

## **Changing Places: Scouting a variety of out-of-town relocation options at OU Jewish Communities Fair offers a lesson in choosing**

By Judah S. Harris

On a Sunday, back in April 2013, I spent some hours in a large New York City indoor event space. There was no need to push and plead my way through thick and unwieldy crowds. This was certainly not an occasion for the masses. But even as I maneuvered with ease, the room felt full of activity. Things were happening. I had all the visual confirmation that I needed, coupled with the sounds of dozens of overlapping conversations that permeated the heavily-trafficked aisles of arranged longer folding tables. As I looked around at the sources of these voices, I recognized some of the people, but many of the others I'd never seen before. All of them had come to 18th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood to attend an event at The Metropolitan Pavilion, a Manhattan spot that regularly hosts private dinner parties, corporate functions, fashion this or that, product launches . . . but on this particular day was offering observant Jewish couples, young growing families, singles and even people of retirement age . . . simply, a better place to live.

For a Jewish demographic that has tended to stay mighty close to the New York Metro area and now wants, maybe, to breathe some different air, this event was a good place to spend a Sunday afternoon. Proudly on display were some of the alternative options for a place to call home, Jewish communities spanning the United States, their exhibits providing an introduction to those looking to be introduced. But as appealing as any exhibit or presentation might seem, any move would involve change.

A desire for change — in the relocation sense — stems, often, from practical considerations fostered by tough economic realities. But also at play is a realignment of thinking regarding the nature of a Jewish community, its many permutations, and how to be an active part — in a personal way — of its growth and vitality. A lot to think about on a weekend, but undoubtedly, the reflection and deliberation in the minds of many who came out to explore this event had begun somewhat earlier and developed incrementally. The stimulus might have been related to employment, need for a larger residence, or a visit to an out-of-town community that motivated some introspection.

The 2013 Jewish Communities Fair, with 41 communities represented and 1300 attendees, was the fourth hosted by the Orthodox Union, and though the organization's inventive idea for promoting community-building and economic remedy is not yet an annual event, they have followed in close

succession. I attended the second fair in 2009 (the event debuted in 2008), skipped 2011, and now was back for Spring 2013 — the largest so far. (The next one will be held this coming April.)

Lots of people in this country move each year. Statistics from various sources fluctuate within the 36 to 43 million range. Couples in their mid-20s to mid-40s with children 2–11 are a prime demographic, housing and employment opportunities significant factors. And at the higher-end of the age range, to be closer to family is a compelling motivator for residential and regional change.

The majority of American Orthodox Jews live in the New York area. No surprise for most of us. A New York Federation study released at the start of the summer in 2012 counted just under 500,000 Orthodox Jews in New York City and its environs, a number that doesn't reckon with areas of Jewish interest that fall outside of the five boroughs and neighboring Long Island. There are sizable bastions in New Jersey, and a few thousand, maybe more, in nearby Connecticut, that we all know about and that can certainly qualify as the New York area for all intents and purposes (and certainly from the perspective of those who live afar in other states or countries). The New York area, in the broadest definition of its boundaries, traditionally has been the ideal place to live — at least New Yorkers have convinced themselves of such — a first (and often final) consideration for the majority, though certainly far from the entirety, of the observant Jewish community in the United States. The reasons are historical and sociological . . . most think they're practical . . . and beyond that we leave to the academics and researchers to fathom further while we go on with our lives, buy orange juice, reasonably ripe avocados and frozen veggie burgers, and do carpool on alternate days.

But maybe there are other spots worthy of exploration . . . viable places where we can move and raise families — or relocate to after the kids are all grown? The Spring 2013 community fair introduced many different and varied options, and I was there to get some of the facts, in tandem with photography of the event, and then reach out to dig a little deeper, after the exhibits were taken down and the Pavilion lights switched off — only to be reignited again on another day for the next cause and presumably a very, very different crowd.

East Brunswick, NJ

I'll start at the end. It's later in the afternoon, practically closing time. Elyse Tuchman and Leya Strauss have been working the East Brunswick, NJ, booth all afternoon — a long day, and for one of them, beginning from setup time, well before the arrival of the attendees. They've had help from others but

are both running at less than peak energy, and yet still able to smile easily, even posing for a photo.

“A little closer,” I cajole them, as I frame my shot, maneuvering slightly to include the East Brunswick signage in the picture I’m attempting.

On the verge of packing up, Elyse and Leya are still glad to answer some questions I have about the community. I know it’s in New Jersey, that it’s basically home to Rutgers University (and that if I’ve ever actually stepped foot on the New Brunswick campus, it’s likely only once) . . . but more than that I’m not too familiar, so I listen up, and they repeat things they’ve probably been saying all afternoon to prospects tempted by an out-of-the-city community that’s not so remote from New York City.

First the numbers: There are 230 Orthodox families in East Brunswick. The overall town population is 45,000. “How far from Highland Park?” I wonder, trying to understand the difference between the two places that I usually, in my mind, put together too easily. Ten minutes, they say, and the Rutgers campus is the same.

Elyse and Leya mention that they’ve lived in town 17 and 16 years, respectively. East Brunswick, they contend, is more suburban than Highland Park. I’m starting to form an impression . . . not Western ranches, but more space, larger lawns, more quiet, even the sounds of crickets chirping — or whatever they do at night. I’ve been to Highland Park, worked there on some photo jobs at a day school, a family bas mitzvah, and looked for parking close to the kosher pizza place/dairy restaurant on one of the main commercial streets in town. In East Brunswick, Leya says, the main commercial “street” is Route 18. It’s a major thoroughfare with strong traffic flow that averages three lanes in each direction, with access and egress to big mall and shopping center opportunities.

Highland Park has multiple shuls, but East Brunswick offers one, the Young Israel. A promotional video of theirs (the Young Israel has its own YouTube channel) is titled “The Shul that Built a Community,” and that’s a campaign phrase they use elsewhere. Rabbi Jay Weinstein has led the congregation since 2010 and prior to that was an Assistant Rabbi at Congregation Shaare Tefilla, a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Dallas, TX.

The women share that Jewish education options in the area are plentiful. Locally, there are about five schools. The shul itself has a preschool and kindergarten, a sign of younger families. There are about 50 families in town where the parents are under 40. “We need more under 30,” says Elyse. They were looking for them at the fair, estimating that their table had spoken to somewhere between 150–200 families during the afternoon. They lost track, but would reconnect with those most interested at their

community shabbaton a few weeks later, and they'd be scheduling, they said, a follow-up shabbaton to accommodate more people who will want to visit, see the community, and look at the homes available— for instance, four-bedroom properties costing in the mid-\$400,000s. For that money you get “a two-and-a-half-bath house, a lot of yard,” says Elyse, and “space between your neighbors.” Leya emphasizes the distance amenity even more candidly: “you don't look in your neighbors' windows.” She mentions nothing about crickets, but I'm sure now that I can hear them.

East Brunswick also offers favorable commuting options. It's halfway between New York City and Philadelphia, and people go in both directions. Leya heads east. “I commute to Manhattan everyday,” she says. Recruiting for her New Jersey shul community is a commitment, but not her official job. She works in project management and her paycheck comes from Citigroup.

## Dallas, TX

Having a good tag line is prudent, a sign of marketing initiative. Having a series of them that are consistently clever is a sign that David Zoller is still in town. That town is Dallas and David Zoller has been a strong force — an innovator — in helping attract some attention for this specific Jewish community. Admittedly, Dallas is not actually a town, but the third-largest city in the state of Texas, population 1.25 million, which ranks it as the US's ninth-largest city.

I really wasn't surprised to see Dallas back at the fair again. And I would have easily guessed David would be there too. I had stopped by their table when I covered the event in 2009, met David then and admired his marketing zeal, his commitment to promoting Dallas as a community option, and the website he established, [mometodallas.org](http://mometodallas.org). It was a prototype. David, as he describes it, had “architected the website that could easily be used for any community — then gave it all to Yeshiva University, who compensated the web guy.”

