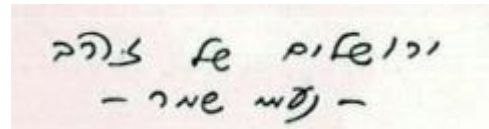


"Yerushalayim shel Zahav" The Sources that Influenced the Famous Song

[Source Sheet](#) by Rachel Buckman

This analysis of the song is based on Ofir Ben Yair's [article](#) that appears on the NLI and Snunit website focusing on *piyutim* and prayers, *The Secret of Many Voices: A Journey to the Heart of Piyut and Prayer*.

[Recording](#) from National Library of Israel archives



Background: Naomi Shemer on the Writing of "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav"

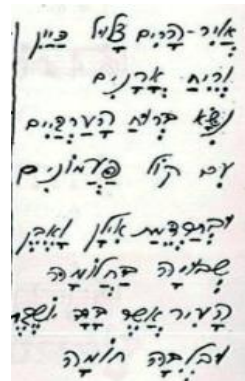
"In the winter of '67 I was approached by Gil Aldema from *Voice of Israel* [the former Israeli Broadcast Authority]. Teddy Kollek [the then mayor of Jerusalem] had asked him to commission a song about Jerusalem. For many years, *Voice of Israel* held a song competition on Independence Day, until then broadcast only on the radio only [because we only got television in 1968]. That same year, 1967, they decided, on a one-time basis, to also commission songs from five professional composers; I was among them. I found it very difficult to write the song, until I recalled the legend about Rabbi Akiva promising his wife Rachel a 'city of gold,' that is, a piece of gold jewellery depicting Jerusalem. I chose Shuli Nathan to perform the song. She was a 20-year old soldier-teacher, with a guitar and a beautiful voice. The song was a hit from the very first performance and, at midnight, when Shuli was asked to return to the stage, the audience was already joining her in the chorus..."

What Sources Inspired Naomi Shemer's Song?

Understanding the First Verse

The mountain air is clear as wine and the
scent of pines
Is carried on the breeze of twilight with
the sound of bells.
And in the slumber of tree and stone
captured in her dream
The city that sits solitary and in its
midst is a wall.

אור הרים צלול כגין ורים ארנים
נשא ברוח הערבים עם קול פִּעֲמוֹנִים
ובתדמית אילן ואבן שבויה בחלומה
העיר אשר בִּדְד יושבת ובלבה חומה.



- What senses are mentioned in the first paragraph?

- What feeling toward Jerusalem do you get from the first paragraph?
- Write three adjectives describing Jerusalem from your reading of the first paragraph?

Source 1

Alas! **Lonely sits the city**, once great
with people! She that was great among
nations is become like a widow; the
princess among states is become a slave.

איכה | יְשֻׁבָה בְּדָד הָעִיר רַבָּתִי עִם הָיְתָה
כְּאַלְמָנָה רַבָּתִי בְּגוֹיִם שְׂרָתִי בְּמַדִּינֹת הָיְתָה
לְמַס:

איכה א'א'

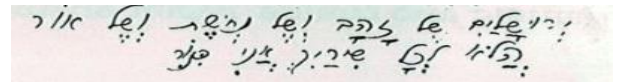
Lamentations 1:1

- What is the book of Eicha (Lamentations)?
Which historical events does it describe?
- Which emotions does the book of Eicha evoke?
- When Naomi Shemer wrote the song, who was in control of the Old City of Jerusalem?
- How many years had passed since Jerusalem had last been under Jewish control?
- What sentence, in the first verse of Naomi Shemer's song, refers to the book of Eicha?
- How does the word "בודדה/solitary" describe the Old City at the time that the song was written?

Understanding the Chorus

First Reading

Read the words of the chorus and answer the questions.



Jerusalem of gold, of bronze and of **light**
Behold I am a harp for all of your
songs

ירושלים של זהב ושל נחשת ושל אור
הלא לכל שיריך אני כנור.

See below for the additional sources referred to in the questions.

- What colors are used to describe Jerusalem?
- How would you explain the meaning of the word "light" here??
- According to the prayer, where does light originate?
- In the Rabbi Akiva story, a "Jerusalem of Gold" is a crown in the shape of the walls of Jerusalem. What does it represent?
- Why do you think Naomi Shemer chose the Jerusalem of Gold image for the name of her song?
- Who was Yehuda Halevi?
- What do you think it means to be a "harp for all of your songs"?

Source 1

Cause a new **light** to shine upon Zion,
and may we all be worthy soon to enjoy
its brightness.

(Ashkenazi siddur, weekday Shacharit,
Blessings of the Shema, first blessing
before Shema, 5)

אור קדש על ציון תאיר ונזקה כלנו מהרה לאורו.

