

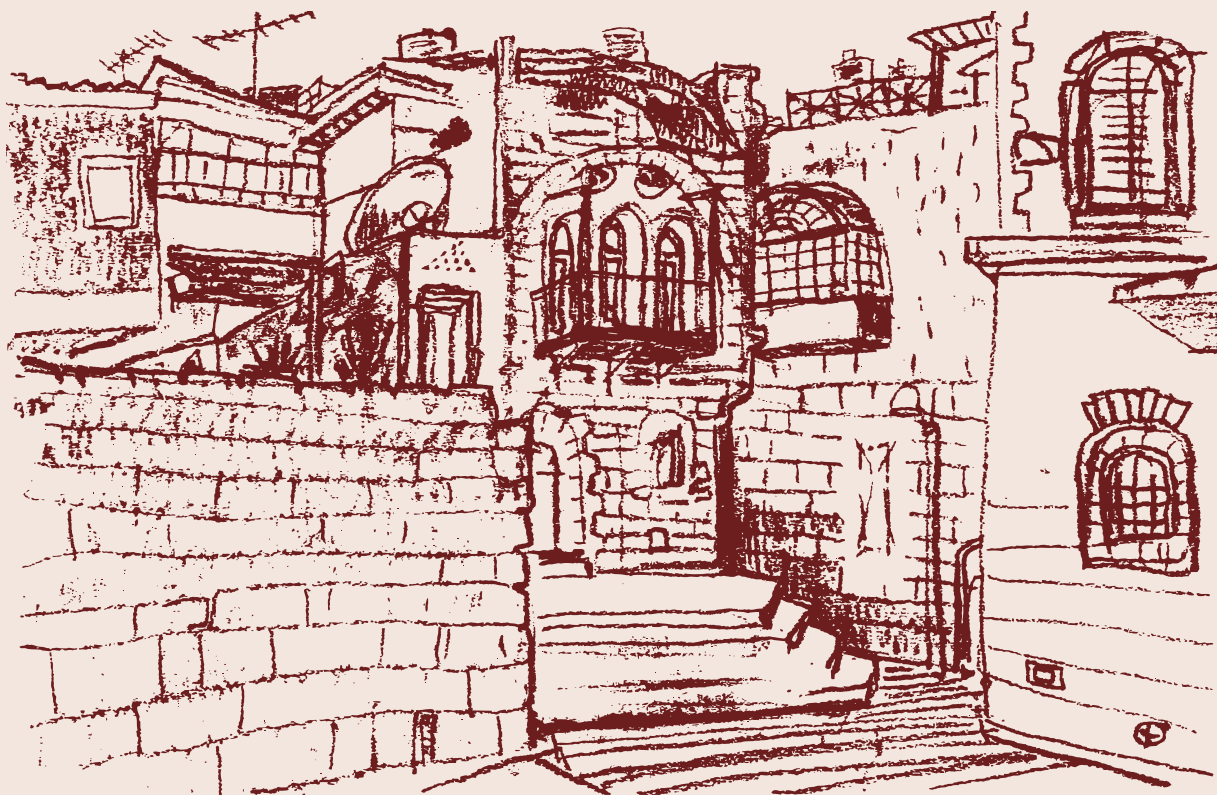


A Visit Back T. in Time

By Malkie
Schulman

Rabbanit Puah Shteiner took me back
to a time of upheaval in Yerushalayim

Visiting Rabbanit Puah Shteiner, author of *Forever My Jerusalem: A Personal Account of the Siege and Surrender of Jerusalem in 1948*, I feel like I'm stepping back into history. It's not just the *sefarim*-lined bookshelves that give me this sense, but the weight of a life shaped by the events she describes so vividly in her book, which I and many others have read more than once and connected to very deeply.



Looking out from her spacious porch, the Old City stretches out before us, its white Jerusalem stone bathed in light. Past and present seem to merge. Rabbanit Shteiner, dressed modestly in soft colors, with a comfortable grace and youthful energy transcending her age, leads me to the kitchen. The sparkle in her eye hints at warmth, intelligence and passion as she offers me a cup of tea and some *Mezonos*. We settle in, and she begins by telling me about her background.

On her mother's side, Rabbanit Shteiner is a third-generation *Yerushalmi*. On her father's side, she is a sixth-generation *Yerushalmi*. In 1835, Rav Eliezer Bergman, her father's great-grandfather, immigrated from Germany to Palestine with his wife and their five children, leaving behind their wealth and comfortable life out of idealism, not persecution.

