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In the beginning, was the word...

Grab a dictionary
and get to know the
Jerusalem Scrabble Club

• By WENDY ELLIMAN

For many of the old-timers, it is their weekly anti-Alzheimer's fix. For the younger crowd, it registers along the scale of "clearing your mind" all the way up to "a burning passion."

Tuesday night is Scrabble night in Jerusalem. In a city of only 830,000, where English is the fourth language (trailing Hebrew, Arabic and Russian), dozens come together each week to play, as they have since the club's first session on April 5, 1983. In those almost 33 years, some 2,000 people have played close to 113,000 games at the Jerusalem Scrabble Club, scoring a total of some 80 million points.

"I started coming to the Scrabble Club a few months after my aliya," says New York-born computer techie (PCGUY) Paul Serkin. "I like the game and wanted to meet people – and I haven't been disappointed. The club's camaraderie, the shared celebrations and holidays, as well as the joy of Scrabble, make for an all-round good time for all."

David Spolter, a patent lawyer and a serial club champion who lives in Beit Shemesh, came with loftier ambitions.

"In all seriousness, I started out aiming to be the best player in the world! That's still my goal, though now I know it can never be. I come to the club to challenge myself, to try to play three perfect games – though I'm lucky if even one of them is perfect. And along the way, I got to know some wonderful people and gained some of the closest relationships in my life," he says.

The birth of the club is an often-told tale. Sam Orbaum, a 26-year-old North American Scrabble Association player (and later a *Jerusalem Post* columnist), left Montreal for Israel in the spring of 1982 and discovered that the Jewish state lacked organized Scrabble. He arranged a tournament in Tiberias to test Israel's Scrabble waters. It was well attended, and those who came – foremost among them, British-born Sara Schachter, who was to play in the club for 30 years until her death at age 97 – urged weekly meetings. The Jerusalem club's first session met in the old Windmill Hotel. Orbaum expected no more than 15 people. Forty-five showed up that first week, and 65 the second week. The Jerusalem Scrabble Club was launched. It became the world's largest Scrabble club and the flagship of Orbaum's Israel Scrabble Players Association, which at its peak comprised 11 clubs countrywide.

"I've played Scrabble since my preteens and was running weekly meets for half a dozen couples on

Moshav Elazar [in the Etzion Bloc] where I live," says Zev Kesselman, a computer programmer from the Bronx and frequent club champ, whose cadre of Elazar families still comes to the club. "But none of us knew anything about an international club framework. That was all Sam. He put the Jerusalem club on the world Scrabble map."

While Orbaum's end goal was, in his words, "to be beaten at the club" (that is, to mentor players to his level), he never regarded Scrabble as elitist. The club was open to all, from players aiming to be best in the world, to those who yawn at things like rack management, strategy and high-probability words, to neophytes who had never sat in front of a Scrabble board. Orbaum died of lymphoma in 2002 at age 46, but the club – renamed the Sam Orbaum Jerusalem Scrabble Club – remains true to his founding vision and still warmly welcomes all comers.

The participants are diverse not only in their Scrabble skills, says club director David Litke, a former Chicagoan, who has alternated with Roger Friedland in leading the club since Orbaum's death.

"The club is a social harbor for every sort of Jerusalemite," he says. "Our youngest player was aged eight and our oldest was 97. Players are religious and secular, left wing and right wing, but we all have Scrabble in common, and that's what matters here."

While the majority of the club's regulars come from Jerusalem, there is a sprinkling of regulars from Beit Shemesh, Modi'in, Ra'anana, Petah Tikva and the Etzion Bloc. While most players are from English-speaking countries, others come from Europe and as far afield as Nigeria, Gambia and the Philippines. Back in the day, there were even Palestinians at its tables.

Veteran player Roz Grossman recounts arranging her tiles to spell ANWAR. "I showed my rack to a nurse from Nazareth and two young men from east Jerusalem, saying, 'A man of peace.' 'Before he went to pieces,' sourly punned one of the two men. And in my ear came Sam's voice, 'Just play Scrabble and stop with the [bleeping] politics!'"

Palestinians were in the club's past by the time the Gulf War broke out in 1991. In the war's first weeks, more than 50 players continued turning up at the club – playing in gas masks, many with eyeglasses perched on top – until the Home Front Command shut down the club for the duration.

Israelis have found their place in the club, too, alongside Anglos, Asians and Africans. Ruth Ogdan is one.

"I've learned not only Scrabble but also to be on my best Anglo-Saxon behavior!" she smiles.



Jerusalem Scrabble Club members make it a practice not to 'moan about horrible tiles.' (Jerusalem Scrabble Club)

She details this behavior in three rules that have not made it into the Scrabble manual: "First," she says, "bear it bravely when you lose, and don't moan about your horrible tiles. Second, don't gloat when you win; sympathize with your opponent, without patronizing. And third, don't complain when paired against a top player. It's an honor!"

True to its founding principles, the club's embrace remains wide, from the competitive enthusiasts to the laid-back social players.

"For me," says Toronto-born actress Sara Rosenbaum, "Scrabble is an addiction, somewhere in the moderate to severe range."

For software architect Josh Goldberg, who has "loved words and all forms of wordplay for as long as I can remember, Scrabble at the club is about anagramming, creativity, strategy and learning in a friendly, competitive and ultimately addictive manner."

Scottish-born *Jerusalem Post* columnist Judy Montagu says she is "not a 'club person,' but I really enjoy being part of an organized framework in which a congenial group of people who love the game as I do meet regularly to get their 'fix.'"

And for Pamela Loyal, the club is "as much a social club as a games club, where I've made wonderful friendships along the way. It's a truly pluralistic community, embracing young and old, men and women, religious and non-religious. We celebrate with one another in times of joy and support one another in times of sorrow. My family knows that Tuesday nights are dedicated to Scrabble, and no one would dare to make any other arrangements for me on that night of the week!"

Learn more about the Jerusalem Scrabble Club at jsc.org.il.