David was inspired by a YU Champions Gate event — a summer think-tank conference — and saw the value of leadership development and how good strategy could help identify opportunities. He learned more about how the outreach programs of the university's Center for the Jewish Future (CJF) focus resources on community building. Also, many of the people he met while dating — observant Jewish singles — were not able to find communities to move to, were stuck in their place but looking for new chapters in their lives. This was a time — and it's not so long ago — when few communities had stand-alone sites or webpages promoting themselves as a relocation option. David was an inventor of sorts,

and now websites of many out-of-town synagogues in fact employ a direct informative pitch to families considering a move.

At the time of the 2013 fair, David was still a single dad (he's now 51, remarried, and he and his wife reside in Preston Hollow in North Dallas, though David's originally from New Orleans). David works in commercial real estate. This had been his third time at the OU fair and he had some new tag lines, along with the already-proven ones, on display at the Dallas booth, that strutted the community's selling points (together with his writing prowess) in terse verse: “No state income tax,” “232 days of sunshine,” “\$238K in New York is the same as \$100K in Dallas,” “Never hear the words 'building fund' again,” “Warm enough to sleep in your Sukkah,” and “Annual Glatt Kosher Chili Cookoff.” These were some of them. A complete ad campaign, I thought, and, since the tag lines were reproduced on small cards, a printed collectible, for sure.

If David was doing the writing, Rabbi Jeff Schrager from the Akiba Academy of Dallas was doing the standing. I worried that he wasn't getting much of a chance to sit on fair day. The rule at trade shows is don't sit, be available to the passersby. Rabbi Schrager is from Rochester, NY, and had already been living in Dallas for eight years. Young couples were asking him questions and he held a clipboard under one arm, looking official, while giving his impressions as a seasoned resident of the city. Especially for these younger couples at the booth, he was perceived as someone able to comment fully on educational resources at the local school. “People were incredibly receptive,” he told me, when I checked in with him about a half a year after the event, “to the extent that at some points I had to speak to multiple families at once.” Rabbi Schrager admits that he found it at times challenging to “handle the crowds” that had approached the Dallas exhibit, but “thought the fair was wonderfully received and is a great service provided by the OU.”

Akiba, the institution where Rabbi Schrager spends a majority of his waking hours, is a sizable school, covering pre-K through eighth grade. Enrollment is about 370 kids, and Yavneh High School, on the same campus, but a separate institution, has 150 students total — college prep, says Rabbi Schrager, and kids go to top-tier schools. Rabbi Schrager, who teaches middle school Judaic Studies, doesn't couch his enthusiasm: “Our school is amazing . . . our students graduate with a passion for Judaism and general studies. If you come to school, kids are just happy.” He emphasizes that they work hard, but yet still love school. “We always have kids saying that over the summer their peers at camp couldn't understand why they were so excited to come back to school. We also are a cutting edge school. We take risks and reap the rewards.”

“We've gotten a few,” says David, when I ask him some time after the event about recruitment results. He mentions a young woman in her 30s, a nurse . . . and a number of couples. For many months after the fair he'd been tracking about 80 people, communicating with them. If there are three or four thousand Orthodox Jews in Dallas (from a Jewish population of 50,000 or higher — a local Federation study will soon clarify the exact amount), there's room for more, and growth will also be coming from the younger generation, an easier to engage, in some ways, demographic, who currently reside in the city. “There are a lot of younger people — lot of twenties coming to Chabad, Machon, Moishe's house,” says David, listing some Jewish hot spots. “The whole shul is getting younger — Simchas Torah was 40 teenagers or younger jumping with their teachers.”

I can picture it, and I'm starting to imagine a new tag line: “Move to Dallas. Jump with your teacher.” I don't share it with David — let him think of it on his own, even though he's the source, or inspiration.

One of the challenges of a one-day-only event is that not everyone can make it. Also, a New York venue — though the right place for reasons expressed — precludes participants who don't live nearby. Still, a larger audience was actually able to get a flavor of the fair via a live broadcast of The Nachum Segal Show (a well established Jewish music and community radio program) that was held in the initial hours of the event. The show host, seated at a table along one perimeter wall of the room with a pro mic and necessary sound accoutrements, and broadcast equipment hidden below table level, called on various guests for short segment interviews. This included OU staff along with community representatives such as David Zoller, who can do radio exposition as well as he does print marketing. On-air, he shared his 12-ad Dallas campaign and discussed the opportunities for Orthodox life that exist well outside of the Tri-State area.

Chesterfield, MO

Find me a shul with a lake.

Not the usual request from those looking for a next community, but if it happens to come along, there's an answer. In Chesterfield, MO, a St. Louis suburb, there's a Torah community 80 families strong — and a shul, with a lake. That was easy. Next?

Tpheris Israel Chevra Kadisha Congregation, known in a more linguistically comfortable manner as TICK, is led by Rabbi Aaron Winter, who joined the community back in 1989. The synagogue building itself, built in 1972, at the time when the Chesterfield Jewish community began, stands alongside a

man-made lake, named appropriately “TICK Lake.” Inside the building, aside from the shul, is a mesivta — a boys high school — and a yeshiva of higher learning.

There are 45 boys in the mesivta, says Rabbi Winter. Half are local and the others from out of town, students who reside in two houses that provide dormitory living accommodations. The high school, Missouri Torah Institute, is one of many Chofetz Chaim branches spread across the country. Rabbi Winter is a graduate of the seminary and five other Chofetz Chaim rebbeim teach at the school and conduct adult learning classes.

Speak to enough community rabbis and you'll get a sense of the common issues they are involved with from dawn to dusk. Numbers (the ages of the rabbis) and names change, as do years of tenure — some rabbis have been present for a couple years, maybe a few more, others for a professional lifetime — but the various elements that comprise any North American Orthodox community and that are the daily focus of communal and congregational rabbis are quite similar (while acknowledging that the out-of-town experience does differ from that found in major metropolitan cities).

But I want a rebbetzin's perspective, so in August, four months after the Community Fair event, I call Chanie Winter. Before she and her husband arrived in Chesterfield, on the cusp of a new decade, the 1990s, they had lived in Richmond, VA, the first start-up community with which they were involved. She and her husband, as a graduate of Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva, which encourages musmachim to focus on careers in chinuch, sensed from the start that their mission would be one of outreach. The TICK shul is made up of nearly a hundred percent baalei teshuva, with more than 60 active families, 90 percent of them professionals. They encompass various religious ideologies; many began with little affiliation and lack of positive feeling for an observant way of life. When Chanie Winter first arrived in her young 30s, the shul was very modern. “People saw a mechitza the first time and walked out,” she remembers, reflecting on the earliest years, far removed from the present reality. She and her husband have grown as the community has. They are a team, and their children over the years have been a part too. “Rabbanus in an out-of-town community is a family affair,” she says, and for the entire troupe “Chesterfield has been a fantastic experience.”

Rebbetzin Winter attended the Michlalah in Jerusalem (her family moved to Israel when she was 15). She married relatively young — at 17 — and the Winters have raised eight children, residing now in Florida, Flatbush, Queens, and three have moved back to Chesterfield, which is proof of something being right about the community. Rebbetzin Winter teaches full time in the day school, limmudei kodesh — she's Morah Chanie to kids and their parents — and has almost reached the point of teaching

second generations.

When I ask how they balance, given the nature of the job, she says “it's never a challenge integrating fatherhood and motherhood with community, being fun people . . . . These people are our children.”

Rebbetzin Winter tries to help her families in multiple ways. She shops for people and she counsels privately — men and women. She portrays her role as being available “to listen and to help, to give advice — help marry them off . . . life decisions.” The men too seem keen on a rebbetzin's perspective. They ask about business deals, medical issues, kids-related topics. Her qualifications, she says — being a mother, complemented by the community's sense of the strong partnership she and her husband have and their being seen as role models. “I love it, I love my balabatim. I know how lucky I am,” she tells me.

