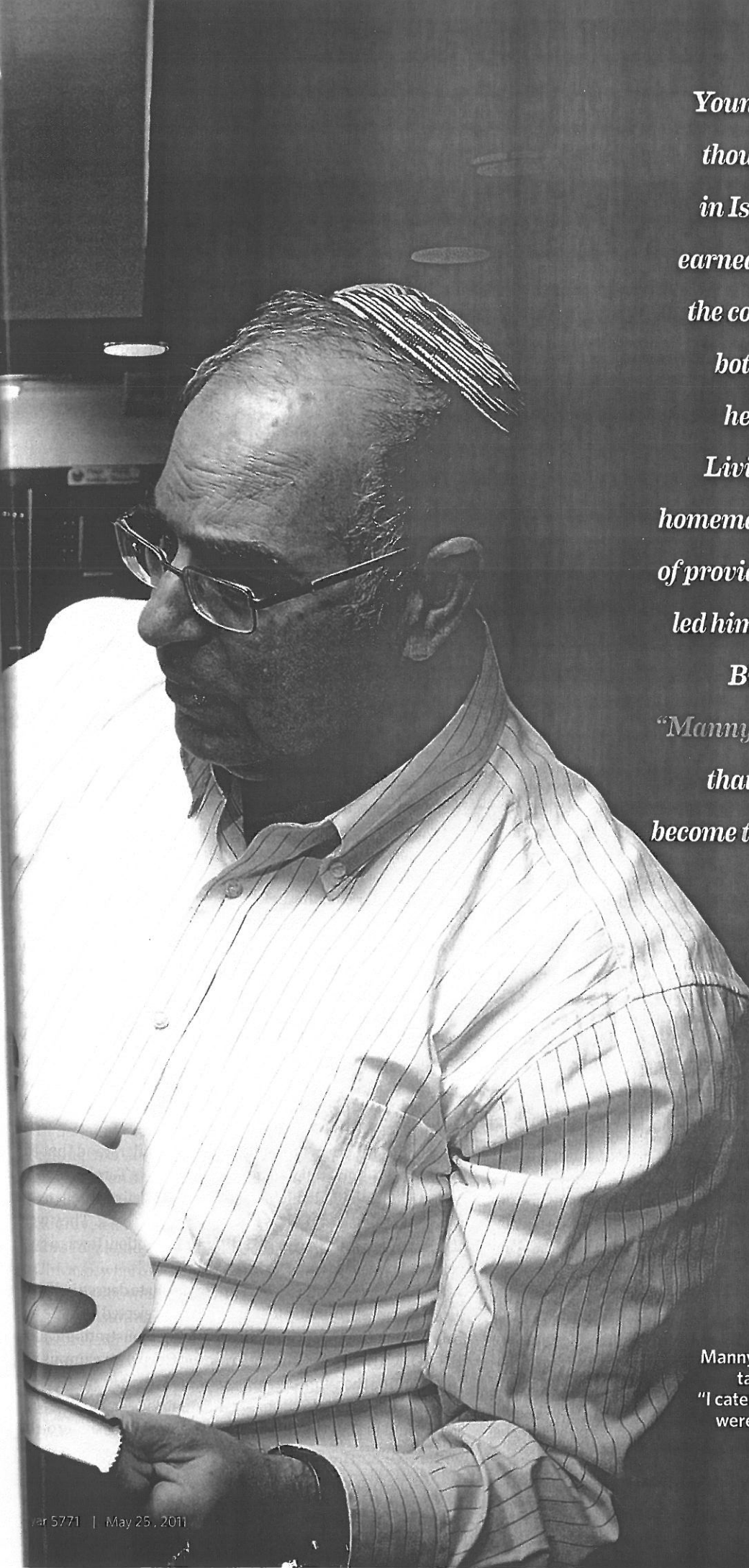


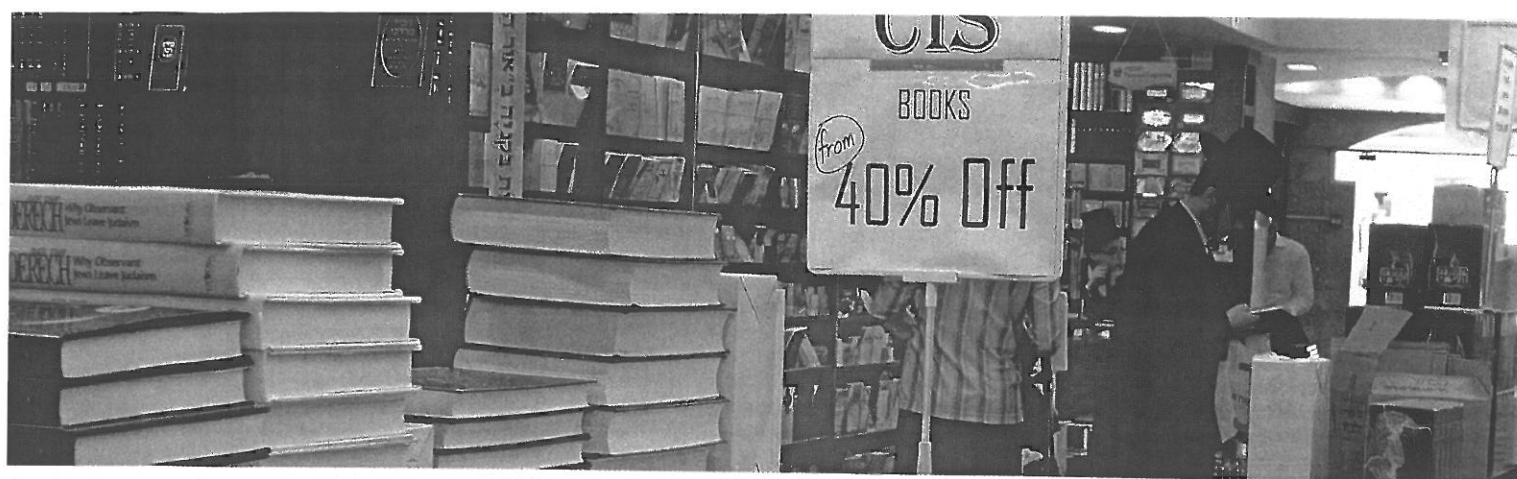
One for the Book



Young Manny Samuels thought he would retire in Israel with his newly earned fortune, but when the commodities market bottomed out in 1983, he was left penniless. Living on oranges and homemade falafel, a series of providential encounters led him to Rav Nachman Bulman ztz"l and to "Manny's" — the business that would eventually become the Anglo haven of Meah Shearim

BY Aryeh Magram
PHOTOS Ouria Tadmor

Manny Samuels says he made a tactical decision years ago: "I catered to the customers who were like me, same mentality, same culture"



Today, business is booming, but it all started out of the back of a stat

I was waiting for Manny Samuels, the owner of Manny's Bookstore, when a small cloud of American seminary girls drifted through the entrance of the store. "Israel's like, the best," one said to another, "but can I just tell you how much, like, you know, I love this store?"

