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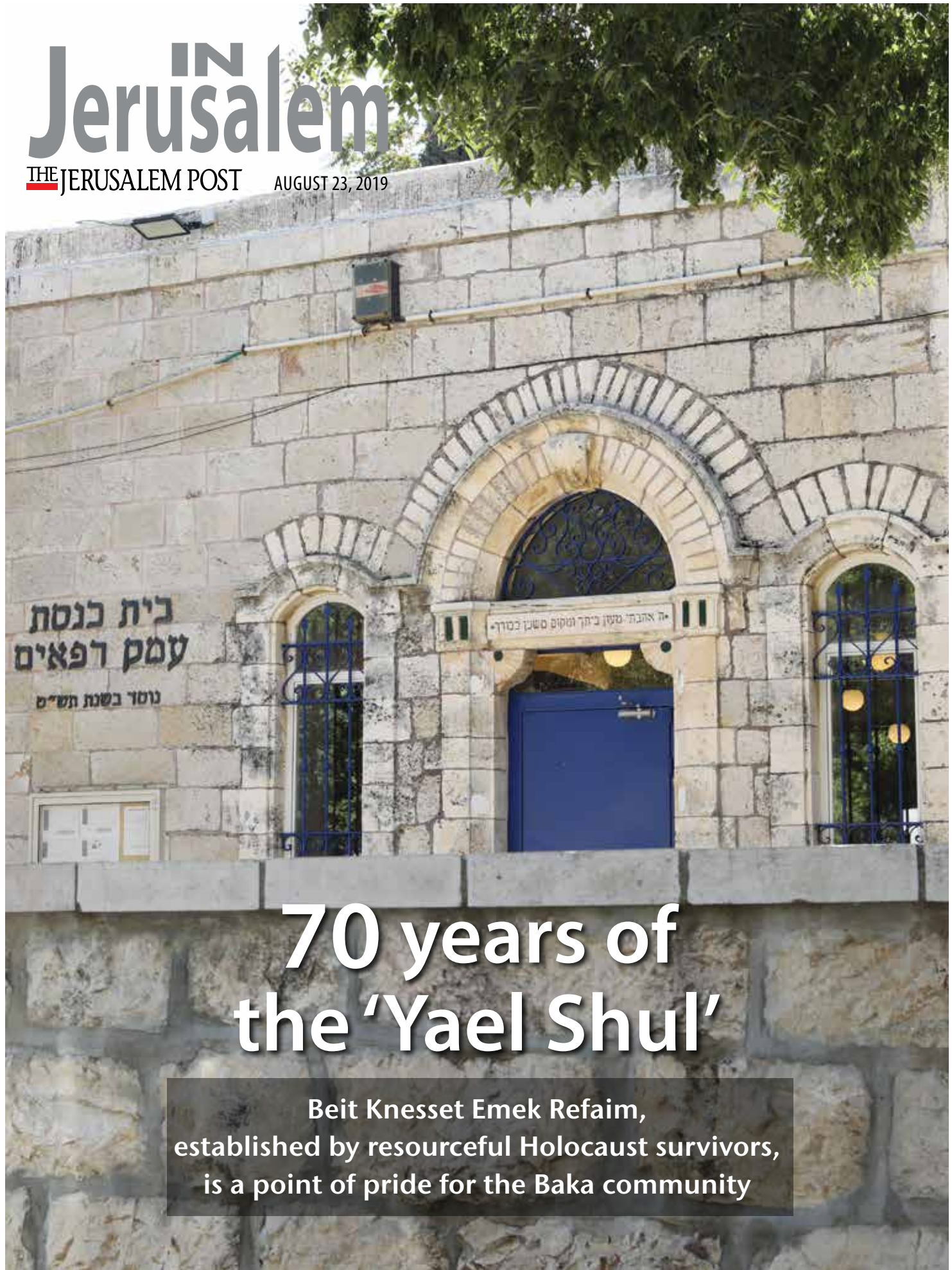
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THE JERUSALEM POST AUGUST 23, 2019

