

***Why did the pasha give the keys of
Jerusalem to the Chief Rabbi?
An Exploration of the 19th-century History of
Jerusalem's City-wide Eruv***

By: MEIR LOEWENBERG

Abdul Aziz I became the 32nd sultan of the Ottoman Empire on Tuesday, June 25, 1861, on the very same day that the previous sultan, his brother Abdul Mejid I, died. In an era without telegraph, telephone or internet, the news of these events that occurred in Constantinople traveled slowly and reached New York, as well as Jerusalem, only in the first week of July.

On July 4, 1861, the *New York Times* published a report with the headline "Rumored death of the Sultan." Three days later, on July 7, 1861, it reported: "The Sultan of Turkey died on the 25th of June, and was succeeded by his brother Abdul Aziz Khan." Readers of the *New York Times* may have overlooked these small reports on an inside page of the newspaper since they were much more interested in the momentous events that were taking place closer to home. Four months earlier, on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln had been inaugurated as the new president of a country that was deeply divided on the question of slavery. In his inaugural address he stated that he hoped to resolve the national crisis without resorting to warfare. Toward this end he said that he had no plans to end slavery in those states where it already existed. Yet at the same time he emphasized that he could not accept secession as a solution. Lincoln's hopes were short lived. No more than five weeks later, on April 12, South Carolina militia men fired the first shots on the federal Fort Sumter, starting the Civil War. From that day on, the interest of Americans was focused on the latest news from the Civil War battle fields and not on what happened in a far-away country.

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In Jerusalem, on the other hand, the report of the change of rulers in Constantinople was important news because the city was part of the Ottoman Empire. The arrival of the news was signaled by a 21-gun salute fired from the Citadel of David. This marked the beginning of a three-day mourning period for the late Sultan. Later in the day another 21-gun salute was fired to honor the accession of their new ruler. On the same day, soon after the arrival of the news, a delegation from the Jewish community met with Pasha Surhaya, the governor of Jerusalem, to demand that he hand them the keys of Jerusalem. They claimed that this was their right whenever a new ruler was inducted.

The demand of Jerusalem's Jews in July 1861 to receive the city keys and their success in achieving what they had requested was widely reported throughout the Western world, both at the time and in subsequent decades. All reports essentially present the identical sequence of events. They do, however, differ in explaining why the keys of the city were handed over to the Jews.

The report most frequently cited comes from a book written by the Italian engineer Ermete Pierotti. In 1854 the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem appointed him as his consultant for the renovations on the Temple Mount. This appointment gave Pierotti a unique opportunity to explore many places in the city, including the Temple Mount, a site that no other non-Muslim was permitted to enter at that time. He served as consultant and later as Jerusalem city engineer until 1861. In 1864, he published in London a book on his experiences in Jerusalem. There we find a detailed description of this event:

Now on July 8th, 1861, the day on which the news of the death of Abdul Megid and the accession of Abdul Azis arrived at Jerusalem, the Jews waited with all formalities on the governor Surrayya pasha, and requested him to restore to them the keys of Jerusalem, according to a right which they claimed on the death of one sultan and the accession of another. At the same time, they brought forward such proofs of the justice of their demand, that the pasha did not refuse it, but referred it to his ordinary council, consisting of the mufti or chief officer of religion, the khadi or chief judge, and other persons of distinction, natives of the country. Their decision was in favour of the Israelites, the whole council being aware that they were the ancient owners of the country. The ceremony was accordingly performed in the following manner. Said pasha, the general of the forces, accompanied by the officers of his staff, and some members of the council, and followed by a crowd of sight-seers, went to the Jews' quarter, where he was met by a deputation of that nation and conducted to the house of the chief rabbi, who received the pasha at