My thoughts return to the lake. It sounds slightly unusual, or novel, for an Orthodox synagogue, any synagogue, to have one. But the rebbetzin is well acclimated to it and still finds its presence enchanting. She describes it as “a very pretty, relaxing view” that “gives you a feeling of suburbia,” and you can also see yeshiva boys, at times, fishing. But it is most “beautiful,” she notes, in “autumn time,” when the leaves have their full say.

When I spoke with them, the Winters shared that at least three families who inquired about Chesterfield at the fair had plans to visit town (though not necessarily derived from the fair, four have moved in the last year and a half or so — two of them to teach in the yeshiva). “We are continuing to grow . . . still a young community, baal habatim just starting to marry off their children,” says Rebbetzin Winter. Recruitment plans include reaching out locally to the unaffiliated and, at gathering places such as the OU Communities Fair, meeting those who, Rebbetzin Winter says, feel that the qualities of an out-of-town experience “can enable them to develop a sense of self, to become socially involved in Torah living.”

Buffalo, NY

Marian Arbesman came with a handful of people to the fair to represent the Buffalo Jewish community and two Orthodox synagogues, the Young Israel and Kehillat Ohr Tzion, located a few miles apart from each other. Both are offering free first-year membership to newcomers, and the day school is offering 50-percent tuition reduction first year, 25-percent second.

Considered one of the top relocation cities in the country, there are job opportunities in major



companies, as well as the healthcare sector, tourism, and of course education — the city website lists 14 places of higher education in the western portion of New York State. Buffalo's cultural ambiance is plentiful and includes major league sports, museums and a popular zoo, home to 1000 animals on 23 acres, with admission prices topping at \$10.50 for adults (13 and older). The zoo is a “good place to bring your family,” promises Marian. Though her kids are now grown, she knows that activities for families with school-age children are added incentives for couples intent on a city with solid Jewish life, along with some other things to do around the town.

But more essential for Sabbath-observing families with younger children would be the presence of an eruv, facilitating stroller and carriage use and conveyance of appropriate types of physical, portable items when needed. Buffalo's is fairly new. “Since we have it, it's been great, and we figured this is the time to come out,” Marian says of their commitment to join the Spring 2013 Communities Fair and investment of resources in sending not two or even three, but five people to staff their table. Kosher dining options are also increasing in the city. A Tops Supermarket features a kosher deli, University of Buffalo has dining, and the JCC Tel Aviv Cafe on North Forest Road in Getzville is now under kosher supervision.

Marian is originally from Queens, NY. She moved to Buffalo as a single, met her husband, a native of the city, and together they work in a biomedical sciences consulting company they founded. The city is two hours from Toronto and an hour drive from Rochester (a smaller city by comparison), but she also likes that they are “a one hour flight from all sorts of places,” including where their sons live, one in Kansas City and one in Cleveland. New York City, for those driving, is seven hours on average, 30 or 40 minutes less when roads are clear. A daily commute is not an option for people who relocate to Buffalo, but family time in the New York City area is very feasible, facilitated by a couple of planned rest stops along the highways, a driving route that cuts through New York, Pennsylvania (depending on the route chosen) and New Jersey.

What about the weather? Mention of Buffalo begs the question — some people simply don't like the cold. They're searching for warmer climates that have sixes and sevens as first digits in their year-round temperature readings.

Still, others don't mind a little chill. They can even handle a lot of it. “Cold in winter, warm hearts,” recites Cheryl Stein, a real estate attorney, to exhibit booth passersby. Buffalo has a reputation for snow — heavy snowfall. The reputation is legendary, but a tad mythical, it seems. In actuality, it's the areas surrounding that get the brunt. The city is more temperate. “The snow's not paralyzing. We rarely have

snow days,” Marian assures, likely having heard the “weather” question repeated a few times that afternoon, an April spring day, with welcome warmth the new seasonal reality.

White winter stuff aside, what Buffalo does have, says Marc Brown, also an attorney and Co-President of the Kadimah School, the city's day school option which caters to a full spectrum of Jewish religious observance and affiliation (he's also a graduate and former sports coach), is immediate room for new couples and their children who are looking for an “affordable start.” He'd like to see families be able to live, thrive, and “not be stuck in the bank in debt.”

There were 10 families who signed up at the 2013 fair with interest in exploring Buffalo's features more seriously, and the five representatives seemed satisfied their message was finding an audience. The most important thing smaller communities can offer, suggests Marian, is a “lifestyle difference.”

## Manalapan, NJ

“You can't even imagine how busy we were,” Rabbi Chaim Veshnefsky of Manalapan, NJ, tells me, when I call him to speak about the town — “104 families at the fair . . . .” His tally of how many had inquired about the community in one form or another is a good number, but not out of range for the attention a New York City-area community can draw.

I had contacted Rabbi Veshnefsky to find out more about what's happening in Manalapan, but I also was curious about the impressive white house on a large lot that appeared on the community's page in the fair's program guide (each of the communities had its own page featuring brief information, community offerings and amenities, four small photos, and contact information). The picture was tiny, but the house was large — huge, actually — and I wondered to myself if it was a stock photo or if it really existed. What street was it on? What was the cost? (Any offers yet?!)

Manalapan's many exhibit-table inquiries on fair day was only step one, but the follow-through was also rather affirming. Some months after the fair, more than 35 families had visited, five had moved in, and Rabbi Veshnefsky was expecting “five more in the next few months.” These families were going through the “consuming” process, he says, of finding a house and closing on it. Those that are choosing Manalapan fit somewhere between the Modern Orthodox world and Black Hat, according to Rabbi Veshnefsky. The common denominator, he says, is that these are people in “growth mode . . . who love learning and appreciate diversity.”

Some people don't seek diversity, preferring to settle in a more monolithic environment (they may not

call it that). Manalapan is a half hour north of Lakewood, one Jewish enclave with seemingly less diversity to offer, though definitely more than people think exists, and it's a good hour south of New York City, which is probably all about diversity. Manalapan's total population is just above 38,000 and the township has experienced a growing Orthodox community for two full decades. One of the Orthodox shuls, Bais Torah U'Tefillah, the Jewish Learning Center of Monmouth County, headed by Rabbi Veshnefsky and catering to a younger crowd, was started a little over a decade ago. The other synagogue is next to a senior development. For the times when not immersed in prayer, there's a kosher Chinese and Italian restaurant in town at Summerton Shopping Plaza. A Bais Yaakov school for girls appeared in recent years and a boys school, says Rabbi Veshnefsky, is in the works, as is a mikvah that is being constructed on the shul's six-acre property.

The community is swinging younger and kollel families continue to arrive from Lakewood to help build a community kollel. Rabbi Veshnefsky also learned in Lakewood Yeshiva and lived there. He was first exposed to observant Judaism at the age of 11 and Shomer Shabbos by 13 — influenced by the Jewish Education Program (JEP). He's watched with satisfaction the slow but steady transition in Manalapan. Over 20 years, more than 100 residents have become observant, and he was in town for about half that time. Before the recent influx there had been 30 observant families living in town. Numbers are changing in the right direction.

“They meshed so beautifully,” says Rabbi Veshnefsky of the visitors who joined a “Visit Manalapan” weekend held shortly after the fair. Among them were two Chasidic couples from Borough Park (“Boro Park” is the more casual spelling). “They loved it . . . need not be near their rebbe,” says Rabbi Veshnefsky, stressing that sincerity and warmth are two dominant traits that bring people to Manalapan and forge quicker connections than might be expected between strangers. Certainly, for families planning a move, connecting to a community is an ultimate goal.

About the over-sized white house in the program guide — it's real, the rabbi tells me, resolving my initial question. The home rests on three acres of land . . . priced in the \$700,000 range. An attention-getter for sure.

## Jersey City Heights, NJ

Jersey City Heights, a neighborhood in the northern section of Jersey City, also has a diverse population — “all but the extremely wealthy” live there, according to one observer. The streets are

lined with multi-family homes, apartment buildings, and newer residential townhouse developments equipped with modern features not found in the older constructions. Central Avenue is the main commercial thoroughfare, and a few blocks away is Sherman Avenue where Congregation Mount Sinai has been in continuous existence as a synagogue for over a century. Its landmark building with large stained-glass windows features double steps in front, approaching from left and right, that lead up to double main doors; on top of the building, copper caps that have turned green with age; and, inside, a congregation comprised of youth and adults, both observant and traditional — or somewhere on the scale.

