



Eran Hayet, executive director of the BYU Jerusalem Center

# Jerusalem Program Reborn: An Interview with the Executive Director

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and Ray L. Huntington*

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**Holzapfel:** We want to focus on what the new Jerusalem Center program has to offer. In the past there were three incarnations. There was the pre-Jerusalem Center program, which was the David Galbraith–Kelly Ogden era, when we did not have a building. Then there was the Jerusalem Center program that began with the building of the BYU Jerusalem Center and continued until the center was closed to students in 2000. Then the program began anew in 2007.

**Huntington:** I think one purpose of this interview is to have teachers and faculty be aware of (a) the new program and (b) the new executive director so they are acquainted with you, Eran Hayet, and know a little bit about your background.

**Holzapfel:** First of all, the original director was a BYU full-time faculty member who came from Provo. When did you come to the center?

**Hayet:** I first came here in January 1994. Kent Brown was the director.

**Holzapfel:** Could you tell us a bit about your background, where you were born and where you lived?

**Hayet:** I was born in a kibbutz in upper Galilee called Kibbutz Ga'aton. I lived on the kibbutz until I was seven years old. We lived in what I would call the old kibbutzim—the way that kibbutzim used to be—because today they are not the same. It was a sharing community very influenced by socialist views, democratic socialist ideas, a special

invention of Israel Zionist socialists. So I grew up in a kind of commune, sleeping and eating and learning together with the kids. We didn't live with our parents at the time; we just had some quality time every day with them. We slept in a dormitory with the other kids.

When I was seven we moved for three years to Chile. My father was sent there by the kibbutzim movement. This again is a very unique Israeli thing. It's a little hard to explain, but there were Zionist activists going out to try to offer Jewish people to immigrate to Israel. This was done through youth movements, and my father with my mother, my two brothers and me, went to Chile in that role. We missed the Yom Kippur War. In "compensation" we got the coup d'état in Chile. So we had some tough times in 1973 with the overthrow of Salvador Allende. We came back in late 1973 to the kibbutz for a couple of years. Then we went again on another mission, this time at the Jewish Agency raising funds for the state of Israel in the Central American Jewish communities. We were stationed in Panama for four years. I came back to Jerusalem in 1979 with my twin brother when I was fifteen. For five months we lived with our grandparents in Jerusalem, and then my parents came. I finished the last two years of high school in Jerusalem.

*Huntington: By that time were you speaking both modern Hebrew—and Spanish?*

**Hayet:** Yes.

*Huntington: Could you speak English?*

**Hayet:** I was fluent in Spanish with an Israeli accent. I also think I improved my English in Panama because they taught English in the Jewish school there.

After two years of school in Jerusalem, like most Israelis I joined the army in 1981, a couple of months before I was eighteen. I served for five years—three of those I was an officer in the Air Force, not a pilot. I left the military after five years. After that, I was very heavily involved in politics in Jerusalem in the youth division of what was called Mapam; this was the socialist party of Israel at that time. It was part of the labor coalition at one time and then left it. I joined the university and became very involved in political life on the Hebrew University campus.

*Huntington: The Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus?*

**Hayet:** Yes. I focused on Latin American studies and international relations, but this is not really something that is meaningful in my career or the things that I did later on. In 1990 I was appointed spokesperson for Peace Now, the largest peace movement in Israel, and coordinated its operations against the Israeli settlements in the West

Bank and the Gaza Strip. I was involved for ten years with politics and then left it overnight.

*Huntington: Were you married at the time?*

**Hayet:** Yes. I was married to Na'ama already and I had a son, Nimrod. In 1992 my daughter Noa was born. Then we had a third child, Hadas, who is now seven years old. They are my three bosses. In December 1993 or January 1994, the Jerusalem Center was looking for a facility manager, and I was looking for a job. At that time my uncle was involved at the MOR Company. I started to work with them dealing with some security equipment. They got to know me, and then they offered me the job here as a facility manager.

*Huntington: For the benefit of our readers, could you tell us about the MOR Company?*

**Hayet:** The MOR Company is a facility management company, and the name actually comes from "Mormon." The company was established in 1987, right after the Jerusalem Center was opened. It was established to provide security, maintenance, and custodial services for the Jerusalem Center. At that time the company was headed by Eliezer Rahat (chairman) and Arie Goldenberg. Later, Arie Goldenberg went his way, and Nahum Nuriel is now CEO. The MOR Company is in charge of the overall facility management. The company has developed and now has different projects outside of the center, mainly in Jerusalem. Eliezer Rahat is still involved with the center, however, and has always considered the Jerusalem Center as the jewel in the crown. This is the project that he's most proud of, and he's done some very important projects like the Supreme Court in Israel, the Open University, and the Shaarey Tzedek Hospital, but he still considers this as his best accomplishment. By the way, David Resnick, one of the two architects of the Jerusalem Center, also considered this one of his major accomplishments. He is one of the leading architects in Israel.