Torah-observant Anglos who come to Israel, either to live or to visit, feel intuitively that Israel is their true home. But, as Chazal teach us, we have an innate love for our native countries. So while Anglos love Israel, they also occasionally long, at some level, for *chutz l'Aretz*. And that's what draws people to Manny's. You can speak English, find your friends, and feel a little like you're in Eichlers, without stepping out of Meah Shearim.

Today Manny Samuels is reaping the fruits of his labor. But the sun wasn't always shining on him, and as a struggling immigrant from Chicago, he went through years of privation before life turned around for him.

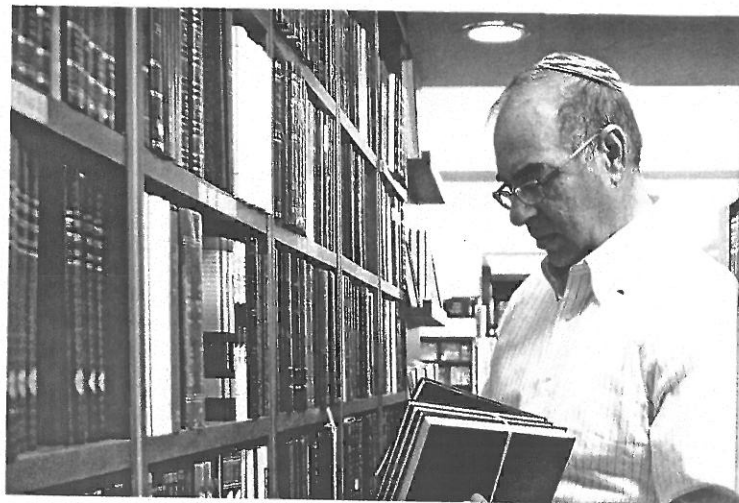
Stumbling Through the Market Manny (Menachem Mendel) Samuels, born in April 1949 in Chicago, Illinois, is a third-generation American whose parents were born in the United States — unlike those of most of his friends. "So my parents were more laid back," he says. Which partially explains why, although he attended a Jewish day school and a religious high school, "I did my own thing. Unfortunately, I used school more as a country club than as a religious experience. I wasn't particularly religious at the time."