70 years of the 'Yael Shul'

Beit Knesset Emek Refaim, established by resourceful Holocaust survivors, is a point of pride for the Baka community

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The 'Yael Shul' in Baka turns 70

How a group of Holocaust survivors took over a building in the middle of the night

• DAVID OLIVESTONE



In the period immediately following Israel's War of Independence, Jerusalem's Baka district was, by all accounts, very far from the genteel neighborhood it is today. Even though the beautiful houses and mansions that lined some of Baka's streets were spared damage during the war, the military forces declared Baka a restricted area and, without inhabitants, the neighborhood rapidly started showing signs of neglect. But early in 1949 the urgent need for housing, both for new immigrants and for those forced out of the Old City and the surrounding areas, compelled the government to open Baka for residential use, and it was quickly filled with families who made themselves at home in the empty apartments.

The new residents were a mix of Sephardi immigrants from Arab countries and from North Africa, alongside Ashkenazim from Central and Eastern Europe, and some native-born Israelis. In the streets you would hear Arabic, Hungarian, Yiddish, German, Polish and also some Hebrew. And, of course, each community brought its way of life and cultural heritage to the neighborhood.

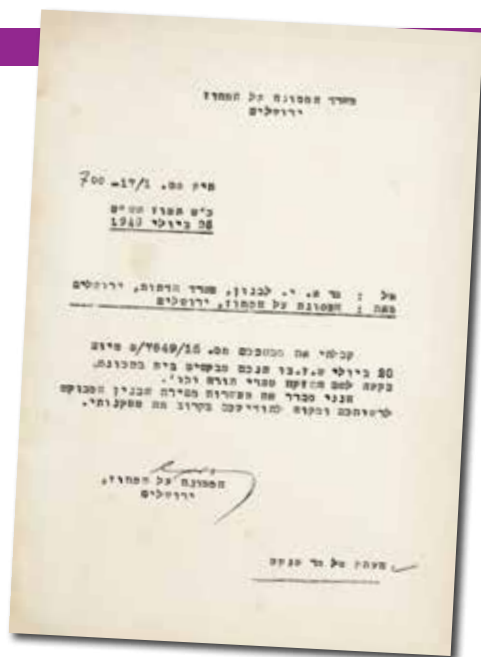
Among the incoming residents were employees of the Ministry of Religions (later renamed the Ministry of Religious Affairs) and other government ministries that were now being set up in the nation's new capital. Although some of the residents had managed to reach Israel even before the outbreak of World War II, most of the Ashkenazim were Holocaust survivors hailing from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, with some also from Germany and Poland. A group of about 20 of these families began to hold Shabbat services in various homes while looking around for a permanent location.

Sometime in the summer of 1949 they spotted an abandoned, locked building on Rehov Yael, near the corner of Rehov Shimshon. The one-story building, dating probably from the end of the 19th century, had been used as the workshop and home of an Arab shoe manufacturer who had abandoned it. It looked like it would suit their purposes but they needed to get it assigned to them. The allocation of buildings for public and institutional use was in the hands of the Interior Ministry's Jerusalem District commissioner, whose office was overwhelmed by the number of requests coming from across the city. On July 20, the



REHOV YAEL.
(Photos: Courtesy)

INTERIOR OF the Yael shul today. (Marc Israel Sellem)



LEFT: IN this letter, the Jerusalem District Commissioner acknowledges the request for use of the building.



BAKA WAS designated as a closed area immediately after the War of Independence.

BOTTOM: BEIT Knesset Emek Refaim on Rehov Yael. (Marc Israel Sellem)

group wrote to the district commissioner, and a few days later they received a response that his office would consider their request in due course.

But that's just the "official" version. According to Meir Edelstein, whose parents were among the founders (and on whose history of the synagogue, which can be found on its website, much of this article is based), the facts are otherwise. What actually happened was that a few individuals had taken the law into their own hands and had broken into the building in the middle of the night. "Only once they had established themselves there did they apply for formal permission," he suggests.

