

A New Beginning in the Old City

Behind the famed Zilberman yeshivah is a thriving, young kehillah, with a 365-day-a-year commitment to Torah study. How did they get to Jerusalem's Old City, and what drew them? Avraham Zuroff takes us on an exploration of the community that dwells in Tziyon. »»

The fourth graders meet in the basement of Beit Rothschild. The class is chanting *sefer Yirmiyahu* from a *Tikkun*, which has no punctuation. Only a few boys occasionally consult a Tanach with vowels, for assistance. The rebbe wears tefillin the entire day, a custom of many members of the Zilberman *kehillah*, based on the *psak* of many early *Rishonim* and advocated by the Vilna Gaon, whose teachings the *kehillah* follows.

As the children sing out verses from *sefer Yirmiyahu* in unison, the rebbe taps his ruler on the desk to the *haftarah's* rhythm. The children are singing: *Rachel m'vachah al bane'hah... V'shavu banim l'gvulam* — "Rachel cries for her children... The children will return to their borders."

Indeed, the Zilberman *kehillah*, now numbering some ninety families in Jerusalem's Old City, is an example of the return of Rochel Imeinu's children to their borders.

The first families began to trickle in some twenty years ago, at the inspiration of Rav Yitzhak Shlomo Zilberman, *ztz"l*, whose fourth *yahrtzeit* will be commemorated on Adar 18. Their arrival palpably raised the level of *kedushah* in the Old City. While the style and warmth of the *kehillah* is vintage Yerushalmi, its sense of purpose and its commitment to Torah and to the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisrael has attracted many American-born families.

R' Zvi Aryeh Ingber was among the first American families to join the *kehillah*. "Sixteen years ago, we moved into the Old City. It was a very mixed community, without direction," said R' Ingber, referring to the formerly secular nature of the "Rova," the Jewish Quarter. "But today, it's clear in its vision."

Today, some ninety-five percent of the Jewish Quarter's 600 families are religious. "People who moved to this community did so with great sacrifice, under difficult conditions. Some might consider the Rova a difficult place to live, but people from the Zilberman community live here without complaint. They are building bridges, in a spiritual language."

Becoming such a dominant portion of a relatively small community brings many responsibilities along with it. Setting up an educational system from kindergarten through kollel serving hundreds of *talmidim* from all over the Jerusalem area was just one such enterprise. Another was the successful effort by *askanim* to encourage Israel's largest health-fund to open a clinic in the Old City. One of the first community-wide efforts the Zilberman family took upon itself when they moved to the Old



The beis medrash of the yeshiva gedolah

City was the establishment of a charity fund for its residents.

"The Old City had no charity fund when we first moved here," says Rav Yehoshua Zilberman, who manages the fund. "The Rambam says every community must have such a fund."

Although in an upscale neighborhood such as the Old City, one might think that a charity fund would be unnecessary, Rav Yehoshua, as he is fondly known to Old City residents, says it fills a real need.

"And you'd be surprised at who comes to us. People's fortunes turn and the fund has been a lifesaver for people who have a short-term need," he said.

One of the Old City's veteran residents is Rav Shlomo Fox-Ashrei, also American-born, who came with his family to Eretz Yisrael thirty years ago. In the 1960s, friends inspired them to make aliyah. In 1974, after the Yom Kippur War, they actualized their dreams, settling into the Ramot Polin neighborhood of northern Jerusalem. Then a friend, searching for the most effective form of child education, discovered a class being taught by Rav Yom Tov Zilberman in the Old City. The class consisted of less than ten boys, but the Fox-Ashrei family was attracted to the methods being used; they enrolled their oldest son Aaron, age nine. Later, their younger sons also joined. As a result, the family relocated to the Old City.

Rav Shlomo Fox-Ashrei is an *avreich*, substitute teacher, and member of the Zilberman *kehillah* since 1989. He doesn't feel that living conditions in the Jewish Quarter are particularly difficult. As far as parking is concerned — the kvetch of most Old City residents — he doesn't have that problem, since he doesn't own a car. He doesn't think that the area is particularly noisy. Indeed, the only sound that I was aware of in his house was the gentle cheeping of their parakeets.

On the difficulties of raising children in a tourist-filled environment, Rav Fox-Ashrei says that the tourists appear so foreign to their children that they don't relate to them at all, and so aren't exposed to their incongruent viewpoints. Besides, for most of the day, the cheder boys aren't in the streets. "The cheder has long hours, so the kids don't have problems with what to do in the afternoon," says Rav Fox-Ashrei. To help prevent exposure to tourists in immodest garb, Rav Yitzhak Shlomo Zilberman distributed a pedestrian map detailing preferable, *pritzus*-free streets.

