

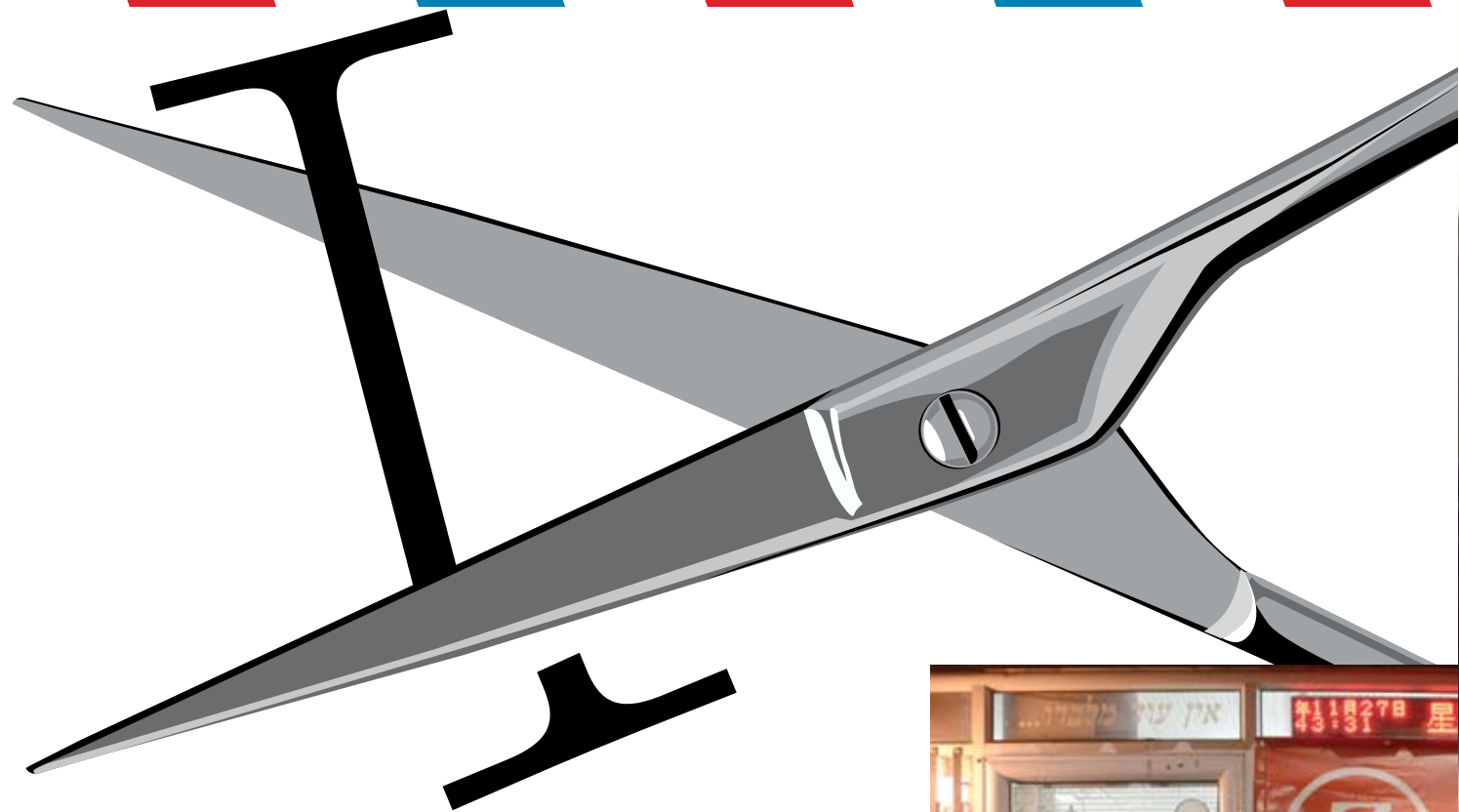


Scissors & soul talk

BY **Refoel Pride**
PHOTOS **Ouria Tadmor**

ZION THE BARBER IS A FIXTURE OF THE NARROW STREETS SURROUNDING JERUSALEM'S MIR YESHIVAH — NOT JUST BECAUSE OF HIS HAIRCUTTING SKILLS, OR THE TRUST HE'S EARNED FROM ITS ROSHEI YESHIVAH, BUT BECAUSE OF THE WAY HE TURNS EACH HAIRCUT INTO A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

Mishpacha



“It’s in my blood to talk to people, TO TRY TO HELP THEM. EVERYWHERE I GO, I’M TALKING TO PEOPLE, even if I don’t know them”

It’s a warm winter Thursday night in Yerushalayim’s Beis Yisrael neighborhood. The usual frenetic pace on the warren of narrow streets is cranked up a notch as Shabbos preparations get underway in homes and the Leil Shishi *mishmar* begins in Yeshivas Mir.