In 1969, he left home to study sociology at the University of Illinois in Champagne. He still had an affinity for his Jewish roots, which he expressed as a leader of a Young Judea group. A discussion about Israel with this group was his first catalyst to visit the Land.

"Here I was, talking about Israel with these kids, and I'd never been there myself. I felt like I needed a break anyway, and so I decided to take off from my studies and spend a year in Israel." It was 1970. Manny was twenty-one.

He bounced around Israel for a while, spending some time on a kibbutz, touring, and visiting friends. In Arad, visiting a friend, he met his wife-to-be. They married and Manny and his new wife rented an apartment in Arad. He set out to find a job, stumbling through various positions, not yet really knowing where his niche in the working world was meant to be.

"I had about five or six different jobs at that time. I lost one every couple of weeks. I worked as a night guard. I worked building up the hotels at Yam HaMelach, taking cement bags with the Arabs off the truck. When it came lunchtime, I didn't know if I should sit on the floor with the Arabs or sit with the Israelis in the shack, so I sat on the floor, but they dragged me into the



shack. Then I moved up the rungs to be trained as a carpenter. After a few days on the job, I stepped on a nail. That ended my career as a carpenter.

"I worked at a garage, training to be an auto mechanic. They handed me an oil pan to clean. You're supposed to just dip it into a rinse and put it back, but I scrubbed it clean and brought it back twenty minutes later. It was the cleanest oil pan they'd ever had at that garage. That and a few other mishaps ended my career as an auto mechanic."

After over a year of failed career starts in Israel, Manny and his wife decided to go back to the US so that he could finish his degree. But being in Israel had nourished a certain spiritual hunger. "We had felt very Jewish in Israel, although we weren't religious. We were sitting in a 'kosher-style' restaurant in Chicago. Here we were about to have our first child. The secular life had nothing to offer us; no spiritual or intellectual stimulation. We said 'Let's try to be religious.'"

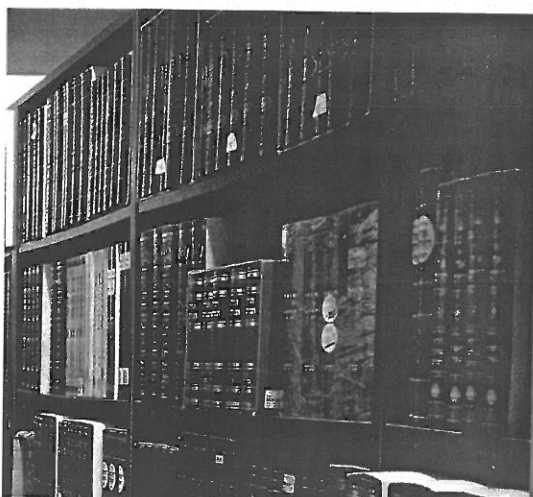
Religious life wasn't foreign to him; he understood that the engine driving any religious commitment was Torah learning, and so Manny joined a night kollel. "I was learning three nights a week, and I had my old high-school *chevrah* back. They were still learning, while I'd gone in a different direction. It was a good practical bonus to having returned to Torah."

Meanwhile, he completed an undergraduate degree in liberal arts and applied to graduate school, but was rejected because he'd been arrested in the turbulent sixties for demonstrating against the ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) on campus and interrupting their military exercises.

Little did Manny know to what extent the academic world's loss would lead to the Jewish world's gain. With a baby on the way, Manny was forced to try his hand in business. His father



gon



“I did my own thing. Unfortunately, I used school more as a country club than as a religious experience. I wasn't particularly religious at the time”

was a salesman, a manufacturer's representative for Liberty Jeans of Birmingham, Alabama. He gave Manny a bag of samples and said, “Go out with this.” Manny was out of samples on the very first day. “This is fun,” he said. “I can do this.” Many years later, that tiny seed of success, planted in the American Midwest, would bear fruit in the holy city of Jerusalem.

For the next eleven years, Manny sold clothing to retailers in Chicago. “I had samples of men's jeans. I'd go out to these ma-and-pa stores — little neighborhood stores in Chicago. A little chatting here and there, and I'd convince them that they should see my line. They'd see the merchandise and order it.”

