

Although most **Meah Shearim** residents are camera-shy — holding their hands up to their faces when interlopers invade their privacy with the camera lens — Reuters photographer **Gil Cohen-Magen** has softened their hearts and gained access to their daily lives. The walls of Meah Shearim are high, yet for the last ten years, Gil has been let into the inner sanctums of some of the most insulated **chassidic courts**, creating a pictorial of life most Israelis can only speculate about

BY **Aryeh Ehrlich**
PHOTOS **Gil Cohen-Magen**

Black & White

in color...

It was the summer of 2001,

and Gil Cohen-Magen had recently been hired as Reuters news agency's first Israeli photographer. Now, before Rosh HaShanah, Reuters wanted a supply of photos showing Jewish religious and traditional life.

Gil, a native of Jerusalem's (then) secular Kiryat HaYovel neighborhood who had little contact with Orthodox Jews, first tried hunting for such pictures in the Machaneh Yehudah market, capturing images of market stalls where zucchinis and *esrogim* sat side by side. He found Jews choosing their *esrogim* the way most people select a watermelon, building lightweight succahs made of fabric, and performing *kaparos* at the Central Bus Station with a bundle of coins. But his instincts whispered that this was not the "tradition" that he was looking for. He understood that if he could succeed in crossing the impassable border into Meah Shearim, he might have some best-selling pictures in his hands.

So Gil decided to be brazen. Decked out in a bright red shirt, a pair of jeans, and white sneakers, he began exploring the alleyways of Meah Shearim. Every closed shutter behind which a local resident was lighting a Chanukah menorah drew his attention. Every sign warning that it was forbidden to take photographs heightened his level of motivation. Every closed function taking place in the inner courtyards of Meah Shearim whetted his appetite.

Well, how hard could it be to look religious and really get into the neighborhood? he thought. So he put on a crocheted yarmulke, but that didn't much ingratiate him to the locals, and his pictures still lacked the intimacy only an insider can get.

"I grew up in Jerusalem, just meters away from chareidi enclaves, yet here I was, 30 years old, and my concept of everything relating to the chareidi world was limited to religious coercion, modesty patrols, and blocking roads on Shabbat," he says. "Suddenly I was encountering something entirely different — a world revolving around G-d, Torah, a vibrant community life marked by acts of kindness and altruism."

Gil Cohen-Magen gradually developed connections with some of the local youth who were intrigued by his project, secretly aiding him in circumventing the barriers and teaching him how to lose himself in a crowd or among protesters. Gil understood that if he didn't want to stick out, he would have to dress in line with the scenery, and while he didn't grow *peyos* or don a long coat, he did grow a short beard and began to dress in black and white, topping his short haircut with a large black yarmulke.

Still, a photographer in their midst is anathema to many Meah Shearim residents, but with time, and with the recognition that Gil was sincere and that his interest was genuine, their attitude began to soften.

Throughout ten years of photography, his pictures manifested his pure intentions. It was obvious that he was not another scheming journalist in search of sensationalism or looking to blacken the neighborhood's reputation; he was curious, eager to learn and to capture the precious moments of Meah Shearim, hidden as they were behind media ignorance, for digital eternity. He wasn't looking for burning dumpsters, flying stones, or riots; he wanted the dancing flames of Chanukah candles, the building of succahs, and the redemptions of firstborn donkeys and other mitzvah events surrounded by festivity. Eventually Gil was ushered into the homes of rebbes and the inner chambers of prominent communal leaders where even a regular chassid was not permitted unrestricted access.

With time Gil's camera produced an impressive collection of award-winning pictures of the chareidi street. His now-famous photo of a chassidic man blocking the path of a bulldozer about to obliterate ancient graves, selected as Israel's entry in a prestigious worldwide picture-of-the-decade competition, took first prize.

"It symbolizes David and Goliath. The puny chareidi against the massive metal monster. The judges chose this as the picture of the decade for Israel. For America, they chose the destruction of the Twin Towers, and for Iraq they chose a combat picture. But Israel's picture was not of the intifada, or terror attacks, or the security wall or the Disengagement. It was a young chassid stopping a bulldozer. A chareidi victory."

His most recent international award winner was a picture he took this year, of a *yungerman* dragging pots to a soup kitchen.