*Huntington: So you started here with the MOR Company as a facility manager and you were here doing that from 1994 until . . .*

**Hayet:** Until 2002. In 2002 we realized that students were not going to come here for a while. Professor Arnie Green was the last director to leave here in 2002, and Jim Kearn appointed me as agent for the Jerusalem Center. This meant responsibility for the operations of the Jerusalem Center, including a power of attorney to deal with finances. So I started as an agent, and then it evolved to be the executive director.

*Huntington: During the absence of the students, what was the Jerusalem Center doing?*

**Hayet:** First, we had to be ready for more students, and we didn't know when students would be coming back. We had a challenge to find the balance between a dramatic cut in our costs and maintaining what is essential to keep the building from deteriorating. It started with a very painful process of reducing our workforce by half. You have to understand that these were all loyal and devoted workers that only circumstances pushed out. We decided at least to do it in a dignified and fair way: Professor Jim Kearn came for a special visit, and together with Arnie Green we met each one of the workers, explained the situation, thanked them, and gave them generous severance pay. Now, what do we do with a closed building? If you want to keep it in good shape, you have to maintain it. All student rooms had to be shut down, and one of our nightmares was that when we will try to reopen them, they will be a mess. So we had to learn how to keep up the center while not spending too much money.

Second, we wanted to maintain the presence of BYU and the Church in the Holy Land. For that we expanded some of our activities and developed others: With some wonderful service couples, assigned to the Jerusalem Center, we developed community services and outreach activities such as helping schools and universities mainly with their English programs and offering help in the hospitals. Of course, we still held concerts in the center. We have one of the best concert programs in the country. It started with classical music, and then we expanded it to jazz and ethnic music. We offered the facility to worthy groups, donating the facility for some activities. Occasionally we had conferences here, meetings of some organizations dealing with charities and with culture. The building was always open for tours.

*Huntington: Do the tours still occur?*

**Hayet:** Yes, again, to keep a good presence in the Holy Land. I think we achieved that. Third, we used the time when the building was closed to finish some projects to improve the facility. We added a new student commons area. We added some safety systems to the building, such as fire sprinklers all over the building, which was a very big project. We refurbished the rooms, changing carpets, wallpapers, and so on. We used that time for projects.

*Huntington: The purpose of the building is for students, but since they weren't here you took advantage of the down time.*

**Hayet:** Yes. We believed the students would eventually come back, so we used the time without students for remodeling to have the building ready for their return.

*Huntington: Then, all of a sudden, students came back, and this certainly must have changed your life.*

**Hayet:** Yes, they did change my life. I didn't realize how much actually. You know, the building had a different pace and rhythm without the students, so we were focusing on different issues. I have to admit it caused some of the assistants here to slow down, and when the students arrived we had to get moving again. Actually we expected them during 2006, but it had to be put off because of the war with Lebanon. We were preparing and getting ready for the students to be back, hoping that no catastrophes happened. We tried to do whatever we could to make sure that the building was ready for the first group of students. Just in case, we asked the first forty-four students to consider themselves as pioneers and a part of the effort to reinstate the BYU Jerusalem Center program after six years of being shut down . . . and they fully cooperated. They were a great group of young adults—mature and responsible.

*Holzapfel: What was your number-one concern that you had when you realized students were coming back? Security?*

**Hayet:** Obviously security. We have a set of rules here to protect the students. Some say things like, "You're dealing with adults. How come you have curfew time?" or "You make us go out in groups of three, and you're chauvinist in a way because you're asking men to join the women." When we were planning to reopen the center, we had a visit from Church security. Greg Dunn, head of security for the Church, was appointed to talk with us. We had long discussions about what we called risk management. I very much like his philosophy. He had experience in some dangerous places in the world, and he said, "You're not dealing really with security—this is risk management. If you keep rules and regulations, in most places in the world when others are not safe your people will be safe." I relate to that philosophy. I thought that this is what we were doing, but I was very glad to hear it from someone with longtime experience in security.

We have a unique system here because of our philosophy. People look at us and ask, "How come in this conflict area your guards are unarmed?" This is a longtime policy. I think we've managed during the years to become a place that is perceived as a neutral place that is friendly with everyone. So in that sense it's not a target. This was our main goal, not to be a target. So we were never really concerned with the threats over the building, or really about our students as targets, but since we're in an area of conflict we have to deal with potential problems and regular crime. My main concern is that students will not

be caught in a security incident. At least we can say that we've done our utmost to keep them safe, but I can't guarantee security here or anywhere.