In those days, many Jews moved to Eretz Yisrael at the end of their lives because they wanted to be buried there. The Bergman family, however, wanted to *live* in Eretz Yisrael and not just die there. Rabbi Bergman, a *talmid chacham* and *askan*, was one of the founders of the Holland Deutschland Kollel as well as the Batei Machseh compound, a "modern" housing project that was built in the Old City after his passing. His grandson Rabbi Nachum Bergman, Rabbanit Shteiner's great-grandfather, helped found Meah Shearim, one of the first neighborhoods to be built outside the Old City walls in 1867.

Rabbanit Shteiner's father, Rabbi Shlomo Bergman (he later changed his last name to Min Hahar, the Hebrew translation of Bergman) was born in 1911 in the Old City. But the economic conditions of the times were difficult, and his father was forced to go back to Germany. The plan was to make some money to support the family and return as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the First World War intervened. Rabbi Bergman ended up being separated from his family for seven years, as he couldn't go back to Eretz Yisrael



“I remember that my older sister didn’t like the Old City; she missed the grass and the butterflies. Everything was made out of stone. But I didn’t feel that way.”

even after the war ended. (Germany was the enemy of England, and the English controlled what was then called Palestine.)

“With no other choice, my grandmother and her children relocated to Nuremberg,” Rabbanit Shteiner shares. “My father was nine years old when they arrived. Since there was no formal *talmud Torah*, he had to attend public school. *Limudei kodesh* studies were only on Shabbos and Sunday. His father supplemented his learning by teaching him.”

A few years later, Rav Elya Lopian came from Kelm to raise money for his *yeshivah*. He visited Rabbi Bergman, who by then had been appointed the city’s *dayan*. As they sat discussing *divrei Torah*, Rav Elya noticed the 14-year-old Shlomo sitting there, his eyes raptly fixed on them. When he asked the boy if he wished to study in *yeshivah* in Lita, Shlomo replied, “Yes, but my parents won’t let me.” “Leave them to me,” Rav Elya told him—and that’s how Rabbi Bergman ended up studying in Kelm, Telshe and the Mir before returning to Eretz Yisrael in 1936.

After Rabbanit Shteiner’s parents got married, they lived in a small village in the north called Yesod HaMa’ala, relocating a year later to Sdei Yaakov, also in the north, where young Puah was born. After her grandfather passed away suddenly, her father wanted to live near his mother, so he packed up the family, and they moved to Batei Machseh in the Old City. At the time, her family consisted of her parents, her older sister Nomi, Puah herself and a younger sister. Another sister and brother were born in the Old City, and her youngest sister was born in Katamon (outside the Old City) after the war.

“I was four years old in 1945 when we moved to Batei Machseh,” she shares. “I remember that my older sister, Nomi, didn’t like the Old City; she missed the grass and the butterflies. Everything was made out of stone. But I didn’t feel that way. I loved everything about it even though we lived in a tiny one-room apartment. My parents used a dresser as a room divider between their ‘bedroom’ and the rest of the apartment. I had one storybook that I had gotten for my birthday. We didn’t have many clothes, but we had each other and we were happy.”

The Min Hahar family didn’t even have plumbing, nor did any of their neighbors. Every day the Arab water carrier would come to the neighborhood, and the women would stand in

line, waiting their turn to fill their pails.

When they first arrived, there was minimal tension between Jews and Arabs. Still, even though they could go to the Kosel to *daven*, the Arab woman whose house adjoined the wall would make sure to spill her dirty *sponja* water on their heads. “But I still went to the Arab *shuk* to buy fruits and vegetables with my mother, and we had a cordial relationship with the water carrier,” she recalls.

However, any good feelings between Arabs and Jews changed after the United Nations voted on the Partition Plan in November of 1947. That’s when the Arab gangs emerged in full force and began their acts of violence. They rioted all over the country: on roads, in small villages, in *yishuvim* and in the

bigger cities.

Because their apartment was so tiny, the Min Hahar children played outside most of the day. “We played in what was then called the Deutscher Platz, named after the German immigrants who settled there. That’s where I often heard the latest news,” Rabbanit Shteiner says. “Girls of all ages played together and voiced their opinions on the unfolding world events. As time went on, we began to see young Jewish men training in the plaza for the inevitable war. These young men were members of the Haganah, Etzel and Lechi, three groups with different philosophies on how to get the British to leave the country and win the war against the Arabs. Watching them doing their training exercises, we decided that we also needed to

prepare, so we would jump from high to low and move from right to left as we imitated them. However, as soon as a British soldier was spotted, the Jewish men disappeared, and we would pretend that we were only playing.”

