



THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

In 1954, my grandfather [Ed Tilsen](#) and my father, Bob Tilsen, built 63 new homes in Minneapolis in what was the first new private housing development “available to Negro Americans on the ‘open’ market” (St. Paul *Recorder*, May 21, 1954, p. 1). In the post-war period, of the 9,568 single and two-family dwelling units built in Minneapolis, less than 20 were purchased by black families. Housing discrimination was considered the “number one problem” confronting the black population at that time, perhaps even more serious than employment discrimination.

In that era, housing discrimination was deeply entrenched. Most real estate boards had “in their code of ethics for members that it is not proper for them to sell or rent a home to a person who does not conform to the racial or religious pattern of the existing neighborhood.” The FHA and Veterans Administration did not challenge this reality in the private market. Banks would not make loans to non-segregated projects. Leavitt “systematically excluded Negroes from all its developments on the eastern seaboard” (*Recorder*). Archie Givens, a real estate salesman, and in retrospect an outstanding community leader – and a relative of cousins on my mother’s side – is credited with initiating the project and selling all of the units on an integrated basis.

Ed Tilsen had tried to build an integrated project in St. Paul in 1948 but the banks refused to finance it. He would not build according to the banks’ requirement of segregation. But by 1954 he had figured out how to make it work – a feat of “salesmanship” and persuasion. For the Tilsens, it was more than a business opportunity (and was not in

the end particularly profitable). It was an issue of justice and common good. Housing discrimination and enforced segregation were simply repugnant practices, defying notions of common decency. As Jews in Minnesota they had experienced and understood discrimination. The impact of discrimination against blacks was more severe and forceful.

Back then, the real estate brokers, banks and builders gave what they thought were good reasons to enforce segregation. It protected white property owners’ investments and the “quality” of the neighborhoods, and prevented blacks from buying properties that were sure to plummet in value (due to blacks moving in). It kept peace for blacks and whites alike by avoiding the inevitable conflict and violence of integration; who wants to provoke the Klan and other racist and violent agents? And indeed, some outspoken black people opposed integration out of fear of provoking violence and making matters worse.

It is with this American experience in mind that I view the current housing controversies in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem has its unique history and complex politics, and simple comparisons are not possible. Jerusalem faces a chronic shortage of affordable housing (for Jews, Arabs and everyone else), inequality in public services by neighborhood, the residency of a large number of non-citizens, and contention over numerous holy sites dear to the politically involved and perhaps also to the faithful.

The announcement of implementation of a plan (initi-

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ated in the 1990s) for construction of modern housing units in the southern Jerusalem area known as Givat HaMatos (just across the street from Ramat Rachel and next to Beit Safafa) set off a firestorm of condemnation by the Belgians and other Europeans, claiming that this will somehow make peace impossible and end the prospects for a Palestinian State. The *New York Times* drones that “most of the world” considers this “illegal” (but can never provide a basis for this unwarranted approbation). Givat HaMatos is an area two-and-a-half times the size of the New Haven Green. The developers have tried to ensure that at least a quarter to half of the new units would be especially available for current (Arab) residents of the adjacent Beit Safafa neighborhood. There is no real reason on the ground why this construction should be objectionable, no legal basis of complaint in local or international law, and no reason that this small space in Jerusalem would interfere with Palestinian Arab national aspirations or actual economic or other interests. They complain that there is insufficient housing for Arabs, and they complain when such housing is built.

Similarly, the Europeans, State Department, Palestinian Authority and King of Jordan are freaking out because seven Jewish families have moved into homes they purchased in the Silwan neighborhood – bringing the Jewish proportion of residents up to a whopping 1 percent in that neighborhood. Given that many thousands of Arab residents live in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem, it is not apparent what worthy principle these parties are promoting in raising their howls of objection. Even if one believes that Jerusalem is “occupied territory” subject to the rules of international law for belligerent occupation (an unsupportable proposition), then it would likely be criminal for the State of Israel to enforce pre-existing laws or impose new rules that allow such discrimination. In the light of municipal politics, encouraging more Jewish Jerusalemites to move to Silwan might improve the neighborhood’s

chances of getting better pavement and trash collection.

Granted, some of the new Jewish residents might be there to make a point (like in Selma) or may be trouble-making “in-your-face” instigator-integrators or vandals (like in Hebron), but Jerusalem has been a multi-cultural Jewish-majority city for hundreds of years, with the exception of the nineteen years it was split under partial Jordanian occupation, when part of the city was off-limits to Jews (in violation of the armistice agreement). Jerusalem was never envisioned to be an “Arab City” or capital by the Allies after WWI, the League of Nations Mandate, or even the aborted United Nations partition plan of 1948. There is no particular legal or historical reason for people with democratic values to promote dividing Jerusalem to make a new Arab half-city, and even if one has that vision, there is no reason to insist the Arab areas be Jew-free, or that these particular areas should become “Arab territory.” Whether such a plan for ceding territory to a new or existing Arab government would somehow promote peace is beyond my ability to forecast, although peace is a supreme value.

The only objection to this integration is that it provokes the “international community” and some local residents and offends Arab sensibilities. What are the principles at stake? Do we really want our State Department to complain that it is offensive for seven more Jewish families to live in Silwan or for the Government of Israel to allow the construction of integrated housing at Givat HaMatos? If we want to criticize and complain about the government, there is abundant cause, but in this instance such criticism is misplaced. I can’t see how demanding that the Israeli government enforce segregation is a worthy cause. In the long run, peace will require people to accept the legitimacy of the Jewish commonwealth in Israel, which might even mean having a Jewish neighbor.

My emotional reaction and legal and political analysis is based on my family history, personal experiences, and cultural values. Others have different experiences, values and aspirations, and thus different perspectives. But this is my viewpoint, and I am sticking to it, until I change my mind.