Even amid the bustling activity, Zion’s barber shop is pretty hard to miss, with its distinctive circle-Z logo facing the main Mir *beis medrash*. Step in through the front door, and there’s no question that you’re in the right place.

“You came at the perfect time,” Zion calls out. “Have a seat. The best time for me to talk is when I’m cutting hair.”

It’s Zion’s busiest time of the week. One customer sits for his haircut, another waits quietly on deck. Two more customers converse in Hebrew. The foot traffic, the banter, and the gurgling of the fish tank combine to create an atmosphere that is at once intimate and intense — quintessentially Israeli, yet instantly familiar to any New Yorker.

The door rattles and a tall, bearded American *yungerman* steps partway in. “Zion, can we say 2:30 tomorrow?”

“Sure thing,” Zion responds easily in English.

Another young American *yungerman* flaunts his Arabic skills with Zion and a Teimani *bochur*.

“I speak five languages,” Zion says. “Hebrew, English, Arabic, Russian, and Bukharian.”

The customer base this night spans the entire spectrum of Jewish life — Sephardic, Teimani, *litvish*, *chassidish*, Mizrachi. They clearly value the standard denoted by that circle-Z logo emblazoned on the front door.



“The haircut has to be perfect; that’s what brings customers in. But the atmosphere is what brings them back”

“My customers tell me I’ve helped them make *shidduchim*,” Zion says proudly. “A friend of mine, Moshe Ber, told me straight out: ‘Zion, my *shidduch* was because of you. My fiancée told me that on our first date she was really admiring my haircut. She said I looked very neat, and that made a good impression. I have to thank you.’”

Prime Opportunity As the previous customer pays and the Teimani *bochur* takes the chair, Zion gives a quick recap of his biographical details.

Zion Yosefov was born in Bukhara, then part of the Soviet Union, 40 years ago. He doesn’t remember a thing about the place, though, having left with his family when he was one. His family managed to settle

in Eretz Yisrael, in the then-new Yerushalayim neighborhood of Neve Yaakov. There Zion grew up, in a largely nonreligious setting, and at 16 he became an apprentice at a ladies’ hair salon. He parlayed that interest into a stint as a men’s barber during his army service, during which he followed a “*shavua-shavua*” duty schedule — one week with his unit, one week off, which he spent continuing his work in the ladies’ hair salon.

He was to meet his future wife, a *dati leumi* girl, at that salon. After completing his army service, he took a year to go to the US, settling in the Corona Park area of Queens, where he picked up English and more tricks of the hairstyling trade. When he returned to Israel and married, he settled down and, with his wife’s support and

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encouragement, became a *chozer b'teshuvah*. At that point he knew he had to drop any plans to work as a ladies' hairstylist. He initially took an administrative job at Hadassah Ein Kerem Hospital's internal medicine department. It gave him plenty of opportunity to engage in his favorite pastime — meeting and talking to people — but the atmosphere drove him back out into the job market.

"It's in my blood to talk to people, to try to help them. Everywhere I go, I'm talking to people, even if I don't know them," Zion says, smoothly running the buzzing clipper over the *bochur's* head. "But it was depressing for me working at Hadassah Ein Kerem. People were always dying."

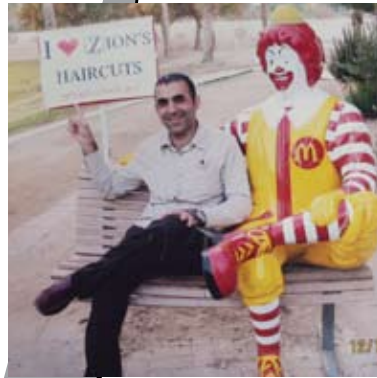
He decided to return to his first love — hairstyling — but this time confining his clientele to men. He began casting about for a place to open a barber shop, hoping to stake a claim in a religious area. One day he was at a restaurant with his brother, and someone overheard him discussing his plans. This person approached Zion with a tip: A small shop on Rechov Beis Yisrael, right across from Yeshivas Mir, would soon become vacant.

"I had never heard of the yeshivah before," Zion says. "I immediately came over here, saw the place, and took it. My father paid the first year's rent. Some people told me it wasn't a good idea — how's a barber shop next to a yeshivah going to go?"