But by the early 1980s, things were beginning to change in the United States. The mom-and-pop stores were being bought up by national chains operating in the malls. Neither Manny, nor the company he was working for, had any experience dealing with national chains. Manny weighed the effort involved with breaking into the conglomerates against the risks involved in jumping out on his own, and decided to enter into his own independent business.

He traveled to fashion shows in New York, where he'd find the best deals, buy in bulk, and have the merchandise shipped to Chicago, where he'd sell it to retail stores. His overhead was low, because he was working out of his basement, and so Manny prospered, gaining valuable business experience, which would serve him later.

Time to Move Meanwhile, Manny Samuels was continuing his Torah learning, and his desire to move to Eretz Yisrael was growing stronger. He'd built up a large nest egg, which was invested in various commodities. It would provide Manny

and his family with the financial security to finally actualize the dream of aliyah. In 1983, having no concrete idea of what he'd do in Israel, but feeling secure with his investments, Manny and his family made the commitment. It was time to move up to the Holy Land.

But that year, the US commodities market showed itself to be no more than a pawn in the Hand of the Grand Master, when it made a freakish twist, shaking off even the most stable commodities and sending them plummeting. The price of Manny's holdings dropped like a stone, and Manny Samuels, now an official Israeli citizen, with a wife and five kids relying on him, was left penniless.

“It was a very difficult time. We were living in the absorption center in Beer Sheva, with no income. We ate bread, oranges, and falafel for six months. Bread was cheap. We'd make falafel in the house, and an Arab taxi from Gaza with crates of oranges would pull up in front of the *mercuz klitah* every day. I'd be the first one out there.

“I thought I'd go into the clothing business in Israel, but back then, Israeli fashion for men was shorts and T-shirts. I said, ‘You can't make much money like that,’ so I took a job as a security guard at the dorms of Ben-Gurion University. I had been making \$50,000 per year in the US, which was an extraordinary amount in those days, and now I was making the equivalent of \$2.40 per hour.”

Still, the Samuels family never considered returning to the United States.

“I always felt optimistic. Things would turn around. Tomorrow would be better. I had a good feeling about it.”

Then someone told them about a growing community in Migdal HaEmek in the Jezreel Valley, run by Rav Nachman Bulman *ztz"l*. Rav Bulman invited them for a Shabbos. Being taken with the *rav* and feeling comfortable with the community, they soon made arrangements to move. But *parnassah* remained the lingering question.

The Book Business “In Migdal HaEmek, Rav Bulman made a *shidduch* between me and Yechiel Bortz, a South African. Yechiel had lots of connections, and I had the experience in business. Rav Bulman thought it would be a good match. On the first day out, we went up to the Ohr Somayach yeshivah in Zichron Yaakov. We set out the books and the guys pounced on them. It was our first day out. I said to myself, ‘This looks like it's going to be a good business.’”

Manny and Yechiel would travel the two and a half hours each week to Jerusalem because they wanted to target the yeshivos

One for the Books

there, and the English-speaking *bochurim*. They began working out of Yechiel's station wagon, though Manny's parents would later lend him money to buy a van. The pair would stay overnight in Jerusalem and do the yeshivah circuit for two days, traveling back to Migdal HaEmek, where they opened a storage facility for their stock.

A year and a half later, a fundamental difference in the way Yechiel and Manny envisioned the business brought them before Rav Bulman. A split was inevitable, and Manny suggested a way to divide up the partnership in which he would move his family to Jerusalem, while Yechiel would retain the store in Migdal HaEmek and work the yeshivos further north. The business split was just that, and the two men are still good friends.

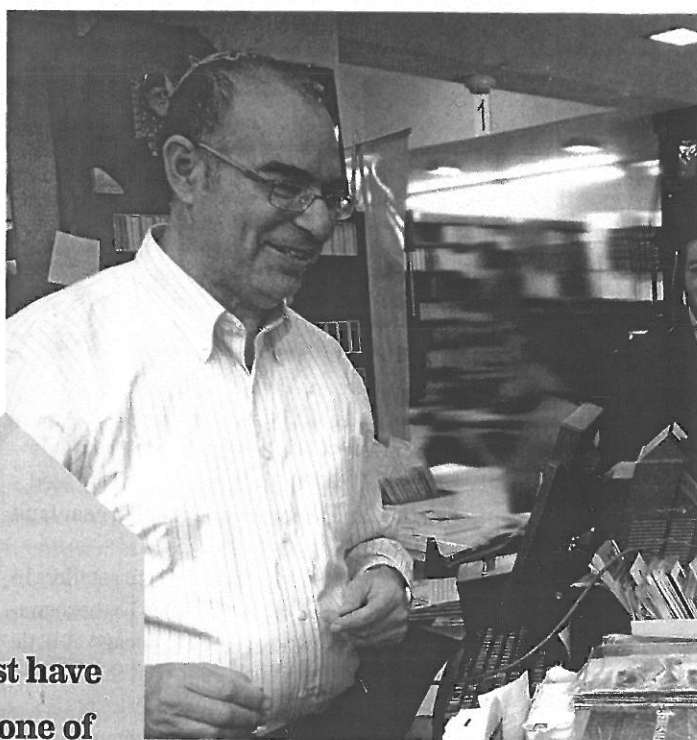
For the next nine years, Manny's face became a familiar one on the steps and courtyards of Jerusalem's yeshivos. He visited a dozen yeshivos regularly, including Torah Ore, Kol Torah, Mercaz HaTorah, Brovenders (Hamihtar), Kol Yaakov, Rav Kuschelovsky's, Mercaz HaRav, Sha'alvim, Mercaz HaTorah, and several Sephardic yeshivos.

