

# Three Faiths, Three Languages, One Love in Jerusalem's Old City

BY EETTA PRINCE-GIBSON | PUBLISHED JUN 28, 2018



**Just after midnight on a warm** Jerusalem night, more than 700 people crowd into Jerusalem's ancient David's Citadel, just inside the Jaffa Gate, to take part in a Hebrew, English and Arabic "Koolulam" song-mob rendition of Bob Marley's "One Love."

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Koolulam, founded just over a year ago, has become one of Israel's most popular events. The name is a multiple play on words, combining the English word cool, with the Hebrew words kulam (everyone) and kol (voice) and with the kululu, the joyful ululation used by Israelis of North African and Middle Eastern descent on happy occasions.

According to its promotional materials, Koolulam “enables participants to enjoy the feeling of togetherness through a deep communal experience — our sounds and voices coming together to create a social choir, full of hope and optimism.”

Koolulam already has organized more than a dozen events across the country, including groups of cancer patients and their medical staff, and Holocaust survivors and their children and grandchildren.

The Jerusalem event, on June 14, was advertised on social media, and tickets (40 shekels or about \$11.50) sold out in less than 10 minutes. The evening — sponsored by the Tower of David Museum and Jerusalem.com with the cooperation of the Interfaith Encounter Association and more than 50 other local and international dialogue and interfaith organizations — was held in honor of Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf of Indonesia, head of the 60-million-member Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Muslim organization.

Staquf had been invited to Jerusalem to speak at the American Jewish Committee's annual Global Forum, held in Israel on June 10–13; and he also met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

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As they walk through metal detectors and their bags are examined by security personnel, participants are asked by event staff if they are baritones, sopranos or altos. Based on their answers, they are handed a page of a corresponding color with their respective singing part in the song's arrangement.

Members of the crowd are excited, primed for the experience. They are religious and nonreligious, Arabs and Jews, older and younger.

Staquf, together with a priest and a rabbi, leads a convocation prayer for peace. The crowd answers “Amen,” then cheers wildly. Pumping background music creates a beat, lights bounce off the ancient citadel, the sky is clear and everyone wants to have fun and feel together in this city that usually is so divided.

“It is Eid-al-Fitr [the festival that marks the end of the 40-day Ramadan fast],” explains Samach, a Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem who declines to give her full name. “Soon, I'll join my family; but first, I wanted to be here, to remind myself that this city can be hopeful and fun, too.”

Sivan Matanovitz, a 43-year-old teacher from Jerusalem, overhears her and holds out her hand. “We don’t know each other but at least we know one thing — we both like to sing and we can sing together. And we’re both Jerusalemites.”

“But I’m an alto and you are a soprano,” Samach laughs, pointing to their different-colored pages. “Wouldn’t it be great if that were the only difference between all of us?”

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***Jerusalem isn’t only about conflict. It can be about Bob Marley, too. – Galit Rudolsky***

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Even the usually taciturn Ze’ev Elkin, minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage and a hard-line member of the Likud Party, is standing in the crowd, smiling. “I can’t sing,” he says, “but what could be more wonderful than being here in Jerusalem, together?”

The participants scramble over the 700-year-old stones, trying not to trip over sound cables and light riggings. As they find their places and quiet down, they are directed by the organizers to move to areas where they can learn their respective parts. Following Koolulam’s set format, they will have 45 minutes.

The baritones — all men — walk to a side chamber in the citadel to be taught by one of the staff members. Ben Yefet, Koolulam’s musical director and a well-known face of the group, teaches the sopranos and altos, his trademark dreadlocks flying in the breeze. He tries to separate them into two groups but acknowledges that “Israelis don’t always follow directions. So follow the music, OK?”

Yefet has arranged “One Love” into three languages and the pages are printed in the original and in transliterations. Yefet leaps and bounds across the stage, coaxing, joking and cajoling participants to learn their parts, charismatically controlling the unruly crowd.

“E-nun-ci-ate,” he says, and the sopranos, then the altos, repeat a line in Arabic. But then he stops them. “Sorry, ladies. Love is wonderful, and I hope your love lasts forever, but in this song it’s short,” he says with an almost-childlike grin. “Cut the ‘-ve’ short and tight.”

When the baritones rejoin the group, the cameras and boom mics move through the crowd. “Don’t look at the cameras,” Yefet says. “Look at each other. Look at the words. Look at love!”

He leads five takes. In the final take, images of children, doves and the word peace in dozens of languages are projected onto the citadel's walls. The best bits from the takes will be edited together into a single video.

It is after 4 a.m. when Koolulam ends. Long lines of cars make their way into the Old City as Muslims come to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif to pray and celebrate their festival. Glimmers of first light come up in the east.

"I know it's a bit hokey and kitsch," says Galit Rudolsky, a 29-year-old student at Hebrew University. "But I don't care. I want to feel it. We all do. Jerusalem isn't only about conflict. It can be about Bob Marley, too."

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