Josh Bernstein has been involved with the shul for a few years plus — as president, and now VP. His day job is the office furniture business. He moved to the area from Scotch Plains, a 20-minute drive southwest, is married, likes the community, and can share some of the history, past and present, of a place that was once known by a different name: Hudson City.

Jersey City Heights, as a neighborhood, is overwhelmingly residential. “A good number of people live here because it's very affordable, a quick commute to Manhattan — a bedroom community,” Josh tells me during one phone conversation. “Everybody says they're 15 minutes to Manhattan,” he tells me, referencing other nearby towns that use the “commute time” selling card — in his estimation, too freely — “but you need a helicopter.” He can do it for real, he promises, be out the door and in the city in 18–20 minutes — literally — and 20–30 to Downtown. “Door to door,” Josh says, emphasizing his point.

One can rent in Jersey City Heights for as little as \$1200–\$1700, which is low relative to the city (there was a listed two-bedroom brownstone apartment a half mile from the shul, for instance, at \$1300 per month — new floors and tiles, but no closets in bedrooms), and home prices run from \$200,000 to \$450,000 for townhouses or condos. I saw one property listing, a two-bedroom, 1000-sq-ft luxury loft condo a block away from the shul, on the market for \$350,000. The common roof patio offered inviting views of the Hudson River and NYC, with glimpses of the Manhattan apartment buildings and luxury towers that house similar units, but at multiple times the cost.

The synagogue has the structure in place, a solid, impressive piece of history, and is continuing to recruit to build a community to fill more of it. Josh says they're “trying to get an awareness out there.” There are no resources for a massive capital project to do things large scale, and Shabbos and the Jewish holidays are the only times when services take place. He describes the makeup of the synagogue: Half are in their 20s and 30s, married or newly married; the other half are generation residents with long family histories in the city. Sabbath-observant families are about half, and the

others are in-between or some form of traditional.

The Rabbi of Congregation Mount Sinai is a man with the right credentials to grow the Jewish “neighborhood” of Jersey City Heights. He is open and non-judgmental in his approach and experienced in outreach to various segments of Judaism. Rabbi Shlomo Marks, originally from the UK, came to the synagogue in 2006 from Virginia, where he headed a Hebrew school. Prior to that he was living in Israel. Not Jerusalem, but in the Haifa hills at Yemin Orde, a star youth village which had a UK program — Rabbi Marks' connection. Concurrent with that he was working for Rabbi Grossman in nearby Migdal Ohr (an hour drive away) with Russian speakers. “They were remarkable young people, ended up going to college,” and achieved a “normal family life,” he recalls, reflecting on the influences to which he's been exposed along the way. “All of this taught me to be open . . . but I was open anyway— part of being a British Jew.”

By nature of the location it services, the synagogue must appeal to Jews of many stripes who live in the vicinity. Here is not the place where there exist four or five choices for minyanim on an extended block. There are neighborhoods where that's the case, but not in Jersey City Heights. Not now at least, and not in the imaginable future.

“I run a shul which is really a big tent . . . made up of families who did not grow up in halachik Judaism,” Rabbi Marks says, as he describes the congregants that arrive on a given Shabbos. Mount Sinai is a mechitza shul, and what we'd label easily as Orthodox, but Rabbi Marks shuns that word. “Halachik shul” is more his palette. He feels the term “Orthodox” is insular and the connotation off-putting to a segment of sincere Jews who didn't grow up with the same loyalties and may be pushed away, or not feel drawn to the categorization and the label. “We meet people where they are,” he says. “Suits and ties, and jeans and tee shirts.”

Rabbi Marks is still waiting for real growth in his area. It's been somewhat slow, but he's patient and counting on publicity opportunities like the fair, to build the shul community. They don't need a lot, or expect a lot — just one or two families, he says. More would be even better of course. But two families less in Manhattan, or wherever, would make a real difference for a section of Jersey City that at one time, in another generation, had a lot more Jews living there.

Louisville, KY

You don't have to race horses to live in Louisville, but it doesn't hurt. This Kentucky city that rests

alongside a weaving Ohio River is home to the famed May-time Derby that's been held annually since the 1870s. It was a couple decades later that another tradition began in the city, as the first Orthodox Jewish services took place at a private residence on 8th Street. They called themselves Congregation Anshei Sfard (Ashkenazic nusach despite the name), which has remained as the city's only Orthodox synagogue.

The location of the current synagogue building, erected in 1957, is in a different section of Louisville, reflecting the migration to the suburbs. An interstate highway was built through a previous synagogue site, as urban development changed the topography of neighborhoods.

The earliest generations of Jews in Louisville came from Germany and Poland. They settled and more established communal institutions began a few decades into the 19th century. Today's Jewish population is around 8,500, served by five synagogues. In 1991, an influx of 800 Soviet Jews added significantly to the local community's growth.

Today there are about 200 members at Anshei Sfard, which secures a steady, though smaller attendance of 100 members on a given Shabbos, and at times slightly less. There is also a Chabad center located in town.

The Aryeh Kaplan Academy day school has approximately 30 students, with tuition obligations averaging \$7000 a year and discounts available when families have multiple children in the school. Classes are mixed gender with imminent plans to separate from fifth grade.

There has even been active talk of a high school (Cincinnati, Memphis, Chicago, and New York are where kids are being sent today), but what has actualized already is a new yeshiva named for Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan — Yeshivas Darchei Aryeh, for 18–25 year olds. The author of many influential books on Jewish learning and core topics, such as the Sabbath, Mikvah, and Tefillin, and booklets on Jewish philosophical ideas and Jewish mysticism, would be 80 now — if he hadn't passed away from a heart attack in 1983, just shy of 50 years old. Rabbi Kaplan, a recognized name in many homes, synagogues, and places of learning, lived in Louisville, taught there, and received his bachelors degree in physics — with highest honors — at the University of Louisville in 1961. The yeshiva now in its infancy has its very first students and will be an added Jewish landmark for Louisville's mufti-faceted growth initiatives, of which there are more than a few.

Judy Wallace has plans. She and her husband Brian, front-persons for the Louisville recruitment effort,

founded Yad Moshe of Kentucky, a community service organization (a family foundation named in memory of their son) that promotes goodness in the community, hunger abatement, volunteerism, shidduchim, and provides a hospitality house for patient families. Louisville's medical centers are expert for certain procedures, “including microsurgery and artificial heart transplants,” she says. (Dr. Lamar Gray and his team performed the first heart transplant in Kentucky at Jewish Hospital in 1984.)

“We moved here so we can be married,” says Judy, semi-cryptically, during our first phone conversation. She explains what she means. She and her husband moved to Louisville in 2006. She's from Binghamton NY, and he from Pomona, NY, (150 miles away) which she considers for all intents and purposes part of metro NYC, whose radius reaches into three states. “I am a small-town gal and he is more city oriented,” Judy says, explaining that they needed a place right for both of them. Louisville offered the Wallaces the right combo. “We have a friendly, rural feel, yet Louisville is blessed with all the benefits that come with urban living.”

But their initial visit was five years earlier in 2001, when Judy came for a fertility procedure involving microsurgery. They've gone on to have six children and their permanent move to the city nine years ago was motivated in a large way by wanting to help the Jewish community — “hakaras hatov” she says. Judy describes Louisville as a real city which maintains an out-of-town feel. That combination, although sought after, is not always possible; it's often either-or. Judy is an MBA, and she together with her husband own an infographics company that employs 16 staff, providing services for local and national clients.

