The other row house shul, a Chabad shul: 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.”

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

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 rebbeztein 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 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 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.”

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

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,” said Malkiel Nadel, who is 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.”

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