

Orthodoxy on the Periphery

—Where it Counts

By Chaim E. Schertz



Keshet Israel Synagogue in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which recently celebrated its one hundredth anniversary. Pictured here is the building that housed the synagogue from 1918 to 1949. In 1949 the synagogue moved “uptown” where most of its members live. Photos and illustrations reprinted with permission from the 2002 edition of Keshet Israelite, the annual publication of Keshet Israel Synagogue.

For Orthodox Jews, the real distinction between a large city and a small one is the nature of its Jewish community. In a large city, the Jewish community is increasingly defined in restrictive, exclusivist terms. Orthodox Jews in such cities usually have little or no social interaction with those who are not Orthodox, and neither do their children. Jews even within the Orthodox community itself tend to be connected almost exclusively to their particular synagogue or *shtetlel*. Their comfort zone is increasingly limited to include only those people who are identical to themselves. Unfortunately, the definition of the “other” is constantly expanding.

By necessity, the Jewish community in a small city has a totally oppo-

site dynamic. For a small Jewish community to survive it must constantly expand its definition of Jewishness and be as inclusive as possible. Such Jewish communities include within their ranks members of all the Jewish congregations as well as the intermarried, converts and even prospective converts and openly identified homosexuals. For the community at large, there are no social barriers between these varied groups, and all are treated with respect. Were this not the case, the local Jews would quickly dissipate into the hundreds of thousands of non-Jews who live around them. This is true of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as well, where I have served as rabbi of the local Orthodox shul—Keshet Israel Synagogue—for the past twenty-one years.

In small communities, the Orthodox contingent is absolutely cru-

cial for the maintenance of general Jewish life, serving as the anchor that holds everything together. What is most revealing is that the majority of non-Orthodox Jews in Harrisburg recognize this fact and do their utmost to maintain a viable Orthodox presence in the city. (While some 7,000 Jews live in the Harrisburg area, about fifty families are actually *shomer Shabbat*.)

The primary contribution that Orthodox Jews make is the establishment of a geographically recognizable Jewish neighborhood. Because Orthodox Jews must reside within walking distance of the synagogue,

Rabbi Dr. Schertz was ordained at Yeshiva University. He received his PhD in Western philosophy from New York University. Rabbi Schertz served as a chaplain with the US Army, was the director of the Hillels at Brooklyn College and Penn State and taught at Penn State and Regis College, Colorado.

they tend to live in close proximity to one another. In Harrisburg, the “Jewish area,” known as Uptown Harrisburg, consists of mostly large, beautiful homes situated along the Susquehanna River. The non-Orthodox Jews who live in this area choose to do so, for the most part, because they want to give their children the experience of living in a Jewish neighborhood. In Uptown Harrisburg on Shabbat and *yom tov* one sees mostly Jews walking in the streets. During December, seasonal decorations are few and far between in the area. And on Sukkot a sukkah is visible in almost every other house, Orthodox or not. As part of a community tradition known as “sukkah hopping,” Jewish children of all backgrounds visit *sukkot* for sweets and Torah learning. Additionally, because Jews of all stripes live in the same neighborhood, many non-Orthodox parents prefer that their children play with their Orthodox friends on Shabbat and *yom tov* rather than go to the mall or the movies.

The interaction between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox has had significant consequences. On occasion, a family that attends a non-Orthodox synagogue ends up joining the Orthodox shul. (In all such cases, I advise those contemplating leaving to first discuss the matter with their current rabbi.) Additionally, many non-Orthodox children, influenced by their Orthodox peers, pursue Jewish education beyond the elementary school level. The local NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) chapter, which attracts a significant number of children from non-Orthodox homes, encourages many of them to

further their Jewish education. Since Harrisburg does not have a Jewish high school, currently around fifteen children from our community make the hour-and-fifteen-minute commute to Beth Tfiloh High School in

Baltimore. Upon their graduation from high school, some of the graduates attend *yeshivot* in Israel, or elsewhere in the United States.

What makes Harrisburg most unique, however, is the level of communal cooperation. While most of the students of the local Jewish day school—the first day school in the United States established outside of a major metropolitan

area—come from non-Orthodox homes, the school operates under the auspices of Torah Umesorah (the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools). The non-Orthodox rabbis of the community support the day school despite the fact that its philosophy is not consistent with their own.

Throughout the school’s sixty-year-long history, there has never been an attempt by the community to change its affiliation.

All communal institutions and events are kosher, and no rabbi in our community would attend a communal event if it were not. Despite the fact

that the vast majority of the residents of the nursing home in town do not observe *kashrut*, the institution employs a resident *mashgiach*, at a significant cost to the community. Similarly, programs at the Jewish Community Center do not violate *halachah*. Thus, a program with music would not be scheduled during *sefirah*.

Another wonderful example of cooperation involves the local funeral

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home. I have recently been involved in renovating a funeral home that will be dedicated exclusively to Jewish burial.

Although the Reform congrega-

tion does not use the services of our *chevrah kadishah*, its rabbi has decided that he will patronize this facility. The additional business will enable the home to service the traditional community.

My relationship with the other rabbis is open and respectful. On a regular basis I receive halachic inquiries from my non-Orthodox col-

leagues on issues such as marriage, divorce, conversions and funerals. Additionally, all questions of communal *kashrut* and Shabbat observance are referred to me. The rabbis meet at regular intervals to ensure that *halachah* is observed at all communal events and



Rabbi Eliezer Silver, who became one of the most influential rabbis in the United States, served as rabbi of Harrisburg from 1907 until 1925. At the time, he was paid six dollars a week.



The constitution of Keshet Israel Synagogue.

that when communal speakers are invited they do not attack any Jewish denomination.


While maintaining good relationships with the other movements is absolutely necessary for Jewish life to flourish in Harrisburg, it is not always simple. As the Orthodox rabbi, I must make it absolutely clear that *halachah* cannot be violated or compromised. Thus, for example, while I consider myself a friend of the local

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Reform rabbi, an intelligent, caring individual who is a staunch supporter of upholding communal halachic standards, I cannot accept or condone his lifestyle, as he is an open homosexual.

Why is it that all the Jewish streams get along so well in Harrisburg? It is partly because of the great respect that the community has always had for its Orthodox rabbis. For most of its history, Kesher Israel was led by the larger-than-life figures of Rabbi Eliezer Silver and his son, Rabbi David L. Silver. These tremendous personalities had a great impact not only upon the Orthodox and the broader Jewish community of Harrisburg, but indeed, upon American Jewish life as a whole. Moreover, the Harrisburg community witnessed the same phenomenon occur over and over in the surrounding towns and cities such as Middletown and York. When the Orthodox congregation ceased to exist, within a few years Jewish life in the town came to a standstill. Determined to prevent that from happening in our town, the Harrisburg community is very supportive of Orthodox life.

We have been especially fortunate in our ability to retain young Orthodox families. Several of those who have grown up here and found it to be a beautiful and meaningful community did their utmost to locate employment nearby. From our congregation, the vast majority of those who left Harrisburg did so to make *aliyah*.

A final thought: Orthodox Jews who contemplate moving to a small community must understand that they will become vital members of their communities. They will be expected to participate, support and work for the various institutions necessary for Jewish life—the synagogue, the yeshivah, the mikvah and the *chevrah kadishah*. In a small community an Orthodox Jew cannot remain anonymous. His presence will always be appreciated, his absence always noted. His life will be shared by the community. His joy will be its joy and his pain will be its pain. He will always count. 



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