Liberating Yerushalayim EVERY DAY

The students of the Vilna Gaon helped revitalize Torah and religious life within the ancient walls of Jerusalem in the early 1800s. The JNF have been involved with redeeming land for the Jewish people for over 100 years. Rothschild, Montefiore, Moskowitz and others have helped redeem land in and around Jerusalem, each in their own generation.

These were giant footsteps taken by idealistic Zionists who both dreamt and materialized those dreams of revitalizing Jewish life in the heart of Jerusalem.

Today, Ateret Cohanim is walking in the footsteps of these “Jerusalem greats,” because for this organization, the struggle to keep a united Yerushalayim in Jewish hands is far from over.

Ateret Cohanim (Crown of Priests) has been operating for about 40 years as the main non-profit organization for redeeming land in the eastern neighborhoods of Jerusalem and strengthening the Jewish communities of the Old City and its environs. The purchase of properties and land from the Arabs, some of whom are either illegally squatting on old Jewish property or protected tenants, is a complicated and delicate process requiring patience, funds and emunah. Ateret Cohanim facilitates such acquisitions for ideological investors from Israel and abroad.

Up against the Arab nations, world condemnation and hypocritical UN resolutions, extreme left-wing groups and ever-growing Arab violence and intolerance, Ateret Cohanim are, in the words of the Spokesperson and Executive Director, Daniel Luria, “modern day paratroopers fighting the 7th day war.”

Ateret Cohanim is the link connecting past and future Jerusalem.

How it All Began

In the mid-late 1800s, there were close to 19,000 Jews living inside the Old City, out of a total population of 28,000 residents. A Jewish majority inside the Old City, with 21 synagogues and six yeshivot in the area today known as the Moslem Quarter. It was the main hub of Jewish life and activity due to its proximity to the Temple Mount. Under the Turks, Jews and Arabs lived side by side and there were no quarters as we know today. (The current division into four quarters came later, under the British.)

But Arab pogroms and riots in 1920, 1928-29 and 1937-38 decimated Jewish life in the Old City, and Jews were evicted from their homes by both the Arabs and the impotent British authorities. What remained of the tiny Jewish Quarter was also lost in the Independence War of 1948.

The miraculous Six-Day War victory in 1967 brought Jewish life back to the Jewish Quarter, but the old Jewish Quarter (also known as the Moslem Quarter and the Christian Quarter) was left abandoned and forgotten.
Mati Dan, a young yeshiva student, had a dream to return to the Old City of Yerushalayim. On Chanukah in 1979, he founded Ateret Cohanim, also known as the “JNF of Jerusalem,” which began its real estate redemption efforts by facilitating the purchase of the well known Yeshivat Chayei Olam from the late 1800s, now the Breslover Shuvu Banim Yeshiva. Miraculously, when they approached the Arab owner at the time, he said, “This is a Jewish house. Give me compensation and I’ll get out of here.”

The flame had been lit and the door opened up to the Old City;

The Photographer’s House
Since then, G-d has opened many doors for Ateret Cohanim. Every time Ateret Cohanim manages to facilitate the acquisition of a house, there is an incredible story of hashgacha pratit behind it. One such house is Beit HaTzalam (The Photographer’s House).

22 years ago, Ateret Cohanim was trying to track down a Jewish photographer who had taken pictures of a group on tour. Due to a mistake of one digit in the phone number, Mati Dan accidentally called an Arab from the Old City, who agreed to sell his home, on condition that Ateret Cohanim organized a flight and work in America.

Beit HaTzalam has joined dozens of other complexes in the Old Jewish Quarter that are currently inhabited by Jews. Today there are 1,000 Jewish residents (families and yeshiva students) in this area.

The Dangers
Sometimes, dealing with buying property from Arabs can be dangerous. An official Moslem edict (Fatwa) declares death to any Arab seller of land or apartments to Jews. Any Arab middleman who assists in any of these transactions can be arrested, tortured, excommunicated and jailed for life.

And although the Jewish families in the Old Jewish Quarter live in relative safety and life is “normal,” there have tragically been a number of terrorist attacks over the years, the most recent being Rabbi Nehemiah Lavi Hy’d from Beit Wittenberg four years ago. Following the murders of Chaim Kerman and Gabi Hershberg Hy’d (23 years ago) inside the Old City and subsequent efforts of Ateret Cohanim to enhance security, the Government of Israel decided to install hundreds of security cameras, a surveillance center and security guards in the Old City. In fact, the Government spends close to $30 million on security for all Jewish families in and around the Old City.

“It has made a huge difference to the overall security,” Luria says, adding, “but the best security is having more Jewish families!” In many neighborhoods, attacks have lessened as Jewish presence has increased.

Tehillim Stand in the Way
Despite the dangers, it is clear that G-d protects those who serve Him. When Mati Dan first founded Ateret Cohanim, he went to the JNF to see if they could help support the cause, as the JNF was primarily set up to reclaim land for the Jewish people.

He sat with the then Director, who wanted to introduce Mati to an Arab who had connections and might be able to find Arabs willing to sell in Yerushalayim. Neither Mati nor the Director followed through with the introduction.

A few years later, Mati needed a taxi. He flagged down three drivers, none of whom would take him. Frustrated, Mati got into the fourth taxi. Upon conversing with the Arab driver, Mati discovered this was the same man he had been meant to meet a few years earlier.

Mati told the driver that if he ever had any property to sell, he should be in touch, giving the driver his phone number which he had written in a tiny Sefer Tehillim. This driver became the middleman responsible for bringing many deals to Ateret Cohanim.