Meanwhile, fearful of being peremptorily evicted, and in order to make their presence there seem somehow legal, they shrewdly offered a room in the building to the Ministry of Religions. Pleased to have the space, the ministry brought in a *sofer* (Torah scribe) to work on repairing damaged Torah scrolls that had been rescued from decimated communities in Europe.

Inside the building, graceful arched walls curved up to vaulted ceilings soaring to five or six meters high, lending it a dignity and inspirational quality that strongly suggest that the shoemaker was not its original occupant. In the center of the north wall was a niche, and within it an ornate wooden cabinet which had apparently been used by the previous tenants as a wardrobe. Overnight, after some minor adjustments, this cabinet became a beautiful *aron kodesh* (Torah ark). "It seemed as if this piece of furniture had somehow waited for decades to fulfil its true destiny and purpose," says Edelstein.

THE SPACE the synagogue occupied consisted of a rectangular hall with another room added on alongside the wall where the aron kodesh stood. This room served as the women's section. Thus the women, although they were behind the usual *mehitza* (divider), were actually positioned in front of the men. This odd arrangement became even odder on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when some women sat in another adjoining room, which ordinarily was part of the neighboring apartment but which had two doorways that could be opened to the synagogue.

This was not the only way the women were disadvantaged. The bathroom facility was primitive, to put it mildly, and since it was located in the back courtyard, could only be reached by the men. "Women used to walk across the street to one of the neighbors," recalls Miriam Steiner, whose late husband, David (Ziggy), was one of the synagogue's early leaders. "Sometimes I would take them back to my home further down Rehov Shimshon. Some women would stay in synagogue as long as they could and then just leave."

The synagogue didn't really have a name at the beginning. At some point it became Beit Knesset Emek Refaim. Although quite a distance from the popular

street by that name, apparently it could be seen across the open fields that still dotted the neighborhood at the time. The official name was never changed, but as the years went by and as the neighborhood was built up, the synagogue began to be known by the name of the street in which it is located, and it became universally referred to as the Yael Shul.

At the outset, there was no money available to purchase furniture and all the ritual items a synagogue needs. Moshe Schlesinger first went there in 1949 as a teenager and remembers that, although one or two of the founders were teachers or had gone into business, they were mostly clerks. "They came here with nothing," he says, "and they earned very meager salaries."

So they were forced to improvise. "Whoever had a skill, such as carpentry," says Miriam Steiner, "put it to use for the shul." Some armchairs and a sofa were found inside the building itself but there was no other seating. Not far away, however, stretched along Derech Hebron, was the Allenby Barracks, a former British Army camp that was still strewn with various pieces of abandoned equipment. Finding some broken-down buses and trucks, they tore out the seats and carried them over to the synagogue to use as benches. Even so, several worshipers were still forced to stand or sit on the floor during services due to the lack of seats. Later, probably in the early '50s, some benches were purchased from another synagogue that had bought new seating for themselves.

Three small Torah scrolls that had survived the Holocaust were brought to the synagogue by the founders, and later a larger Sefer Torah (Torah scroll), also a survivor, was provided by the Ministry of Religions. The ministry also provided *chumashim* (Hebrew Bibles), *siddurim* (prayer books), *machzorim* (holiday prayer books), and other *sifrei kodesh* (holy books).

Most of the founders identified themselves as religious Zionists and this gave the synagogue its character. The largest group came from Pressburg (the present-day Bratislava, capital of Slovakia), and so the synagogue adopted the *Nusach Ashkenaz* mode of praying, reflecting the tradition of their forebears. There were some dissenters who prayed *Nusach Sephard* and, unwilling to give it up, moved to the other half of the building, establishing the hassidic synagogue which is still there.