*Holzapfel: We can't guarantee safety anywhere. For example, there was the incident at Trolley Square in Salt Lake City.*

**Hayet:** If an incident like that happened at another campus, no one would say we need to close the university down, but here it might happen because we are far away, we're in a high-profile area related to ongoing conflict, so if something happens here it's different. Of course, I'm concerned with security and safety of the students, and this is my main concern. People always have electricity, always have hot water, always have food, and they should. It would be a failure if we don't provide that, but these are smaller concerns. So, of course, my main concern is the safety of the students. So we are chaperoning them as much as we can. We try to treat them as adults. We tell them what the rules are. We have to have certain confidence in them, if we want to turn them loose in the city. We have to leave them some freedom. They haven't come here to be closed in the building, but on the other hand we have strict regulations, and we are very serious about them. If a student is breaching those, he might find himself on a plane back home.

*Holzapfel: But that, in real sense, makes everybody else safe. If everyone follows the rules, then they're all better off.*

**Hayet:** Yes, I think they are appreciative. I think that most of them understand, but occasionally, especially after they are here awhile, we tell them, "Look, you came to a dangerous place," and then they say, "Where is the dangerous place? It's not here. We feel so safe; we feel so comfortable." You need to remind them, "You might be comfortable; you have started to know the city; you've been here three months already. If you're too comfortable, you have to understand that things can still happen, and if they happen and they are serious enough it could impact the whole program." So you need risk management. We need to check ourselves also. It's not only to ask them to do what they should do and to keep full regulations, but we need to check if the city out there or other places changed and we're not aware of it. We need to be constantly monitoring to make sure that we know what's happening.

At the center there is something unique—the combination of me, as an executive director of the center, and Tawfic Alawi, who is Palestinian, as the assistant director, in charge of security. Where else in the country is there a site that the Palestinians are in charge of security? This is what we have here, and the combination of my background in Israeli security, police, and army mentality and Tawfic's connection with the

Palestinian contacts, language, and cultural mentality gives the center a unique security system that cannot be found in many other places.

*Holzapfel: BYU always felt it was important to be neutral and not favor either side of the conflict. Now we have both sides looking out for us.*

**Hayet:** I think the center's combination of Israeli and Palestinian directors allows us to look at things more objectively. For example, if Tawfic says it's not safe to go into Jericho, then it's not safe to go into Jericho. If an Israeli says it's not safe to go into Jericho, some might question, "Maybe he doesn't want people to go to a Palestinian town. Maybe his motives are different." So I think we can look at situations and judge them in a better way, detached from politics, which is so difficult to do over here.

*Holzapfel: You've done a good job with this. What has it been like to work with the faculty now that you are the executive director?*

**Hayet:** Well, of course, this was a concern for me at first. How many people would say, "How come someone that is not a Mormon is the director of the Jerusalem Center? How come he doesn't have any teaching or academic background?" Actually the "how come" question is also asked from the other side. The other day I applied for a visa to Egypt, and in my meeting with the Egyptian consul he said, "You're asking for a visa as the director of a Christian/Mormon group, but you're Jewish. How come?" So this "how come" question comes from all sides. Sometimes I ask it too. I have had only cooperation here every day from all parts. The teachers who come here are very supportive.

I was very pleased when I heard that Paul Peterson would come back because I used to report to him. He was the director here when I was facility manager. We had long discussions and were very good friends. I knew that it would work very well, and then, unfortunately, he couldn't come. When I heard that Ray Huntington was coming, I didn't know what to expect. Ray is now finishing his second year here as an associate director and academic coordinator, and I couldn't be more pleased. I think we're a great team. I have great support and couldn't ask for more.

*Holzapfel: Well, I think one reason Jim Kearn thought of you is that you are well liked. You are kind, nice, quiet, and not intrusive. You handle well the ever-changing administrators, faculty, service couples, and students who come through the Jerusalem Center. I know this can be very difficult, to have the people you work with always changing.*

**Hayet:** Thank you. I'm trying to be open and work together with people and learn some of the Mormon culture so that I don't make mistakes. I try to be kind and respect people, and I'm receiving only

kindness and respect from them. I think in most cases you just have to say it once in a nice way, in a nonoffensive way, and it works. I don't know if this method would work in other places, but in this specific place and with this culture, it does work. I also think people here at the Jerusalem Center work extremely hard. Last year, Ray Huntington, David Whitchurch, and Byron Merrill worked days and nights to reinstate the program. Later came Vic Ludlow, Richard Draper, Craig Ostler, David Seely, Andy Skinner, Roy Huff, and Keith Wilson—all doing a great job and contributing to a life-changing experience for many of our students. When we reopened the program, we wanted to make sure the basics worked first, and this required a great deal of effort. Later on we've added some more activities, and we believe now we are pretty much settled, although we are always open for improvements.

