

Lytle

Continued from p.18

were once home to over 150 row house *shuls* (a row house is Philly's version of an urban townhouse) by the 1930s. In these small, ornate neighborhood *shuls*, the rabbi usually lived upstairs, while services were held on the main floor. Now only a couple row house *shuls* remain. One is called The Little Shul. "The Little Shul is literally like stepping back in time," said Shapiro, who now serves as its director of community engagement. "We're getting a lot of young couples. During Covid we had to close completely because the *shul* was too small for social distancing. We just recently started having services again in July."

"We're famous for our Shabbos lunch," he added.



Inside the Little shul. (Photo by Kvn Shapiro)

The other row house *shul*, a Chabad *shul* ironically named Vilna Shul, is completing its transformation into Center City's first and only *mikveh*. "Vilna has always been an interesting *shul*," said Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, who serves as president of Chabad on Campus International. Rabbi Schmidt is also a musician, and plays lead guitar at JAC and around Philly with his rock group *The Baal Shem Tov Band*. "When we first came to downtown more than 30 years ago, a lot of Jews were moving out of the city. But Vilna was always very open. People would go to different *shuls* – even non-Orthodox *shuls* – and after they would come to us for *kiddush* and a *farbrengen*."

"But the fact is," Schmidt continued, "there is no *mikveh* in Center City and this is a very big problem." Thus came the decision to give up his congregation's home to remedy the problem. "It wasn't easy to do this," Schmidt said, taking a moment to gather his emotions. He gave a resolute chuckle and added, "But that's the *halacha*: When there is no *mikveh*, the *Chofetz Chaim* says you make the *shul* into a *mikveh*." Schmidt said he expects the *mikveh*, which has both men's and women's accommodations, as well as a place to *toivel* dishes, to be ready "as soon as G-d finishes sending us the rain." As for the *mikveh*'s importance, he said, "I can't underplay it, not only to attract people to our community, but to strengthen our community's observance and to give people the opportunity to do this *mitzvah* which has been a cornerstone of Judaism since forever."

Mamash!

"We both came from non-religious homes and we met at Oberlin College, a very alternative atmosphere in Ohio," said Rabbi Doniel Grodnitzky of Mamash! Chabad, speaking about his and his wife, Reuvena Leah's, journey to Center City. "We started becoming religious together while in college, so after we graduated I went to yeshiva and became a rabbi." Grodnitzky and his *rebbetzin* initially planned to return to Oberlin and open a Chabad House, but after those plans fell through, Rabbi Schmidt convinced them there was a need



Entrance to Mamash! Chabad. (Photo by Baruch Lytle/JP)

among the students in Center City.

"Starting out, we didn't know anyone in the city so I was just meeting people on the street. We started with 5-10 people and it grew so much that before Covid we were averaging 60-80 people every Friday night." On Friday theme nights, he said, that number regularly propelled to 150-180 people, filling up the dining room, basement, backyard, and upper floors of their home.

Today Mamash! draws an eclectic crowd of



Rabbi Doniel Grodnitzky, of Mamash! Chabad, and family. (Courtesy)

young Jews in their 20s and 30s ranging from traditional *Shomer Shabbos* backgrounds to those having their first Shabbos ever. It recently opened its new community center, a three million dollar project that boasts a large dining hall, commercial kitchen, *beis midrash*, conference space, and a full kosher wine shop – Philly's first. "It's interesting to me, because it clearly is a special and unique place," Grodnitzky said of Center City. "I was just on the phone with a young professional and he said 'Philly's still my favorite place I've ever lived' – and he's lived all over. A lot of people say that."

Rebounding After Covid

Even before Covid, The Chevra, the venue that is the heart and soul of Jewish nightlife in Center City, faced a major crisis. In 2019, a fire tore through the multi-level social club. "We were really challenged being without our incredible space," Leon Vinocur, vice president and co-founder of The Chevra, told *The Jewish Press*. "It had everything from an art gallery, a coffeehouse, and a social event space. But once the pandemic hit, it started a whole other level of challenges."

Still, Vinocur said it presented a unique opportunity for The Chevra as its leaders worked to stay connected with its members and meet their needs during the pandemic. "What we learned is young people in particular were feeling isolated and alone. Families have kids, but young singles are stuck in an apartment by themselves with just their phones and computers – there was no social interaction. A lot of our participants were really looking for ways to still connect, and in a lot of cases they were really hurting."

"There was really no alternative but to attempt to do what we do virtually," said Malkiel Nadel, Chevra's managing director. The goal was to keep



From left, Malkiel Nadel and Jon Erlbaum (who work at the Chevra) with participant Ian Seyler. (Photo by Baruch Lytle/JP)

everyone connected and having fun in a virtual world, so the Chevra took their music and entertainment and educational events online. "People were having drinks [but now from the comfort of their homes]," he explained.

Nadel calls The Chevra a "large net" concept. Its singles events not only provide a place for young Jews to meet, they also give the caring staff and in-house rabbis a chance to be a part of the process of the participants growing closer to Hashem. Intermixed in the itinerary of live music gatherings are a lineup of Torah-based classes, group trips to Israel, and Shabbatons. "We've really taken this strange time to rebuild our foundation," said Nadel, "so that when things get back to normal, we'll be even stronger than we were beforehand."

A Place for Everyone

Historic shul Bnai Abraham has seen the entire span of Jewish life in Center City, from its historic past to its new vibrant present. On a Wednesday in July it held a celebratory gathering to commemorate its return to in-person services. The crowd was



Nissim Black being interviewed by Steve Dickstein at Bnai Abraham. (Photo by Baruch Lytle/JP)

filled with Jews, both young and old, and despite Covid, the mood was festive and optimistic. "We have a new appreciation for priorities – what is important in our lives," Rabbi Yochanon Goldman told the crowd of about 100 attendees. "We don't take things for granted anymore."

On hand as the guest speaker for the evening was the popular Jewish rapper Nissim Black, visiting from Israel, who shared about overcoming his own personal challenges in creating his music, starting a family, and being accepted in a community where he is unique. Afterwards, he graciously accepted questions from the audience. When the event was over Black shared his thoughts about the night – thoughts that, incredibly, embodied the spirit of the Center City community in its fullest.

"Absolutely amazing," he told *The Jewish Press*. "It's the way to come back [from Covid] – a loving, warm, diverse and accepting community. I didn't feel intimidated to be myself."