

## THE HOLY LAND AT WAR: A JOURNEY THROUGH ISRAEL, the WEST BANK and GAZA

By Mark Patinkin

It is my first night in Jerusalem, and though tired from the flight, I feel drawn, as do most sojourners here, to see the Old City, the most soulful enclave I know. And so, after settling into my hotel, I begin the 20-minute walk.

What a beautiful, stunning place, Jerusalem; on almost every block, you can hear the song of history in its ancient streets and limestone walls. Soon, I'm through the Jaffa Gate which still shows bullet scars from the war of 1948, past the Fortress of David, down the narrow path near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Jesus died and rose.

Finally, I emerge into a vast stone plaza, and there it is, the Western Wall itself. Above it, 3,000 years ago, King Solomon, son of David, built the original Jewish temple to house the Ark of the Covenant. It stood for five centuries until destroyed by the Babylonians, the first of 40 conquests of the city, and 100 battles for it.

And now there is another, which is what brought me here as a journalist. The current war, of course, is about Gaza, but in the sweep of history and the eyes of combatants, it can be seen as one more fight over Jerusalem, the seeds of it where I'm standing now, a spot that for millennia has drawn the passions of the world.

It is astonishing to be in the presence of the Western Wall, a wonder both spiritual and physical, running 1,601 feet long and 62 high, its huge limestone blocks forming a tableau accented by growths of Thorny Caper, Black Henbane and Sicilian Snapdragon.

Astonishingly, the blocks extend another 100 feet underground. It was constructed by Herod the Great using 10,000 laborers as a retaining wall for the Jerusalem rise known as Mount Moriah, where Abraham built an altar to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command.

Scores of Orthodox Jews are praying here this night, and I find a place among them. I am not overly religious, but when you touch this ancient stone, you can't help but ask God for the things you hope for in this world, and a part of you believes that just maybe, this is among the few places on Earth where he is most likely to hear you.

They say the conflict between Arab and Jew is among the world's most complex, but if you look toward the top of the wall, framed by the magenta Jerusalem sky, you also understand its simplicity.

This holiest spot for Jews stands under what is now among the most sacred Islamic sites, the Golden Dome of the Rock built where Solomon's temple stood—all of it yards from where Christianity began.

And now you see. For thousands of years, three great faiths have competed over the same few acres, and it is happening again today in Gaza, the Israelis in essence defending Jerusalem and the Palestinians coveting it.

Yet here at the wall, you feel only peace. And then you walk across the vast stone plaza and on the opposite side find a new monument in this hallowed site, a metal plaque with over 1,200 names of the Oct. 7 murdered, lit candles beneath it. Usually, it takes years before a nation starts putting up memorials, but this one-day slaughter was so horrific no one doubts it will stand in Israeli history alongside its many wars—of 1948, 1967, 1973 and the long intifadas.

Finally, the hour late, I head back to the hotel.

But it would not be the only evening I visit the Old City. Later, after a day on the West Bank and on another eve returning from inside Gaza, I find myself passing the Jaffa Gate at just the right moment of dusk when Jerusalem calls most poignantly to the spirit.

Both those days had been long, with hours ahead of me to write, but I couldn't help but pause to take in the ancientness of Jerusalem's center. And so I stood, the Old City's massive walls before me, and beyond them, the minarets and domes, the parapets and spires. I was looking at more than stone, I was seeing half of history itself.

It seems impossible that so much has happened in so small a space. It is where Jesus walked, David ruled and Muhammad ascended to heaven. Even today, it is the holiest of cities for billions of souls.

As I took in the vista, I wondered: if this place calls so strongly to an undevout visitor, what must it do to true believers whose roots run deep in its soil? More than any other place on the planet, conquerors have coveted Jerusalem and subdued it. Romans came and so did Mongols; Crusaders came and a dozen others. They came and in time, most, eventually, were gone.

But two peoples have remained.

The Arab and the Jew.