About eight years after this “chance meeting” in the taxi, Arab gunmen burst into the home of this middleman and shot him with five bullets in his upper torso. In the ICU, the doctors removed a small, blood-drenched Sefer Tehillim, with a bullet hole in its center, from the man’s shirt pocket. Thinking the man was a Jew, the doctors called Mati Dan, whose phone number was in the Tehillim. There was blood on the top part of the Tehillim from the wound to the man’s shoulder, but the bullet that should have hit his heart and killed him on the spot didn’t fully penetrate the book. There was no blood around this bullet hole, in the middle of the Tehillim.

The Arab miraculously survived, took the Tehillim home and had it framed. Mati Dan tried to get it back, but the Arab family wanted to keep the holy Jewish book. Eventually, after many requests, the Arab agreed to give Mati the Tehillim, on condition that he buy him another one – “this time a lot thicker please!”

When Mati saw the framed Tehillim, he couldn’t believe his eyes. The Tehillim was opened at the end of the hole made by the bullet at perek 84, which speaks about Yerushalayim as G-d’s courtyard, and the following words: יִלָּחֶם יְשֵׁשֵׁנָא לָא-לְךָ זָי וּלְא-א-ל יִשְׂרָאֵל ליבי ובשרי ירננו אל א-ל חי, “my heart and my flesh will rejoice to a living G-d.”

Facts on the Ground
Ateret Cohanim’s conceptual platform stands firm on undisputed historical facts.

“Our ambition is to return the situation to what it was in the past, and to do some national introspection regarding our priorities in the Old City. We want to return home, to the old Jewish neighborhoods near Har HaBayit, where Jews have lived all those years. This place
is the heart of the nation, and we must be in it,” Luria explains.

“The whole world wants to divide Yerushalayim. The soft underbelly of the eastern neighbourhoods of Jerusalem is the Old City, the Mount of Olives and moving eastward. Jewish life in these places is a far more significant human shield than any wall or fence.

Only our physical presence in this place will establish facts on the ground. The war for Yerushalayim is over every inch, and in today’s atmosphere of disengagement and compromise, the Zionist dream begins to crumble. We must tell people to stop, wake up and remember our roots. The Arabs understand, just like us, that the facts on the ground will determine reality.”

In recent years we have also witnessed an alarming phenomenon of illegal Arab construction in and around the Old City. Ateret Cohanim must also contend with the future and sovereignty in Jerusalem.

Leaving the Old City
About 30 years ago, Ateret Cohanim decided to expand its activities beyond the walls of the Old City. Together, these old-new communities create a vital lifeline for united Jerusalem and are thus called the “Shield of Jerusalem.”

Maale HaZeitim, located on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, is one of Ateret Cohanim’s best success stories, with over 100 Jewish families living in the gated neighborhood overlooking the Old City. Ateret Cohanim refers to the project as the “jewel in the crown,” due to the significance of the project in the face of world and Arab objections at the time. Yasser Arafat once quipped, “the only Jews I will allow in my Al-Quds are those who have been here for generations” (referring to the Jews buried on the Mount of Olives). Look where we are today.

The most hotly contested and hostile neighborhood with the most Arab violence is undoubtedly the area called Silwan (initially known as Kfar HaTeimanim, the Yemenite Village) in the Shiloach.

Before a single Arab lived in the area, Yemenite Jews settled there in 1882. At its peak, over 120 Yemenite families lived in the area, but Arab pogroms coupled with British apathy saw the end of the Jewish neighborhood in August 1938. Arabs destroyed homes and subsequently squatted on the land.

In 2004, backed by overseas and Israeli investors, Ateret Cohanim helped move families back to Kfar HaShiloach. The first buildings were Beit Yonatan (dedicated to Jonathan Pollard) and Beit HaDvash. The original Yemenite Beit Knesset is currently undergoing renovation as part of a wider restoration project of the Lamm Yemenite Heritage and Synagogue complex. This area is today home to 21 Jewish families in six building complexes, including the original Yemenite Beit Knesset, with another 15 families about to move into two compounds recently acquired.

There are also 10 families in the strategic Kidmat Zion project, east of the Mount of Olives, at the municipal border of Jerusalem, and adjacent to Abu Dis. A vital Jewish neighborhood of 300-350 residential units is planned for the land first purchased by Jews in the years 1917-23.

Other projects of interest in Jerusalem include the “Key to the Old City,” the Jaffa Gate Hotels project, which is currently in the Israeli courts, and the very symbolic Multi-Shefer Hotel Project. The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin El Husseini, was paid by the Nazis and responsible for the massacre of Yugoslavian Jewsry. He established the only Nazi SS unit of Moslems (Hanjar) and spearheaded the Arab pogroms of the 1920-30s. His Jerusalem home is today in Jewish hands. “Having his residence turned into a Beit Knesset and a children’s nursery for the Jewish families in the area is both very symbolic and beautiful historical justice,” says Luria.

The Future
Ateret Cohanim has come a long way, but there is a lot more work to be done. Besides their determination to continue facilitating acquisition of more homes for Jews, Ateret Cohanim looks forward to the day when they won’t need security cameras for their rooftop playgrounds or escorts for children; the day when Jewish children will play freely and in safety in every and all alleyways of the Old City and the surrounding neighborhoods. They look forward to a day when Arabs will be able to sell freely to Jews without the fear of death threats. They envision tolerance, an end to violence, and the sweet sounds of Jewish prayer and learning ringing out from every corner and rooftop in the heart of Jerusalem.