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## WHO ARE THE GUARDIANS OF THE WALLS OF JERUSALEM?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

As a *jungerman*, or at least as a younger man, I thought that my experience of music-with-words was intimately bound up with the meaning of the lyrics. I tuttted at chazanim who ayayayed and looked down my nose at rock music with drowned-out vocalist (although perhaps my hearing was not so good then either, and my friends and students really could hear the words, as they claimed). I tried to use or compose niggunim for davening that really connected with the liturgical texts.

In retrospect, I often didn't hear the lyrics correctly or fully, and even when I did, I often misunderstood them, bilingually. My Hebrew wasn't reliable for texts that I had not studied in depth, and I often didn't have the necessary experience or cultural literacy needed to get contemporary secular music. (My Italian wasn't so good either, but I thought that opera was a legitimate exception – it was enough to read the plot summary and have a general sense of what was happening emotionally.)

One of the hit frum songs at summer camp, I think in my late teens, was *al chomotayikh Yerushalayim bifkad'ti shomerim kol hayom vekhol halaylah*, sung by Dov Levine on an album called "Ruach". The lyrics built toward saying "Yerushalayim" repeatedly. I did not look it up in context in Yeshayah 62:6. But the translation seemed perfectly clear: "*On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have assigned guards all day and all night*".

What did I think it meant, assuming that translation? It seemed to me to have a sort-of Zionist flair. The American Charedi world both then and now often engaged in that sort of plausibly-deniable Zionism aimed at appropriating Israeli military success without taking responsibility for anything else about Israel. That was as clear as I got. So I approached the verse in this week's haftorah with a fairly open mind.

Alshikh (16<sup>th</sup> century Tzfat), writing before Zionism, has no incentive not to go full literal Neturei Karta. Who are the Guardians of the city and its walls? These are the *talmidei chakhamim*, who *are not silent* but rather study Torah out loud *all day and all night constantly*, and pray before Him early and later.

Perhaps the most puzzling thing about this utterly conventional interpretation is that I can find no one who suggested it before Alshikh.

On Menachot 87a, in the last unit of Chapter 9, the Talmud asks what the guardians-who-are-never-silent are saying. That is to say, the Talmud understands "*constantly*" as meaning "throughout the entire time of exile". Rashi compellingly understands this to mean that the guardians are angels.

Rava Bar Shela replies that they are reciting *You will arise and have mercy on Zion* (Tehillim 102:14), while Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak suggests *The builder of Jerusalem is Hashem* (Tehillim 147:2)

Both seem reasonable liturgical choices for angels praying for the restoration of a destroyed Jerusalem. However, the Talmud then asks, What had they been saying originally (=before the destruction)?

Said Rava bar Rav Sheila: "*For Hashem has chosen Zion, picked it as a settlement for Himself*" (Tehillim 132:13).

Rashi is compelling again: "So too in the ultimate future, the angels will again be guards and say "*For Hashem has chosen Zion*". The chapter ends upbeat.

The Talmud's take is based on close reading, Here is the whole verse, with the next verse as context:

על־חומת־יהוּדָה יְרוּשָׁלַם הַפְּקֻדָּתִי שְׁמֹרִים כָּל־הַיּוֹם וְכָל־הַלַּיְלָה  
תָּמִיד

לֹא יִשְׁכּוּ

הַמְזַכְרִים אֶת־יְקֻנְךָ

וְאֵל־תִּתְּנוּ דְמִי לָךְ אֵל־דְּמִי לָכֶם:

עַד־יִכּוֹנֵן וְעַד־יִשְׁאֵם אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם תְּהִלָּה בְּאַרְצִי:

*On your walls, Jerusalem, I have assigned guards/watchers  
all the day and all the night*

*constantly*

*they will not be still/silent*

*those who mention/remind Hashem*

*be not silent. And give Him/it no silence*

*until He establishes and until He appoints Jerusalem as a glory in  
the land.*

Verse 6 apparently states that the speaker has assigned guards/watchers to posts on the walls of Jerusalem; this implies that the verse is written when Jerusalem is built. Verse 7 looks to a future time in which G-d will establish Jerusalem as a *tehillah*/glory of the land, which implies that it is not yet built. The solution is that the same guards were, are, and will be present, regardless of the state of the city and its walls.