Congregation Anshei Sfarad, the minyan that goes back 125 years, is the only Orthodox option, not only in town, but in the entire state. When they had been actively looking for their next rabbi, Judy says that they pictured someone who would be “forward-thinking, while acknowledging the legacy of the shul and whom it serves . . . someone who can be generous with the community at large.” Rabbi Dr. Joshua Golding, who has been a member of the shul for many years, and recently the acting rabbi, became the official rabbi last May. The position will include day school opportunities, too, as the school gains in strength, in addition to ongoing outreach efforts to the many Jews in the city — as well as a chance to be involved with the broader Louisville community of one million people. Judy states that during the search process (which they did on a national basis, before choosing one of their own) their goals were to find a religious leader who could be instrumental in helping the city's broader Jewish population, while sufficing their own immediate need as an Orthodox kehilla.

While walking around the 2013 fair and browsing exhibits, I had watched with interest the level of

reaction to Louisville's booth. I too found their signage immediately noticeable, strong text and symbols working together — infographics! (a term still new enough to need its own infographic informational visual to explain what exactly it is).

“We're definitely a standout,” Brian admitted, as I caught him towards the end of the fair, his livelihood on display in large-scale form for event attendees to glance at. The founder of NowSourcing (the name of the Wallace's company that purveys the infographics and social media services), I considered him as a cobbler wearing his own shoes, not just fitting others. Here he was relying on his product and service, in this case, to promote not his commercial clients' information, but his own close-to-the-heart Jewish community project.

And then there was the technology that made the event day go by smoothly for the Louisville staff. “There wasn't a moment when it wasn't super crowded,” he had told me. But Brian was all prepared, wired up and wielding an Apple iPad at the show, to enable any visitors to the booth a moment of interaction with trendy tablets and a chance to easily input their information on a Google Docs form that Louisville could use for follow up.

There were nearly 100 responses, Brian told me when I checked in some months later. “I'm talking to a number of people, things are rocking — advanced discussions.” He was excited that he's got prospects in hand, that lesser-known Louisville is getting some needed attention — and that he can use more superlatives in conversation.

Back at the April 2013 fair he thought a few dozen might stop by in the summer months. Their shabbaton that July was intended to be a follow-up to get people in the door — give them a taste of the city, share work possibilities that might tempt, at least assure. “We have a tremendous amount of jobs, 2000–4000,” he tells me in one of our conversations. His company alone employs a nice amount, primarily a 30–40-something crowd, and there is probably room for a few more infographics wizards.

The reason for ample jobs in Louisville is logistics. The city is geographically central. Draw a large circle around it, says Judy, with a radius of 400 miles, and the population within that circle equals 66 percent of all the millions of people who live in this country. People who need things and buy them. This is considered prime real estate for lots of companies who've made Louisville their hub, or a major hub site, for primary methods of shipping and transportation. Because of the logistical advantage offered, corporations such as UPS, FedEx, and Amazon — the biggest of shippers — call Louisville home.



Potential relocators who attended the 2013 fair seemed fully cognizant that a successful relocation hinged on their finding a job, whether it means securing employment with the largest of corporations, such as the real big ones based in Louisville, or smaller business never heard of on a national level.

Most every successful job search starts with the updated, even revamped, CV. With this in mind, the OU scheduled volunteer professionals to be at the fair to help candidates best market themselves — on paper for starters. Beyond the OU Press exhibit table, which displayed a collection of published hardcover and paperback releases from the organization's publishing division, tables were arranged L-shaped for scheduled slots of what the identifying sign called a “Resume Tune-Up.” I approached at one point in the afternoon and observed seven or eight candidates sitting opposite the female and male professionals from various industries. Those offering the advice handled the CVs gingerly, and looking carefully line by line, listened to the job candidates, while offering relevant suggestions and modest encouragement.

## Portland, OR

Portland, OR, has most of what any Jewish community can offer — synagogues (four are Orthodox), an established day school, mikvah, eruv, kosher dairy restaurant (meat menu on Tuesdays, with entrees priced \$18–\$21), and a JCC, with a 25-yard, six-lane lap pool.

There are 47,000 Jews in Portland, according to a Federation census conducted in 2011 that revealed a whole lot more members of the faith than previously thought, and surprisingly, nearly double the oft-quoted number. But most of Portland's Jews have not been synagogue-goers — only 11 percent attend, the survey shows, and only a third participate in some forms of Jewish activity.

This reality beckons those committed to outreach work, kiruv professionals who have come to the city to woo some of the younger population who, in contrast to those in their 50s and older, have not been involved or found a comfortable place to express their Jewishness. The Portland outreach team believes that there are many individuals in whom an element of yearning — or, or at least a desire to discover more — is readily present.

Rabbi Yossi Goldblatt, Director of Programming and Development at a program called The Portland Kollel, speaks to me about their efforts to reach out to other Jews. The Kollel motto is “Torah for All.” Rabbi Goldblatt, in his late-20s, arrived in September 2012 at the suggestion of Torah Umesorah, which has affiliation with the Kollel and initially founded it back in 2005. The educational organization

made the introduction between the rabbi and the kollel and strongly encouraged his move to the community — so he picked up his family and left the far away Belarusian city of Pinsk, where he had spent six years working at the Jewish school and orphanage.

The fostering of a Torah observant life in Portland needs more able people, Rabbi Goldblatt says. One of their recruitment goals for the community, and a reason they attended the fair, is to draw young adult kiruv professionals to what has been touted by media and others as one of the best American cities to live in (and a prime place for families to visit).

Rabbi Goldblatt is not the sole educator at the Kollel, which was founded a decade ago. The team includes three other rabbis and their wives, and a couple other individuals. He elaborates on the “Torah for All” credo: “Our mandate is to provide Torah to the entire Jewish community of Portland and to build Portland into a viable Jewish community.” Their website appeals to all affiliations, lists various Portland suburbs whose residents are presently joining learning opportunities, and stresses the importance of “uniting fellow Jews through Jewish education.”

In any Jewish community, it's essential to have established learning programs at varying levels. This is vital for the larger well-established Jewish habitats, and those that can be termed “emerging.” On a Thursday night in Portland, as the work week ebbs, the Kollel becomes a gathering place of study for the “all” that the kollel motto celebrates. Rabbi Goldblatt conducts what has become a popular class with repeat attendees, It Takes 2 to Torah. It's a chavrusa, or one-on-one study opportunity, with source sheet handouts to involve the learner. Between 30–40 people gather each week to ponder topics such as the permissibility of “Going up to the Temple Mount,” The Oral Law and Mesorah, and the structure and meaning of the Pesach Seder Night service. And each evening, 15 community residents join the kollel learning seder. “The Daf Yomi and Mishna Berurah shiurim are going strong,” Rabbi Goldblatt says.

But aside from Kollel activities, there's regular synagogue life in Portland's observant, or close-to-observance, community. Rabbi Ken Brodtkin of Kesser Israel, the main Orthodox shul in town, describes his congregation as an “eclectic group” where “people do different things.” Some are observant in a halachic sense; others help build the shul in alternate ways.

“People are very open out here,” says Rabbi Brodtkin, affirming that there are many young Jews who, in fact, could be reached out to, with reasonable chances of success, even if not bountiful. Achieving a sustainable Orthodox life in Portland is still a work in progress. “Orthodox Jewish people, when there were, left the city,” he notes. But things are picking up, and now there are young frum families who

were not here when he came ten years ago from Houston, a city where he was also involved in outreach education.

Actually, this has been Rabbi Brodkin's first pulpit experience. When he was considered to lead the congregation, the president at the time, Rick Haselton, stated how the congregation was very impressed by the rabbi's resume, but even more so when he and his family visited during the recruitment process. "The Brodkins are bright, energetic and open," the synagogue lay leader said. "They have an instinctive ability to understand where people are coming from and have terrific interpersonal skills. They're particularly interested in reaching out to teenagers and families, especially those with younger children."

During his tenure, Rabbi Brodkin has maintained Kesser Israel as a place of inclusiveness. The shul and overall community is trying to be "a big tent for everyone — all Orthodox types," he says, conjuring up an image — perhaps the House of Abraham — that other rabbis also call upon freely.