Like most synagogues, Yael had its ups and downs as the generations grew up and moved on. During the 1980s, there was a definite feeling of crisis as several of the founders, and most of their offspring, moved away and the synagogue became quite empty. But in the late 1980s the neighborhood started to become more gentrified. The 1990s saw an influx of young families from North America and Western Europe who breathed new energy into the synagogue and respectfully began to take over leadership roles. The Holocaust survivors who were still there were delighted to hear the sound of children playing, even during the services.

IN 2000, a major renovation was undertaken that completely transformed the synagogue. Diane Rosenschein, Jane Medved and the late Rabbi Baruch Rackovsky made up the building committee. Rosenschein, who had come to the synagogue with her husband, Bob, and their family in 1991, recalls, "The initiative may have started with the newcomers, but many of the old-timers soon became very enthusiastic about it." The synagogue was closed for nearly an entire year as walls were demolished and moved so that all the various spaces, including the room previously used by the neighbors, could be combined into one handsome, well-proportioned hall. "We took great care," Diane Rosenschein notes, "to preserve and incorporate as many of the original features as possible, such as the light fixtures, into the new design." All the flagstones that made up the floor were numbered, removed, and replaced in the new configuration. A new niche was created for the venerable aron kodesh, which was refurbished and expanded. Custom-designed furniture, including a *bimah* (podium) platform crafted in cherry and pine woods, was installed throughout the synagogue.

Subsequently, the large courtyard outside the synagogue was renovated to be used for *kiddushim* (receptions after services) and other activities. Modern bathrooms, available to both men and women, and a kitchenette, were added. Another small building to the side



of the courtyard was also renovated and became a pleasant *beit midrash* (study hall) for various lectures and classes.

Located as it is in what is now one of the prime residential areas of Jerusalem, Yael naturally attracts more than its fair share of professors, doctors, ambassadors, lawyers, writers, scientists, entrepreneurs and retired rabbis. But it also boasts Nobel Prize-winner Prof. Yisrael Aumann, and Israel Prize-winner Prof. Michel Revel.

Over the years, the synagogue has become very popular and is often packed to overflowing. But with less than 200 seats in total and no possibility of expanding the building any further, there are no real solutions to the lack of space. Its activities, however, have kept expanding with shabbatonim, shiurim, lectures and community events marking national holidays. The synagogue also makes its facilities available to other neighborhood educational endeavors. A very active *tzedaka* (charity) fund directly assists many needy people in and around Baka.

The last decade has seen another large wave of Anglos coming to the neighborhood and the synagogue, making English the language most often heard there. However, unlike the previous cluster, which consisted mainly of young families, those who come now tend to be retirees. They, too, have enthusiastically begun to contribute their experience and expertise to the running of the synagogue. But unless they arrive with a working knowledge of Hebrew, the retirees are unlikely to acquire it in their senior years, and so the synagogue now has classes in English as well as Hebrew, and the weekly announcements are posted in both languages.

Yael's rabbi, Rav Shlomo Vilka, who has held that position for close to 30 years, always speaks in Hebrew,



THE BEAUTIFUL lintel over the entrance door to the women's section has often been admired and photographed. (Courtesy)

but takes care to throw in a word or two of English translation when he senses it is needed. A brilliant, highly articulate and extraordinarily eclectic rabbinic scholar who is an authority on the philosophy of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, Rabbi Vilka teaches several classes on Shabbat and during the week, and is always available to answer members' questions on *halacha* (Jewish law). His full-time position is rosh hayeshiva of the Ohr Torah Stone Machanayim Hesder Yeshiva in Efrat, and he refuses to take any compensation from the synagogue. "Others," he says, "do so much for the shul – those who lead services, the board members and so on – and my participation as part of

the congregation is to do what I do."

Perhaps this sense of commitment and loyalty to the synagogue, very much shared throughout the membership, was handed down from the founding generation whose fierce love for the synagogue they had built was infectious. In any case, many of the current members say they knew this was to be their synagogue from the very moment they first walked in.

As it celebrates its 70th anniversary, Yael's members can look forward with great confidence to its continued flourishing as an exemplary place of prayer and of service to the community.

The Yael Shul's website can be found at yael.org.il.

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