Jerusalem's secular revival

A new pluralistic movement is gaining traction in the capital

By Renee Ghert-Zand

MIRIAM ALSTER / FLASH 90

Stepping into The First Station,
Jerusalem's renovated old train station

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For many, Jerusalem's newly restored train station is a sign that the city is getting back on track. Located adjacent to the trendy German Colony and Baka neighborhoods, and the bustling Emek Refaim Street, and a center for food, culture, and entertainment, The First Station, as it is called, has a good chance of being successful no matter what. But what's bringing it both intense attention and strong attendance is the fact that it is open on the Sabbath—not something that's business as usual in Jerusalem.

It hasn't been business as usual; that is, until now. Those who have been working for the past five years (since before the last mayoral elections that brought the non-Haredi Nir Barkat to power) to restore religious pluralism, tolerance and openness to an increasingly ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem, see The First Station as an important sign that their efforts are paying off.

Others, although pleased that The First Station is a popular destination, are wary of declaring it or other such achievements as signals that large parts of the Orthodox community have internalized "the hard but essential price of Jewish sovereignty," as Yossi Klein Halevi, senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, wrote recently in The Jerusalem Post – namely "the need to respect the primacy of democratic rules in the public space, even if that means restricting how one's notion of Jewish law should govern that space."

"Who will come to shout, 'Shabbos!' when thousands of people are here?" Rabbi Uri Ayalon counters. Ayalon is CEO of Hatnua Hayerushalmit (The Jerusalem Movement), an NGO of religious and non-religious Jerusalemites working to improve the quality of life for all of the city's residents and to combat extremism and discrimination in the public sphere.

Ayalon speaks to *The Jerusalem Report* while sitting one fine summer morning at one of the cafés at The First Station. It happens to be Landwer Café, a non-kosher establishment that stays open on Shabbat. All around are visitors who have come to shop, eat at one of the station's seven restaurants and food outlets, view on-site exhibitions, check out the children's area, or partake in one of the many activities offered at the station, like Segway tours, concerts and zumba dance classes.

An open air, musical Kabbalat Shabbat service on Friday evening draws an average of 400 people, and according to spokesperson Noa Berger, all aspects of The First Station remain open and active on Friday nights and Saturdays, save for the kosher dining establishments and the retail shops.

> THE FIRST STATION CAME AFTER MUCH WORK WAS DONE TO CHANGE HOW PEOPLE PERCEIVE THE WHOLE SHABBAT ISSUE

With all the buzz, it is hard to imagine that the building stood empty and boarded up for 15 years, until its renovation was completed last April. Even before its official closing in 1998, the train station hadn't been very busy, with demand for the rail route between Jaffa and Jerusalem having drastically fallen off in the latter part of the 20th century.

BUILT 120 years ago and inspired by 19th century European and Templar architecture, Jerusalem's original train station consisted of a two-story building with one-story wings on either side of it. It was almost identical to Jaffa's train station, only built with different materials. Jerusalem-born Sephardi banker and businessman Joseph Navon managed to undertake the project after earlier attempts

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(Left and center) Weekday fair at The First Station; (above) CEO of Hatnua Hayerushalmit Rabbi Uri Ayalon (left) and Hitorerut Chairman Ofer Berkovitch

by archeologist Dr. Conrad Schick and philanthropist Moses Montefiore failed. With the arrival of the first train from Jaffa on September 26, 1892, the travel time between the two cities was reduced to three hours, from the 10 it had taken to cover the distance by donkey or camel.

While the station is again operational and open almost 24/7, the train tracks leading to and from it now serve a different purpose. Today, they are covered up by a park with walking and biking paths extending 7 km south of the station, all the way to Malha and the new train station there, including a section that goes through Beit Safafa, an Arab neighborhood in southern Jerusalem.

"This connecting of Beit Safafa and Emek Refaim is revolutionary," says Ayalon, who is buoyed to see Jerusalemites of all backgrounds and religious persuasions and levels of observance mingling at the station, including on Saturdays.

"We're in a much better place, but there is a lot more work to do," Ofer Berkovitch, chairman of the Hitorerut (Awakening) movement that has a seat on the city council (Berkovitch and his colleague, Meirav Cohen, have shared the seat) tells The Report. Berkovitch, 30, and a group of other young people started Hitorerut in 2008 to ensure a Zionist, pluralistic and creative future for Jerusalem. "We were no longer willing to stand on the sidelines," he says of the city's situation at that time.

"The year 2007 [the end of Haredi Mayor Uri Lupolianski's tenure] was the lowest point in the city," Ayalon agrees. "We were ready to pack and leave, but we woke up," he says, referring not only to Hatnua Hayerushalmit, but also to the thousands of other individuals and organizations that are part of Yeru-Shalem (Whole Jerusalem), a coalition working to empower Jerusalem's civil society.

PLURALISTIC OBSERVANCE of Shabbat is only one focus for Berkovitch and the rest of the Hitorerut team, which is gearing up, with the national Yesh Atid political party's endorsement, for municipal elections on October 22. "We have teams working on 15 different issues, from housing to education to employment," Berkovitch says.

But there is no question that religious pluralism is a major issue for Berkovitch, who also happens to be the strategic and content manager for The First Station, charged with connecting the venue to life in the city. "You can't avoid religious pluralism issues," he says.

Hitorerut has been involved in getting the government to allocate land equally for building Haredi and non-Haredi institutions in neighborhoods like Ramat Sharett and Kiryat Hayovel. It also supported Barkat's successful efforts to keep the Mamilla parking garages, just outside the Old City's Jaffa Gate, open on Shabbat, as well as keeping the Intel plant in Jerusalem running seven days a week.

