The Topography of Symbol: Between Late Antique and Modern Jewish Understanding of Cities

This article explores the theological role of cities in Judaism as settings for the mediation between the heavenly and earthly realms. By way of juxtaposing the late antique city of Sepphoris and the modern settlement of Me’ah She’arim in Jerusalem, two understandings of this mediation will be studied dialectically. The differences and similarities between the two communities and their self-representation through urban architecture reveal the ways in which the highest religious symbols are manifested in the life of a city. They also unfold the transformation of modernity and the particular interpretation of a Jewish settlement it inspired.

The place of cities in eschatological speculations and the prominence of urban topographies in sacred texts mark their religious importance as settings for and symbols of the community. It may be said, furthermore, that the distance between their role as places of everyday life and their symbolic status is at the heart of the religious process of mediation between the earthly and heavenly realms. For the purpose of illuminating the part of cities in this process I will examine, in what follows, two very different Jewish urban settlements and their theological understandings. In positioning one against the other, the late antique town of Sepphoris and the 19th century settlement of Me’ah She’arim in Jerusalem, I will stress the significant religious questions emerging in Judaism with the advent of the modern era. The implications of European modernity (in which architecture played a central role) for Judaism have hardly been studied in regard to the paradigm of city. Hence, while fusing, in the Gadamerian sense, two historical horizons around the topic of city, I will try to show, in the course of this discussion, how cities are themselves settings for engaging with different horizons.

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* This article is based on ongoing PhD research, undertaken at the Department of Architecture, Cambridge University. Such research was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation, B’nai B’rith – London, and the Royal Institute of British Architects – the Research Trusts. I would also like to thank the participants of the ‘Makom’ conference, held in Potsdam in the summer of 2005, for their insightful comments on an early version of this paper.

The mediation of cities

Years before he became the leading founder of the Me’ah She’arim 19th century settlement, Rabbi Yosef Rivlin wrote a kabbalistic poem called ‘At your gates, O Jerusalem’. The city’s sacred topography is described in the poem in messianic language, which later on figured in a text depicting Me’ah She’arim as a project meant to “hasten redemption”. In referring to Jerusalem’s restoration saying: “then, as ‘a city knit together’ (Psalms 122:3), God’s city which is above and that which is below will unite,” Rabbi Yosef Rivlin alludes to a Talmudic saying attributed to the sage Rabbi Yoḥanan. However, Rabbi Yoḥanan, who minted the terms ‘Jerusalem which is above’ and ‘Jerusalem which is below’, did not conceive of these two cities as capable of uniting but rather as ontologically distinct entities linked only by the love of God for his people. Moreover, in accord with rabbinic tradition, his imaginative articulations of the eschatological city were always at the speculative level, never to be forced into realization by man.

In order to explore the difference between these two understandings of urban topographies in view of the city’s role in Judaism, a brief ontological consideration is required. The phenomenological approach places representation (through which being is disclosed) at the heart of the process of understanding. On the fact that the ‘whole’ can never be directly experienced by humans rests, for example, the need for the mediation of architecture and other modes of representation, through which this whole is manifest in the world of the individual and the community.

In analyzing architecture Gadamer describes it as being similar...
lar in nature to decoration, which "consists in performing that two-sid-
ed mediation: namely to draw the viewer’s attention to itself, to satisfy
his taste, and then to redirect it away from himself to the greater whole
of the life context which it accompanies". One of the most important
implications of this statement is that architecture is not an aesthetic or
conceptual project as such but rather operates at the background, di-
recting attention to the more universal dimensions of our existence.

Merleau-Ponty links the place of language in perception to the role
of the city as background by saying that, in speaking, the words "...are
behind me, like things behind my back, or like the city’s horizon round
my house, I reckon with them or rely on them, but without having any
‘verbal image’". The formation of a symbolic image or a concept, ac-
cording to him, takes place through further emancipation from this deep
structure of reality in which we are always already immersed. It ap-
ppears that the position of urban architecture in the slow deep structure
of the background, and its capacity to provide orientation for the artic-
ulated levels of action and language, allow cities to become symbolic
representations of the world. Their closeness to the universal aspect of
nature and the fact that they pertain to what is common to all is what
makes cities so receptive to cosmic imagery.