If Rabbi Brodkin describes his congregation as eclectic in background, his own background also shows some variety. Nearing 40, and originally from Boston, Rabbi Brodkin learned in Israel for four years at Toras Moshe and a kollel in Beit Shemesh and spent his college years at Brandeis — a History major, who speaks about history from the pulpit. His semicha is from Rabbis Zalman Nechemia Goldberg and Gedalia Dov Schwartz. Rabbi Brodkin and his wife have six children and he's a proponent of Portland's unique characteristics as a location — he extols the city's quality of life, innate beauty, and comfortably slower pace.

The synagogue presently has approximately 120 family members. Every additional family counts. As of this past fall, 10 Shomer Shabbos families had moved into the area, seven of them with elementary school children. Hopes are for a few more willing to head out West. There were some positive early indications from the Community Fair, with 130 sign-ups, then 20 resumes sent, and four people that applied for jobs shortly after. The Kollel's Rabbi Goldblatt says he was taken by surprise at the large response — "I was shocked."

Rabbi Brodkin, though, stresses that his hopes don't lie exclusively with new arrivals from other places. "My personal goal is more on families that live here." He's trying to reach those living outside the immediate synagogue area, introducing to newcomers and existing shul-goers what he refers to as "foundational ideas that speak to people's lives." One of Rabbi Brodkin's 45-minute Shabbos Haggadol drashos, for instance, focused on "Is it a Mitzvah to be Machmir on Pesach," a topic that could play equally well in the largest, most-established Orthodox communities, places that are hardly lacking the

resources necessary to facilitate a comfortable Orthodox lifestyle — a blessing which presents a challenge in its own right.

What Portland seems to have in abundance, that may be a draw for new families, suggest the rabbis, is cohesiveness in the community. In the bigger cities, the full union of disparate Jewish elements, at the local level, is a rarity. When it happens, it's news material. Out of town, as is often stressed, has no such luxury. There are too few Jews to go it on your own.

Also abundant in Portland is the noted scenic advantage — it's “outdoorsy, good for kids,” says Rabbi Goldblatt, who faced a strong adjustment of terrain, tempo and mentality upon moving back to the US. Portland is safe, he says, listing more virtues: It's “very green, tons of museums, coast, mountains, desert, Columbia River Gorge . . . in sync with nature.” Rabbi Goldblatt calls Portland a “relaxed town,” and he knows like-minded families will appreciate it in the same way he does.

In addition to being a poster-pretty city, Portland has a low cost of living. A 4-bedroom home on a one-third acre can be rented for \$1500 a month. Purchase of a similar-sized property, a 4–5-bedroom, will require \$300,000 to \$500,000. In regards to Jewish education, the Maayan Torah Day School, four years old and with more than 65 students (Rabbi Brodtkin is Rabbinic Dean), is offering 15–20 percent discounts for the first two years (regular tuition is just under \$10,000). The shul and JCC also have discounts of their own for new families that will join the Portland community.

## Columbus, OH

Richard Barnett is at the fair representing Columbus, OH. He's known the city for 40 years — enough time to understand the facts, see the evolution of a community, and consider what the next steps might be for growth. Columbus has had a presence at each of the OU's four community fairs, “been part of the show since day one,” he notes. “Repetition is important, it can take years,” says Richard, to cultivate familiarity.

Even if Columbus is accepting of slow growth, they do know their target audience. It's one of two scenarios and not so different from other communities: young couples looking for residence, just starting a family, or . . . younger adults, a little more settled, that need better opportunities, and what Richard calls “Mid-Western values.”

I listen, wanting to believe, but many out-of-town places mention the “values” word. Can he prove it? Seminaries coming from Israel to interview students have assessed that differentiation, he continues —

and though I can imagine he's told that to people before me, many times, I believe him. I've witnessed it.

Richard (known by many friends and colleagues as Rick) owns a real estate brokerage in Columbus. There were a good number of brokers who came to the fair to speak with firsthand knowledge (and enlarged neighborhood maps) about home costs and current availabilities in their areas, and, in Richard's case, about what money can buy in Columbus, a city with a Jewish population of 24,000. Richard knows all the streets and avenues, and the institutions. He is communally entrenched — a past president of Torat Emet, the largest Modern Orthodox shul in the city, school involved, and sits on five boards.

Columbus religious leaders also came out to the fair. “All three rabbis [are] here from shuls — everybody is on the same page,” Richard tells me.

When I first arrived at the Communities Fair that Sunday, I met two of those rabbis. They were very much on the same page as far as a lunch break was concerned. When I first entered the fair building (via the Metropolitan Pavilion loading dock — my mistake), I had meandered into a side room off the main event space, after peeking in to see what was being served up and who was taking a break from the show floor set up.

Rabbi Chaim Yosef Ackerman and Rabbi Avi Goldstein were catching something to eat, but answered some brief questions, after I initiated the conversation.

Rabbi Ackerman, a Chofetz Chaim musmach, serves Ahavas Sholom and its 100 member families that are of various religious leanings and commitments (they describe themselves as a “diverse membership” on their website). The synagogue has a 100-year history. The present building's sanctuary affords emotionally and physically comfortable services for all who attend and has implemented an innovative sectional one-way glass mechitza to allow the women's section full view of the shul.

Beth Jacob Congregation, the flagship Modern Orthodox Columbus synagogue led for decades by Rabbi David Stavsky, who built the Columbus Orthodox Jewish community (an epic story in its own right), is also a welcoming spot, sporting an almost over-abundance of programs for all audiences.

Enter Rabbi Avi Goldstein, a Ner Yisrael graduate, who has been at the synagogue now for just over three years. He arrived to lead Beth Jacob in January 2012, following rabbinical experiences at sizable and well-established synagogues in Baltimore and New York, and was hired, one can only assume, given the broad constituency at the shul, for his background working with all ages, especially youth. He

holds a Masters degree in Clinical Community Counseling, which could be viewed as instrumental as the shul attempted to affect some positive changes. “Like most shuls,” says Rabbi Goldstein, the goal is “to increase membership, try to generate momentum, a culture of optimism — without breaking from tradition.” Creating that feeling of momentum is especially necessary for institutions that are experiencing change or regrowth. Changes, invariably, can take longer to transpire. Momentum can happen more quickly and can insure that changes actually do transpire, that results will come because the commitments don't wane.

Since starting at Beth Jacob, Rabbi Goldstein's mission and mandate has been to foster this change, in a synagogue 200 families strong, 40 percent of whom are “still not” shomer Shabbos, and to do so while keeping things familiar to those who have known the shul in a specific way. To “keep and embrace Rabbi Stavsky's tradition,” explains Rabbi Goldstein, who recognizes that he, today, is in certain paralleling ways following the footsteps of a young rabbi, a graduate of Yeshiva University, who in August 1957 — fresh from a US Army chaplaincy — accepted a position that would soon oblige him to steer a community towards deeper religious observance. That was a different era; Orthodoxy was a weaker force. Rabbi Stavsky started with adherence to the Sabbath and allegiance to Family Purity, and even as the community grew larger, the membership younger, more fluent and more faithful, lived by the credo which he would quote, *kol hamekayem nefesh achas b'yisroel* . . . if you save even one Jewish soul, it's as if you've saved the entire world.

The Columbus Jewish community charts their growth, representatives say, at about five to 10 new families each year. But first there are the necessary visits, the weekend being the most strategic time to provide an accurate experience to visitors. The 2013 spring fair had resulted in 24 requests to visit for Shabbos, by the time that fall came around. Aside from an affordable home, Richard Barnett promised the weekend guests, and any others that relocate, that they are in store for a warm and heimish environment. The only major adjustment challenge, he concedes, whimsically, is that those who choose to relocate to the city will find it “difficult to adjust to the amount of money they have at the end of the day,” as people free themselves from the costly tolls of the NYC byways that remain far from the thoughts of Columbus residents.

Harrisburg, PA

If families feel strongly tethered to the Northeast, they might consider looking at Harrisburg, a city familiar to many who've visited some of the local family attractions, such as Hershey Park, or a bit

further, Lancaster County's Amish experience and amusement destinations — including a kids favorite, Dutch Wonderland (head just another 20 minutes southeast for the National Toy Train Museum in Strasburg).