An Orphan Seeks His Derech

Rav Yitzhak Shlomo Zilberman was born in Berlin in 1928. His father, Rabbi Dr. Avraham Silbermann became renowned for his *Silbermann Chumash*, the world's first translation into English of Chumash with Rashi, published in 1934. When Yitzhak Shlomo was three years old, his mother Rivka passed away.

In 1936, under threat of the Nazis, father and son fled from Germany to England. There, tragedy struck again; young Yitzhak Shlomo's father died in England. In 1940, the 11-year-old orphan made his way to Eretz Yisrael on the last legal boat to leave England for Palestine. Yitzhak Shlomo was subsequently raised, during those turbulent times, by his uncle, his mother's brother, Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Levi, who headed the pediatric ward of Jerusalem's Bikur Cholim Hospital.

The boy joined the newly opened Yeshivas Kol Torah, founded by and for immigrants from Germany. The *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Yechiel Michel Schlesinger, *ztz"l*, used to say of him, "Even if he were the only *talmid* here, it would have been worth establishing the yeshiva just for him." He continued at the Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem, learning in a group with Rav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, *ztz"l*.

He married the daughter of Rav Yom Tov Zlotnick. The young couple settled in the Shaarei Chesed neighborhood of Jerusalem, where they raised their large family. During those years, Rav Yitzhak Shlomo sought out *gedolei Yisrael* representing the full spectrum of *hashkafos* — interviewing, investigating, asking, and deliberating — all in pursuit of an ideal path to follow in *avodas Hashem*. After an exhaustive search, Rav Yitzhak Shlomo finally chose the *derech* of the *Prushim*, the *talmidim* of the Vilna Gaon, the pioneers of the Old Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael, combined with the teachings of the Ramchal.

Rav Yom Tov Zilberman, his oldest son and *mashgiach* of the cheder, explains that Rav Yitzhak Shlomo's investigations into the fundamentals of *Yiddishkeit* brought about an unexpected benefit. When the *baal teshuvah* movement was in full swing, Rav Yitzhak Shlomo was able to attract famous *baalei teshuvah*, such as Rabbi Uri Zohar, who embraced Rav Yitzhak Shlomo wholeheartedly at the beginning of his path of return.

After independent research, Rav Yitzhak Shlomo Zilberman decided that the best way for a child to master the entire Torah would be to follow *Chazal's* dictates, described in *Pirkei Avos* and reiterated by both the Maharal and the Vilna Gaon: Starting with Chumash and Navi at age five, proceeding to Mishnah when more than half of each class turns ten, then beginning Gemara at a later age.

By the time students start learning Gemara in eighth grade, they have already learned four *sedarim* of *Mishnayos*.

Cheder graduates of the system know all twenty-four books of the Tanach virtually by heart! Before Rav Zilberman actually implemented his new-old method, starting with his own children, he consulted the Steipler Gaon. Rav Zilberman asked for advice what to do for his own children, as he wanted them to learn under such a system, but no such school existed. The Steipler told Rav Zilberman to "home school" his children, which he did.

Later, his methods were implemented in the Kamenetz Yeshiva and Hadar Tzion, two renowned Jerusalem chadarim. Due to parental pressure, the schools started teaching Gemara at an earlier age. But Rav Yitzhak Shlomo would not compromise! As a result, he opened his own fifth and sixth grade class in the Old City. Now the Zilberman Method starts from kindergarten, and continues on through kollel.

In the *yeshiva ketanah*, run by one of Rav Yitzhak Shlomo's sons, Rav Yirmiyahu



Zilberman, Gemara learning intensifies. Each year, *talmidim* learn an average of 150 to 200 *daf*, with an emphasis on knowing the "*shakla v'tarya*," and knowing the *psak* of the Gemara, at the end of the *sugya*. At least two hours a day are devoted to review of Tanach and Mishnayos, to ensure that the boys retain what they've learned in the cheder.

In the *yeshiva gedolah*, whose *rosh yeshiva* is the *mara d'asra* of the *kehillah*, Rav Eliyahu Zilberman, the *bachurim* continue at a demanding pace. This year, they're learning *Ksuvas* as their main *masechta* and *Chullin* as their *erev Shabbos* and *motzai Shabbos seder*. The goal is that by the time the boys reach marriageable age, between eighteen and twenty, they'll have learned at least 1,000 *daf*. Only after the boys are married, with *yishuv hadaas*, are they encouraged to go into *iyun*.