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MULTIPLY LIKE FISH

The Sadigurer chassidim used to go to the Yarkon river for Tashlich, but due to the Rebbe's advanced age they have begun performing the ritual closer to home. "This was Tishrei two years ago," Gil explains. "The chassidim told me that they cook the fish after Tashlich, and the Rebbe conducts a *tisch* at which the cooked fish are served to him. All of the chassidim sat in the court and watched the Rebbe conduct Tashlich over a small pool containing three fish. I felt that my sins were being cast into that tiny pool, and I was certain that I too was experiencing the beginning of a good, sweet, and successful new year."



A BRACHAH IN THREE DIMENSIONS

A Karliner chassid gazing at the sun on Erev Pesach 5769 (2009), using special three-dimensional glasses to recite *bircas hachamah*. This picture was chosen to grace the cover of Gil's book and to capture its essence: "chareidim in the lens of the camera."

"The day before *bircas hachamah*," Gil relates, "I met a few Karlin-Stolin chassidim at the drawing of *mayim shelanu*. They asked where I was going to take pictures of *bircas hachamah*, a rare and brief *tefillah* that lasts only a few minutes. I was surprised that they wanted me to photograph them, but they explained that the *tefillah* was going to take place on the roof of the yeshiva in Ramot, and they wanted to document the rare mitzvah for their archives."



THE BURNED SIFREI TORAH

During Succos last year, the *aron kodesh* in the main Vizhnitzer shul of Bnei Brak was destroyed in a fire, consuming 11 *Sifrei Torah*. The halachah requires that a *Sefer Torah* that has been burned be given a funeral and buried, and so the scrolls were placed into earthenware containers wrapped in talleisim.

"I came and found a chilling scene," Gil recalls. "The containers were placed next to the *aron kodesh*, and in front of thousands of chassidim, a special, rare *tefillah* was recited, lasting several hours, in order to take leave of the scrolls and beg their forgiveness. People were crying as if a close relative had died."

Black and White

And now, even the secular can get a glimpse of what many consider the mystery of Meah Shearim — the human, spiritual, elevated side of this insulated chassidic world. After a decade devoted to capturing the community with his flash, Gil and his wife Efrat have created and self-published a richly appointed coffee-table tome entitled *Hassidic Courts*. The book, he says, has made the hard-nosed Reuters photojournalist into a goodwill ambassador for the chareidim.

Climbing the Walls In Gil Cohen-Magen's Moroccan-Persian family, tradition was valued, but not important enough for life changes. From childhood, he concluded that chareidim were a breed that he was better off not encountering. "I was hostile enough toward them, and I thought they were hostile toward me," he admits. "That's just how it was. I was brainwashed by the secular media. Like most secular Israelis, I had little respect for that sector of society."

Gil studied photography at Hadassah College and then in Canada, and worked for *Yediot Aharonot* before joining Reuters. In 2000, with the outbreak of the second intifada and the years of terrorism that ensued, Gil found himself at every bloody scene, every heart-wrenching funeral, every demonstration, Jewish or Palestinian. The Israelis — especially the right-wing — don't care too much for photographers. "They'll scream 'get out of here, you liars!'" Gil told the *Jerusalem Post* in an interview. "That's the difference between Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinians will open up the morgue refrigerators and take out the dead bodies just to show you what the 'Zionist occupiers' have done to them."

Photographers are pushy and aggressive; but everyone has a breaking point. Gil's came in late 2002 at Kibbutz Metzger, where a terrorist infiltrator shot dead five people — including Revital Ohayun and her two children as she tried to shield them from the terrorist's bullets. When Cohen-Magen arrived at the home that night, the father, Avi Ohayun, was just arriving as well.

"There was so much blood, so much blood," Gil told the *Jerusalem Post*. "He was absolutely torn to shreds; he had found his children's pacifiers and was sucking on them and weeping. My first child had just been born, and I just couldn't bear to see that. I couldn't manage to take a single picture in focus." The next day, Gil was assigned to cover the funerals, but he refused. He couldn't do it.

So when Reuters asked him to supply pictures of the spiritual side of Jewish life, it was, in a way, a balm for his spirit. He needed a break from the horror, blood, and gore that was making up Israeli news.

"When I was studying in Hadassah College on Rechov Haneviim, right on the border of Meah Shearim, my friends and I made several attempts to enter the neighborhood to shoot some photographs, but we always returned empty-handed, either because we were afraid or because we encountered the wrath of the local residents who didn't appreciate our presence. I recognized that there were very tall walls surrounding the neighborhood, and that I would have to climb over them one day, if I didn't want to get a bucket of garbage dumped on my head," he recalls.