Orthodox Jews in Harrisburg live in a smaller walkable area within the city. There's one shul, Keshet Israel, and a satellite minyan in a private house, as well as a Chabad Shabbos minyan with a 9:30am start time for shacharis.

Rabbi Akiva Males of Keshet Israel, who is standing at the Harrisburg table when I approach, tells me he is surprised by the range of housing prices in his area. The price points, he senses, hinge on closeness to the highway as well as the size of the home.

Rabbi Males points out a Harrisburg advantage that many families would find attractive: There are no plane flights necessary to travel to New York City. Distance is a relocation challenge that many Jewish communities must deal with when trying to attract New York families. Proximity to close relatives is a strong consideration when contemplating a move, and for some, being nearby is a mandatory requirement. Though driving New York-Harrisburg is fine (and to Baltimore via I-83, an hour-and-a-half drive time, is not even a question), commuting to work on a daily basis won't be happening — unless a breadwinner is employed in the trucking industry.

“Elizabeth can tell people to keep their job. We have to connect them with a new job,” says Rabbi Males, pointing to the advantage that cities close to New York have for those presently employed, and happily so. Originally from Cleveland, Rabbi Males studied at Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva and then moved from Queens, NY, in 2007 to Harrisburg to assist the soon-to-retire rabbi. As the state capital of Pennsylvania, there are abundant government jobs in the city, and the shul community has been more than conscientious about helping facilitate employment in multiple industries. They founded K.I. Recruiting (the initials are the congregation's: Keshet Israel) to formalize the process of passing along resumes, and they've hired a staff person to work exclusively on the job-related initiative. In a more recent conversation, some months back, Rabbi Males mentioned that they were dealing with “10 excellent resumes” which were being shared with employers. It's quite clear from the way he speaks that he believes that relocation hinges almost exclusively on jobs. The local Orthodox community can have a wonderful shul and other Jewish benefits, but for any couple or family considering a move, he says, “the only compelling reason to leave friends and family behind . . . is to be employed.”

Rabbi Males has watched as many communities from across the country — including his own — bring out their people, set up their exhibit presentations — “The same things happens at fairs . . . no one likes to speak about this,” says Rabbi Males, as he wonders about the efficacy. He points out that those specific places that we all hear about as having enjoyed tremendous Jewish growth — Texas and Florida, for instance — have also had an “incredible job market boom.” First there has to be a job opportunity, Rabbi Males contends, then families can decide if there's “viable community living” in that area that meets their particular needs.

It's, therefore, not just pure altruism that motivates Harrisburg's more aggressive and involved approach in finding jobs for candidates. Like all the other communities on the list, they need the people. Rabbi Males has seen “communities that have fallen apart because of the job market,” and has even explored and written about one place near to Harrisburg, Mahanoy City, a former coal mining town that lost its Jewishness over the span of decades, as has happened in many industry towns.

When mining became extinct there was no longer a need for the Jewish merchants . . . the shop owners that had initially come to the small towns for opportunity. No merchants, then no need for a kosher butcher, and so on. When the economy slumped in Mahanoy and elsewhere in the region, it stayed that way. (The city can't even afford to demolish the abandoned synagogue building, built in 1923. Its doors were locked in 2003, and even 15 years prior to that there were predictions in the newspapers of its closing.) It doesn't have to be a coal mining town. The kids go off to college, says Rabbi Males, and don't come back. They move away because the jobs are elsewhere.

After living in Central Pennsylvania for eight years, Rabbi Males has become convinced that another issue which many older communities contend with is not the local economy, but religious faith.

“Orthodox shuls throughout America were built and populated by 'Traditional Jews',” says Rabbi Males. While many may not have been fully observant in practice, they retained nostalgic memories of the religious traditions of their Bubbe and Zayde, and that brought them almost exclusively to the Orthodox shul. But many of those traditional Jews are disappearing; they're in their 80s and 90s now, and the younger generation, if they affiliate, will often do so with a different Jewish denomination. Orthodoxy as a whole might be thriving (compared to decades ago), says Rabbi Males, but on the smaller communal level “we're the most at-risk denomination.” “If the mikvah or day school closes,” generally speaking, it's the Orthodox community that will falter. The eruv, he adds, “is a luxury.”

At the fair, alongside Rabbi Males, stands another representative: Arielle Salkin, also from Harrisburg, but now living in Washington Heights with hundreds of younger observant Jews also in their mid-20s.



(She managed a soap and body product business — Sabon, manufactured in Israel — and now does fashion design.) The advantage of a smaller community, stresses Arielle, is the safety net. She has had friends in New York that fall through the cracks, “young people having trouble finding where they are at.” In her hometown the connectedness is stronger, and it's there that she finds easily, what is for her, a missing dimension in the larger places. “I always find it very relaxing when I go back to Harrisburg — a breath of fresh air.”

Kesher Israel Congregation was founded in 1902. Just 50 years earlier, and 40 miles away, was the Battle of Gettysburg, the three-day fight that was the Civil War's largest and that resulted in 51,000 casualties. The 150th Anniversary of this turning point in the war was first commemorated in 2013 over a number of summer days, as June swept into July (anniversary-related programs continue). Rabbi Males and his wife Layala went ahead of the expected crowds and took a guided bike tour of the battlefields right after Pesach that year.

The American history education, as well as the lighter entertainment attractions in the area, are worthwhile additions for families that will choose Harrisburg first and foremost for the sense of community and economic opportunity. But even those not yet searching for a new home in the area can plan to at least visit Harrisburg, with the incentive of a stay at the city's kosher guest house, Rachel's Rest, an establishment run by Sharron Ellyce on a property footsteps away from the Susquehanna River. Rachel's Rest has two guest rooms and remains the only kosher guest house in Pennsylvania. Sharon prepares specialty meat or dairy meals (all cholov yisrael) for guests and also for local delivery to those staying in hotels or residing in the city. Room rates are \$120 or \$138 depending on the season and include a full buffet breakfast (fresh squeezed juice, breads, lox and cream cheese, eggs, omelets, pancakes, and salads). “I will serve it up to twelve noon — they don't need lunch,” says Sharron, as she reveals to me some of her menu (she does in fact prepare lunches when guests request).

Dinner seems an even more tempting time at Rachel's Rest. Sharron walks me through her regional-themed Pennsylvania Dutch Seven Sweets and Sours — a kosher replica of the Amish cooking found at communal events in the heart of Lancaster County, where various families contribute assorted dishes for gatherings such as barn raisings. A cloth streamer running the length of the table in Sharon's dining room is set with seven bowls of food items — the introduction which gives the meal its name, its flavor and identity. The meal continues with chicken corn soup followed by assorted side dishes, meat and poultry, such as schnitzel and potatoes, pot roast with carrots and onions, various salads, and other

novelties that include apple butter and pickled red eggs (yes, indeed . . . ask for doubles), and cabbage-based dishes. This array necessitates a minimum of six people and an outlay of \$42, but other dinner options start at \$28 for Chinese food, salmon, butternut squash soup, asparagus, meatballs, and honey fried chicken — the batter coating assisted by a variety of spices, including turmeric, cinnamon, and ground flax seed. Save room for Chinese Butterfly Cookies (or the next morning's breakfast).

After dinner, Sharron's guests should avoid heading straight to their rented quarters and lounge in her “gallery of art,” which is scattered over five rooms and two hall areas and includes an assembled-collection of Judaica displayed on the walls. Sharron, when pressed for a number, counts in excess of 30 oils, watercolors, charcoal, and other original art, including lithographs that she culled from assorted visits to auctions or consignments shops, or received as gifts. Her favorite (if she must choose) is an oil portrait of a child — somewhere “around ten,” Sharron guesses — that resembles one of her grandsons. One of the more notable items, however, is a painting of a Chasidic man holding a chicken over his head, an artistic rendition laden with concentrations of purple and white. “Picasso like . . . and representing kaparos,” Sharron explains, before revealing one more, perhaps unexpected, item in the gallery. Sharon has sheimos on display: a salvaged Torah in a “grape and gold” embroidered covering with thin tassels as trim, an older scroll that was no longer usable in a house of worship, but could still be admired and revered . . . in a kosher guest house along the banks of the Susquehanna.

