

bs"D **From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles** < editor@ascentofsafed.com >
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A HAPPY SURPRISE IN THE MOSLEM QUARTER

It was the month of Iyar 5727, the days after the miraculous victory of the Six Day War (June-5-10,1967). The attacking Arab nations had been totally defeated in an incredible few days, and parts of our country had been liberated by the Israeli army.

The Western Wall in Jerusalem, the resting place of our matriarch Rachel in Beit Lechem, the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron, the resting place of Yosef in Shechem ('Nablus') – all these places to which for many years access had been denied to the Jewish people – once again were in our possession.

Crowds of jubilant people hugged the stones of the Western Wall and visited the resting place of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron and Beit Lechem.

Streams of visitors made their way through the alleys of the old city of Jerusalem on their way to the Western Wall. They were representative of all the many kinds of people that made up the Israeli community: religious, non-religious, veteran immigrants, young and old. The differences of all the varied lifestyles disappeared in the unity of this deeply moving occasion. The children had come home.

Among those making their way through the Muslim section of the old city was **General Chaim Herzog**, accompanied by his staff, who had been appointed military governor of Jerusalem. They went through the Via Delarosa, which parachutists of the army had entered through the Gate of the Lions, on their way further into the old city and continued to Hagai Street.

All of a sudden an Arab child approached them. Excitedly the child requested from one of the general's staff to accompany them. From speaking with the young boy, Herzog, an officer in army intelligence, understood that the boy's father was interested in meeting with them.

At first Herzog hesitated, but in the end agreed to meet with the father. The boy took them to one of the houses where they met an elderly Arab man who received them with respect. He opened the door for them and upon entering they stood amazed: before their eyes a big *beit midrash* (house of Torah study) was revealed. In a small locked side-room, holy books were kept together with furniture.

"I guarded this," the man said with shining eyes. "For nearly 20 years I haven't let anyone touch this place."

The story began eighty years earlier. **Rabbi Yitzchak Vinograd**, a well-known great Torah scholar, emigrated to Israel in 1886 from Pinsk [then] in Russia and settled in Jerusalem. He arrived four years after the *aliyah* of his father and brother, because he delayed to travel extensively in Russia and Lithuania to raise the funds

necessary to establish a *yeshiva*. When he succeeded to do so, in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, he named it "*Torat Chaim*," after his father, Rabbi Avraham Chaim "*Matmid*" ("the Diligent").

The yeshiva was highly praised. Students from all over the Jewish neighborhoods and settlements--chassidim and non-chassidim, Ashkenazi and Sepharadi--came to learn there. At its peak there were two hundred students. The study program in the yeshiva was demanding, it began in the morning only ending at midnight.

The yeshiva became known not only in the merit of its high academic level but also because of the pleasant voice and musical abilities of Rabbi Yitzchak.¹ Many came to hear the beautiful way he led the prayers, accompanied by a big choir.

When the student body grew, Rabbi Yitzchak bought an empty lot in the Muslim quarter and in 1894 built on it the yeshiva, a project made possible by the donations he had collected. The location was chosen because of its proximity to the Temple Mount. Today the building houses the *Ateret Yerushalayim Yeshiva*.

Rabbi Yitzchak explained, "When Mashiach will redeem the Jewish people he will no doubt be revealed on the Temple Mount. There he will blow the *shofar* and gather in the far-flung Jews. The second place he will come to will be here, 'Torat Chaim', the Torah center closest to the Temple Mount."

His dream was that more Jews would follow his example, and would buy property in the Holy City in order to enlarge the Jewish settlement.

Being a Russian citizen still, Rabbi Yitzchak received assistance from the Russian Czarist government. Their representatives in Jerusalem clashed with the Christians, who opposed the building in every way possible. As a result of the establishment of the yeshiva, many Jewish families also moved to the Muslim section, which aggravated the Christians.

The yeshiva also suffered from the hatred of their Arab neighbors. During the pogroms of 1920-1921 in which six Jews were murdered, the yeshiva was set on fire.

A period of quiet followed, but two years later the *shamash* (caretaker) of the yeshiva was killed and several of the students were injured in an attack by a group of Arabs.

The yeshiva then recovered until the pogroms of 1936-1939 a decade later.

At that time an Arab man was hired to guard the yeshiva. His name was Chudat Abdul Ranani. He had been a sergeant in the British army. After his death his brother, **Muhammad Abdul Ranani**, replaced him. In the following decade, with the fall of Jerusalem in 1948, the yeshiva was abandoned. All were convinced that there was no doubt that the place would be torched and burned to the ground and destroyed by the Arabs, as they did to the "*Churva*" synagogue and other Jewish holy sites.

¹ Many asked him why he never opted for a career in opera. He said that G-d blessed him with musical talent in order that he would be able to glorify the holy Name of G-d, not his own name.

And now, 19 years after the last of the students left the hall, here was the yeshiva, whole, exactly as it was on the day it was deserted! There were 3000 undamaged books as well as the *bima*, the stand of the cantor and the Holy Ark.

A wave of emotion washed through Herzog. His father had merited to hear a Torah class by the founder of the yeshiva decades before, and now he is witness to the yeshiva's redemption.

Next to him, stunned, stood the soldier to whom the Arab child had turned. His name was Zerach; he was named after Rabbi Zerach Epstein, the brother-in-law of Rabbi Yitzchak Vinograd, and the last head of Yeshivat "Torat Chaim" before its closing.²

"Tell me," said Herzog, turning to Muhmad Abdul Ranani, "during 19 years you have not received your salary for guarding the yeshiva. Why did you continue to do it...and so faithfully? How is it you were not afraid to protect Jewish property in the heart of the Muslim quarter?"

"I'll tell you the truth," answered the man, putting his hand on his heart, "I always believed that you would return here. But I want to tell you, that more than me guarding a holy place, the yeshiva guarded and protected me!"

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*Source:* Freely adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the excellent first-draft translation by C. R. Benami, long-time editorial assistant for AscentOfSafed.com, from *Sichat HaShavua* #1779, based on the report of Ariel Kopler and Chani Glatt. The added details, from *Wiki* (Hebrew), are the basis for the footnotes and bio notes.

<http://www.chabad.org.il/Magazines/Article.asp?ArticleID=13333&CategoryID=2168>

*Connection:* The **Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day)** celebration this year starts on Thursday evening, 28 Iyar, May 18.

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Yitzchak Vinograd** [5611 > 15 Kislev 5673 (1851 - Nov. 1912)] moved to the Holy Land from Pinsk in 1886. His reputation as a great Talmudic scholar preceded him. Soon thereafter he founded the Torat Chaim Yeshiva in Jerusalem, in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. In 1894 he financed the construction of a building for the yeshiva in the Muslim Quarter from the funds he had raised in Europe for that purpose before making Aliya. He is the author of the book, "*Torat Chaim on Kodeshim*." (Hebrew). One of the suburbs of Jerusalem, "Neve Yaakov," is named for him.

**Chaim Herzog** (1918–1997) was an Irish-born Israeli politician, general, lawyer and author. The son of Ireland's Chief Rabbi Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, he immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1935, where he soon began his long military career, retiring from the IDF in 1962 with the rank of major-general. Between 1975 and 1978 he was Israel's representative to the UN. From 1983 to 1993, he served as President of Israel, a largely ceremonial role. His son Isaac Herzog is the current President of Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Another source reports that Rabbi Yitzchak Vinograd was succeeded first by his brother, then his brother-in-law, and finally, his son.