(סידור אשכנז, ימי חול, תפילת שחרית, ברכות
קריאת שמע, יוצר אור ה')

Source 2

Rabbi Akiva became betrothed to the
daughter of Kalba Savua. When Kalba
Savua heard about their betrothal, he
took a vow prohibiting her from eating
from his property. Despite this, she
went ahead and married him. In the
winter they would sleep in a storehouse
of straw, and he [Rabbi Akiva] would
gather strands of straw from her hair.
He said to her: If I had the means I
would present you with a **Jerusalem of
Gold**.

Nedarim 50a:2-3

ר' עקיבא איתקדשת ליה בריתה (דבר) דכלבא
שבוע שמע (בר) כלבא שבוע אדרה הנאה מכל
נכסיה אזלא ואיתנסיבה ליה בסיתוא הוה גנו בי
תיבנא הוה קא מנקיט ליה תיבנא מן מזייה אמר
לה אי הואי לי רמינא לך **ירושלים דדהבא**
נדרים נ' א:ב-ג'

Source 3

Zion, do you ask if the captives are at
peace --
the few who are left? ...
I cry out like the jackals when I think of
their grief;
but, dreaming of the end of their
captivity,
I am like a harp for your songs.
Rabbi Yehuda Halevi

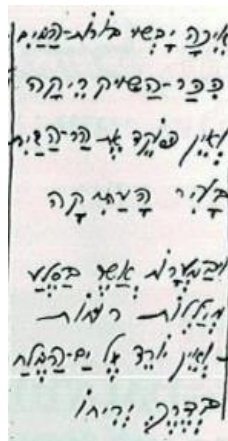
ציון, הלא תשאלני לשלום אסיריך
דורשי שלומך והם יתר עדריך ...
לבכות ענותך אני תנים ועת אחלום
שיבת שבותך **אני כנור לשיריך**.
ר' יהודה הלוי

Understanding the Second Verse

Read the words of the second verse and answer the questions below.

How the cisterns have dried, the marketplace is empty,
And no one frequents the Temple Mount in the Old City.
And in the caves in the mountain, winds are howling,
And no one descends to the Dead Sea by way of Jericho.

איכה יבשו בורות המים כנר העיר ריקה
ואין פוקד את הר הבית בעיר העתיקה
ובמערות אשר בסלע מיללות רוחות
ואין יורד אל ים המלח בדרך יריחו.



See below for the additional sources referred to in the questions.

- After reading the second verse, what three adjectives would you choose to describe Jerusalem?
- From which biblical text does Naomi Shemer get the inspiration for her expression of the sadness and desolation of the city while under Jordanian control?
- Eicha is the Hebrew name for the book of Lamentations. How else is it translated in Naomi Shemer's song?
- Do you think that is a good name for the book that describes the destruction of the Temple?
- How does Isaiah use the word Eicha?
- Naomi Shemer also used a part of the first verse of Lamentations in the first verse of the song. Why do you think that she referenced this verse so often?

Source 1

Alas! Lonely sits the city, once great with people! She that was great among nations is become like a widow; the princess among states is become a slave.

Lamentations 1:1

איכה | יושבה בודד העיר רבתי עם היתה כאלמנה
רבתי בגוים שרתי במדינות היתה למס: (ס)
איכה א:א'

Source 2

Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt – but now murderers.

Isaiah 1:21

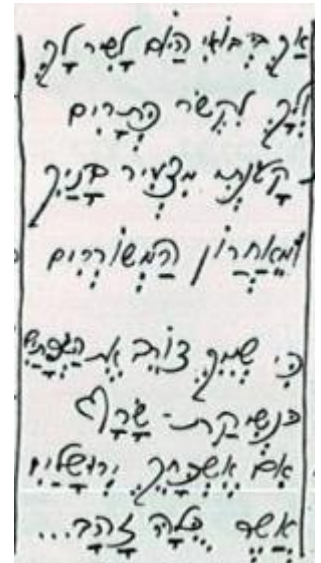
(כא) **איכה** היתה לזונה קריה נאמנה מלאתי
משפט צדק ילין בה ועתה מרצחים:
ישעיהו א:כ"א

Understanding the Third Verse

Read the words of the second verse and answer the questions below.

But as I come to sing to you today
and to **adorn crowns** to you
I am the smallest of the youngest of
your children and of the last poet.
For your name scorches the lips like
the kiss of a seraph
If I forget thee, Jerusalem which is
all gold.

אך בבואי היום לשיר לך ולך לקשר
כתרים
קטנתי מצעיר בניה ומאחרון המשוררים.
כי שמך צורב את השפתיים כנשיקת שרף
אם אשכחך ירושלים אשר כלה זהב.



See below for the additional sources referred to in the questions.

