

Life West of the Hudson

By Daniel Alter

For a large segment of Orthodox Jews in America, “out of town” used to refer to any community west of the Hudson. Times have changed. By necessity, many of these same Jews are being forced to move out of New York and other large centers of Jewish life.

The reason behind this slow but steady migration: the lack of affordable housing. Most Orthodox families understandably want to live in an area with a high concentration of Orthodox Jews. Unfortunately, such areas are limited to a few large cities. As the Orthodox population grows and the demand for housing increases, housing

prices begin to skyrocket.

Last year, I met Daniel Schwartz, a young married man from Los Angeles, when he came to Denver for a visit and ended up staying with us for Shabbat. Daniel described how many young couples who live in Los Angeles and have several children are trapped in two-bedroom apartments. The only families who can afford to buy a house in the area are either those who are used to living in debt or those whose parents are supporting them. (A three-bedroom house in Los Angeles’ Pico-Robertson area can go for \$1 million!)

Daniel and his friends had begun discussing the possibility of moving—as a group—to another part of the country where the cost of living is more affordable. A few months later Daniel came for Shabbat again—this time with his wife and child. On his

third trip here, Daniel bought a house in the heart of Denver’s Orthodox neighborhood for a fraction of what it would have cost in Los Angeles.

During a recent visit to Los Angeles, I met with Daniel’s friends to discuss life in Denver. A number of them are looking to make pilot trips to our city to further explore the possibility of moving here. Perhaps such groups of young Orthodox families will be the pioneers in the mass migration I believe will take place within the Orthodox world in America. But while housing prices may be the catalyst behind this Orthodox migration, in my mind, moving to a small Jewish community has tremendous advantages.

The Workplace

Work schedules in smaller cities

A musmach of Yeshiva University, Rabbi Alter lives in Denver with his wife and four children.

are often more manageable. The pace of life is slower; individuals tend to spend more time focused on things other than work, whether it be Torah study, leisure activities or family. Commutes are often shorter. The drive from any of the three Orthodox residential neighborhoods to downtown Denver takes between ten and twenty minutes. Rush hour adds five minutes. Hadassa, a young Orthodox woman who moved to Denver last year, used to live in a New York suburb and travel to Manhattan, where she worked in a large accounting firm. "I would drive my car to the bus and then transfer to the train," she says. Currently, she spends a few minutes driving to work. Additionally, the drive is pleasant. "Drivers don't cut you off here," she says. "It's so refreshing to get to work in the morning and still be in a good mood."

The Home

Is there truth to the assertion that kids from smaller communities have a "*middot* advantage"? In his book, *Making of a Godol*, Reb Noson Kamenetsky writes of his father, Reb Yaakov:

Throughout his life, my father cherished his formative years in Dolhinov [Russia]. He felt that by having been raised in a small-town environment, he had developed a healthy outlook on life and a positive view of humanity.

Indeed, according to one of his grandchildren, Reb Yaakov encouraged his children and grandchildren to move to smaller Jewish communities throughout the United States.

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *rosh yeshivah* at Yeshiva University's Caroline and Joseph S. Gruss Kollel Elyon, agrees that there is a "*middot* advantage." "Although my students from smaller communities often come with less [of a] Torah background, they tend to have a more polished and fine character," says Rabbi Rakeffet, who has been teaching for over forty years. "Their sense of *aidelkeit* [refinement] is part of their

charm. As the [smaller] communities grow and form a stronger nucleus, their ability to attract better Torah teachers grows as well, raising ... the levels of Torah education."

Perhaps children who are raised in smaller communities are more refined because of the slower pace of life, which allows for more quality family time. Or perhaps it is because children in such communities are raised to be more sensitive to the needs of others and to greet a stranger walking down the street. Maybe it is because parents serve as role models to their children through their involvement in so many

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aspects of communal life. Or perhaps it is because our communities tend to be more diverse, allowing children to be influenced in positive ways by those who are less wealthy and often less materialistic. My sense is that all of these factors contribute to the quality of the children we raise.

The Community

In an era of increasing polarization, smaller communities offer a different paradigm. On Shabbat morning, in the East Denver Orthodox Synagogue, where I serve as rabbi, it is not uncommon to see a man wearing a *kappota* seated next to one wearing jeans, or a yeshivah boy helping someone who can't read Hebrew find the place. Our shul regularly receives visitors, members of the non-Orthodox shuls in the area as well as those who are totally unaffiliated. Guests generally

enjoy our shul experience, and, over time, many of those who continue to come gradually become more observant. In this kind of climate, it is easier to feel a sense of kinship with the entire Klal Yisrael. We—the Orthodox members of the community—appreciate the impact we can have on others, and are not willing to abdicate our responsibility to *kiruv* organizations.

