

Return to the Hurva

Photos: Toby Klein Greenwald

When I had the occasion to attend the brit milah of a family member this year on Yom Ha'atzmaut in the renovated Hurva Synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, I wasn't expecting the magnificent grandeur that awaited us . . .



Sixty-two years after the destruction of the synagogue by the Jordanians during Israel's War of Independence, the Hurva, once the largest and most impressive synagogue in the Land of Israel, has been rebuilt and restored to its former glory.

The Jewish landmark in Jerusalem in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, the Hurva hosted the installation of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook as chief rabbi of the Land of Israel, at which time Rav Kook said that the synagogue had a special holiness, in addition to the holiness of Jerusalem.

Sir Herbert Samuel, a Jew and Britain's high commissioner of Palestine, was once invited to read the *haftarah* for Shabbat Nachamu from the *bimah*. When he got to the words "On his chair will sit no stranger," Rav

Kook reportedly arose from his chair and repeated the words, emphasizing them. This was an event that made waves, since Rav Kook was voicing his view that there should be no capitulation on the subject of the sovereignty of the Jews in the Land of Israel.

But since the destruction of the Hurva by the Jordanian Arab Legion, the Hurva had become a symbol of the destruction of the entire Jewish Quarter, or "the Rova," as it is affectionately referred to by its residents. Prior to the

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Jordanian destruction, the Jewish Quarter abounded with Jewish life, with the sounds of families, prayer and the study of Torah echoing through its alleyways and courtyards.

As I began to re-search the Hurva, I discovered that one of the experts on the synagogue lives around the corner from me. Yehoshua ("Shuki") Freiman, a seventh-generation resident of Yerushalayim and an internationally renowned artist and silversmith, was nine years old when he and his family were forced to leave their home next to the beloved Hurva. (When the rebuilding of the Hurva was completed back in 1864, Rabbi Avraham Leib Monzon and his son Rav Shimon were the *gab-baim* of the shul. Their descendants, members of the Freiman family, carried on this sacred duty into the next century.) Shuki Freiman's father, Shlomo Eliyahu, the *shamash* of the Hurva, also held the key to Kever Rachel.



According to Eliezer Avni, engineer and project manager of the renovation, the renovation of the Hurva, completed this past March, cost NIS 40 million. It was paid for by the Israeli government as well as by private donors, including Vadim Rabinovitch, a Jewish businessman from the Ukraine.

The renovation, under the guidance of architect Nahum Meltzer, aimed at creating a near-exact replica of the nineteenth-century synagogue building. The project received government approval in 2002, but work did not officially begin until 2005.

During the mandatory pre-construction archaeological "salvage excavation," walls and clay vessels were discovered dating back to the First Temple. Additionally, mikvaot and vessels were discovered dating back to the Second Temple. Archaeologists also found an underground ammunition depot used by the Irgun during the War of Independence.



"The ezrat nashim [women's section] was small," says Yehoshua ("Shuki") Freiman, "because in those days women didn't go to the synagogue; they stayed home and took care of the children."

The rows in the ezrat nashim were all on the same level, so that only the women in the first row could see. Avni, the engineer working on the Hurva, insisted that the rows be built on an incline so that the women will be able to see.



Remnants of the original Hurva railings had been salvaged by Freiman, who noticed a worker cleaning up “rubbish” in the Old City, and asked if he could look through the pile. Freiman’s finds were used by artisans to create the new elegant railings of the restored Hurva.

The wall paintings (seen above) underwent several stages of restoration work since the late 1800s. Each shows one of the holy cities in the Land of Israel: Jerusalem (the Tower of David), Kever Rachel, Tiberius and Hevron. The current paintings were designed by Meltzer and executed by the artist Yael Kilmenik. Some of the paintings were worked on directly on the walls while others were first painted on cloth in a studio and subsequently hung in the synagogue.

As a Child in the Hurva

Freiman remembers having a happy childhood in the Old City. *Chassidim, Mitnagdim, Ashkenazim, Sephardim and Yemenites* lived there in peace, until they were forced out when the Jewish Quarter fell.

“On Lag B’omer, everyone in the Rova—all the different kinds of Jews who lived there—would get together around bonfires,” says Freiman.

“On Sukkot, there was a special atmosphere in the Old City; and the joy of Simchat Torah, as we danced wildly around the *aron kodesh* in the Hurva, was unbelievable.

A view of the magnificent three-story-high aron kodesh. Freiman points out that there were steps leading up to the “original” aron kodesh. Beneath the steps was a cave, called the “kasefet” (safe), used to store the synagogue’s silver ritual items. In the days and weeks leading up to the War of Independence, the Irgun also used it to store ammunition.

“The *cheder* in the Old City was in the courtyard of the Hurva . . . We learned the Aleph Bet, and *Chumash*. We learned by rote. [Good students] would be rewarded with a piece of orange. I remember once we heard a loud noise in the middle of class and looked out the window, wondering what it was. It was the bombing of the King David Hotel.

“During the War for Independence, members of the Irgun would come [to the Old City], and, while they hung up the posters protesting the British, they would gather the kids to play around them so the British [soldiers] couldn’t see what they were doing.”

Freiman showed me a photograph of his mother and sister in their home in the Jewish Quarter. Behind them is a bookcase, which he says, served as an Irgun “slick” (hiding place for weapons) during Israel’s War for Independence.

The Freiman house was the first one burnt by the Arabs during the war.



The Return, Discoveries and the Renovation

Freiman fought during the Six-Day War; seeing the Hurva again in 1967 was emotionally overwhelming for him. In 1971, he decided to move back to the Old City with his family. He lived there for twenty-three years, in a house in the same courtyard where he had grown up.

In the mid-1970s Freiman noticed a truck driver hauling “rubbish” away from the destroyed Hurva, as

part of a clean up initiative by the state-run Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter. Freiman stopped the worker and offered to pay him if he would let him sift through the rubbish. Amazingly, he found priceless remnants of the Hurva including numerous decorative railings, artwork and fragmented verses from the Torah that once hung in the ornate synagogue.

In 1994 Freiman moved to Efrat. Freiman adorned a



Surviving remnants of the original Hurva Synagogue found by Freiman. The remnants, including railings and fragments of verses that are now hung on Freiman's garden wall, were used to assist artisans in the restoration process.



“It wasn’t easy to build something like this in the Rova, in so public a location,” says Avni, the engineer. “People live there, thousands of people pass by here in the course of one day. It was an enormous difficulty to get workmen and equipment into the Hurva.”

wall in his courtyard with the precious relics. Freiman’s treasures, which were on display in the Israel Museum at one point, proved to be a valuable resource for the artisans working on the restoration of the Hurva.

Yehoshua Freiman has come full circle. Today he has a gallery with his own silver work, paintings and illuminated books in the Mamilla Mall, just minutes away from the Hurva.

One of the fragments on his garden wall includes words from Isaiah 56:7, referring to the *Beit Hamikdash*, but resonating, as well, with the renovation of the Hurva: “I will bring them to My holy mountain, and I will gladden them in My house of prayer; their elevation offerings and their feast-offerings will find favor on My alter, for My House will be called a house of prayer for all people.” ■