- According to Naomi Shemer, what is the role of the poet or songwriter?
- What are the crowns that the Talmud (Menachot) is referring to?
- According to the midrash, who wrote the crowns?
- Who was the person who made meaning of the crowns on the letters?
- How does Naomi Shemer use the image of the crowns on the letters in her song?
- Who was the youngest who was chosen to be king described in the book of 1 Samuel?
- Why do you think Naomi Shemer described the poet as the "smallest of the youngest of your children"?
- Why might a songwriter, writing a song about Jerusalem, choose to reference King David?
- What does the Psalm say about the place that Jerusalem should take in our thoughts and hearts?

Source 1

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and **tying crowns on the letters** [of the Torah]. Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, who is preventing You [from giving the Torah without these additions?] God said to him: There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name; he is destined to derive from each and every thorn [of these crowns] mounds upon mounds of *halakhot* [Jewish Law].

Menachot 29b:3

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב בשעה שעלה משה
למרום מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים
לאותיות אמר לפניו רבש"ע מי מעכב על ידך אמר
לו אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות
ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו שעתיד לדרוש על כל קוץ
וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות
מנחות כ"ט ב'ג'

Source 2

(11) Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these all the **boys** you have?" He replied, "There is still the **youngest**; he is tending the flock." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send someone to bring him, for we will not sit down to eat until he gets here." (12) So they sent and brought him. He was ruddy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and handsome. And the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him, for this is the one." (13) Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD gripped David from that day on. Samuel then set out for Ramah.

I Samuel 16:11-13

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל אֶל-יֵשׁוּעַ הַתָּמִיד הַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר
עוֹד שָׂאֵר הַקָּטָן וְהִנֵּה רֹעֶה בְּצֹאֵן וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמוּאֵל
אֶל-יֵשׁוּעַ שְׁלַחְהוּ וְקָחוּנִי כִּי לֹא-נִסְבַּ עַד-בָּאֹץ כֹּה: (יב)
וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיְבִיאֵהוּ וְהוּא אֲדָמוּנִי עֵם-יִפָּה עֵינָיו וְטוֹב
רָאִי (פ) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה קוּם מִשְׁחָהוּ כִּי-זֶה הוּא: (יג)
וַיִּקַּח שְׁמוּאֵל אֶת-קֶרֶן הַשֶּׁמֶן וַיִּמָּשַׁח אֹתוֹ בְּקֶרֶב
אֶחָיו וַתִּצְלַח רוּחַ-יְהוָה אֶל-דָּוִד מִהַיּוֹם הַהוּא
וּמִעַלָּה וַיָּקָם שְׁמוּאֵל וַיֵּלֶךְ הַרְמָתָה: (ס)
שְׁמוּאֵל א ט"ז: י"א-י"ג

Source 3

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour.

Psalms 137:5-6

אִם-אֶשְׁכַּח יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי: תִּדְבֹּק-לִשׁוֹנִי
לִחְפִּי אִם-לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ אִם-לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת-יְרוּשָׁלַם
עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמִי: תְּהִלִּים קל"ז: ה'ו'

In his article about Yerushalayim Shel Zahav, Ofir Ben Yair asks the question: why does Rabbi Akiva feature so prominently in Naomi Shemer's song?

See below for the midrash that Ben Yair refers to in his answer and answer the following questions.

- Summarize the midrash in your own words.
- What do we learn about Rabbi Akiva from the midrash?
- What was his attitude toward Jerusalem?
- How were his feelings different from those of the other rabbis mentioned in the story?
- Do you think that he is the right person to be associated with a song about Jerusalem?
- What other historical figure might Naomi Shemer have used to present the Jewish people's love for Jerusalem?

Again it happened that Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, Rabbi Joshua, and Rabbi Akiva went up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies. The others started weeping; Rabbi Akiva laughed. Said they said to him: Why are you laughing? Said he to them: Why are you weeping? Said they said to him: A place [so holy] that it is said of it: "the stranger that approaches it shall die", and now foxes walk in it; and we shouldn't weep? Said he to them: That is why I am laughing...But the Torah makes Zechariah's prophecy dependent on Uriah's prophecy. With Uriah it is written: "Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed as a field; With Zechariah it is written: "Old men and women shall yet sit in the streets of Jerusalem". As long as Uriah's prophecy had not been fulfilled, I feared that Zechariah's prophecy may not be fulfilled either. But now that Uriah's prophecy has been fulfilled, it is certain that Zechariah's prophecy will be fulfilled. With these words they replied to him: "Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us."