Thirteen years at that address have amply answered that question.

Illustrious Clientele Given the prime location, it's no wonder that Zion has had an illustrious list of personages visit his shop. Naturally, the *roshei yeshivah* of Mir have been regular customers. Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel *ztz"l* gave his unofficial endorsement to the shop, in the form of regular haircuts, soon after Zion moved in. His son and successor, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel *shlita*, has maintained the tradition, and Rosh Yeshivah Rav Refoel Shmulevitz has also been a patron. In the course of his career, Zion has also had occasion to meet Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg *zichronam livrachah* — all thanks to his barber shop.

"Since I'm here, everything in my life has completely changed," Zion says. "I, my wife, and my kids have all become more religious, my sons are learning



The Mir may be the center of his world, but Zion's reputation and logo have spread far beyond the Beis Yisrael neighborhood. He even had occasion to meet Rav Elyashiv *ztz"l*, thanks to his barber shop

"EVERY FRIDAY, WHEN THE ROSH YESHIVAH CAME OUT OF THE MIR, I would always go out and greet him and kiss his hand"

in yeshivos. Only from this place."

His position has afforded many rare privileges — but the *petirah* of Rav Nosson Tzvi gave him perspective on the responsibility it carries.

"When the Rosh Yeshivah passed away," Zion remembers, "a Jewish publication wanted to put out a special package commemorating his life. They called me and asked me to sell it out of my shop, promising me a good percentage on the sales. Like everyone, I was reeling after the Rosh Yeshivah's passing, so I told them I would have to think about it. They said, 'Fine, but think fast. We have a deadline, and this is a good offer.'"

"The Rosh Yeshivah's physician, Dr. Adler, had become a regular customer of mine during the time he spent treating Rav Nosson Tzvi. The morning after the *petirah*, he came in for a haircut. I asked him, 'How do you feel?' He was very shaken up and he said, 'We lost a big person.' Then he looked at me and said, 'He used to love coming to you.'"

"Every Friday, when the Rosh Yeshivah came out of the Mir to get in his car, I would always go out and greet him and kiss his hand. This is a normal custom among Sephardim and Edot Hamizrach, but I was the only one kissing the Rosh Yeshivah's hand on a weekly basis.

"Anyway, Dr. Adler explained why the Rosh Yeshivah loved coming to my shop. Dr. Adler told me he would say, 'Zion's barber shop is a *makom naki*, a clean place — there are no newspapers, no magazines inside.'"

"I said to Dr. Adler, 'This is a big *tzava'ah* you're giving me.' Two hours later, this publication called me back to ask for my final decision. I had to turn them down."

A clean-shaven *yungerman* pokes his head in and calls to Zion in American-accented Hebrew, "Zion! *Machar, tesha v'chetzi?* [Tomorrow, nine thirty?]"

Zion nods to him and reaches for his smart phone to record the appointment. His Friday is filling up.

As august a list of clientele as Zion has managed to compile over the years, perhaps no visit to the shop created as great a stir as that of Eliyahu HaNavi.

"One afternoon, a little while before *shkiyah*, a young couple comes

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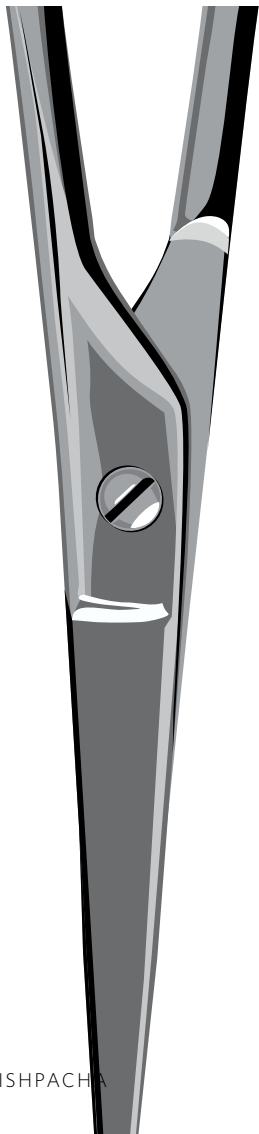
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rushing in with their newborn baby and a mohel,” Zion recaps. “I have a special light that I use in my shop, and the mohel wanted to check the baby under this light — he was looking for jaundice. So I arranged the light for him and he examines the baby and soon he says, ‘We have a bris!’”

Zion and his staff flew into action. Someone ran to the corner grocery to buy cookies and drinks — “On the house, of course,” Zion says. Meanwhile one barber’s chair was commandeered for the *sandak*, while another was set up as the Kisei shel Eliyahu.