*Holzapfel: In Provo we were sad to see the students stop going to Jerusalem. Around the Provo campus, we saw the number of Jerusalem bags decrease until we stopped seeing them. Of course, students could participate in other ways in our classes, but without the program we realized students were no longer getting the same experience. However, I thought one of the benefits of having the Jerusalem program put on hold is that sometimes when we have a program year after year, we don't have time to stop and think: Is there another way to do this? Is this the best way to do this? Why do we have this rule? Is that rule really necessary? So the question I have is having had that break and starting over, have you been able to ask those kinds of questions like, Why do we do it this way? Is this the right way?*

**Hayet:** Arnie Green left us a kind of a legacy. I think this was the foundation of what we're doing today, but we realized after implementing it that some things needed to be changed. We told the first group of students who came after the closure, "You will have a great experience. This is guaranteed; don't worry." But we were experimenting. Some of the things we tried with them we decided to drop. They were in a way privileged, and also they were a smaller group and had some special attention. We've changed some of the rules and the policies. Some of the rules that have to do with disciplinary issues we're trying to address and be open-minded. We are trying to go with time and be modern, while keeping the expectations of parents and of the institution but also responding to some requests, thoughts, and reactions from the students. We have made some changes in what we call the policy handbook, which policies the faculty and students get in both the orientations in Provo and Jerusalem.

Before every group I read the handbook again and look at things that need to be changed. They are not major changes, but we have had some discussions about dress issues and other issues like dating and pairing off. We need to keep the expectations and go according to the honor code and always be reasonable.

*Holzapfel: Well, if you look at parents who went to BYU in 1975 and their kids who go to BYU now, you want the same goals but certainly, because things change, you wouldn't want the same rules. It would be unbearable because society changes. So you would hope that the Jerusalem Center would adapt as BYU has adapted.*

**Hayet:** Now we need to adapt ourselves to BYU and to what has changed there, but we need to also, of course, look at the environment that we're living in here in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Center also has its own policies, but we're trying to dialogue with the students to a certain point.

*Holzapfel: That's good. It's important not to think we're creating the exact program of 2000. We have a new program. That's why I love this idea of the rebirth of the Jerusalem program; it's a different Jerusalem program. So when you talk to your older sister who was here fifteen years ago, it's going to be different. We keep the program alive that way.*

**Hayet:** One thing is not different. We are still trying to make every day of class a kind of life-changing experience. We're keeping the program very intensive. I don't think we're giving up the academic demands or requests. We have tried to prepare the students in a better way for that. They need to know that when they come here that they will be involved in a serious academic program. We try to emphasize it again and again because when some of the students come here they think, "Wow, we are in the Holy Land; we're going to go on many field trips." In a sense, they get the feeling of a tourist here, and they need to remember this is not the only reason they are here. They are much more than tourists. Students who don't realize this in the early stages struggle a little later.

*Holzapfel: There's going to be some constancy, but change is healthy. Ray, what do you think is the biggest contribution of this new arrangement with Eran as executive director? What's the best advantage?*

**Huntington:** Over the years I have had the opportunity of working with five Jerusalem Center directors. They have all been great, and I think that they were each here at a time when their talents were best used. The first director of the center from BYU was Martin Hickman, and he came here to establish a BYU university program. He'd been a dean for twenty years, so he knew what a university program ought to

look like here at the center. Each director has come and added their unique gifts and talents. I've always looked at Eran and Tawfic as a bridge between what we've had and where we're going. Eran is Israeli, and he knows his culture, language, and people. Tawfic is Palestinian, and he knows his culture, language, and people. Eran and Tawfic get along great. They're great, they're good friends, and they work really well with each other.

*Holzapfel: Who works right under Tawfic?*

**Hayet:** He has the whole security department. In addition, he is in charge of computer and communication systems and the logistics of field trips.

*Holzapfel: What a great combination to have Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Muslims, and Israelis working together at the Jerusalem Center!*

**Huntington:** I wanted to say a couple more things. Eran and Tawfic are both hands-on. Eran is very hands-on and is very much involved with what is happening, and he is extremely respectful. If I or Tawfic has an area that is our unique responsibility, Eran will always defer to us. I've never felt threatened at all with what I do here. I just feel so comfortable. This really is a very comfortable working relationship. Plus, Eran and Tawfic put in long hours.