In smaller communities, Jews of all affiliations depend on each other more. We see each other at fundraising events for the local Jewish organizations such as the federation and Holocaust institute as well as *yeshivot*. There is a recognition that the entire community is needed to keep these organizations strong. The non-Orthodox population supports the kosher institutions in town as much as we do.

Three years ago, members of my shul started a softball league with four teams: two Orthodox, one traditional and one Conservative. By the second year, there were nine teams with members from across the Jewish spectrum. One of the teams was comprised of the members of two shuls—one Conservative and one *Chareidi*—each of which could not, by itself, constitute a full team. Such communal endeavors allow for the type of "people-to-people" encounters that remind us that often we have much in common with those we may disagree with. It is hard to dislike people when you know them personally and recognize that they mean well.

I will never forget a meeting that took place in my home a number of years ago. One of the participants was a bright individual with obvious leadership skills who had recently moved to Denver from a large Jewish community on the East Coast. At one point he commented that this was the first time he had ever been present at a meeting for a Jewish institution. The others in the room were shocked. How had this individual's talents been overlooked? He explained that he had lived in a community where everything had been

provided for him. All he needed to do was “show up.” Needless to say, in the short time he has been in Denver, he has contributed enormously to the community.

Often, growing up in a smaller Jewish community can inspire one to dedicate himself to Jewish communal work. Rabbi Ari Rockoff, who grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, and currently works at the Max Stern Division of Communal Services of Yeshiva University, explains that his small-town upbringing has much to do with his chosen profession. “Everyone around me valued the importance of giving to the community, caring for the needs of other Jews and actively supporting the Jewish infrastructure.”

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Anyone who yearns to have a positive impact on the Jewish people has the potential to play more of a significant role in a smaller community.

While relocating entails being far away from family, there is a tendency to respond to this challenge by forming extremely close relationships with one’s friends. When someone in our community is sick, friends pick up and drop off that person’s kids at school, cook for the family and help out in other ways.

Multigenerational friendships also tend to be unique to smaller communities. Upon moving to Denver, Ilan, a member of my shul, was surprised at the nature of his Shabbat invitations. “I was invited by people who are my parents’ ages. I never would have been invited to spend Shabbat lunch with my parents’ friends in New York,” he says.

Small community life is clearly not for everyone. Denver is one of the many mid-sized Orthodox communities in the United States with a yeshivah high school, a Bais Yaakov, a *kollel*, a Modern Orthodox day school, a *Chareidi* day school, two *mikvaot*, three eruvs, numerous shuls and a handful of kosher restaurants. Yet despite our Jewish infrastructure, we cannot provide the same resources of a large community. An acquaintance of mine once remarked that he would never move to a place where he could not find shwarma at 11:00 p.m. on a Saturday night. Smaller Jewish communities have a limited number of kosher restaurants. It is often hard to find appropriate candidates to teach in day schools as well as people willing to do *hashgachah* work. If the kosher stores run out of *chalav Yisrael* milk, we have to wait for the next shipment to arrive.

I generally advise singles to think twice before moving to a small community. Similarly, those who are part of a

tight-knit family should not take the decision to move lightly. Some of the fondest memories of my youth are the Sunday afternoons that I spent in my grandparents’ home. Obviously when children live hundreds of miles away from family members, it will affect their relationship with them. Finally, one who is looking for a homogeneous community, where everyone is of the same mind and *hashkafah*, will not be happy in a small community, which tends to be far more diverse. Diversity is a challenge. Encountering other *hashkafot* forces one to rethink his own value system; not everyone is comfortable with that.

The challenges of being overstressed, having insufficient quality time with our children and lacking a sense of community are often at the root of many of the problems plaguing the Orthodox family. Many families that find themselves struggling under these burdens feel that they have no options. They are wrong. Moving to a smaller Jewish community—whether it is St. Louis, Cincinnati or Denver—may be worthy of serious thought.

This summer, Daniel, his wife and child will be packing their bags and beginning a new chapter of their lives in Denver. There will be more Daniels in the future. Maybe it is time for you to consider being one of them? **IA**

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