There's no *bein hazmanim* at Zilberman. Learning is a 365-day-a-year enterprise. Recognizing that boys do need an occasional break, the *yeshiva ketanah* generally takes a *tiyul* each Rosh Chodesh and a three-day trip, together as a *yeshiva*, before Elul *zman* begins. The *yeshiva gedolah* has two annual *tiyulim*, planned and supervised by the yeshiva. >>>



Deeply-Rooted Innovation

A unique aspect of the Zilberman *kehillah* is its davening practices, which are in accordance with the Vilna Gaon's dictates. For example, the *shaliach tzibbur* recites out loud the blessings of Krias Shema. This practice is noted in the *Tur Shulchan Aruch* as *poreis al haShema*. The Rosh writes that in the twelfth century, the practice was discontinued, since synagogues became larger and noisier. The actual Krias Shema is sung with the *trop*, cantillations. Still another practice, which the Zilberman *kehillah* shares with Yemenite congregations, is seen by the Torah reading. Unlike most shuls, where a *baal koreh* reads from the Torah, in the Zilberman shul, each person who is called to the Torah reads from the



Rav Yom Tov Zilberman

In the middle of the nineteenth century, many of Jerusalem's Jewish residents preferred to live in what is today known as the "Arab" or "Moslem" Quarter, since the homes there were closer to Har HaBayis. Some homes even had a view of Har HaBayis!

In the 1880s, Jews from Galicia, Austria, built the Chatzar Galicia, the Galician Compound, in the Moslem Quarter. The three-story residential compound contained both the Tzion HaMitzyuneshul and the Tiferes Moshe shul, founded by *talmidim* of the Chasam Sofer. By 1923, Jerusalem's Old City contained 17,000 Jewish residents; 7,000 in the Jewish Quarter and 10,000 in the Moslem Quarter. In the 1929 Arab pogroms, the Jewish residents of the Moslem Quarter fled for their lives. In 1936, Arab vandals ransacked Chatzar Galicia. From 1936, no Jews were to be found in the Moslem Quarter, until after Jerusalem's liberation in 1967.

From 1948 until 1967, there were no Jews anywhere in the Old City. Following

Torah, himself — no problem for those raised by the Zilberman Method, where *leining* is taught from first grade.

Some criticize the Zilberman community's *minhagim* and educational method. Paraphrasing the Torah's dictate, *Chadash assur min HaTorah*, the Chasam Sofer warned against innovations that are far from the *Mesorah*; however, innovations, such as *chiddushei Torah* that are firmly rooted in tradition, are legitimate expressions of Judaism. Where to draw the line is a matter of controversy.

Rav Shlomo Fox-Ashrei comments: "Many of the *takkanos* that Rav Yitzchak Shlomo had made were controversial. But the *gedolim* never opposed him, because they realized how firmly he based everything he did on *Shas* and *poskim*. The opposition would say that [his methods] were not traditional; he said that the method was always done, just not in the last few hundred years."

The Galician Compound: Home of the Zilberman Kehillah

the surrender of the Jewish Quarter on May 29, 1948, the Arab Legion and occupying forces devastated Jewish institutions and homes in all quarters of the Old City, destroying all but a few of the more than eighty synagogues and yeshivos. Only one yeshivah, Yeshivas Toras Chaim, in the Moslem Quarter, survived intact. An Arab who lived downstairs protected the property. The Jewish Quarter was reduced to rubble; Arabs moved into vacant Jewish property in the other quarters. Most of today's Arab residents are descendants of those squatters. The holes in the sides of the doorways of the homes, where *mezuzos* were once imbedded, give silent testimony to their previous Jewish ownership.

When the Old City came under Israeli sovereignty after the Six-Day War, the Company for the Renovation of the Jewish Quarter began to rebuild its gutted, desecrated streets. A decade later, Jews began to return and rebuild homes and institutions in the other quarters. Until 1981, Arab families occupied the Chayei Olam Yeshivah: Today, the Shuvu Banim Breslover yeshivah is housed in the building.

In 1982, Chatzar Galicia was restored by the now-defunct Atarah L'Yoshnah organization, which was involved in the purchase and restoration of formerly Jewish property in the Moslem Quarter. As the Jews started clearing away the

Rav Yom Tov Zilberman once made a firsthand observation about his father's innovations. "You have to understand how my father operated. He was never in a hurry to make a *takanah*. He would learn a *sugya* thoroughly and when he felt he had reached a conclusion, he would set it aside for two or three weeks, then come back to it and review every source a second, and sometimes a third, time to see if he came to the same understanding, as he did the first time. Only then, would he make his *takanah*."

The Zilbermans had eighteen children; nine sons and nine daughters. His daughter, Rachel Weiss, together with her children, was tragically killed in a terrorist bus bombing on the way from Tiberias to Jerusalem. Rav Zilberman's sons continue their father's *derech*. All but one of them live in the Old City, and are active in the yeshivah and in the community.

Rav Yom Tov Zilberman, the *mashgiach*

and rubble of years, they discovered another two stories that descended below street level. Today, the restored compound is composed of Jewish homes, a guard booth, and the Zilberman's Aderes Eliyahu *yeshivah gedolah*, which was created from two rooms.