"My oldest son, Dovid, joined me in the business and we would take the van around to the yeshivos. We had about 20 percent English and 80 percent Hebrew seforim, which is pretty much how the breakdown has remained throughout. At that point, I hadn't begun to sell to the seminaries. We had boards in the car with horse legs and yellow plastic cartons. I'd set up outside the *beis medrash* or dining room and the *bochurim* would come. We got to know each other pretty well. I've also always loved playing sports, so when the American guys were playing baseball or football during the break, I would join them.

"The yeshivah Neve Tzion was known for accepting high school graduates from difficult backgrounds with minimal Torah education. The first week I went there, the boys just wanted magazines. But I saw their transformation from week to week; the yeshivah eventually became one of my best stops. I even formed a softball team with these guys and we competed in the Israeli Softball League.

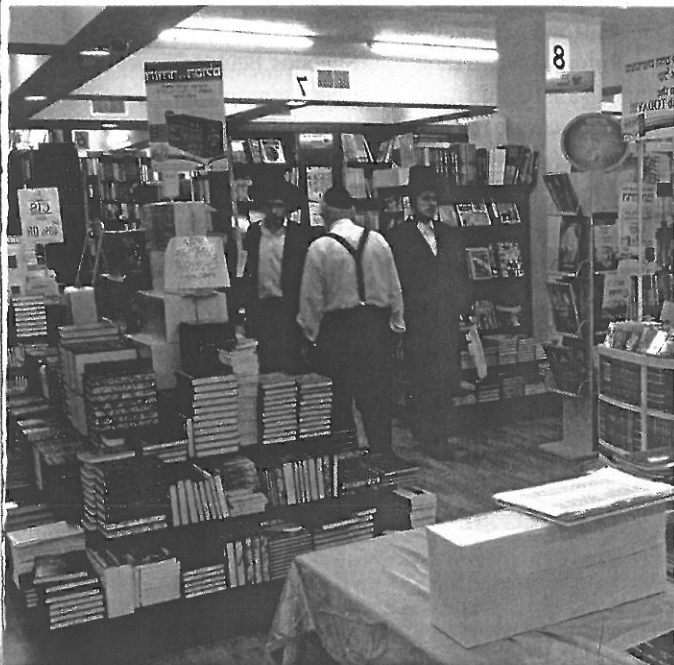
"I had five kids to support, and I had to work hard," Manny says. "It was a lot of schlepping of these twenty-five-kilo crates in and out of the van — not just once a day, but twice, sometimes three times a day. I remember one cold winter night. I was selling in the hallway of Mercaz HaRav. I was unshaven and very tired and half asleep, and sitting on the stool near the seforim while the guys were eating supper. It must have been one of the last stops of the day, and I must have really looked terrible, because a young kid came by and put *tzedakah* in my palm."

In 1993, after nearly a decade of traveling around the country selling his wares, it was time to settle down. Manny's oldest son, Dovid, heard about a seventeen-meter bookstore at 15



