to advance the truth. The truth and peace are interconnected. A peace that is built

48 TIME 2018, (00:19:20–00:20:10).

on lies will crash on the rocks of Middle Eastern reality. You can only build peace on truth, and the truth is that Jerusalem has been and will always be the capital of the Jewish people, the capital of the Jewish state. [Applause] Truth, peace and justice – as our Justice here, Hanan Melcer, can attest – truth, peace and justice, this is what we have, and this is what we believe in. The prophet Zechariah declared over 2,500 years ago, [Hebrew] “So said the Lord, ‘I will return to Zion and I will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth.’” May the opening of this embassy in this city spread the truth far and wide, and may the truth advance a lasting peace between Israel and all our neighbors. God bless the United States of America and God bless Jerusalem, the eternal, undivided capital of Israel.⁴⁹

The concept of an “eternal truth” – that Jerusalem is forever the inseparable capital of Israel – is here deeply bound in with the city itself. Jerusalem is the “city of truth”, as, again, the Bible proves. Recognition of this eternal truth must lead to peace, so the event being celebrated can only be beneficial. No explanation is given of how the embassy might contribute to peace, an absence all the more striking as many expect the opposite.

The Palestinians are almost never mentioned in the speeches, and certainly not in relation to their claim to Jerusalem. Within the ceremony, no reference is made to the conflict about Jerusalem, with the relocation of the embassy framed in the speeches exclusively in positive terms. The veiling of the Palestinians and their claims during the ceremony denies their existence.

Performative and Medial Representation Levels

We turn now to the staging of the ceremony, looking at aspects such as its structure, timing, location and music, and at its medial representation. How does the raw material of the speeches become ceremony or, indeed, religious ritual? How does the audience view the events depicted on their screens and why?

On the performative level, we first consider the symbolic significance of the time and place selected for the ceremony (and for the embassy). The ceremony was held on Israel’s 70th Independence Day and on the border (“green line”) that divided Jerusalem before 1967. Both time and place speak of Israel’s authority and power over the Palestinians. The speeches given by the religious figures came at the start and end of the ceremony. Sermon-like and prayer-like, these speeches are reminiscent of a church service and forge the ceremony as religious ritual.

49 TIME 2018, (01: 06:25–01:08:02).



Fig. 7: Chagit Yasso, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:35:05).

At two points in the ceremony, a band plays. The choice of both singer and songs is symbolic. The singer, Chagit Yasso (fig. 7), is the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, whence they fled and were “saved” by Israel. The two songs are “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen⁵⁰ and “May Peace Yet Come to Us All” by Mosh Ben Ari⁵¹, an Israeli artist. Both songs are sung half in English and half in Hebrew. The songs underline the message conveyed by the speeches. “Hallelujah” contains references to the biblical King David and it too emphasizes the 3,000 years of Jerusalem’s Jewish history and the legitimizing continuity from King David to today’s State of Israel. “May Peace Yet Come to Us All” again relates the event to a promised peace, underlining its beneficial character. Moreover, music is part of religious worship and arouses emotion. Almost all of the speakers – religious figures and politicians alike – ask for God’s blessing at the end of their speeches, suggesting God’s participation, perhaps even that God has brought about this event.

Turning to the medial representation, we observe a play with closeness and distance. Camera settings showing the speakers (fig. 8) are interspersed with settings that show the audience. Additionally, wide settings that show the whole audience

50 TIME 2018, (00:31:20–00:35:18).

51 TIME 2018, (01:13:30 – 01:16:35).

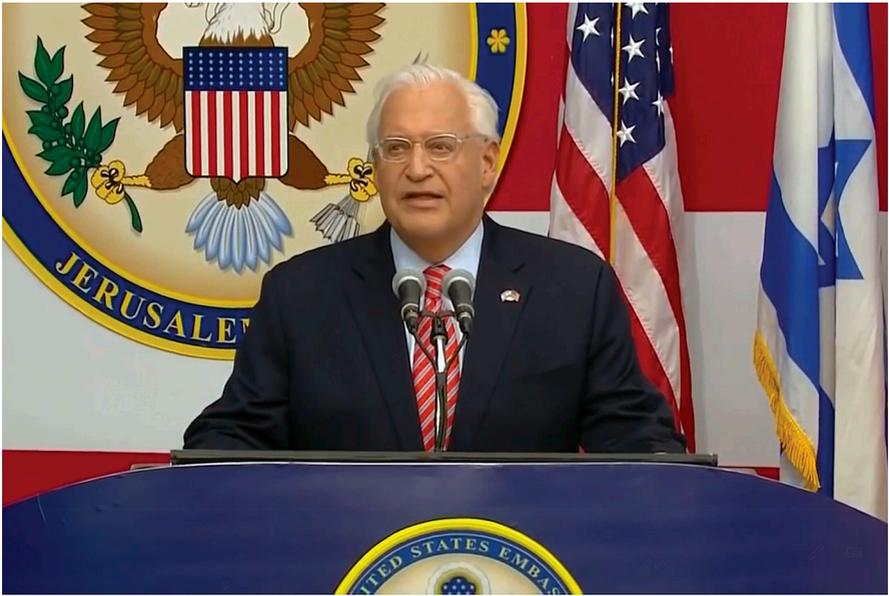


Fig. 8: David Friedman, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:03:55).