“It was the last few minutes before *shkiyah* on the eighth day,” Zion explains. “They had to make the bris right then. They didn’t even have time to call their parents. We of course had a minyan available. It was a perfect location for a bris, right across from the yeshivah.”

Although people come to Zion for a trim and a shave, there is clearly another draw. After all, there is no shortage of barber shops catering to Mirrer stalwarts in Beis Yisrael. Zion attributes his popularity to the ambience he tries to foster in his shop.

“People come in here wanting to talk,” Zion explains. “They tell me everything, even the most private things. I try to offer a listening ear, support, and give whatever help I can. My barber shop is like an information center. I give Americans advice on where to buy gifts, where to look

for apartments....

“I had an American guy here, one of my regular customers, a few weeks back,” Zion says. “As I was cutting his hair, I was talking to the next guy waiting in line. I chatted with that other fellow for 15 to 20 minutes as I finished this guy’s haircut.

“At the end of his haircut, the American guy took out his wallet and handed me the money, with an upset look on his face. He said, ‘Zion, I’m paying you for the haircut, but I didn’t enjoy it all. You spent the whole time talking to another customer. You didn’t give me *hakshavah*.’”

Zion winces at the memory. “I had him in here again, just two days ago. I gave him my full attention. The haircut took 30 minutes, I gave him nice service. This time at the end he smiled as he paid, and he said, ‘I feel so much better when I can pour my heart out to you.’”

Zion points to the sign on the wall that displays his corporate motto: “Your head is my business card.”

“The haircut has to be perfect,” he insists. “That’s what brings the customers in. But it’s the atmosphere here that brings them back. People praise my ability, my location, how clean my shop is — but you also have to connect to your customers and give them what that they want.”

Around the World As the last Thursday night customer washes *negel vasser* and dons

his hat and *rekel* after paying, Zion takes out a packet of photographs that customers have sent him from around the world. Loyal patrons have made it a hobby to travel to far-flung locations on the globe — New York, Los Angeles, London, the Himalayas, the Alps — and photograph themselves holding the Zion the Barber banner.

But it’s not just Zion’s logo that has traveled the world. The barber has also made quite a few treks. Invariably, wherever his travels take him, he encounters friends, customers, and fans.

“About a year ago I was in Venice, Italy, with my wife,” he recounts. “We saw a group of American Jews, around 40 to 50 years old. We joined up with them and got to talking. I mentioned to one of the people in the group that I have a barber shop across from Yeshivas Mir in Yerushalayim. The fellow stops and stares at me and says, ‘My son knows you!’ Then the tour guide came over to me and said, ‘Wow, this guy is the barber for the Mirrer Rosh Yeshivah!’ Soon everyone was crowding around, saying, ‘I got a haircut from you once!’”

“Whenever we visit New York, in Brooklyn or in Queens, people always stop me on the street and greet me. My wife says, ‘Everywhere we go, we see your friends.’ This happens to me also in England, in Belgium.... Once it even happened to me in a kosher pizza shop in Niagara Falls. I have to say, it’s a good feeling to have people tell me that. My position gives me the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people.”

More Than Just Haircuts There was a time when barbers were expected to do more than just trim the sides and leave a little on top. The striped, spinning pole outside that beckons customers for a shave and haircut actually harkens back to a time when barbers provided a wider range of services, including tooth extraction, bloodletting, and minor surgery. (The red and white stripes evoke the streams of blood that ran down the white pole a customer would grip as his blood was being let.)

Although any barber who tried to pro-

vide such services today would get his license yanked, Zion has nevertheless found himself in situations where medical *seichel* was called for. And Zion acquitted himself in ways that would have made his medieval predecessors proud.

“One Lag B’Omer, the place was packed,” Zion recalls. “A man came in — *menahel* of a cheder — with his son, who needed to go to his friend’s bar mitzvah at the Zvhill *simchah* hall, a few blocks from here. I managed to squeeze in the son between jobs — he looked great for his friend’s bar mitzvah — and two weeks later, the father came in for a haircut, as a gesture of gratitude. In no time he became a regular customer.

“About a year later, he was in for a haircut, and as I trimmed his beard I noticed something growing on his face. ‘You’d better go to a skin doctor,’ I told him. He said he’s okay, not to worry. Well, the next time he comes in, this thing is bigger. I said to him, ‘You better get this checked out.’ Again he said don’t worry about it, he’s okay.

“He stopped coming for a long time. I worried that maybe I offended him and he just decided to find a barber who wouldn’t bother him with all these comments.

