The Bookstores That Taught Me Jerusalem



I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Moving to Israel meant leaving behind a particular Sunday ritual—getting lost in the Strand, exploring the small bookstores around Manhattan, living in a city full of English books.

Here in Jerusalem, it's not so easy to find quality, up-to-date English works. The primary Israeli bookstore chains have an English section, but it's often full of the generic books I tend not to seek out. I will admit, I still often rely on ordering from Amazon and waiting for a family member to bring it to Israel, but I've also been trying to expand my book repertoire around the city.

I did some exploring and found a few remarkable used bookstores, all with wide-ranging English sections. I love secondhand books because they tell stories beyond the words inside of them. They're dusty, yellow, and worn around the edges—they have been well loved. Sitting in the (usually musty) store, they await being passed on to new, curious readers.

I want to take you along on my own search—a few Jerusalem stores, old and charming and vital, that deserve more love than they get.

HaSalon — Emek Refaim St. 21



HaSalon is warm, well lit, and doesn’t have any labels on its shelves—which is a feature, not a bug. The idea is for the space to feel like your living room at home (hence the name of the store).



This store sells a mix of secondhand and new books, most of which are in Hebrew, but my favorite spot is the little corner dedicated to English works. This corner may be small, but it is mighty—secondhand fiction, poetry, antique works, children’s books, nonfiction, classics.



As a rule of thumb, every shelf of new books must begin on the left with a title authored by a woman—a quiet commitment to something the store believes in. They host events promoting local writers and smaller publishers. The store has cozy couches for you to pick up a book on a sun-dappled afternoon.



While I was interviewing Benny, the bookseller who kindly showed me around the store, he was approached by a woman, a regular at the bookstore, who wanted to discuss with him a book he had recommended to her. That’s the spirit of the place—personal, unhurried, the kind of bookshop where the seller remembers what he recommended you last time.



I picked up a secondhand copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*, a Virginia Woolf classic!

The Book Gallery — Shatz St. 6



With more than 100,000 books in their catalogue, The Book Gallery is unlike any secondhand bookstore I know. Buried underneath Shatz St. in the heart of Jerusalem, their collection spans literally everything—philosophy, art, history, Zionism, and more—and several languages.



They have an amazing collection of antique and rare books, which I couldn’t even see because they’re stored elsewhere in the city for preservation.



The collection at the Book Gallery feels endless

The store is a family business, but they’re struggling to stay open. People read less nowadays, tourism has dropped significantly due to the war, and city taxes are taking their toll. They used to host evenings at the bookstore, making themselves into a unique cultural center.



If you can, give this place a visit the next time you're in Jerusalem. Postcards spill out of boxes downstairs. Art lines the walls between shelves. Every surface holds something worth pausing over—and the books go on further than you'd expect in a basement in the center of town.

Sefer ve Sefel — Yaavetz St. 2



Founded in the early ’80s, Sefer ve Sefel—which means “book and mug”—used to be exactly what it sounds like: a bookstore and coffeehouse combined. They haven’t been a coffee shop for a long time, but they kept the name. They sell mostly used English books, mostly fiction, but there’s a cute little loft with a pretty wide range of nonfiction as well.



Michael, the bookseller who showed me around the store, explained that their clientele spans the Anglo Jerusalem community. Some of their customers have aged, and cannot walk up the steep stairs to get to the bookstore, so Michael brings them their books. Some of their customers are yeshiva guys ditching afternoon seder, and some are Hasidim who want to work on their English. Located right off of Yafo St., it’s a quiet little haven, the kind of place that, once you know about it, you’ll keep coming back to.

Honorable Mention: Jerusalem’s Street Libraries

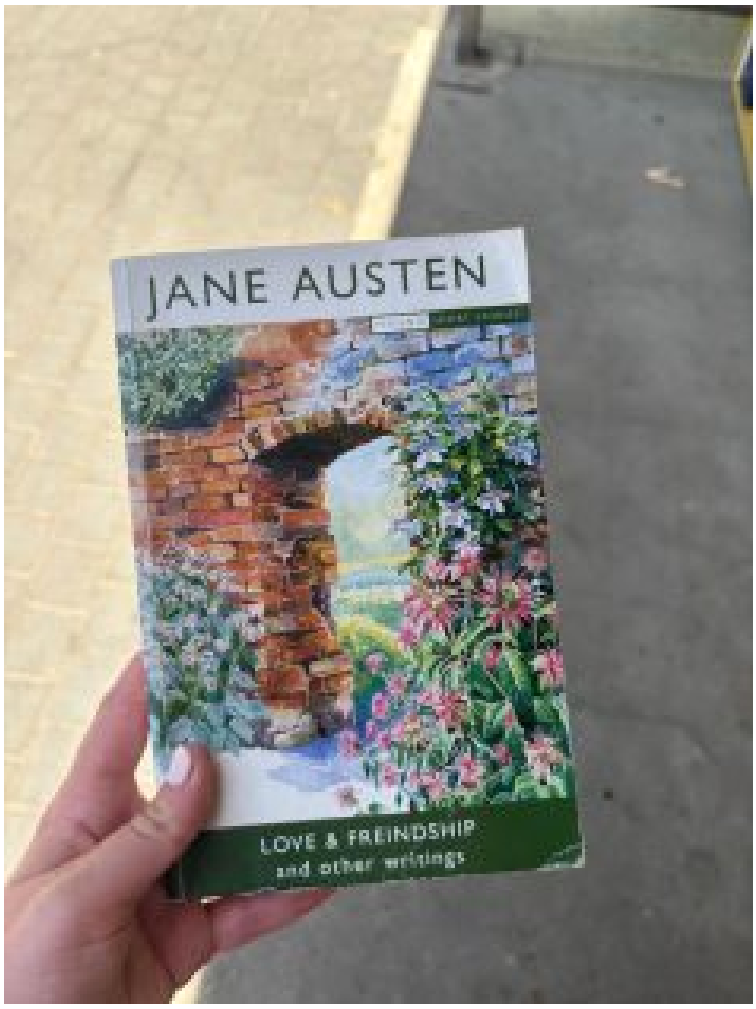


One of Jerusalem's underrated features is its street libraries—old bus stations that have been refurbished into free public libraries.

You can find these in a few spots throughout the city; I like to visit the one right off the Mesila in the Baka neighborhood. The idea is simple: leave a book, take a book. I love it not just for what it represents, but for the crowd it draws—booklovers of every stripe, hunting for something new wherever they can find it. You might see a whole set of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, or collected essays by Jane Austen, or French self-help books.



To me, the street libraries are sort of emblematic of what Jerusalem is all about. Wherever you go in this city—whether it's the shuk, the Kotel, or even a street library in Baka—you'll find yourself in the company of people you'd never otherwise meet. My quest to find good books has turned into something else entirely: an education in the range and variety of Jewish life in this city.



To no one’s surprise, this is what I picked up at the street library!