



Mea She'arim through a secular lens

• BARRY DAVIS

In his quest to photograph the ultra-Orthodox, Gil Cohen-Magen variously protected his equipment, shattered stereotypes – and forged some unlikely friendships

Any artist will tell you, it is always a thrill when he or she discovers a whole new world, but in the case of Gil Cohen-Magen that new, multi-faceted world was right on his doorstep all the time.

Cohen-Magen was a hard-nosed photographer with the Reuters news agency for some time before approaching his latest project, a wonderfully illuminating book entitled *Hassidic Courts*. The richly appointed tome is the result of Cohen-Magen and his wife Efrat's own efforts and was produced and published, and is being distributed, independently.

Going the solo road, naturally, leaves the artists having to deal with all sorts of logistical headaches and potential marketing and other land mines, but it also left Cohen-Magen with a great degree of freedom to point the book toward the sales channels of his choice.

"We aren't selling the book via the big chains, like Steimatzky and Tzomet Sefarim," says the photographer. "They offered me a very low percentage on sales, so we decided we'd manage without them."

That go-it-alone ethos is omnipresent throughout the whole process of creating *Hassidic Courts*, even though the initial impetus for the project came from unexpected, extra-territorial quarters.

"I was one of the first Israeli photographers to work for Reuters and they asked [me] to take pictures of Jewish customs ahead of Rosh Hashana," Cohen-Magen recalls, "so I

started spending time in Mea She'arim."

But there was a steep learning and adaptation curve to be negotiated before the photographer could start to bring home the chicken soup.

"I lived in [the Jerusalem neighborhood of] Kiryat Hayovel at the time and I began to take pictures, initially on the streets and from a distance."

Cohen-Magen had taken some rudimentary measures to blend in somewhat with the religious milieu.

"I put a kippa on, a crocheted one, but, of course, that was very different from the sort of kippot the haredim wear. In their eyes, it was tantamount to being completely secular."

As the work progressed, with Reuters delighted with the results, Cohen-Magen found himself being drawn into a very different world, a world that he had kept at arm's length and, at best, viewed with suspicion for most of his life. But the haredi community gradually began to unfold before him, and doors to previously cloistered places and customs began to open up to him and his cameras.

"I started to make some contacts in the community. I'm talking about youngsters – the older haredim didn't want anything to do with me."

Considering the obstacles Cohen-Magen had to overcome in his pursuit of images of some of the hidden practices and ways of life in Mea She'arim it is nothing short of miraculous that he managed to capture some of the remarkable photographs in *Hassidic Courts*.

"The teenagers there are more open," the photographer continues. "They are interested in what is going on in the



outside world. They use the Internet and are looking for excitement."

After a while, Cohen-Magen built a small network of "informers," including members of some notoriously anti-Zionist groups, and he began to obtain inside information on special events that were coming up, and learned about some of the lesser known religious rituals.

"I showed them some of the photos I took and they became quite enthusiastic about what I was doing, and some wanted to help me get to where the 'action' was. Some of them came from Hassidic sects like Toldot Aharon and [Toldot Aharon offshoot] Toldot Avraham Yitzhak. These were the groups that really interested me, because it is so difficult to get a glimpse of their way of life. You can't mingle with them, even if you are a secular Jew who became religious. Some put their hats in front of their faces when I tried to take shots of them."

New tactics were required for a fresh assault on the bastions of the more extreme Hassidic sects.

"I began wearing a white shirt and black suit. I changed to a black kippa and grew a bit of a beard," says Cohen-Magen. "I looked like a secular Jew who was becoming more Orthodox."

The change in appearance began to bear fruit.

"They didn't treat me with suspicion anymore and I began to blend in," he says.

One of the most dramatic pictures in the book is also one of the most intimate, and one of the riskiest shots Cohen-Magen took over the eight years he spent documenting life and tradition in Mea She'arim. It was taken in the Toldot Aharon synagogue, at the

hakafot shniot dance festivities at the end of Simhat Torah.

"I learned that the head rabbi did a dance on his own, in front of all the Hassidim and members of the congregation, at some stage of the *hakafot shniot*, but I didn't know exactly when."

Cohen-Magen also knew he wouldn't be able to get more than one snap, so he had to do his groundwork before the moment arrived.

"I got there at about seven o'clock, to get a good position," he recalls. "Everyone started dancing and it went on for about six hours until, finally, the rabbi started dancing on his own. I got my camera out and got the shot."

He was immediately evicted, and roughed up a bit, but he managed to hang on to his camera. Tellingly, there is an outsized sign in the top left hand corner of the picture cautioning attendees not to take pictures.

Cohen-Magen was less lucky on another occasion, when he snapped Hassidim at prayer holding *lulavim* (palm branches).

"I took a bit of a beating and they took one of my lenses from me," he says, "but they returned it to me the next day."

Sometimes a bit of chutzpah also went a long way.

"I'd heard about some rabbi who played the violin on one of the nights of Hanukkah," says Cohen-Magen, "but I didn't know who or when."

Eventually he got some information which led him to the admor (Hassidic court head) of the Kretchnif Hassidic community.

"I went to their center and just walked

into a room where a rabbi was teaching a class and asked, straight out, if they knew who the rabbi was."

He was summarily thrown out, but a youth he met in another part of the building told him the teacher was the rabbi he was looking for. Amazingly, a few days later he got an invitation to come to the admor's house, with his camera, to take a picture of the violin ceremony. The photo, like many others in *Hassidic Courts*, shows a lighter and softer side of Hassidism of which most secular Jews are completely unaware.

Besides the pictures of religious practices, from *malkot* (flagellation) on Yom Kippur Eve and weddings, there are wonderful photographs of Haredim at play and taking care of everyday chores – at segregated beaches, cycling past wheat fields in the Galilee or enjoying inebriated antics on Purim.

"It very much depends on how you approach them," observes Cohen-Magen. "Today I am friendly with all sorts of people from the community, and we have visited each others' homes. Before that I fed off the secular media, which only showed things like violent demonstrations in Mea She'arim and people throwing stones at cars on Shabbat. But that's only a small minority. Most Hassidim don't want anything to do with the extremists. They just want to live their lives."

Hassidic Courts is available at independent bookstores such as Meir Ludwig, Lichtenstein & Son and Yarden in Jerusalem, and Tolaat Sefarim and Sippur Pashut in Tel Aviv. For more information: www.eyehafakot.com

FROM LEFT: Hanukkah, home of the Admor of Kretchnif Hassidut, Mea She'arim, Jerusalem, 2006; 'hakafot shniot' at the end of Simhat Torah, Toldot Aharon Hassidut, Mea She'arim, Jerusalem, 2005; Purim, Batei Ungarin, Mea She'arim, Jerusalem, 2007.

(Photos: Courtesy of Gil Cohen-Magen)



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