"It would be a huge achievement if we can also get the soon-to-be-open Cinema City movie multiplex above the National Government Center parking lot opened on Friday nights and Saturdays," Berkovitch says. He voted against the mayor, who had agreed to keep it closed. "There is a lack of places open on Shabbat, and Cinema City isn't even in a residential neighborhood," the city council member points out. "It is a greater desecration of the Sabbath to make people risk their lives on the roads travelling to other cities to see movies. There has been an appeal to the High Court of Justice, the Finance Minister is sympathetic, and we are hopeful," he says. If the court does not rescind the Shabbat closing order, Hitorerut plans on pursuing legal action against the municipality and the Finance Ministry.

Berkovitch, who led several large protests over Cinema City this year, was especially

A weekday free concert pulls in a crowd at the open area of The First Station

happy to see some ultra-Orthodox Jews among the supporters of religious freedom. "We know we will always wake up to Haredim living in this city, so it's important to moderate their leadership," he says.

In the meantime, Hatnua Hayerushalmit has been focusing on fighting the disappearance of women from publicly displayed advertisements, and also on improving the quality of life of young families. Over the past three years, it has held some 100 events and activities for families on Shabbat in parks and open spaces throughout Jerusalem. "In the winters, we've opened the community centers for these activities," Ayalon explains. "We broke the taboo."

"To me, The First Station is a milestone. Opening community centers on Shabbat was a real tipping point," agrees city council member Rachel Azaria, the religiously observant head of the Yerushalmim (Jerusalemites) party. "The First Station came after a lot of work was done to change how people perceive the whole Shabbat issue," Azaria tells The Report. "Back in the 1990s, the religious-secular conflict was all about Shabbat, but the issue is no longer about whether you observe Shabbat or not. People are starting to think about Shabbat differently.

"Orthodox people would not have come to a place like The First Station in the past. It's a natural result of the pluralism inroads that have been made, the shift in mindset," she adds. "Shabbat is no longer the criteria for 'us' versus 'them.'"

Tourists and new immigrants are noticing the change. "Jerusalem is getting better and better, and the station is an example of this," says David Moyal, a recent immigrant from Toronto who lives minutes away in the Yemin Moshe neighborhood. "Personally, I observe Shabbat, but I am happy to see restaurants there open on Shabbat. I'm glad that the opportunity is there for families who aren't observant of the Sabbath."

Sara Shapiro-Plevan was visiting the city from New York this summer and attended the station's Friday night service. "The energy was delightful, positive, and frankly inspiring… The beauty of the experience for me was that there was space for every person who wanted to participate, in whatever way they were able to do so – there was no rigidity," she recalls. "I know that there were Jews there who would identify themselves as Shabbat observant, yet they were perfectly comfortable *davening* alongside an open café. Additionally, it was scheduled so that it began and ended well before Shabbat began so that all those who wanted to welcome Shabbat in a more traditional way could do so later."

THE OLD DELAPIDATED TRAIN STATION HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED AND IS OPEN ALMOST 24/7

HER EXPERIENCE radically changed her perception of Shabbat in Jerusalem. "I tend to see prayer experiences in Jerusalem as monolithic; those who go to shul on Shabbat

The restored station is a popular center for food, culture and entertainment

are those who identify themselves as religious. This destroyed that image for me, in an overwhelmingly positive way."

Shapiro-Plevan was surprised to discover that the station is open on Shabbat, but believes that it makes sense given that it is an enclosed space that doesn't maintain any visibility to the street. "Now there's a center of culture… art, family activities and more, that chooses not to ignore that it is Shabbat but to reinterpret Shabbat in a way that is more closely aligned to the real lives and celebrations of the non-Orthodox. It's a way to remember Shabbat, but not necessarily observe it in the traditional sense," she says.

Karen Brunwasser, deputy director of the Jerusalem Season of Culture, a summer showcase of Jerusalem's flourishing arts scene and contemporary cultural treasures, believes one of the upsides of this progress is that more secular people are doing Jewish things, like attending the service at the station.

JSOC promotes and supports artists and organizations that are open on Shabbat, and schedules its own events on Shabbat when necessary, while avoiding it when possible for the sake of inclusiveness. "It's always a negotiation, but we are not motivated by not wanting to upset the Haredim," Brunwasser emphasizes.

Longtime Jerusalem resident Karen Lakin is regretfully more pessimistic about what The First Station means for the capital. It seems to be too good to be true, and she is waiting for the other shoe to drop. "I'm afraid the station won't continue to stay open on Shabbat," she says. "I worry about the underlying violence [by Haredim against non-religious Jews and non-Jews] and fracture in the city – about the multiplying of these ugly events and the police's inability to deal with it," she shares. "In spite of the lovely cosmetic changes and progress in the courts, I still feel, very sadly, that we are moving backwards."

Ayalon doesn't expect to do any backpedalling. "We've made the breakthrough on the Shabbat issue. You can do things here on Shabbat and the sky will not fall on your head," he says. "There has not been a single demonstration by Haredim against any of the activities we have held on Shabbat. This city is much more tolerant than people think, and there are more moderate Haredim than people think," he adds.

Berkovitch believes young people and artists who are choosing to return to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv understand this. He is encouraged by a rise in the last two years in the enrollment of first graders in the city's non-religious public schools, as well as statistics indicating that slightly over one-third of Jerusalem's new residents are what he defines as "Zionist," meaning secular, traditional or moderate in religious outlook.

Ayalon has confidence in his fellow pluralistically minded citizens. "The main fight is not about the Haredim. It's about the mistaken image and false assumptions of this city," he says. "We are talking values instead of apologetics now, and there has been a radical change as a result.

"Israeli society doesn't realize it," Ayalon says of the momentum that is underway in Jerusalem. As he sees, it the rest of Israel hasn't caught on that the train has left the station. ■