The girls would also pass judgment on who they thought had the best approach. After the British left, some of the girls were ecstatic, believing that Jews from all over the world would now be able to join them. (The British had imposed severe restrictions on immigration.) “When we heard that we had to share Eretz Yisrael with the Arabs, I remember some girls parroting their parents, saying, ‘Why do we have to divide Eretz Yisrael into two? Don’t the Arabs have enough countries? They already have enough space!’ Other girls argued against that, no doubt also echoing what they’d heard at home: ‘We have to be realistic. It’s already a miracle that the non-Jews voted in favor of a Jewish state.’”

Rabbanit Shteiner is often asked to share her story. She speaks to schoolchildren from elementary through high school, seminary students and older women. People are eager to hear her firsthand account. She incorporates her narrative with some history, explaining that her story is ultimately that of *Am Yisrael*.

What’s interesting, she notes, is that when she asks her young audiences if we should give the Arabs more land, they usually say no, but sometimes they’ll argue with each other. “I smile and tell them, ‘Just as you are arguing now, we also argued.’”

A Period of Upheaval

Puah and Nomi were in school (the only Bais Yaakov) outside the Old City on the day the Partition Plan was voted

on. “When we got out of school, we saw people singing and dancing in the street. ‘We have a state!’ they were shouting. Everyone was so happy.”

When they arrived in the Old City, however, the atmosphere was different. “A menacing group of Arabs stood in front of us making cutting motions across their throats, sending a loud and clear message.” Three days later, the Arab mobs started rioting. The British, claiming to protect the Jews, just stood by and watched.

“One day, we were called out of class and told not to return home after school. Instead, we were instructed to go to our grandparents who lived outside the Old City walls in Beit Yisrael. They didn’t know much about what was happening, just that there was rioting going on. We had no idea what happened to our family. People were saying that Jews had been killed, and we were terrified. It wasn’t until later that we heard that our family was safe, but the Arabs had burned down our uncle’s store and stolen all his merchandise.”

The girls remained at their grandparents’ home for four months. During that time, the entire Yerushalayim was under siege, with the Old City under an additional siege. There was no safe way to get in or out. Supply convoys attempted to bring food to the 100,000 Jews who were living there. (Only 600,000 Jews lived in the entire country at the time.) The pro-Arab British soldiers would stop the convoys to search for ammunition, confiscating and imprisoning those who were caught smuggling weapons. Meanwhile, they turned a blind eye to the Arab gangs lying in wait, ready to ambush the Jewish convoys. The roads from Tel Aviv and Chulda were especially dangerous. The Arabs had been stockpiling weapons for months, and they hadn’t had their ammunition confiscated by the British like the Jewish



fighters.

Their father once managed to visit Beit Yisrael, bringing them some clothes. “We cried a lot when he left,” Rabbanit Shteiner recalls. Another time, Puah’s mother visited with her new

three-week-old baby brother. A few weeks later, their grandmother, Savta Bergman, arrived by convoy to bring them home. Years later, Rabbanit Shteiner asked her mother why she and her father

had decided to bring them back to the Old City in the middle of a war. “The fighting was everywhere, but we trusted the United Nations,” her mother had replied. They had believed that the agreement, which stipulated that Yerushalayim would be under international control, would keep the city safe. But the UN didn’t keep their word and allowed the Arabs to attack.

Nevertheless, the girls were overjoyed to return to their family and friends. One thing did disturb Puah, though: She could no longer visit the Kosel, as the area was too dangerous. Life became very tense. Yerushalayim was first under a curfew, followed by a full blockade that eventually turned into five and a half months of siege.

On Friday, May 14, 1948, the British officially withdrew. It was a moment of relief...until the bombings began. The Arabs had launched a massive attack from the direction of the *shuk*. The war had begun.

Although Rabbanit Shteiner was only seven years old at the time, the following incidents are etched in her mind. “That Sunday (May 16), we heard gunshots. We were terrified. We took blankets from our apartment on the top floor and went downstairs to an elderly couple’s flat on the first floor.”