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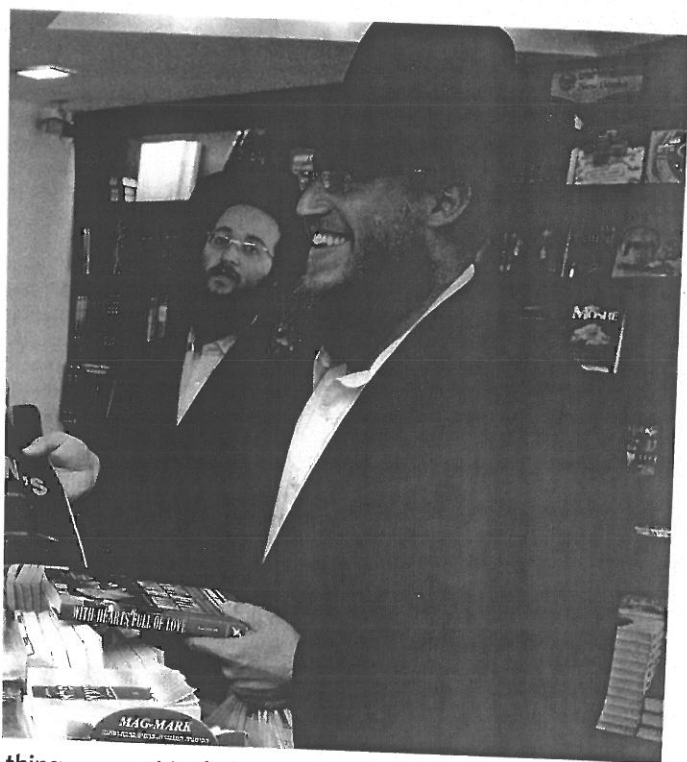


Meah Shearim owned by people of the Bucharian community. They owned another store a few blocks away in the Bucharian neighborhood and weren't happy with their location in Meah Shearim. Manny saw his opportunity and quickly made a deal. And so, "Manny's Books" was born.

"There are already so many seforim stores in Meah Shearim," a friend advised Manny back then. "The last thing you want to do is open up another one."

But the store took off from day one. "Aside from the yeshivos, I also attracted neighborhood clients, tourists, and — biggest of all — seminary girls."

Manny learned that one of the strong points of the business is

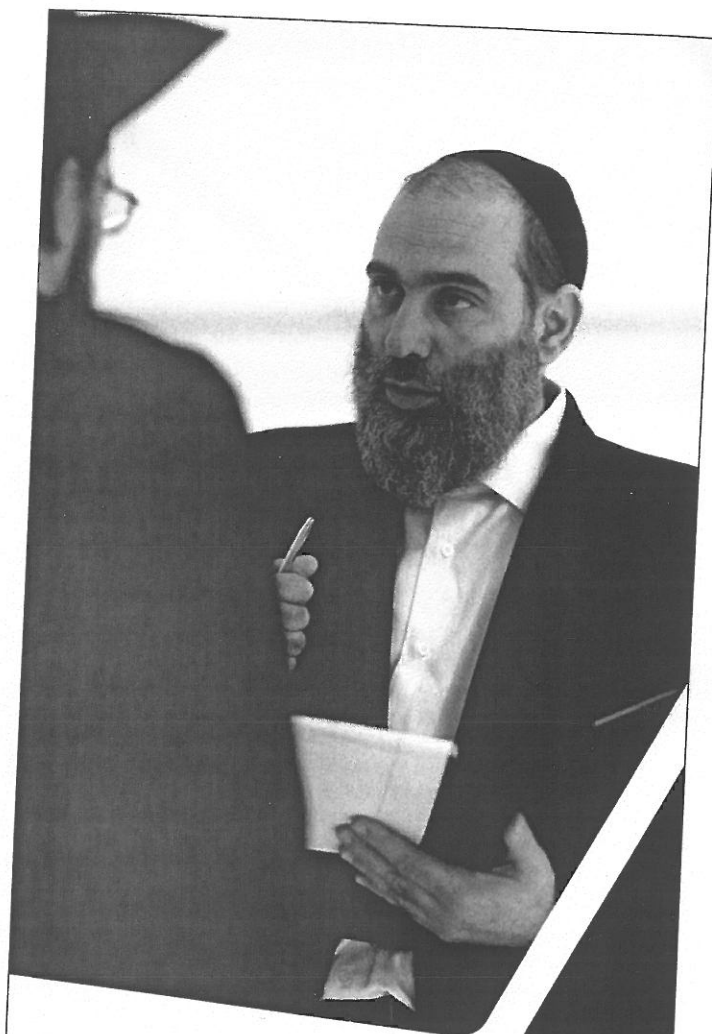


thing you want to do is open another one"

that a new group of seminary girls and yeshivah guys come every year. There is a basic list of seforim, as well as Gemaras, that they need, and so each year brings a new crop.

"The quality of the books, and the physical appearance of the books, has gotten much better. Almost everything that's been used has been reprinted. When I first got into the business, there was only one *Mishnah Berurah*. Now there are more than thirty — and more on the way. The same applies to *Shas*, *Shulchan Aruch*, and *Mikraos Gedolos*."

