

A Young Jewish Community Flourishes In Philadelphia

By Baruch Lytle
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On any given Friday morning, Kvn Shapiro heads over to the Old City Jewish Arts Center (JAC) in downtown Philadelphia, unlocks the doors to receive the day's art lovers and potential buyers, and then prepares Shabbos boxes to be delivered to Jewish families around the neighborhood. Like many city dwellers, Shapiro doesn't own a car, but doesn't mind – he is perfectly happy to deliver the 16 or so packages on his list to each of their designated families by foot.

"I was very disillusioned after being active at a [local Reform synagogue] for four years," Shapiro told *The Jewish Press*. "I couldn't stand it. It was as Jewish as ham." Four years ago, Shapiro decided to embrace his Jewish identity, and during that time he tried to fit into a Conservative synagogue as well. Ultimately, Shapiro found his place in a world that at first glance seemed an unlikely fit for a free-spirited textile designer with a colorful personality who had worked with some of the biggest names in the clothing industry.

"I actually walked down here on a Friday night because my friend was having an art opening. And all these black hats were standing outside and they said to me, 'Hi, are you looking for us?' And I said, 'No.'"

That's when Shapiro noticed the sign above the gallery. "I was, like, 'Wow, I follow you guys on Facebook!'" The men in black hats encouraged Shapiro to come in, but instead, he promised to return at 9 p.m., after his friend's art show and when the JAC would be serving Shabbos dinner. Being naturally shy, he searched out the crowded room for the men who had invited him. "I sat down with them, and I was fed a full-course Shabbos meal. And the rabbi – I didn't realize who he was at first because he was so young – chatted my ear off all night. I just thought, 'These people are super friendly.'"

Come for the Art, Stay for the Rest

It took a moment for Shapiro to realize he'd stepped into the world of Orthodox Jewry, or that the art gallery was the inspiration of a group called Chabad. "The funny thing is," Shapiro recalled, "a friend of mine suggested that I would like Chabad, but I was too embarrassed to tell her I didn't know what Chabad was. So this turned out to be my introduction into the Orthodox world of *Yiddishkeit*."

Shapiro's story is not unique – in fact, it's the norm for the young, Orthodox community that has sprouted up in just a few years in downtown Philadelphia. Called Center City, it is routinely ranked by travel magazines as one of the trendiest and most livable downtowns in America. Philadelphia was, in fact, America's first big city, and eventually became the birthplace of the nation, signed into existence by 56 men inside Independence Hall, not far from JAC in the historic part of Center City known as "Old City." Today, Old City is home to fashion boutiques, coffee shops, the National Museum of American Jewish History, historical landmarks like the Liberty Bell, and of course, art galleries.

"Old City is like the Philly version of SoHo in New York," Rabbi Zalman Wirberg, director of JAC, told *The Jewish Press*. Just like in SoHo, on the first Friday of every month, known as First Fridays, all the local art galleries open their doors to the public for a few hours in unified fashion. The long-time attraction draws thousands of



Rabbi Zalman Wirberg, director of JAC. (Courtesy)

art lovers to Old City's cobblestone streets once a month. "The thought was, how can we connect with Jews on a typical Friday not necessarily running to *shul* – or maybe even running away from *shul* – and create a Shabbos experience that will touch their soul?"

Wirberg said JAC adopted the slogan "Come for the art, and stay for the rest." On its trial opening night, the gallery's founding rabbi stood by the door and counted how many people came in



Outside view of the Jewish Arts Center. (Photo by Baruch Lytle/JP)

to view the art, and once he'd counted 1,000 heads he decided that JAC was here to stay. "Not all the art is for sale," said Wirberg. "But you can view the gallery and hear the artists talk about their creations and their inspiration. Then, the rabbi will get up and give out wine to everyone who's there and he'll make *kiddush*. And all of a sudden people don't know what hit them – they're in an art gallery and they heard *kiddush* on a Friday night. And then the crowd leaves, and a new crowd comes in every 25-30 minutes, and we have another *kiddush* waiting for them."

While JAC opens its doors and Shabbos table to anyone who walks in, Jewish or non-Jewish (Wirberg pointed out the all-welcome, open-door

policy provides an invaluable service in shaping outsiders' perceptions of Jews and combating anti-Semitism), ultimately JAC's passion is for the disconnected Jew. "A lot of the people who come here – especially the artists and [from] the art world – are such spiritual seekers. There are so many souls out there screaming for spirituality to fill their void, and they just aren't sure, physically, how to get it."

Sandwiched between four prominent universities with heavy Jewish enrollment – the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University to its west, Temple University to its north, and Jefferson University and the University of the Arts at its core – the neighborhood was somewhat destined to be a place where young Jewish professionals, ranging from unaffiliated to religious but with progressive attitudes, would settle, if only the right visionaries would come along and make it both sustainable and attractive enough for them to want to stay. To the credit of Chabad – and Divine Providence – such visionaries did come, and even worked together to build what is today a thriving community.

A Modern Shul for Young Professionals

"I moved to Center City with my wife Miriam in 2006 for an organization called Etz Chaim, a *kiruv* group," Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch told *The Jewish Press*. When asked why he decided to take on Center City in the first place, Hirsch said, "My *rosh yeshiva*, HaRav Yaakov Weinberg, *zt"l*, of Ner Yisrael, encouraged us to dedicate our lives to serving [all levels of] the Jewish community." Hirsch said when he arrived in Center City they began teaching classes on relationship building, and up to 100 young people would show up regularly. On Shabbos, Hirsch would lead a small group that would meet if ten people would commit to ensuring a *minyan*. That *minyan* grew to 50 people, then 100, and moved several times to bigger spaces. Today, the Modern Orthodox shul, named Mekor Habracha, has over 150 member families. "Our congregation spans all age groups, but graduate students, young professionals, and young families comprise over half our membership community," Hirsch said, "and I'm proud to say that we have played a vital role in advancing Jewish life in Center City."

When Chesky Kopel's wife, Talya, was accepted to medical school at Jefferson University, they decided to move to Philly. "My wife and I are originally from New York and were living in Washington Heights," Kopel, a lawyer, 31, told *The Jewish Press*. He said they considered living in one of the larger, more traditional Orthodox communities, such as Rhawnhurst on the northeast side of Philly or Lower Merion in the suburbs, but decided they wanted to find a more urban community. "So, we did some research and spoke to some people who lived in Center City." After visiting, Kopel said, "we were surprised with how friendly the community was, and we were amazed how often we were getting invited to Shabbos meals – perhaps even more than in New York." Today the Kopels have a three-year-old daughter named Lev, and are considering buying their first home in the community.

A New Community with Historic Ties

Center City and its neighboring South Philly

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