"So I started doing some investigation, reading about things, learning about Chassidus and the Baal Shem Tov. When Reuters wanted pictures, I thought, 'What should I do? Should I go to a secular home and stage a display of tradition?' I knew that authentic Judaism was there, in Meah Shearim. I soon discovered that the stereotypes I grew up with were far from accurate. I found some teenagers who were willing to help me and give me tips. In fact, I called them 'tippers' because of the tips they gave me. They taught me about different events, instructed me how I should appear on the street, and gave me a few telephone numbers of 'news lines.' I became an avid customer and listened to every update so that I could find out about special events taking place in various courts. And I learned how to read a *pashkevil*."

His daily contact with the chareidi public had a deep impact on Gil. "You go to Meah Shearim before Succos and see the people involved in building succahs and all the tumult surrounding the purchase of the *arba minim*, and you say to yourself, 'What's going on? Am I not Jewish? Shouldn't I build a beautiful succah for myself and my children?' The first time I returned from a Meah Shearim photo shoot before Succos, I came home and announced, 'Kids, we're building a succah.' On Chanukah I said, 'Why should we light the Chanukah



BULLDOZED

This international award-winning picture from the summer of 2005 brings back memories of the demonstrations during road construction of the northern portion of Route 6, after ancient graves were discovered near Kibbutz Regavim. "During one of the protests, I caught a glimpse of a chassidic young man running toward a bulldozer that was flattening the ground. As the bulldozer was backing up, the man tried to stop it with his body, until people started screaming for the driver to stop. The chassid could have been crushed. The director of the international competition told me that out of all the pictures that were sent to him from Israel, he chose this one because it depicts the Jewish People's situation. Despite their weakness, they manage to stand up to weapons of destruction and overcome."



TOPPLED OVER

Without his even realizing it, this picture was one of Gil's greatest accomplishments. He didn't even know that he had photographed the great *gaon* Rav Meir Brandsdorfer *ztz"l*, sitting at the Purim *seudah* along with his family in the year 5767 (2007).

"All I knew is that people from the Toldos Avraham Yitzchak Chassidus would come to get a *brachah* from him and read the *megillah* with him.

"I was focusing on a father holding his son on his shoulders. Suddenly, while I was taking the picture, the father lost his balance due to his drunkenness and stumbled backward with his son. In the picture, you can see someone reaching out to take hold of the father as he falls, but he wasn't successful. You can see the father bent over backward, with the boy's legs in the air. Despite the chaos, the Rav was giving a *brachah*, and I think he didn't even notice what was going on behind him."

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HIS RIGHT HAND WILL EMBRACE ME

Rav Shmuel Moshe Kramer, one of the leaders of Breslov Chassidus in Jerusalem, on the night after Simchas Torah in the large Breslov shul in Meah Shearim.

"One of my chassidic friends invited me to take pictures at the special ceremony in Breslov," Gil recalls. "At one o'clock in the morning, they turn off the lights, sit down on the floor, and perform all sorts of stunts in the darkness. I arrived for the seventh *hakafah*, in which the Rav was dancing alone for half an hour clutching the *Sefer Torah*. It reminded me of the way one embraces a beloved infant."



DAYS OF THE WHEAT HARVEST

Gil relates, "For years, I've been photographing the various chassidic communities when they harvest the wheat for their matzos. At one such wheat harvest, which took place in a field on the outskirts of Mevo Choron in 2009, dozens of Vizhnitzer chassidim came, took off their black coats, donned straw hats, took out their scythes and sacks and began to cut the wheat. I found this image multilayered and beautiful".

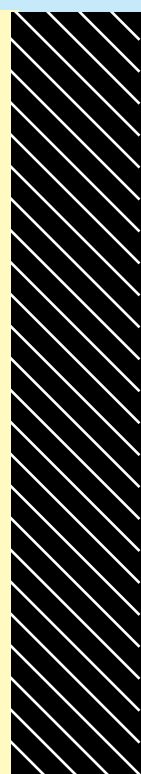


NO CHOMETZ HERE

If a chassid would ask to be present when the Toldos Avraham Yitzchak Rebbe performs the mitzvah of *bedikas chometz*, it's unlikely he'd be granted permission. So how did a complete stranger gain admittance to his home at that auspicious time?

"I came to the home of the Toldos Avraham Yitzchak Rebbe on Rechov Chevrat Shas in order to document his *bedikas chometz*," Gil relates innocently. "I stationed myself alongside a group of his close people, and when they received the signal to enter the Rebbe's home, I ran inside with them.