The book business was booming, and space was getting tight. After another year in the cramped store, Manny negotiated with a neighbor and expanded into his store for another seventeen meters. But even double the original size wasn't large enough for the store's growing needs. Then, about ten years ago, the landlord of the next building approached Manny: "I have a large area for you right next door, but there's no street entrance, just a hallway." After



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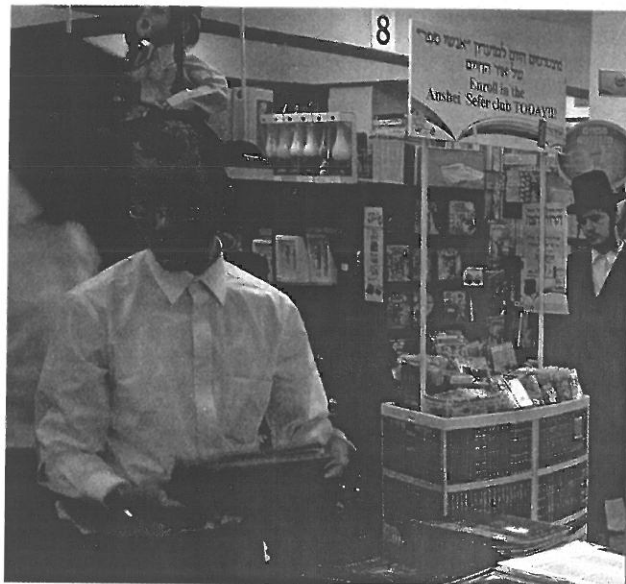
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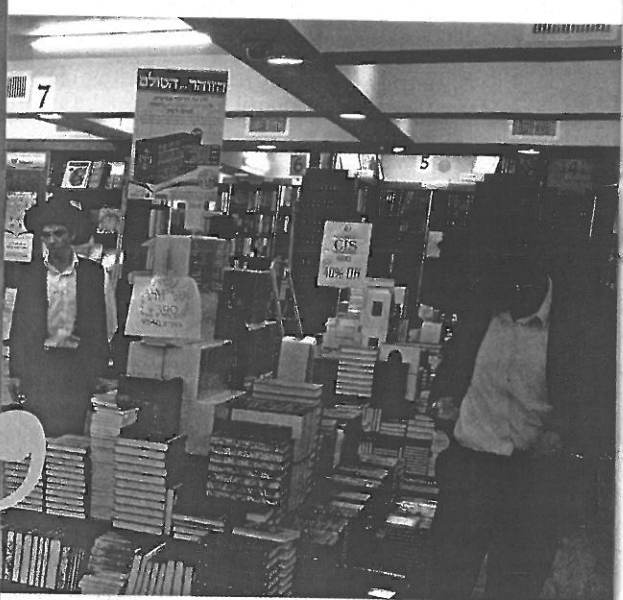
One for the Books



“My motto was always to stay competitive in prices, give good customer service, and know whatever you can about the seforim in your store”



Occasional street protests don't phase Manny, and don't



much negotiation, Manny decided to keep what he had and also add on the bigger area next door, with the promise from the landlord that within two years, Manny would also get a street entrance. The landlord was good for his word, and two years later, Manny's was the largest store in Israel at over 380 square meters.

“My motto was always to stay competitive in prices, give good customer service, and know whatever you can about the seforim in your store.”

As successful as the store was, there were aspects of the physical structure he wasn't happy with, and so, when the supermarket at 2 Chabakuk closed in 2008, Manny was interested. This time, however — as retirement age was on the horizon, he wanted to share some of the burden of starting over in a new location, so he approached the Ohr HaChayim book chain, which sells seforim all over Israel and Europe.

“We've been open at the new location since March 2009. We went for it and haven't regretted it since.”

What's the Attraction? “Although I always had Israeli clientele,” Manny says, “the tactical decision I made early on was to cater to the customers who were like me. I went for the people with the same mentality, culture, and background — the people I understood better. We still have many happy Israeli customers, and as the years have gone by, this has increased. In the new location, we also have many more chassidim coming into the store. But I depend on the Anglos for my main customer base, not on the native Israelis.”

