

# Jerusalem reborn

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Jerusalem I first came to in 1958 was a very different and much smaller town than the Jerusalem of nearly one million it is today. There was no Old City. It was cut off by the Wall, the one built by the Jordanians on parts of the demilitarized ceasefire zone, to keep the Old City out of bounds to Jews. The Jordanians had destroyed the Jewish Quarter and expelled its population for the first time since a once more enlightened Islam got rid of the Crusaders in 1187 CE. The New Jerusalem extended westward in all directions. Despite the different areas and suburbs, it was intimate and warm.

Long before Zionism, pious Jews came to live in Jerusalem and inhabited the Jewish Quarter in the Old City. In the nineteenth century as numbers increased they began to build suburbs outside the walls. Sephardi Jews came from Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent and Persia.

The Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe. They built buildings that clustered around courtyards, markets and wells. Looking inward protectively, like walled cities against marauding enemies and robbers.

To the North lay the Ultra-Orthodox area of Meah Shearim called "A hundred-fold," not "A hundred gates" (Genesis 26.12). It was built in 1874 to provide more salubrious housing than the cramped Hebrew Quarters in the Old City. But also for the poor and the elderly. There within its boundaries lay Batei Polin, houses for Polish Jews, built in 1891, and Batei Ungarin 1891 for Hungarians and Batei Varsha in 1894.

If initially they were a big improvement over the cramped Old city, by the time I arrived in the 1950's they were showing their age, overcrowded and badly maintained. The Jews who lived there were fiercely protective of their own atmosphere and dress. As secular migration increased in the wake of anti-Semitism the Old Yishuv did its best to protect their pious world from what they saw as godless decadence. They called themselves the Old Yishuv, the Old Settlement.

Meah Shearim in 1958 was a culture shock. The heat, dust, and not a tree to be seen. Notices on the public walls and over the gates of the courtyards warned visitors to dress modestly. They announced deaths, births, and attacks by one sect or leader against another. Tourists would invade to see these

exotic medieval Jews and were often ushered out. On Shabbat, the roads in and out were roped off. And the atmosphere was of a very secluded ghetto except in the Jerusalem of the Middle East rather than the Eastern European Anatevka.

I was a country lad. Brought up in the wilds of Oxfordshire and I was sent to Jerusalem as a teenager to study. My presence was discovered by my father's mother's the Wilhelms, well known in Batei Varsha. And I was invited to visit them. They welcomed me with pious warmth. Their apartment was small and their children many. But despite the outside disarray, it was spotless and every bed made with military perfection. I felt more at home in the suburb of Rehavia, home of academics, politicians, rabbis and the Zionist elite.

I returned years later to study in the Mir Yeshiva which was housed in a nearby area called Beit Yisrael. The Wilhelms had moved. Now the Finkel families who had been contemporaries of father back in Mir in Europe, treated me warmly and graciously. That was when I got to know more of the inhabitants of Meah Shearim. Despite the outward monochromatic similarities there were subtle differences of dress that identified which community one belonged to. There was an air of kindness and respect in the air. There were saints who denied themselves food to help others. But some were brutish and objectionable. It was like any village community in the world that had its rich and its poor, its sick, aged, disadvantaged and criminal. I threw myself into this world and loved it.

I discovered that within the strict confines of Torah study and the devoted adherence to tradition, there were little private oases of culture that seemed totally out of character. In Batei Varshaw lived a modest man who had an amazing collection of Impressionist art that he had brought to Israel before the Second World War. Another who frequented my yeshiva I initially mistook for a beggar, turned out to be an expert in Linguistics who had corresponded with the great Danish academics Otto Jespersen & Holger Pederson. A rabbi who knew Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by heart. I came across men and women who lived double lives. They conformed within the ghetto but privately or outside it pursued other interests and careers. A mother of twelve who moonlighted as a Judge. Another as an accountant in a big bank.

One of the most impressive men I met was Shmuel Ashkenazi. He was born in Jerusalem and lived for much of his life in Batei Ungarin in Meah Shearim. He was an outstanding Talmudist and destined to become a leader of the ultra-Orthodox Eidah Charedis, the strictest of the Jerusalem religious authorities. But he chose the private life of a scholar and was one of the brightest jewels of Judaica even if largely unknown outside his own special area of expertise.

He would walk out of Meah Shearim most mornings of the week to work and research at the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography in the National Library where he established a bibliography of the Jewish people. He was modest and gregarious and established lifelong friendships with academics of all persuasions and degrees. He even welcomed conversation with any callow ignorant youth who showed an interest in any area of Jewish scholarship. His passion was rare and unpublished books and manuscripts.

He died this past month at the age of 98. He was one of the unknown, good men of Jerusalem. There is a fine obituary and appreciation here by Menachem Butler

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After the ninth of Av and the memories of Jerusalem's destruction, the revival of Jerusalem today ( and its reunification with the Old City) is one of the great miracles of Jewish life. It is now the biggest concentration of Jewish, secular and religious scholarship and creativity ( and saints) anywhere. It is Athens, Baghdad, Constantinople and Rome all rolled into one.

Everywhere public and religious life is dominated by powerful men of limited spiritual capacity. Hucksters, charlatans and self-promoters who prove the adage that the noisier the pot, the emptier it is. I can recognize the need for self-promotion and career politicians and public officials and I agree there is room and need for all sorts. But I have never felt comfortable in their company. I admire the modest scholars, the benevolent saints who help others without need for public adulation or recognition. This need is the curse of our age exacerbated by social media.

The true giants are those who are not known. Who devote themselves to good deeds, to preserving our traditions and learning, quietly and modestly. The Talmud talks about the 36 good people, the Lamed Vavnicks, through whose merit we survive. We are privileged to live at a time when there are many more than 36. My soul comes alive in their company.

We have mourned the destruction of Jerusalem three and two thousand years ago. My comfort comes from people like Ashkenazi. Of course, I value the fighters and physical builders. But in the end, it is the anonymous, good spiritual individuals who make sure our flame is kept alive.