

Jerusalem, out of the mouths of teens?

By Robert L. Cohen
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Writer and educator Isaac Mozeson learned at Maimonides High School—where his father, Rabbi Leon Mozeson, taught and where he studied from 1965 to 1969—the Talmudic principle *"Eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim hayim"* ("These and these are the words of the living God"), which he loosely renders as "Always give the other side a hearing. Hear everyone out."

So Mozeson and his wife, Lois Stavsky, who live in Teaneck, New Jersey, and summer in Jerusalem (where they own an apartment in the German Colony), decided to give the young people of Jerusalem a hearing—to let them speak in their own words. In their respective neighborhoods, in parks and malls, they interviewed, with a tape recorder, some 50 Jewish and Arab teenagers (along with an Armenian and a Baptist)—chosen at random, except that they wanted 30% of their subjects to be Arab, to reflect the demography of the city.

The result—edited transcriptions of 34 of interviews, deliberately published without commentary or analysis—is *Jerusalem Mosaic: Young Voices from the Holy City* (Four Winds Press, 1994). It is very much a "social history"—in the now-fashionable sense of "ordinary people's history"—as well.

"It's one thing to read about Israeli domestic issues or the peace process," remarked Stavsky in a recent interview. "It's another thing to put flesh on these issues, to see them embodied in the lives of young people, in their personalities and voices." And, adds Mozeson, when you talk to teenagers, "the adults of the coming generation," you're looking at (or, in this case, listening to) "not only Israel's present but its future, at where the country is headed."

So what did Stavsky/Mozeson learn from their interviewees? To begin with, that Jerusalem is (to echo the distinction made by New York City Mayor David

Dinkins) "a mosaic, not a melting pot; the stones—Jerusalem's children—don't meet." (In their brief but elegant introduction, the authors point out that the Hebrew words for "stones" and "building" have the same root as the word for "children": "A wall, a city, and a nation must be built one layer of stone, one generation, at a time.")

Though Stavsky has lived in Jerusalem with her husband for ten summers, she was startled at the degree of distance between Jewish and Arab children. "They don't play together, don't go to each other's homes," she reports, "they know nothing about each other's lives, even if they live only a few hundred feet apart." Yet, she and Mozeson caution, "neither group is going to leave."

Stavsky was mildly encouraged, though, to find that the Arabs they talked to—she wonders if their willingness to talk in and of itself makes them unrepresentative—were more amenable to the idea of the State of Israel, more comfortable with its existence, than she had imagined. (Eighteen-year-old Sami eloquently exclaims: "Look into my eyes! I don't hate Jews at all. I don't care about politics. I only want a better life.")

Both authors were heartened that the Jews they spoke to, however otherwise divergent in their Jewish knowledge and observance, cared so much about Jerusalem. Mozeson, in particular, was surprised that secular Jews with no connection whatsoever (other than, in some cases, a derisive one) to religious Judaism were loyal to the State of Israel and attached to Jerusalem in particular.

Thus, 17-year-old Efrata, a self-described atheist ("To me the Torah is a bunch of fairy tales, made-up stories"), nonetheless avers that "I love this country. I would never want to leave Jerusalem....I don't know if (I'll) get married. I wouldn't even want to get married till I'm 25. But when I do have a family, this is where I would want to raise my children."

Stavsky and Mozeson did find Arab

youngsters more consistently religious than their Jewish counterparts; even those Arabs who were not very religiously observant believed in God, and "secular" Arabs tended to be more religious than "secular" Jews, many of whom have no use for traditional Judaism at all. If reconciliation is possible, the authors intriguingly suggest, it will be along religious lines—and grounded in a respect for Arabs as a spiritual people.

Oral history is nothing new to the authors—and neither is a fascination with words in general. Together they produced *The Place I Call Home*, which featured interviews with homeless teenagers, and Mozeson also wrote *The Word: The Dictionary That Reveals the Hebrew Source of English*, which Jason Aronson will reissue next year. Mozeson teaches English and writing at Touro College in New York City; Stavsky is Writing Coordinator and teacher of journalism at Seward Park High School on New York's Lower East Side.

They prefer doing their oral histories with teenagers as they find them easier to interview: more open and ready to speak their minds; flattered by the attention rather than suspicious (though *haredim* were distrustful, and the hardest of all Jerusalem teenagers to talk to); and without careers, images, and reputations to protect. And they also wanted to avoid the pitfalls of talking, as most reporters and writers do, to pre-approved, pre-selected spokespersons.

They were scrupulous about the book's being even-handed (not only vis-à-vis Jews and Arabs but across the spectrum of Jewish, and Arab, religiosity and politics). "I lean to the right," Mozeson remarked, "and Lois to the left, and we watched each other like a hawk." They were concerned, too, that none of their subjects "come off as monsters, or one-dimensional; none are put down or caricatured." All, rather, come off as human—and as kids.

As educators, Mozeson and Stavsky also consciously chose to let readers, young and old, draw their own conclusions from these monologues. They hope that the book sparks discussion and debate (Stavsky hopes to see it translated into Hebrew), and that it opens readers' eyes to something of how Arab and Jewish children see Israel and each other—and, especially, to how precious Jerusalem is to (all) those who live there.

"Jerusalem is the address," notes Mozeson, "of the Zionist enterprise and of Zionist destiny. It's the eternal city—and an eternal issue."