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Secular Jerusalem Syndrome

Jan. 6, 2010

Ilan Evyatar , THE JERUSALEM POST

To say that Sallai Meridor suffers from Jerusalem syndrome would be a tad trite. But talk about the Holy City with the former ambassador to the US and his eyes light up, a passion is awakened and his soft, at times almost inaudible, voice is infused with a religious fervor.

Given that Meridor was recently named the chairman of the Jerusalem Foundation, that is an "ailment" that might be considered fortuitous.

Born and raised in Jerusalem, Meridor, 54, today lives just outside the city in the settlement of Kfar Adumim with his wife, Noa, and three daughters. In addition to his spell in Washington, he previously served as chairman of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization.

"This is a period when Jerusalem has great opportunities but also faces great dangers," Meridor tells The Jerusalem Post. He likes to speak in metaphors and to illustrate his point: "Jerusalem stands on a slope where it can climb to the peak, but it can also fall into the abyss."

So what are the dangers that threaten Jerusalem and what are the opportunities as Meridor sees them?

First and foremost on his danger list is the demographic threat. While in local parlance that is a phrase that usually refers to Jewish-Arab demographics, Meridor's fault line is productive versus nonproductive populations in the city.

"Look," he says, "people overseas are stunned to hear that Jerusalem is the poorest city in Israel." Repeating that statistic as if not quite believing it himself, he continues, "On the one hand it's the capital of Israel and the capital of the Jewish people, yet on the other it is the poorest city. The percentage of participation in the workforce is lower than in other cities in Israel and certainly much lower than in the West.

"The demographic structure of the city is very worrying in two aspects. Firstly, on the economic side. Because as the portion of the population that doesn't contribute to the growth of the city increases so does the danger that the city could collapse, God forbid.

"Also, there is the issue of the relevance of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, the extent to which Jerusalem reflects the aspirations of the Jewish people in Israel and in the Diaspora. Look at the number of schoolchildren in the city; out of 226,000 schoolchildren, from kindergarten through to 12th grade, some 80,000 are Arabs, 86,000 are haredim and that leaves 60,000 split roughly half and half between Zionist religious and secular. That makes for a very worrying demographic forecast. Add to that the negative population growth of the city, which is losing some 6,000 to 7,000 people a year, most of them young, to other parts of the country. So Jerusalem faces grave dangers socioeconomically and demographically.

"These factors have not only economic significance, but also symbolic and spiritual significance. When a child ascends to the Torah, be it in Tel Aviv or New York, we want him to feel something special for Jerusalem, for him to feel a sense of belonging and not for him to feel alienated and that the city is some

kind of historic museum."

Yet despite the grim picture he paints, Meridor remains an optimist. "Jerusalem has a lot of strong points," he maintains. "It is one of the most beautiful cities in the world. It is a city that attracts interest all over the world and that is something that can be leveraged to increase tourism to the city. It is incredible, in the negative sense, that Jerusalem, a city that is like no other, gets only about one million foreign tourists a year, but you can say 'that's terrible' or you can say 'look what potential we've got.'

"Jerusalem is the capital, not just of Israel but of the Jewish people. If the government of Israel were to treat Jerusalem as a capital, and not just in a symbolic sense, that would have the potential to attract enormous investment and generate employment. Jerusalem has the best academic institutions in Israel. We have a very successful hi-tech industry and we have the potential to attract aliya more than any other Israeli city."

THE JERUSALEM FOUNDATION was set up in 1966 by the city's iconic mayor, Teddy Kollek, and has since been involved in more than 2,000 projects, investing over \$100 million. To name but a few: the Bloomfield Science Museum; the Jerusalem Cinematheque; the Yellow Submarine Music Center; Gan Hashalom, a Jewish-Arab kindergarten at the YMCA; the Sheikh Jarrah Medical Center; Liberty Bell Park; the Biblical Zoo; the Botanical Gardens. The list is almost endless and Meridor, who took over as chairman on a pro-bono basis in October, shortly after resigning as ambassador to Washington, says it would be hard to imagine the city as it is today without the foundation's contribution.

"If you were to take an aerial shot of Jerusalem and remove from it everything that the Jerusalem Foundation has done, you would see a very different picture of Jerusalem," he says with pride. "The Jerusalem Foundation has made an incredible contribution to this city. All the green you see in Jerusalem is to a great extent the Jerusalem Foundation. Take the Jerusalem Foundation from this city and it will be gray, not green. Most of the culture in the city is the Jerusalem Foundation. I can't imagine the city without the Jerusalem Foundation."

