

THE ROOTS OF MEAH SHEARIM

TEXT BY LEAH ABRAMOWITZ

One of Jerusalem's most interesting and colorful neighborhoods is Meah Shearim, today the bastion of many *Chareidi* sects. The neighborhood was first established in 1874 by a group of daring young pioneers from the Old City who wanted to build a new Jewish settlement outside the city walls—the fifth such settlement. They chose the site because of its proximity to the Temple Mount. Furthermore, it was believed that in ancient times, the Kohanim disposed of the *deshen* (ashes of sacrifices) there. The founders were members of the Perushim community (those who follow the teachings of the Vilna Gaon). Their leader was Yosef Rivlin, a member of the community who was known as the *shtetl macher* (the town maker) because he was instrumental in building all the new neighborhoods that sprung up outside the city walls. These pious pioneers were attracted by the Zionist mission even before Zionism crystallized into a movement, and they supported the

Leah Abramowitz, a social worker and freelance writer, is the founder of Melabev, an organization dedicated to helping those with Alzheimer's. She lives in Jerusalem with her family.

Meah Shearim, 1960. Photo: Zeev Radovan

The plots of land for the first one hundred families were distributed by lottery. Houses on the outskirts of the settlement were considered less desirable because they were more vulnerable. Indeed, there were many incidents of murder and robbery by marauders. For security purposes, the buildings were designed like a medieval fortress, with thick outer walls that had no openings



in the courtyards. Hygiene was compromised. For the first time in its history, Meah Shearim began to decline. By



Photo: Jack Hazut

for doors or windows. (Many of these building are still standing today.) The houses opened onto a central courtyard where all of the communal services were located: synagogue, mikvah, communal bakery, *cheder* and water cistern.

By the turn of the century, Meah Shearim was no longer considered an isolated outpost; it had become the biggest neighborhood outside of the Old City, numbering 1,500 people. Its houses were modern, and it had several lovely parks. The Meah Shearim souk was one of the busiest and most colorful in town. Cheap prices attracted Arabs and Jews.

However, with the passage of time, as children from the neighborhood grew up, married and settled in the area, Meah Shearim became congested. Second floors were added to many buildings, and many temporary "houses" were plopped down willy-nilly

in 1916, there were only 818 residents living there.

When the British came into power, the entire city, including Meah Shearim, experienced a renaissance. However, Meah Shearim's revival was short-lived. During Israel's War of Independence, the area was heavily bombed, and many houses were destroyed. Only after the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967 did the neighborhood experience still another revival and once again serve as the gateway to the holy sites.

The founding fathers of Meah Shearim, like Rivlin, worked with Zionist leaders. In the early part

of the twentieth century, Rabbi Yosef Gershon Horowitz, the rabbi of Meah Shearim and *rosh yeshiva* of the Grand Yeshiva of Meah Shearim, encouraged his students to become farmers on agricultural settlements. On Shabbat, Rabbi Horowitz was wont to give fervent *derashot* (talks) on the holy work of Keren Kayemet (JNF). He was also one of the founders of the Mizrachi movement in Israel and the presiding chairman at the founding Mizrachi convention, held in 1927 at the Grand Yeshiva.

It was only in the years following World War I that Meah Shearim took a distinct turn to the right, partly as a result of a large influx of Hungarian immigrants. These immigrants were followers of Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin, a great scholar and *posek* (halachic decisor) who was also the founder of numerous *tzedakah* organizations. Fights broke out between the *Chareidim*, followers of Rav Diskin, who opposed any sign of secularization or Zionism, and the *Perushim*, those who were ideologically aligned with Rivlin and later, Rabbi Horowitz. The latter group believed in cooperating with the Va'ad Haleumi, the forerunner of the Israeli government. There were ongoing struggles between the two groups over funding from abroad, neighborhood leadership and other issues. Ultimately, Rav Diskin's followers became the dominating force in the neighborhood.

In the 1930s, the Neturei Karta, an extremist group, arose. Although a rela-



The Grand Yeshiva of Meah Shearim. Photo: Ely Schiller



Photo: Jack Hazut

tively small sect, it continues to receive wide exposure for its provocative activities.

Today, one finds Chassidim in the neighborhood aligned with groups such as Gur, Belz, Viznitz, Munkatch, Satmar, Breslov, Slonim, Karlin, Boyan and Chabad, as well as *Mitnagdim* such as Kamenitzers, Briskers and Yekkim. There are also enclaves of Sephardim. Most of these groups have their own schools, *shtieblach* (small synagogues), *yeshivot* and social services.

Some years ago, in response to an announcement by Israel's Ministry of Tourism designating the neighborhood a tourist site, the rabbis and *roshei yeshivah* of Meah Shearim signed a strongly worded proclamation objecting to the plan, as it would impinge on the privacy and modesty of the neighborhood. Infrequently, if ever before, have the names of all the spiritual leaders of Meah Shearim appeared on the same *kruze* (proclamation). Despite the community's interest in preserving its privacy, however, many visitors continue to flow to the area because of its unique features, one of which is the lively, often acrimonious, notices hung throughout the neighborhood. Called *pashkevilim*, these postings include death notices, commercial announcements as well as rabbinic edicts regarding current events, political trends and municipal actions.

The notices can be anonymous, and there is no way of knowing if the message represents the opinion of an individual or a group. Timing the posting of



Photo: Jack Hazut

the notices (to assure they are not torn down by opponents) is something of an art—immediately before Shabbat is a favored time. The *pashkevilim* are especially important in the neighborhood since there are few means of mass communication to which this population is

exposed.

From its earliest years, Meah Shearim has had an abundance of charitable organizations. Long before the social welfare system in modern Israel began to look after the needy, the neighborhood committee established soup kitchens, societies for visiting the sick, *gemachim* (non-interest loan societies) and homes for the indigent. Today, a broad array of organizations continues to service orphans, the poor, the sick, the elderly and others in need.

For decades, the Grand Yeshiva of Meah Shearim, a most majestic structure, served as the focal point of the neighborhood. The synagogue on the second floor, where famous *chazzanim* (cantors) such as Yossele Rosenblatt and Moshe Koussevitzky performed, contains beautiful murals by nineteenth-century artist Yitzhak Bak.

Over the past ten years, a commu-

nity-wide reconstruction movement has gotten underway. Under the direction of an energetic and youthful *Chareidi va'ad* (committee) of residents, the neighborhood is undergoing an extensive renovation. While many of the neighborhood's oldest institutions are in



The students and teachers of the Grand Yeshiva of Meah Shearim, 1901. Photo courtesy of Central Zionist Archives

the process of being rebuilt, the area nevertheless remains the same. It continues to offer a wide range of enviable *chesed* organizations as well as Torah institutions—*talmudei Torah*, *yeshivot* and *kollelim*—that is unparalleled in any other neighborhood. **IA**

Much of the information here is taken from Meah Shearim (Hebrew) edited by Ely Schiller and Gariel Barkay (Jerusalem, 2004).

The heart of Meah Shearim; the Grand Yeshiva and the souk, 1931. Photo courtesy of Ya'akov Kresbeiski

