

Jerusalem 'has to stay united,' its mayor says

PRI

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TORONTO – The mayor of Jerusalem just wants his city to receive the same treatment as other capitals the world over.

"There is not one city in the world that works split," said Nir Barkat in Toronto recently. "It has to stay the united, eternal capital of the Jewish people.... More and more people I speak to understand that; we have to be stubborn in fulfilling this vision."

Barkat, who was elected just over a year ago, was in Canada recently for the Builders of Jerusalem Gala of the Jerusalem Foundation of Canada. About 400 people attended the event, which was held at the Four Seasons Hotel.

The event honoured some of the organization's long-time donors: the Azrieli and Asper families; Leslie and Anna Dan; Henry and Julia Koschitzky; and Isadore and Rosalie Sharp.

Founded more than 40 years ago by influential Jerusalem mayor Teddy Kollek, the foundation still follows his vision, supporting a plethora of projects that cross religious and ethnic lines. Kollek, who served as mayor for almost 30 years, was Jerusalem's first after the Six Day War of 1967, which united the city's western and eastern sectors. He achieved fame as much for his yeoman post-war efforts to bridge gaps between Arabs, Jews and Christians as for his larger-than-life persona.

Today, the foundation supports community centres, sports complexes, parks, libraries, museums, theatres and art schools throughout the Holy City. It will direct funds from the event to the City Centre Renewal Project, which will target the economic, social and cultural health of the eclectic centre of the city, home to 25,000 people.

If the dinner guests needed inspiration, they received it early on with a tender performance by a quartet of young Israeli musicians. The visitors to Toronto, two boys and two girls ranging in age from 11 to 13, are products of the 'From Risk to Opportunity program,' which provides musical instruction for children with financial, social and physical challenges.

Barkat's attendance at the event highlights the partnership that he is seeking to develop for his city among public, private and philanthropic bodies. The former high-tech entrepreneur will use all the resources at his disposal and he has ambitious plans that revolve around business, tourism and culture.

While most think of the country's centre as a source of innovation, Barkat emphasized the scientific expertise of Jerusalem's Hebrew University. As well, Barkat believes that a business-savvy strategic planning regimen is required to boost the city's infrastructure, which, along with increased culture, would make it more attractive to tourists.

Indeed, despite the city's challenges, it remains a focus for billions of people around the world, for many of whom the city carries meaning that makes the bright lights of cities like Paris and New York – both currently far more popular tourist destinations – pale in comparison.

"We have to return Jerusalem to the role it played 2,000 and 3,000 years ago," said Barkat, when tourists used to "go back home as ambassadors of peace."

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