"I entered the living room, which was sparkling and spotless. When the Rebbe lit his candle and said the *brachah*, someone asked me to leave. I spotted the *rebbetzin* and asked her for permission to take a picture of the Rebbe. She wasn't quick to agree, but after I promised to give her the picture, she let me stay and click away."



THIS IS MY ATONEMENT

Scribbles on the wall, terrified chickens, a child scampering about at play, and mourning notices about the *petirah* of the Satmar Rebbe ztz"l — these are but a few of the images captured in this photo, taken on Erev Yom Kippur 5767 (2006).

Gil relates with his characteristic innocence that his "tippers" told him, "Many families in Meah Shearim perform the mitzvah of *kaparos* in their homes. The children go out to get the chickens and bring them home."



JUST KEEP SHABBOS

This is one of the only pictures to capture Rabbi Moshe Blum, a *mekubal* and *tzaddik* from the Batei Ungarin neighborhood of Jerusalem. He was celebrating the Purim *seudah* in his tiny home when Gil appeared in the doorway.

"I bumped into a family that was on its way to deliver *mishloach manos* and tried to follow them. After I was rebuffed twice by the father, the elderly man [Rabbi Moshe Blum] noticed me through his window and invited me into his home. I told him that I wanted to take a picture of him in his house, and he responded by asking me what the most important mitzvah of the day is.

"When I answered, 'to drink wine,' he agreed to let me photograph his family on condition that I would drink a cup of wine and try to keep Shabbos from then on. At first his family was alarmed by my very presence, but a little wine makes everyone more relaxed."

menorah with these simple colored candles?' I bought olive oil and wicks, just like the people I was photographing. On Erev Shabbat I told my wife, 'It's very important to me that we have candles. I want there to be an atmosphere of Shabbat; after all, we're Jewish.' I started to conduct a Shabbat table, exactly as I had seen at the *tischen*. I sent my children to an expensive private school that gives priority to traditional Jewish studies."

Gil began to view his subjects as much more than an anthropological study. "I discovered an amazing community, where materialism is deemphasized. I found a sense of family, a sense of community, people who were heavily involved in their families and in raising their children. Suddenly I understood that Jewish tradition went far beyond eating *sufganiyot* on Chanukah. As a Jew, my own mind was opened as a result of my camera. I understood that while we spent our time chasing after new cars or improved computers, the chareidim chased after a better *esrog* or a succah that was more *mehudar*."

Gil felt the greatest pull to the most insular communities, which eschew any communal involvement in areas in which *chilonim* are also involved, such as the Knesset and voting in elections. If he had been chareidi, he imagines, he would have been a chassid of Toldos Aharon. "I connected specifically to the closed circles, where they despise cameras. I saw that everything there was authentic. In the course of my documentary project, I was drawn to these communities like a bee to honey. I didn't even mind the signs forbidding photography. For the first time, I saw people who would not only refuse to pose for a camera, but would even detest it."

In recent years, Gil has become an ambassador for the chareidi community. "People tell me, 'You have destroyed all of our stereotypes about chareidim.' I explain to them what a *mitzvah tantz* is, what *birchas hachamah* is, and what Erev Yom Kippur *malkos* are. I feel it's my responsibility to douse the flames of estrangement and hatred."

Gil says the picture he's most proud of is a picture of the Toldos Aharon Rebbe during the seventh *hakafah* on the night after Simchas Torah. "I found out that there was a reporter for the British newspaper the *Guardian* who was doing a postdoctorate in anthropology on the Toldos Aharon Chassidus. I met with him and he told me that he had disguised himself as a Toldos Aharon chassid for a long time, and that is how he succeeded in doing his research.

"I asked him to show me his discoveries, and he took out an illustration of the Rebbe during the *hakafos*. I asked him why it was an illustration and not an actual photograph, and he told me that they do not permit photography there. The *Guardian* had provided him with an illustrator, just like in the British court system, where they don't permit photography in the courtroom. The illustrator also dressed up as a chassid and drew the picture from the bleachers. So I told myself, 'I'm going to get the picture.'

"I waited on the bleachers for six hours, thirsty and perspiring, without water or anything else, squashed between thousands of chassidim on the edge of a bench. I don't think I suffered as much while earning my beret in the IDF.

"When the climactic moment arrived, when the Rebbe took the *Sefer Torah* in his arms and began to dance with intense devotion, I took my camera out for five seconds, snapped a single picture, and that was it. When the young chassidim realized what I had done, they promptly ejected me. I got my share of bruises, but I had a picture." ■