“After a year I get call from him. He says he’s coming with the whole family, he wants to see me. Sure enough, the whole family shows up, and the kids give me a gift. The father says he’s been in chemotherapy at Hadassah Hospital for months, and now he’s cured. When he first went in and showed the doctors the growth on his face, they told him, ‘This barber at the Mir saved your life!’

“He still comes in for haircuts, all the way from Givat Shaul. He invited me to his son’s wedding.”

Another episode afforded Zion the opportunity to hone a different set of care-providing skills.

“I had a young customer, just married, who was extremely sensitive,” Zion recounts. “Every time I touched him, he completely recoiled. It’s kind of necessary

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for the barber to touch the customer when you're cutting his hair, so it was hard not to notice. It was very odd. And it was like that every time he came in. He *mamash* couldn't stand to be touched. Soon he stopped coming. I wondered what happened to him. Later I found out he got divorced, *Rachmana litzlan*.

"A while after that, I got a call from his mother. She was very concerned about him and wanted to know why he had stopped coming to me. I told her about this situation where he would always shrink away from me. She said, 'Really? That's very strange. That's the first I've heard about this.' Well, she managed to get him into treatment, and soon they got him started on medication.

"It completely changed his life around. He started coming into my shop again, and he was a different person — relaxed, confident, and perfectly normal during his haircut. Soon he got his life back on track and he got remarried. Whenever he drives by now with his kids, he rolls down the window and calls to me, 'I owe this all to you, Zion.'"

Each in His Own Way Zion has also taken his services out on the road, when the situation demanded it. In the wake of the expulsion of Jewish families from Gush Katif in Gaza, Zion wanted to do something to help the *mefunim*, the refugees who had been consigned to nearby Nitzanim.

"I took my chair and all my tools to the hotels where the *mefunim* were staying," he says. "I figured people there probably still needed haircuts. I provided free service. The people there really appreciated

it. I still have customers today who drive into Yerushalayim from Nitzanim to come to my shop."

What's more, his wife, today a nurse at Hadassah, also relies on him for mobile service. "She calls me over to the hospital to give free haircuts to people who are in rehab."

Of course, he conducts most of his activities at the shop. That's where some families have sought him out for another option in the range of services Zion provides.

"I've helped families who have teenage sons at risk," Zion says. "These families usually know me from when they lived here, they know my shop. Their sons basically come into the shop a few hours each day. They help me out here, and we talk a lot. I think they get a lot out of it. Sometimes the mothers call me to thank me afterward. It seems to make a difference for these kids."

His manifold, variegated talents have not gone unnoticed. The assessment he got from one customer aptly summed things up.

"Once I had a doctor here, a Dr. Tzangen," Zion recalls. "He's a Mizrahi fellow. He sat here waiting for an hour, watching me with all the customers. When his turn came he said to me, 'I see how you get into the *neshamah* of each person here. It doesn't matter if they're Sephardic, Ashkenazic, chareidi, Mizrahi, or whatever. It's not an easy thing to do. You talk to each one in his own way.'"

In his 13 years in the trade, he's clearly mastered the art of storytelling as well. Does he ever consider putting pen to paper? He laughs.

"In 10 to 15 years I'd like to write a book," he admits. "I already have a title: *HaSapar Mesaper* [The Barber Recounts]. Right now, I still feel young — I have more of my life to live. But when I get more perspective, I will do it, *b'ezrat Hashem*."

In the meantime, he has more immediate plans for the future.

"We've been renting this space for 13 years now," he says, "but baruch Hashem we've been doing well enough that we were able to buy a place, four shops up the street. It's double the size of this place. We're going to add more chairs, and it's going to be much, much nicer, *b'ezrat Hashem*. I want people to feel that they're coming to a place that's clean, nice — where they'll feel good.

"When I visit the States, people there tell me I should open a shop in America. They tell me, 'Everyone will come to you. You'll be rich!' But why would I need to go there? This is my America. I already get Americans coming to my shop. And also people from Britain, from Belgium.... And of course, here I also get people from Yerushalayim, from Beitar, Bnei Brak, Beit Shemesh, Kiryat Sefer ... I wouldn't go anywhere else. The Mir is the center of the world."

He pauses and looks pensive. "My mother told me that she had davened that I should find a place in a religious area — '*V'zeh hitgashem* [her prayers were answered]. I have to thank the Rosh Yeshiva *shlita* for allowing me to learn in the Mir as an *avreich*. My whole family has benefited.

"You know, it's just a small shop I have here. But it's totally changed my life." ●

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