*Holzapfel: They're hard workers.*

**Huntington:** They will be here at 7 p.m. I tell them, "Time to go home. You need to go home." They work very hard at what they do here.

*Holzapfel: Let me ask you a couple of hard questions. In the past there have been complaints from some professors that when students return from the BYU Jerusalem experience they have shifted their viewpoint to pro-Palestinian or maybe even anti-Israeli. What are we doing to try to keep the program neutral?*

**Hayet:** First, I'm pro-Israeli. This doesn't mean that I'm against Palestinians. And you don't have to be anti-Israeli in order to be pro-Palestinian; you can be pro-both actually. I think I'm pro-both, but of course I'm coming from the Israeli side, so this is my environment. Coming from the other side, Tawfic obviously has a more Palestinian perspective. I'm aware of those claims. Actually the criticism that BYU students leave the Jerusalem program anti-Israeli comes from some Israelis too. First I have to tell you, as a pro-Israeli, I feel totally comfortable with our approach, and I think our goal here is not for the students to be pro-Israeli or pro-Palestinian. When I first talk to them

on the evening of their arrival, I tell them that they should keep their minds open and shouldn't take sides.

I know that people here have a tendency because of the intensity of the events to take one side one day and an opposite side the next day. I will tell them, if I have the opportunity for that, what are the most sensitive issues. Students need to understand the sensitivities here, and they need to understand the complexity of the situation, not everything is simple and superficial as it's seen on CNN or BBC or Fox News; I hope that by the time they leave here they are actually more confused than when they just arrived. This would mean that they understand the complexity of the situation. I think our goal with the students is to expose them to different views from all sides of the issues. This is difficult because even between Israelis there are so many different views; it is not simply Israeli versus Palestinian viewpoints.

So it's hard to balance, but we try to offer them opportunities to hear different views in this short time that we have without overwhelming or boring them. As a part of the academic program, an Israeli instructor teaches them the Israeli narrative, and a Palestinian instructor the Palestinian one. We also have some extracurricular activities such as lectures by local speakers. One of the influential things is the encounter students occasionally have with people who are victims of the conflict and are suffering. This creates strong emotions for students; in fact, when any of us see someone suffering we feel empathy for that person. I think that this direct exposure to suffering is one of the reasons that students leave changed. Some of our students meet and get to know local people, Palestinians and Israelis; that direct contact will also influence their views and change old perceptions.

By the way, sometimes we hear just the opposite claim, "Why are you too pro-Israel?" Why are the majority of our guests to tours and concerts Israeli?

We are aware of people's criticism, but I feel comfortable with what we do here, and I really believe that we are sensitive, open and welcoming to everyone. The composition of our management helps us keep those checks and balances.

*Holzapfel: Was there resentment from either Palestinians or Israelis when we left and closed the center for students? Did they feel like we no longer supported them?*

**Hayet:** No, I don't think so. I think it took time to realize that we left and the center was no longer active in its academic program. I think there was some disappointment but also a lot of understanding. We were not the only people who left or the only programs that

were cancelled. No one came here and tried to put pressure on us to be back, but whenever we asked, people told us, "You should be back. You should get your students back here. It's safe on both sides." We always felt from both sides that they wanted us back very much. We didn't ask the extreme and erratically orthodox, but we got a lot of sympathy here, and I think the center and Mormons are respected here and that we have many more friends today than enemies. Maybe there was opposition in the past. This opposition is gone.

*Holzapfel: Is it because BYU kept its word about not proselytizing, or is it because they saw these students as nice, clean, respectful kids?*

**Hayet:** What I say is not a scientific or empirical study, but I have some assumptions. In terms of the radical orthodox, whenever they see that something is, in fact, done—that there is a firm decision—they yield so in a way the opening of the Jerusalem Center some twenty years ago ended most of the active opposition. As for sympathy and respect for the center and for Mormons in general, this has a lot to do with the commitment made by the center, by the Church and its leaders, and by the leaders of the University not to proselytize. I think respecting that decision has brought a lot of sympathy. The ongoing exposure of the community here to the center through concerts, tours, and outreach activities only benefited the Mormons' image. I think everyone who has been directly exposed to a Mormon has had a good experience here and has a good image of the Mormons as a group, as a society, and as a community, and that's why we have so many friends in the country.

*Holzapfel: So are you glad you took this position as executive director?*

**Hayet:** I'm very glad. It's a job, but it's a great one. I enjoy most of what I do. I never regretted working in my other role, but I really like this one, mainly the interaction with the teachers and the interaction with the students. This is something that is worth waking up for every morning. **RE**