Fig. 9: Audience from above, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:40:55).



Fig. 10: Audience in close setting, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:13:05).



Fig. 11: Ivanka Trump, *U.S. Opens New Embassy in Jerusalem After Trump's Decision to Recognize Capital* (TIME 2018, 00:43:56).

from above (fig. 9) are exchanged with settings that zoom in to the speaker or to a single person or group within the audience (fig. 10 and 11). The shots often concentrate on VIPs like Kushner, Ivanka Trump or Netanyahu. The switching between speaker and audience suggests a dialogue between them or their interaction. The viewer of the event on a screen sees both the speakers close up, with each speaker's demeanor discernible, and the behavior of the audience at the event, for example whether they applaud. Thus, these viewers see people in large numbers, stressing the importance of the event, as well as close-ups of individuals within the audience. With the mood on site transported to this distant audience, the latter can empathize with the emotions of the local audience. They feel as if they are participating in the event, as if they are part of the ritual. The settings also change, with views from above providing an overview and views from within the audience giving the impression that the viewer is amongst the guests.

The Religio-Political Legitimization of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

At the rhetorical level, a dense network of religious legitimations of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is produced, with many references to Jewish and Christian traditions. The religious references are found both in quotations from the Bible and in the narratives of the argumentation. Jerusalem is constructed as sacred space and the actors and the event are superelevated by religious conceptualizations of space that focus on the heavenly Jerusalem as well as by the emphasis on American exceptionalism and Jewish particularism. The alliance of the United States and Israel and the event of the opening ceremony itself are conveyed as beneficial.

At the performative level, the ceremony is staged as (religious) ritual in the speeches given by religious figures, the timing of these speeches during the event and the repeated requests for God's blessing. The music and choice of songs and singer bolster the message. Furthermore, the ceremony overall is endowed with particular meaning by the highly symbolical choice of space and time. In sum, the performative level sees the event superelevated and given "holy" status. At the level of medial representation, the play between closeness and distance involves the distant viewer, who then feels more like a participant. Close-up shots bring an emotional component, for they provide access to the responses of individuals within the audience.

How do these elements relate to the theoretical framework set out at the start of this article? With their respective religious ideas, the actors (the United States

and Israel) perform a ritual that constructs Jerusalem as sacred space. Jerusalem already bears a distinct religious identity, which is then bolstered by the reiteration of powerful religious concepts. Religious concepts are naturalized and the actors sacralized, giving both Jerusalem and the performers a standing that has consequences for the Middle East conflict. Religion's special role is a result of its privileged relationship to power, which makes loading a space with religious concepts especially lucrative. The sacralization of the actors gives them power and a monopoly of truth. A complex web of legitimization is created, binding together the actors, their concepts and space, which then legitimize one another and form an unassailable whole, within which and through which power functions in multiple ways. Already-powerful religious concepts derived from different religious traditions (according to a particular interpretation) are advanced in the ceremony, where they merge with political interest to form a powerful synthesis that serves the actors by legitimizing their claims and giving them a powerful position within the conflict. Thus, the religio-political legitimization of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is intensified.

Moreover, the absence from the ceremony of the Palestinians' claim to Jerusalem and of the holy status of the city in Islam erases their existence. The connection between power and sacred space is realized: since Israel is more powerful, unlike the Palestinians it has the resources to produce sacred space (e.g. to perform rituals and convey them to a worldwide audience), which heightens its powerful position within the conflict. The struggle over Jerusalem can thus be described as a struggle over sacred space: the group that is most successful in endowing Jerusalem with its religious concepts can claim Jerusalem, which Israel is evidently in the stronger position to do.

In the ceremony in particular and in the Middle East conflict in general, religion and politics are tightly interwoven and sometimes cannot be separated. Where the substantial ends and the symbolical begins is often unclear. Conceptualizations of space (the "heavenly" and the "earthly" Jerusalems) are often equated. (Sacred) space, ritual and media are evidently central concepts for an analysis of the entanglements of politics and religion in Middle East conflict, as we have seen from this telling example.

The holiness of Jerusalem is not absolute, but rather a product of political, societal and cultural factors with which the city interacts. With religion and politics in turn interwoven into the Middle East conflict, the constructed holiness of Jerusalem is a vital factor in that conflict.

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