Although the *yeshivah* has renovated the building extensively, there is still quite a bit of work to be done, but true to *Yerushalmi* tradition, the Zilberman family will always be happy with their lot and not with what some feel they may be missing. "I still remember the day we took over the building," says Rav Yom Tov Zilberman. "This basement room that we are sitting in was charred with fire and full of rubble. Look at it now. It's filled with people of all ages learning Torah."

How do the yeshivah students get along with their Moslem neighbors? I ask David Solomon, a Jerusalem tour guide, who used to work for Atarah L'Yoshnah. "The Jews who live there aren't afraid," says Solomon, explaining that it takes a certain tough, no-nonsense attitude to live among Arabs. "And the Arabs respect that, leaving the Jews alone," he elaborates. Rebbetzin Fox-Ashrei, a resident of the Jewish Quarter for the last twenty-five years, isn't afraid of venturing out in the Old City. She explains her method: "Don't make eye contact with them. That makes you invisible to the Arabs."

of the cheder, is the community's *darshan*, equally able to relate to and inspire cheder youngsters and *balabatim*. Rav Yom Tov says a *shiur* for *balabatim* on the Rif, whose commentary emphasizes the halachic aspect of the Gemara, yet maintains the Gemara's original style. Rav Yom Tov feels that *balabatim* with limited time to learn can thereby cover ground while also acquiring an understanding of Halachah.

In addition to the shiur in the Rif, held at night for those who work full time, there is a three-quarters-day kollel for men, who learn a *daf* a day and then hold Halachah *shiurim* three times a week to summarize the *psak* of the Gemara they have learned.

The concept of *Yaffah Torah im derech erez* — "Great is Torah together with an occupation" (*Pirkei Avos* 2:2), is encouraged in the Zilberman community. Except for the government stipend, kollel stipends are purposely not given. Most of the *avreichim* are involved, at least part-time, in supplementing their income. Community members work in various fields, such as *sofrus*, education, computers, and real estate.

Return to Jerusalem

Why did Rav Yitzchak Shlomo choose the Old City? Why did he move his family from the established chareidi neighborhood of Shaarei Chesed to the Old City?

Rav Yitzchak Shlomo Zilberman's study of the Vilna Gaon's works led him to the conclusion that there is a special mitzvah of settling the ancient city of Jerusalem. Rav Hillel of Shklov, a *talmid* of the Vilna Gaon, in his sefer *Kol HaTor*, discusses in depth the Gaon's view that the Redemption will be hastened by settlement of Eretz Yisrael and by the return of the Jewish People from their various places of exile.

The sefer has had some detractors in the Torah world, who contend that the currently available version is abridged and perhaps has misquoted the Vilna Gaon. However, Rav Yitzchak Shlomo and other *rabbanim* in the Zilberman community intensively researched the history of the manuscript of the sefer and found uncontested proof of its authenticity. The manuscript was kept by R' Yosef Rivlin, a descendant of Rav Hillel. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *ztz"l*, once said of Rav Hillel: "No falsehood never emanated from him."

Each new family that moves into the community is treated to a rousing *chanukas habayis*, enthusiastically attended by the entire *kehillah*. This is always held on *leil Shabbos*, after the meal, and the re-



Rav Yosef Zilberman (second from the left) with Torah Umesorah principals

freshments are *shalom-zachor*-style. The emphasis is not on the food and drink, but on the rebuilding of the chareidi *yishuv* in Jerusalem, one family at a time.

"Every day, in the 'Yehi Chavod' prayer, right before Ashrei, we say: "For Hashem has chosen Tziyon; He has desired it as His dwelling-place" (*Tehillim* 132:13), Rav Yirmiyahu Zilberman said in a *dvar Torah*, when welcoming a new family to the community. "This is the only place in Tanach where the word *ivah*, 'desired,' is used in relation to Hashem.

"Some say that with little kids, you have to keep them entertained. We say that each child is a diamond; it's amazing how much you can polish each gem"

—Rav Yosef Zilberman



The yeshivah ketanah building

"Can we possibly say that Hashem has desires? Of course not. Only human beings have desires. This line conveys a profound message: that G-d desires the Jewish People to live in Tziyon. That's why we live here. To fulfill G-d's desire for us and to serve Him with all of our hearts and all of our souls," says Rav Yirmiyahu.

As I leave the Old City, after my comprehensive tour of the Zilberman *kehillah* and *derech*, I return to the place where my

tour began: the steps of Beit Rothschild, a hundred-year-old vaulted stone structure, which houses the Zilberman cheder, Ner L'Rachel. Rav Yosef Zilberman, the cheder's *menahel* watches with satisfaction while the children run about at recess. "Some say that with little kids, you have to keep them entertained," he comments. "We say that each child is a diamond; it's amazing how much you can polish each gem." ■