Around the time when rabbinic Judaism was formed we find depic-
tions of cities that are very much textual ‘cosmograms’, in which a town
is perfected to the level of a symbolic cosmic whole. The 1st century
BCE architect Vitruvius, for instance, suggests to his imperial reader a
city wherein the directions of the winds determine a theoretical urban
diagram. About a century later, St. John of Patmos draws on biblical
and post-biblical apocalyptic traditions to describe a square city of Je-
rusalem from which a river flows (Revelation 21, 22). This highly bal-
anced geometrical structure is different from Vitruvius’ city in that it is
an eschatological entity, which exists in heaven at the highest level of
sanctity and is understood to descend to earth only at the end of time.
Both these cities, however, mark a possibility which can materialize in
our present imperfect world only partially and through the mediation of
civic and religious practices. Plato, who several centuries earlier had
carefully described his desired polis in the Politeia, explicitly says that
it is “the city whose home is in the ideal… it can be found nowhere on
earth”. For him, the continuity between the highest symbol and the
world of the city is a mediated distance, wherein the one is gradually
embodied in the many. Although the philosopher aspires for the polis

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12 Plato, Politeia, 592a-b.
to embody the ‘highest Good’, the real and ideal cities are never seen as fully collapsing into one another. Moreover, it is precisely because of this distance between the real and ideal cities that the mediation of the architect, ruler or philosopher is necessary.

**Sepphoris and its stratified symbolic topography**

This seems to resonate also in rabbinic literature, and most notably in the Talmudic tractate of **Eruvin**. Its urban system of interweaving private and public domains as well as its construction of a Shabbat boundary was meant for the manifestation of the sacred paradigm of the Seventh Day in the reality of everyday life.\(^{13}\) However, the coherent geometrical matrices of **Eruvin** were never built as such and never inspired the construction of a real city. At most, minor symbolic architectural gestures were made to facilitate the implementation of the **Eruv**, mediating between the holiest level of the paradigm and that of the actual city. The fact that a city such as Sepphoris, which seems to have had a Jewish majority from Hasmonaean until Byzantine times and was a prominent rabbinic and political centre, looked like any other eastern Roman town is indicative of this urban understanding.\(^ {14}\) Such a gap between the archaeology and the literature is not due to lack of sufficient evidence, but rather it appears to manifest this stratified mediated distance between the remote background of architecture and the more articulated level of textual symbols.

The Sepphorean marketplace may provide an important insight into this ontological distance. What in the Greek **agora** and the Roman **forum** was a manifestation of the city’s public sphere and a representation of the culture, had in Sepphoris a very fragmented representational nature.\(^{15}\) Its architectural structure was a combination of domestic shops, colonnaded streets and more spatially defined buildings (Figure 1).\(^ {16}\) This structure provided the setting for the **praxis**, which ranged from trade to rabbinic legal debates and dialogues, through prayers of indi-

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\(^{13}\) For a recent discussion of **Eruv** see Charlotte E. Fonrobert, ‘From Separatism to Urbanism: the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Rabbinic **Eruv**’, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 11, 1 (2004), 44–45.


\(^{16}\) The colonnaded **cardo** and **decumanus** in Sepphoris are built according to the Roman tradition of aligning these streets to the north-south and east-west axes (although the alignment in Sepphoris is not accurate), thus endowing the orthogonal system of the marketplace routes with a cosmic dimension. See Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: the Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World*, Cambridge Mass. and London 1988, 45-50.
individuals amongst its shops to study conducted, we are told, within the framework of this marketplace. At the more symbolic level of iconography we find an inscription on a market weight showing a colonnaded street bearing the names of two Jewish market administrators (Figure 2), as well as a mosaic in what seems to have been a forum building (Figure 3). The mosaic depicts a cityscape as part of a Nilotic scene, in which the typical images of the Nile and its fertility generate a correspondence between the fecundity of nature and the splendor of the city. These images come as close as we can find in the town to a representation of the marketplace and the city and yet they seem to be generic, not depicting Sepphoris as a Jewish community but rather an instance of a universal city in a Graeco-Roman context.

See, for example, BT Avodah Zarah 16b-17a; Tanaitic Midrash to Deuteronomy 26:19; BT Sanhedrin 19a; Palestinian Talmud (henceforth PT) Khetubot 35d; PT Berakhot 8c; BT Eruvin 54b.

R. Martin-Nagy et al. eds., Sepphoris in Galilee, 201.

James F. Strange, ‘The Eastern Basilical Building’, in Sepphoris in Galilee, 117–122; Lucille A. Roussin, ‘Spheres of Influence in the Mosaics of Sepphoris’, in La Mosaïque Gréco-Romaine VII, Tomes 1, Tunis 1999, 171–175. The building, which according to the excavations...
At the highest level of symbolic articulation we find an eschatological Talmudic speculation in which Sepphoris’ market is represented as a paradigm of the city’s wholeness. Reish Lakish, whom together with his teacher and friend Rabbi Yohanan frequented Sepphoris, incorporates it into his imagining of the future Jerusalem. Jerusalem, according to him, will one day be enlarged by God to include thousands of gardens, towers, castles and archways and each of these additions to the city will be “as Sepphoris in its tranquility”. At the end of this speculation the Talmud quotes Rabbi Yose, a resident authority in Sepphoris, who says: “I saw Sepphoris in its tranquility and there were in it one hundred and eighty thousand marketplaces merely for vendors of pot stew”. Sepphoris is here the model of tranquility through which Jerusalem will grow and this tranquility is constituted by the institution of the market.