Manny says his best years have been since his second wife, Marlene, joined the business, taking care of bookkeeping and accounting. “My wife has brought blessing to the business — its most rapid growth has been in the last ten years since she's come

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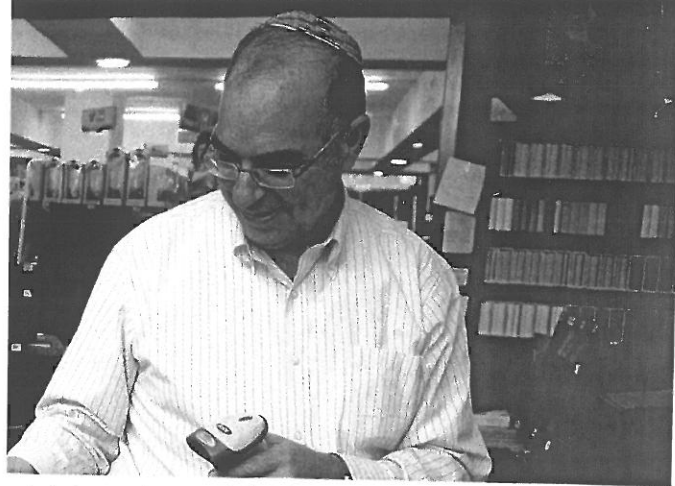
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to take away too much business either

on board. I also have, baruch Hashem, three sons who are also making their *parnassah* from the seforim business."

Manny's customers range from the secular to the *chassidishe*, including yarmulkes of every size and color. Manny says he isn't interested in making a political statement or drawing lines in the sand. He's interested in selling seforim, and he therefore stocks books from the entire Orthodox Jewish spectrum. Books about Zionism sit on the shelf next to books against Zionism; rock-based Jewish music sits alongside CDs whose producers decry the use of rock 'n' roll in the making of Jewish music; *chassidishe* seforim peacefully share shelf space with their *misnagdishe* counterparts.

Never Without Controversy Although Anglos rave about the new store, not everyone is equally thrilled. Some of the natives of Meah Shearim, not wanting their neighborhood to become any more of a tourist attraction than it already is, and displeased with some of the books that Manny's sells, have long been vocalizing their distress. In their own words, they are "attempting to protect the sanctity of our neighborhood."

One source of friction is that many Jews who are either at the very beginning of their commitment to Torah, or are not holding at the same level of modesty as the residents, are drawn to the area by the bookstore. The residents relay their opinions on wall posters called *pashkevillim*.

"At the old location," Manny explains, "the entrance to the store was small, and so it never turned into a problem, but since we're now in the middle of the street, we're right in front of them."

"A few weeks ago, there was a protest outside," said Ari Leitner of Manchester, a regular at Manny's. "I do this thing called 'English updates,' which is a text message to over 100 British guys here. Someone told me about [the protest] and I sent a text that there was a protest outside Manny's. We came out and started making a circle dance, cheering on Manny's — 'Manny's, Manny's, Manny's; three cheers for Manny's.'"

"Come on," one customer asked while watching the demonstration outside the store, "tell me the truth. How much did you guys pay to stage all this publicity?"

Do people ever come in to ask Manny advice about breaking into the book business? "Occasionally I meet people who tell me they want to open up a bookstore; I ask them some questions until I can get a feel for whether the person can succeed. But I wouldn't recommend going into the book business these days. The big guys have taken over, and there's not much room for the small guys to come in anymore. I left my business in the States because of the national chains. That's exactly what's happening now in the seforim business."

I ask Manny if he has any advice for aspiring businessmen out there.

"One thing I would tell people is that you can't do things alone. If you want to succeed in business, you have to realize you need other people. I'm not such a great businessman. It's more that I have a way with people and mazel; but part of being successful is knowing that what you can't do, you have to find someone to do it. No one can make it in big business on his own."

Manny attributes his success to a brachah from Rav Bulman. "He said, 'I know you and I know you're going to succeed.'"

Manny exudes an optimism that doesn't attempt at sophistication. But don't let the innocence fool you. Behind those sparkling blue eyes lies a detailed catalog of every one of the 45,000 books in the store, including a basic description of the book, its location, and price.

"Ask Manny," a service rep says after looking on the computer for an obscure title. "He's better than this machine." And, as much as he downplays the part, Manny has a keen instinct for what's going to fly off the shelves and what won't.

"I've been selling seforim for over 25 years," Manny says, "and my greatest pleasure is when customers tell me how they remember when I came selling at their yeshivah from the back of my van. That's how long they've known me."

Because no matter how many years have passed, Manny still knows what it's like to feel the security of the place you come from, but to have the courage to move on to where you need to be. And Manny's life is the essence of that touchstone — a man who once lost everything and subsisted on falafel balls and oranges, who is living proof that although things might be difficult today, "Tomorrow will be better." •

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