Makkot 24b:2-4

שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם כיון שהגיעו להר הבית ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק אמרו לו מפני מה אתה מצחק אמר להם מפני מה אתם בוכים אמרו לו מקום שכתוב בו (במדבר א, נא) והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני מצחק דכתיב (ישעיהו ח, ב) ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן יברכיהו וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה באוריה כתיב (מכה ג, יב) לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו'] בזכריה כתיב (זכריה ח, ד) עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלם עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת בלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא ניחמתנו עקיבא ניחמתנו:

מכות כ"ד ב:ב'-ד'

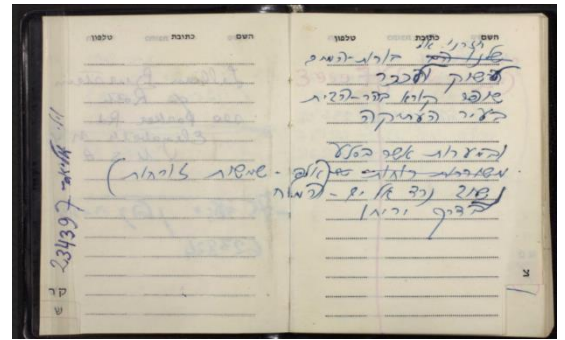
Understanding the Fourth Verse

The last verse of the song was added after the Six-Day War. Naomi Shemer explained:

"At that point [when the song was first performed] we were moving toward war, and three weeks later, when the paratroopers liberated the Western Wall, they had an anthem at the ready. On that day, June 7, 1967, I added a fourth verse to the song in honor of the victory."

This photograph shows Naomi Shemer's first draft of the fourth verse.

- Where was the draft written?
- What can you learn about circumstances of the writing of the verse from looking at where it was written?
- What can you learn about Shemer's writing process from looking at her handwriting?



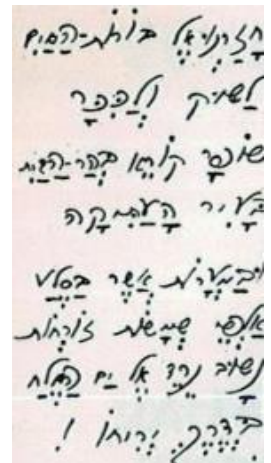
[Jerusalem of Gold \(Yerushalayim Shel Zahav\), 1967](#)

Read the fourth verse and answer the questions with reference to the pictures below.

We have returned to the cisterns, to the market and to the market-place
A shofar calls out on the Temple Mount in the Old City.
And in the caves in the mountain,
thousands of suns shine
We will once again descend to the Dead Sea by way of Jericho!

חזרנו אל בורות המים לשוק ולכפר
שופר קורא בבהר הבית בעיר העתיקה
ובמערות אשר בסלע אלפי שמשות זרחות
נשוב גרד אל ים המלח בדרך יריחו

- Which of the previous three verses does the fourth verse relate to?
- How does the mood change from the first verse to the fourth verse?
- What is the connection between the sign in Photograph 1 and the fourth verse?
- Look at the photographs that were taken days after the Six-Day War. What do they tell you about the atmosphere in Israel at that time?
- The song "Yerushalayim shel Zahav" was written a short time before the Six-Day War and became popular immediately. How do you think it was received after the Six-Day War?
- Ofir Ben Yair claims that the song straddles the definition of a modern Israeli song and a prayer. Which do you think it is?
- Can it be seen as both? Explain your answer.



Photograph 1 – The Border in Jerusalem



[From the Dan Hadani Archive](#)

Photograph 2 – Rabbi Shlomo Goren



After the capture of the Old City, IDF Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren blew the shofar at the Kotel.

- Where is this event referenced in Naomi Shemer's song?

In the days immediately following the Six-Day War, the photographer Dan Hadani took moving photographs of the changes that were taking place in Jerusalem. Thousands of Israelis came to Jerusalem to visit the Kotel and parts of the city that

How did it go? Let us know! learning@nli.org.il

had been previously denied to them. The city of Jerusalem prepared for the large numbers of visitors by expanding the plaza in front of the Kotel.

Photograph 3 – The Kotel (Western Wall) in 1918



[From the NLI Photo Albums Collection](#)

Photograph 4, 5 – Expanding the Plaza, 1967



[From the Dan Hadani Archive](#)

How did it go? Let us know! learning@nli.org.il

Photograph 6 – Returning to the Kotel



[From the Dan Hadani Archive](#)

Creative Activities

- Learn the song, "Yerushalayim shel Zahav."
- Create a presentation of photographs to accompany the song.
Recommended websites: [Canva](#), [Emaze](#), [Prezi](#).
- Write a blog post explaining the textual roots of "Yerushalayim shel Zahav."
- Interview someone who remembers the Six-Day War.
 - Ask them how they felt when they heard that Jerusalem had been reunified.
 - Ask them what they feel now and felt then about the song.