Hence, only in text do we have a picture, an image of the city as a whole, while the architecture embodies this notion in a fragmented and partial manner. Moreover, the fact that the paradigm appears only in the past (that Rabbi Yose saw) or in an eschatological future enhances its distance from the reality of the rabbis. This indicates that the city, in its most universal configuration, is as inaccessible to human manipulation as the messianic age. But it also indicates that the distance of the eschatological future and the remoteness of the tradition of the past allow correspondence with them through the mediation of the rabbis.

Modernity, architecture and ‘world picture’

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cal transformation. The architecture of the city and its capacity to stand for the whole became an attractive vehicle for humanism, which was gradually drawing the transcendental into the human sphere. The rise of perspective, through which all is subjected to the human horizontal view, led to the development of urban planning as a discipline in the subsequent centuries. This capture of divine infinity within the actual city through the vanishing point of perspective also qualified architecture as a structuring device through which the new project of culture could be represented.

Boullee’s hopes of encompassing the whole of knowledge through a forum or temple-like library, and later Schinkel’s engagement with the mythological past through the exploration of architectural styles, are two of many attempts that may exemplify Heidegger’s famous description of the way in which culture becomes the highest value by means of “historiographical and psychological investigation of myth”. It is important for this discussion’s concern with the mediating aspect of cities therefore, to further quote Heidegger’s definition of ‘world picture’ wherein: “what is in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth”.

The role of architecture in making a picture of culture was passed on to European Judaism through its complicated exchange with its surroundings. In the world of print, for instance, the common practice of using architecture as a structure and metaphor for the literary content in frontispieces found its way even into the most orthodox Jewish books. In this sense, Europe’s social and spiritual transformations of modernity, which resulted in the encompassing of culture through the visible, were no less dramatic for its Jews. By the end of the 18th century, Judaism of the modern age had seen bitter persecution, false messiahs, the secularization of the hashkalah and finally the reformation and counter-reformation of hasidim and mitnagdim. This continuous crisis is to a large extent an outcome of the schism between modernity and faith, but, as I shall show in regard to Me’ah She’arim, it seems that the orthodox response to modernity had already adopted many of its rival’s attributes, and in particular the use of architecture and its depiction to represent the culture and give it orientation.

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26 Ibid, 130.
Me’ah She’arim as a built symbol

One of the most significant theological shifts in Judaism of the modern period concerned the problem of redemption. The idea that man could and should provoke God through actions, and so hasten redemption, had its roots in old Jewish traditions, but it is not a coincidence that this idea matured and was realized in modern times. In the age when divine paradigms are consigned to dwell on earth, it is also not a coincidence that the Gaon of Vilna, for example, saw the restoration of the land of Israel and Jerusalem in particular as a project to be achieved by humans. His disciples, the perushim, emigrated to Zefat and later to Jerusalem at the turn of the 19th century, driven also by a speculation that 1840 was the year when the messiah would arrive. Their attempts to find the lost tribes of Israel and to prepare the holy ashes for the purification of the temple seem to have emerged from the search apparent in the Gaon of Vilna’s sketches of the Israelite settlement in the Land and of Ezekiel’s future temple.

When the hopes for the redemption of 1840 failed and the living conditions within the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem deteriorated, the perushim adopted a more active approach and founded a settlement outside the walls in 1874. A few quotes from one of Me’ah She’arim’s booklets of regulations make it clear that the act of establishing a settlement is seen to set into motion an eschatological process and that “the spirit of the Lord on High aroused the dear sons of Zion to go out to redeem their holy city”. The fact that the mission to redeem Jerusalem involved going outside of it to found a new settlement highlights the very problem of the representation and restoration of the city. Building away from Jerusalem, in the ‘wilderness’, as the founders describe it, might have resulted in creating a separate city (Figure 4). In fact, one of the references to the Me’ah She’arim layout in the booklet of regulations portrays it as a ‘city plan’. Hence, in order for the settlement to take part in the redemption of the holy city, Me’ah She’arim would have to be placed within the symbolic topography of Jerusalem.