All the other neighbors had congregated there as well. It was a difficult two weeks with everyone crammed into a one-room apartment. They went to sleep and woke up hearing the Arab Legionnaires pounding their artillery on Har Hazeisim and the rest of the Old City. “We said a lot of *Tehillim*, and my father tried to encourage us. He would constantly say, ‘Moshiach is on his way.’ I also remember my Savta telling us to recite *Perek Chaf* of *Tehillim*. Till today, whenever I say it, my mind goes back to the War of Independence, espe-

cially when I say the words, ‘*Eileh varechev v’eileh vasusim, vaanachnu b’sheim Hashem Elokeinu nazkir.*’”

One day, there was screaming outside the building. A few minutes later, some neighbors ran in urging everyone to leave because the Arabs were on their way with knives. Before the British had withdrawn from the country they had erected a barrier separating the Arabs from the Jews, but the Arab gangs had now broken through and were coming after them. There was panic as everyone tried to escape. “I remember my grandmother holding the baby while I grabbed onto my mother’s dress,” Rabbanit Shteiner says. “We ran down a lot of steps until we reached a small *shul* that was packed with terrified people who were *davening* and crying. I heard a lot of people saying *Viduy*.

“My father took me and Nomi aside and said, ‘I don’t know what the future will bring, but I want you to be prepared. If, *chas v’shalom*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* decides that your Abba shouldn’t be with you, I want you to remember that the most important thing in the world is Torah. Nothing else has value. I want you to promise that you will marry *talmidei chachamim*.’ Through our anguished tears, we gave him our word.”

In the end, the Arabs were chased back, and the Min Hahar family was able to return to their neighbor’s apartment. Morale, however, was low. Many Jewish soldiers and civilians had been killed, among them Rav Yitzchak Avigdor Orenstein, the *rav* of the Kosel, along with his wife. That night, there was a rumor about reinforcements arriving for the beleaguered Jewish army, but that never materialized. The Arabs had taken over the hospital, so the wounded were brought to Batei Machseh in the Old City. “On the Friday after Lag Ba’Omer,” Rabbanit Shteiner recalls, “there was quiet. We were told that there was a ceasefire. Then we found out that even though they had secured the rest of the country, the Israeli army had been forced to concede the Old City. We had to leave. I remember that, at first, I felt happy, thinking to myself, *At least now they won’t kill us anymore.*”

The Israeli army commander, together with the representative of the civilians, signed the surrender treaty. Part of it included giving up their ammunition to the Arabs. It also meant that all of the Jewish residents had to abandon their homes and every soldier would become a prisoner of war. When only 36 soldiers reported to the Deutscher Platz, the Arabs accused the Jews of lying. It was impossible, they argued, that they had been fighting only 36 soldiers for the past two weeks. In the end, they took all of



“We heard gunfire all the time. We were terrified. We took blankets and went downstairs to an elderly couple’s flat on the first floor.”

The Rebbetzin reiterates the idea that in every difficult situation we must look for some chesed for which to be thankful.

the adult males and sent them to a POW camp in Trans-jordan.

“At first we had no idea that they had taken Abba,” says Rabbanit Shteiner. “I remember thinking that he would be coming home any minute. When that didn’t happen, we figured he would meet us in Katamon, where we were headed. Eventually we discovered that he’d been imprisoned with the rest of the men.”

The Jewish residents made their way out of the Old City via the main road that passes through Shaar Tziyon. The Arabs set fire to all of the stores on both sides. Puah was frightened as she walked between the fires. “When we started out, we took as many of our belongings as we could carry. However, we ended up arriving with nothing but the clothes on our backs.”

Between the chaos, the heavy weight of their belongings and an Arab Legionnaire who grabbed the bag containing her mother’s silver candlesticks from Puah’s hand, they lost everything. “Nomi was carrying my father’s briefcase. She had no idea that it contained a *sefer Torah* that he had rescued from a burning *shul*. But in the suffocating crush of everyone rushing to leave, she was forced to abandon the briefcase as well.”

Starting Over

Life in Katamon wasn’t easy those first months, especially without their father, who was still a prisoner of war. Since most refugees had arrived with nothing, they had to start from scratch. The Arab houses in Katamon had been

abandoned, so each family found a room or flat to call their own. They spent their days scouring the neighborhood for furniture or clothes, whatever they could find—a chair, a cracked mirror, a table or a mattress—which they would then lug back to their living quarters.

The winter was very cold, and with only a thin dress and no coat, it was hard to stay warm. Rabbanit Shteiner recounts an incident that although not funny at the time now brings a smile to her face. One day, the school nurse (a makeshift school had been formed for the girls) brought a package of sweaters that been donated to the needy refugees. “When she opened the package, we all turned away in disgust. They were the ugliest sweaters we had ever seen! I only agreed to wear mine three days later when it was pouring and especially frigid outside.”

Puah missed her father terribly and eagerly awaited the letters they received from him. Finally, after nine long months, the prisoners were released.

The Arab Legion was obligated to abide by the Geneva Convention. The negotiations were conducted by representatives of both sides in coordination with the Red Cross.