Beyond philanthropy, Meridor sees the role of the foundation as helping to counter the dangers Jerusalem faces by building the city both in the physical sense and in the wider sense of ensuring that it continues to be at the heart of the Jewish experience, in particular the secular Jewish experience.

"The Jerusalem Foundation is the main tool for each Jew, whether in Israel or overseas, to participate in the building of Jerusalem," he declares. "I think that is an enormous responsibility that is placed on our generation, a generation that isn't necessarily in the state of mind to dream, pray and yearn for Jerusalem. We received Jerusalem into our hands and now the test is can we create an 'earthly Jerusalem,' one that will continue to be significant to Jewish existence?"

"The Jerusalem Foundation is a tool for every individual and every community, for every Jew, Israeli or Diaspora, to do something for Jerusalem and not just to say, 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem' at a bar mitzva or wedding, or on the occasion of a death, 'May the Lord comfort you among all those who mourn for Zion and Jerusalem.'"

To achieve its goals, Meridor says that the foundation needs to concentrate its thinking on education, young people, culture, the connection with the Jewish people and with all who love Jerusalem.

"If you look at how a philanthropic fund can have a strategic influence on the future of the city, then it won't be a leader in employment or housing but it can have a significant influence on several parameters that are critical," he states. "First of all, on young couples and on whether they stay in the city or choose to come to the city. If Jerusalem has one of the best education systems in the country, if Jerusalem has cultural events that attract people to the city rather than people going from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv for culture, and if the young people at academic institutions in Jerusalem - from the Hebrew University through to college and arts and drama schools - feel there is a future then you can change the trend.

"Because, at the end of the day, one of the main things that young parents care about is education. If Jerusalem has outstanding education, then I believe young parents won't leave and will even come to Jerusalem. Employment is important, but people will travel an hour to get to work, they won't travel an

hour to take their kids to school."

Another aspect where Meridor feels the foundation can have an important influence is in reducing Jewish-Arab tensions. "One of the things blocking the growth of Jerusalem is the perception of the conflict. I don't think a philanthropic fund can put an end to that, but it can douse the flames a bit - it can create business relations between people, it can create professional relations. I think that the fund does important work in this aspect and the issue of coexistence is a major issue for the fund. I think this is the right thing from a Jewish point of view and from a Zionist point of view.

"There are forces who wish to intensify conflict for whatever reason - you can't influence them, but what you can influence is the positive side. We don't assume that we can cancel the sources of tension, but we can influence the levels of tension through positive action, and that is one of the things the fund wants to do."

Meridor is the scion of a revisionist family that has been deeply entrenched in Jerusalem's social elite since pre-state days. His father, Eliyahu, was a member of the Irgun Zva'i Leumi, a founding member of Herut and represented the party in three Knessets before his death in 1966 at 52. His elder brother Dan is the minister of intelligence and atomic energy in the current Likud government. But while he still holds on to a belief in the Jewish right to a greater Israel, he now favors a territorial compromise. While he is noncommittal on what compromise would mean when it comes to Jerusalem, he argues that what is important is that Israel make it clear that Jerusalem lies at the very heart of the Jewish experience.

"I have said in the past and that remains my opinion today that Israel will have to make territorial concessions that will be very painful. I relate to every inch of the Land of Israel as our territory, but we have to make these heartbreaking concessions, but unfortunately they are essential to ensure the future of Israel. In the past, as ambassador, I always made sure to emphasize how important it is that the Arab side understand that Jerusalem is at the heart of the Jewish experience.

"I don't want to draw borders. We want peace here and we need peace here and we need to understand what is important to others, but we mustn't think that we can back down on them understanding what Jerusalem is for us; how many times it is mentioned in the Bible, how many times it is mentioned in prayer, how it is part of every stage of our lives. I wouldn't suggest, and I said this also as ambassador, that anyone draw conclusions from what may appear to be manifest as to the real feelings of Jews toward Jerusalem.

"I will never ever forget in the days after the Six Day War paratroopers crying at the Western Wall. Boys 18, 19, 20, who when Jerusalem fell in 1948 either weren't born or were a year or two old and had no memory of Jerusalem - many of them had never even seen the inside of a synagogue - yet when they reached the Wall they cried. When the Old City was opened up to the public, there were rivers of people from all over the country who had come up to Jerusalem. Had you asked me on June 4, 1967, was Jerusalem so deeply a part of the Israeli soul, I would have said no, but Jerusalem sat very very deeply in the hearts of masses, so it's very important for Arabs, Muslims, to understand how dear Jerusalem is to the Jewish people.

"What happens with that politically? That isn't a question I would answer as the chairmana of the Jerusalem Foundation, but even privately it is a question I would be very careful in answering."

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