29 Ibid, 198.
32 Ibid, 198.
33 Booklet of regulations, 48.
34 Ibid, 10, 31. Ruth Kark notes that those regulations themselves might have been influenced by nineteenth century European urban planning, Kark, Neighbourhoods, 13. For the place of Jewish legal traditions in the planning of Me’ah She’arim and other settlements of Jerusalem see Yossi Katz, ‘The Role of the Halakah in the Establishment of the First Jewish Neighbourhoods Outside the Walls of the Old City of Jerusalem’, [Hebrew] Proceedings of the Israeli Geographical Society’s Annual Conference, Haifa 1979, 90-95.
As I shall show in what follows, it would also require that the image of Jerusalem and its Temple Mount be somehow present in the settlement’s architecture to insure their affiliation.

In terms of the topography, the frontispiece for the second booklet of regulations provides much of the necessary symbolic linkage between Jerusalem and Me’ah She’arim in saying:

Booklet of regulations for Mea She’arim, may it be speedily rebuilt. Being re-erected in the holy city of Jerusalem, may it be speedily rebuilt, on one of its ruins, at the northwestern edge of the holy Temple Mount, around a 12-minute walk from there. Founded with the help of the Dweller in Zion and the Builder of Jerusalem.

This note of the walking time from the temple mount joins another connection made by the founders between Me’ah She’arim and Jerusalem, through the archaeological outline of the first century CE Herodian “Third Wall” which was adjacent to the settlement. The proximity of the settlement to the ancient gate, and the several allusions to the gates of Jerusalem in the booklet’s frontispiece also point to Rivlin’s kabbalistic program. In the poem mentioned earlier he describes several lay-

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ers of holiness encircling Jerusalem and argues that evil resides at the layer of the city gates. He therefore suggests that it should be driven out from there by establishing at this layer Jewish communities, or in the words of the Psalm (87:2, 135:5): “the tents of Jacob and the dwellings of Israel”. Such a use of the new discipline of archaeology as a quasi-scientific support for the textual exegesis and the actualisation of a mystical model exposes a very modern tendency for collapsing the speculative and the material into one coherent picture, a picture through which to engage with history.

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36 Rivlin, Me‘ah She’arim, 25. See also Booklet of regulations, 42.
The archaeological evidence was probably brought to the attention of Me'ah She'arim’s founders by the architect of the settlement, Dr. Conrad Schick (1822-1910), a German missionary and a well-known archaeologist of Jerusalem. It was his planning of Me’ah She’arim that established the final linkage of city and settlement by way of architectural representation. On the basis of two maps of Me’ah She’arim, drawn before and after the completion of the settlement in its original form in 1889, it is possible to reconstruct its symbolic layout. Schick’s own involvement in the drafting of these maps contributes to the authenticity of the settlement’s description it included. Me’ah She’arim’s outline as depicted on the maps, wherein a gated, walled structure enclosed a garden and a central structure of a synagogue and school, evokes the image of Jerusalem in more than one way (Figures 5-7). The ‘aromatic garden’ that the founders portray as contributing to the atmosphere and fresh air of the main courtyard, brings to mind Jerusalem’s famous flowers’ gardens.

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38 Me’ah She’arim’s First Booklet of Regulations, section c, translated in Kark, Neighbourhoods, 109.

39 See, for example, BT Bava Kama 82b.
The gated enclosure seems to be a clear reference to the walled city of Jerusalem, and the pivotal location of the spiritual centre echoes its holy core. To some extent this urban plan corresponds with a European city block and was configured to provide a high level of protection from attack, as well as to incorporate nature. Nevertheless, it seems that Schick’s intimate knowledge of Jerusalem and his religious interest in it, exemplified by his own model of the temple precinct, was applied in this challenge to plan a settlement in an allegedly blank region of ‘wilderness’ (Figure 8). Finally, the founders’ reference to Me’ah She’arim itself with the words from Psalm 122:3: ‘a city knit together’, may imply that they viewed the built settlement as ultimately uniting with its paradigm, Jerusalem.
Conclusion

To conclude, the juxtaposition of Sepphoris and Me’ah She’arim has allowed for a dialectic analysis of two different possibilities of understanding cities. For the sages of Sephoris, the topography of the city was acknowledged as a backdrop for mundane as well as sacred activities, and the fact that it only became a symbol of an ideal community in textual speculations, seems to have allowed the rabbis a greater scope for negotiations with their highest paradigms: a greater freedom of mediation evident in their rich textual and liturgical heritage. Regarding Me’ah She’arim however, it appears that the turmoil of modernity led Jerusalem’s perushim to use the very modern practice of holding Judaism together as a culture through the urban architectural realization of paradigms. The project of hastening redemption by rebuilding a mythical city and representing a temple at its centre stems from a deep longing for a faraway God but seems, at the same time, to collapse the distance between the human and the divine, thus, perhaps, limiting the play of mediation between the two. It is interesting to consider to what extent this understanding of the city as literally embodying its divine paradigms lies at the foundations of later urban religious discourses in Zionism, accompanying the question of cities’ sanctity right up to the present day.