“I will never forget that day,” the Rabbanit shares. “My father’s cousin Nachum came running over to our school. ‘I just saw your father!’ he shouted. ‘He’s in Sarafand (an abandoned British army camp in Latrun, now an Israeli military base). He’s on his way back!’ We ran home right away, even though Nachum said that they would probably keep him in Sarafand for a while. By then it was already nighttime and very cold outside, but we went downstairs to wait for him anyway. Suddenly, we heard the sound of a command car. It stopped in the street, and out jumped men wearing uniforms. One of them, a man with a thin, drawn face and a green beret on his head, started walking toward us. Abba was home!”

It would be 19 years before they were allowed back into their beloved Old City. Nineteen years before they could once again *daven* at the Kosel. Instead, they would *daven* at the *kever* of Dovid Hamelech on top of Har Tziyon. After *davening*, they would climb up to the lookout tower on the roof, searching for their house and other familiar landmarks. “Look!” they would say, pointing them out to each other. “Those are the steps going down to the Kotel. That’s where our beloved Churva Shul once stood before it was destroyed.”

Then came the Six-Day War. “My father always had complete faith that Hashem would save *klal Yisrael*.” The day before the Kosel was recaptured, her father told Nomi that she would receive an amazing present for her birthday.

“When we finally reached the Kotel, it didn’t look at all the way I remembered it. When we lived in the Old City, it was small and narrow.”

“And he was right! Till today, my sister always says that the Kotel was her birthday present,” Rabbanit Shteiner relates with a smile.

Returning to the Jewish Quarter and seeing the Kosel for the first time in so many years was an overwhelming experience. “We passed through the Kishle, the former British military compound and prison, and saw the Israeli flag flying; it was now the Israeli Police headquarters.” As they walked past Shaar Tziyon, Rabbanit Shteiner turned to her husband and said, “This is the gate through which we left.” Her husband insisted that she recite a *brachah* at that very spot.

Not knowing what they would find, they made their way with trepidation to Batei Machseh. *Baruch Hashem*, the Rabbanit’s childhood home was still standing and was now part of Yeshivat HaKotel. Despite the fact that the rest of the area was still in ruins, its *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Aryeh Bina, had immediately brought in some boys to establish a *yeshivah*. “What an amazing experience it was to hear the sounds of Torah coming from our former house,” she shares. The Churva Shul, however, was still in ruins. (It wasn’t rebuilt until 2010.)

“When we finally reached the Kotel, it didn’t look at all the way I remembered it. When we lived in the Old City, it was small and narrow. After it was recaptured, the area was almost immediately turned into a large plaza.

Also, back when the Old City was under Jordanian rule, there was a sign on the Kotel identifying it as ‘Rechov Al Buraq,’ a reference to its supposed significance to Islam. As soon as the area was back in Jewish hands, Israelis removed the desecration.”

It wasn’t until ten years later, though, in 1977, that the Shteiners moved back to the Jewish Quarter and raised their children in a house only a five-minute walk from the Kosel—the same home they live in today.

Lessons Learned

Rabbanit Shteiner reflects on the aftermath of October 7, when Jews around the world were filled with sadness. “This was a big blow. I *daven* with more *kavanah* now. I ask Hashem to have mercy on us. It’s frightening, but we are hopeful.”

She shares some of the many stories about Jews returning to Hashem since October 7. When her son, a chaplain in the IDF who is stationed up north, handed out a *vort* on the *parshah* to some soldiers, a group of other soldiers (both *frum* and otherwise) complained, “What about us?” On Rosh Hashanah, he blew the shofar for everyone. He also gives *shiurim* that are well attended.

Then there was the young man who hid in a bush during the Nova attack. Totally secular, he recited *Shema Yisrael* for seven hours until he was rescued.

“But it isn’t Trump or any world leader who will help us,” she asserts. “We need to rely only on *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.”

These days, painful feelings are dealt with differently than they were years ago, especially children’s feelings. “Today’s children are encouraged to talk about them. It’s a good thing.”

One important lesson Rabbanit Shteiner imparts to her progeny and audiences who come to hear her lectures is to be happy with what you have. “I lived in a tiny *dirah* without any running water, but I had my parents, my siblings and my friends. I was happy.”

She also has a message for those living in *chutz laaretz*: “Don’t think that other countries are more secure. As last year’s events have demonstrated, no country

is safe from anti-Semites. Many nations don’t want us to succeed. Nevertheless, we have Hashem on our side, and we will succeed. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* will soon vanquish our enemies, and we will all return home.” ●