RADAK, however, is unwilling to introduce angels; he suggests instead that the guards are a metaphor for Divine Providence. That seems to me to be much less plausible literarily, so I suspect he has a theological difficulty with angels here, but I don't know Radak thought well enough even to guess. Readers who know more are encouraged to comment.

Targum Yonatan identifies the guards as the forefathers, who “shield Israel like walls” while pleading to Hashem for their return. This seems to me even weaker literarily than RADAK; I'm not sure what motivates Yonatan to adopt it.

Abravanel mentions that “Some interpret” this as referring to the Children of Israel, the mourners of Zion. This approach requires taking the “continually” on a human scale, which does not seem to me such a challenge. It is perhaps the best fit for the guards being appointed rather than taking the mission on their own. Probably it requires taking “on your walls” as a metaphor meaning “with regard to your walls”, or one can simply translate *al* directly that way.

Abravanel explains in his own name:

But I see the best explanation as being  
*On your walls O Jerusalem* – when you were intact prior to the Churban  
*I assigned guards*, namely the prophets who call you, who neither nap nor sleep, in the manner of wall-guards

A radical reading is offered by Rabbi Yehudah ibn Shouaib (13<sup>th</sup> century Spain) in his derashah/commentary on Shir Hashirim for the last day of Pesach. Here he is commenting on Shir HaShirim 5:7

בקשתיהו ולא מצאתיהו - שנסתלקה ממנו שכינה.  
מצאוני השומרים - מלכי יון ורומי,  
הכוני פצעוני - בגזירותיהם.  
נשא את רדידי = הודי והדרי.

שומרי החומות = שרי האומות, דכתיב על חומותך ירושלים הפקדתי שומרים וגו'.  
*I sought him but did not find him* – because the Shekhinah had left from (the Temple)

*The guards found me* = the monarchs of Greece and Rome  
*They struck me and wounded me* – with their decrees  
*They removed my veil* = my grandeur and glory  
*The guards of the walls* = *sarei haumot*, as Scripture says: *on your walls O Jerusalem I have appointed guards etc.*

I'm not certain, but my inclination is that *sarei haumot* refers to the angels of the gentiles, rather than to human officers. If so, this is a complete inversion of the Talmudic reading. But even if it refers to humans, this reading inverts the verse. The constant guards are not those praying but rather those whom prayer is seeking to remove.

Abravanel in his own name offers an interpretation almost as radical, in its own way.

*On your walls O Jerusalem*, when you were intact, before the Churban,

*I assigned guards*, namely the prophets who called to them not to nap nor sleep, as guards on the walls do (call to each other);

The meaning is that they would rebuke and caution them to repent. This is *constantly*, *they are not silent*, meaning that the prophets would cry out in a great voice without pause, and they would *mention Hashem* in their calling, and they had no *silence* from crying to Israel to return to their G-d.

Abravanel and Ibn Shouaib each evade the apparent eternity of the *guards*. Ibn Shouaib probably limits the verse to the immediate aftermath of the destruction, when the conquerors' guard still stood on the walls; Abravanel pushes it back even further, to the period before the Churban.

More to my point this week, Abravanel and Ibn Shouaib each reverse the meaning of the verse. In their interpretation, there is nothing whatsoever triumphant about it; it describes either the enemy's triumph, standing astride our walls, or else our own failures that led to the Destruction.

I'm quite sure that neither the composer nor the singer of the dance-music song I enjoyed had these interpretations in mind even as possibilities, nor do those who sing it at weddings nowadays.

Nor perhaps should they; that is the role of “If I Forget Thee O Jerusalem”. This week's haftorah is also supposed to be cheerful and comforting, so perhaps whoever reads it should try to forget that they've read this essay.

And yet – Rosh HaShannah is nearing, so it's hard to completely rule out an interpretation that focuses on the need for repentance.

More homiletically – In a Religious Zionist setting, (I can only imagine, never having attended an RZ camp), the average person might hear this verse and think of the IDF with justified pride. There are certainly constant guards on the borders of Jerusalem these days, although the walls of the Old City aren't primary defense lines, and thank G-d for them. I am enormously grateful to them for accepting that responsibility. But it's important to remember that religiously, our ability to post those guards is a privilege, not a right, a privilege that we've lost twice before. May the merit of our honest Torah study ensure a sweet New Year for all Israel, and ensure that our guards continue to be posted continually on the walls of Jerusalem.

*Shabbat shalom!*