## White Oak, PA

Head a few hours west from Harrisburg and you can find another part of the state that has had Jewish settlement for multiple generations and a modern steelmaking legacy that defined and solidified the area.

The US steel industry started to decline in the late-60s, even as the US maintained its edge for another decade or so over foreign production. McKeesport was a thriving Pennsylvania city prior to the downfall, with abundant jobs available throughout the industry. It was also a place where many Jews settled, a mill town whose name — even if not all the facts about the location — was well known by European Jews. The immigrants had heard of McKeesport while still back in the Old Country, and many newcomers arrived on these shores and headed straight to Western Pennsylvania, a couple decades before and after the turn of the 20th century.

Gemilas Chesed Synagogue, today located on Summit Street in White Oak, an adjacent community to

McKeesport, was founded by Hungarian Jews in 1886 in Pittsburgh's Third Ward, closer to the rivers (the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio intersect) — what is today's downtown area of the city. The Orthodox synagogue moved in 1963 to White Oak, a location 15 miles from its Third Ward origins, and the place to where the Jewish population had shifted. They took the pews, the bima, and marble Torah ark with them. They are presently to be found in the synagogue's chapel, where they remain in use.

Aharon Guttman, native to the area, can tell you some more — the past history and present tidbits of note. He had lived in New York for a couple of years, attending Touro's Lander College in Queens, but now he's back in White Oak, PA, his hometown.

“Does he have a choice?” would be a fair question. He's fourth generation; parts of his family came to the area as early as 1908 as part of the immigrant wave. His family, as a whole, is a mix of Czech and Hungarian, and some of those who arrived in later years had lived in Germany — and then fled to China, when running from the Germans during the war. Things are more tranquil these days and Aharon works in the family business (they have two stores — in White Oak and also in Greensburg, 22 miles away) selling appliances and mattresses, a combination found elsewhere, and now living room furniture too. Serta is a good choice, he advises.

White Oak is a suburb of Pittsburgh. Squirrel Hill, probably a more recognizable name and more Jewishly entrenched, is a neighborhood within the city, 20 minutes away by car from White Oak, or closer to a half hour with traffic. Living in White Oak offers substantially more value. Food prices won't differ much, but housing is where it counts for families looking to have some more for less. A three-bedroom home in Squirrel Hill will fetch \$350,000–\$400,000, and at times lower, but \$125,000 is all that is needed in White Oak. Reach \$150,000 and a four-bedroom brick house becomes a possibility. That leaves a lot over for a good mattress — and the latest appliances! Aharon is a recipient of this savings, with a six-bedroom home to call his own and a more serene life in certain ways. “I leave the keys in the ignition of my car,” he shares willingly. I'm tempted to ask him his exact address, or even just the cross streets (and if he can fill his tank close to the top).

The present Gemilas Chesed building (this is the only Orthodox shul in White Oak) is a 1960s construction, a tall brick building with Ten Commandments and Star of David icons on the outside, and inside, large partially-tinted windows in the front of the sanctuary that bath the room with a glow of light. The room can fit 350 and the synagogue also has an available social hall. Shabbos day there are regularly 40–45 adults — “all walks of life,” says Aharon — and Rabbi Moshe Russell, in his later-30s, acts as education director and interim rabbi and has been there for five or six years.

People who've chosen the White Oak community as their new home have come from familiar places like Scranton, Monsey, Brooklyn, and Baltimore — “there's a huge medical field here,” says Aharon. Huge, indeed; the Pittsburgh area has 43 hospitals.

Aharon came out to the communities fair to introduce White Oak, and weeks after the fair was over he was still in recruitment mode following up with fair visitors. “We actually had four people that are serious candidates,” he told me in an earlier conversation, a response that could be labeled a real good return from the 8–10 people who stopped by to talk for a bit and 30 names total collected at the booth. Unfortunately none of the four “could find jobs in their field,” Aharon relays. They were specialists. Still, additional families, who didn't attend the fair, nevertheless saw White Oak's information on the OU site, among them an IT person who moved with his wife and two kids the December that followed the event. They relocated from San Francisco, and the husband had visited a month earlier to scout. He's in the 30-year-old range, “around the age group of everyone that is moving in these days, 28–32,” says Aharon. They're enticed in part by rental discounts sponsored by the community. Aharon tells me about good deals. Imagine a 2-bedroom apartment being offered for \$200 a month for a full year — compared to a \$500-a-month regular fee. (Even \$500 sounds mighty good.)

This past summer, White Oak welcomed three new families who relocated, bringing new faces to the shul. But there's also attrition, as two moved away — one family returning back to New York and one headed on to Columbus.

One of the questions readily asked is how many families have in fact moved because of the OU Community Fairs? — held in 2008, 2009, 2011, and this last one in April 2013. The organization's Department of Community Engagement, which is responsible for the fair and implements other community and member-synagogue activities and programs throughout the year, conducts studies to measure response. The numbers that relocate are not gigantic, considering crowd size at the events. Between 25 and 35 families headed somewhere “new” as a result of the 2011 fair, though one can assume other influences too. It's hard to track actual results as many have been exposed to new communities at the fairs, but decide only at a later point to relocate. Others don't actually attend the fair, but utilize the OU's community portal on its website to consider options.

What's more transparent is that attendees at the fair are at some stage of information-gathering mode. An OU survey of the 2013 registrants found that 14 percent were at the event primarily to gather information and learn more about what's available, but with no immediate plans to buy moving boxes and padded crates. For others it was more than just curiosity or general edification. Thirty percent

responded that they are considering relocation, and 15 percent attended primarily because they are seeking employment opportunities. The largest slice, 41 percent, describe themselves as actively planning on relocating, though not indicating — and perhaps not even certain themselves — as to when that will likely happen.

I was particularly interested in the time frame. From the minute a couple decides to get engaged till the actual wedding day can be weeks, months, and in some circles even longer. What are we talking about here — another significant life decision — from the moment a family decides to relocate until the time they actually arrive at their new address? The OU says they'd like to cull hard data that tells more about the moving process, but for now can more easily share some of the known facts: From the time of the 2011 fair it took approximately 10 couples a period of six months to “pick up and move everything.”

In general, the OU downplays the notion that there are any precise numbers that can stand as a measure as to the success of the fair and surmises the exhibiting communities are of like mind. The goal of the fair, Community Engagement says, is to “inform people that are looking to move that there is life outside of the Metropolitan Area, and communities looking to grow.” They have “continually” heard from community representatives that their ultimate goal was to get the word out about thriving Jewish populations in their towns and cities.

As part of the survey process, in addition to inquiring “why” people came to the latest fair, the OU asked them “who” they were. Few were empty nesters (only 4 percent), and even fewer, single parents (2 percent). Singles — as in never married — accounted for 16 percent of the attendees and 20 percent were married without children. The largest category were married, divorced or widowed with young children (the oldest being five years or younger), at 34 percent, followed by the same marital status with older children (the oldest being six years or older), at 24 percent.

Sociologist teams could probably wait for a couple more fairs and squeeze additional revelations from the data, but the OU's surveys and follow-up assessments are a good starting point to understand the observant Jewish demographic that is considering relocation.

Still, I can easily think of some questions that were not asked in the follow-up survey. Beyond the tabulated numbers, further insights into the “who, what, where, when and whys” of relocation derive from the anecdotal evidence, the conversations and registered lilt in the voice, or gesticulations, barred from the average pie chart.

A sidewalk conversation with a friend, for instance, highlighted some of the restraints that limit family

migration, keeping back those who've pondered a move to somewhere else (even if they haven't identified to where). It was a Sunday morning while walking on the way home from minyan, and I mentioned to the fellow in passing my article and its focus. He told me his family had looked into options to leave New York — specifically for Seattle, with ample computer research opportunities at Microsoft, for which he'd also, as a PhD in the field, “amply” qualify.

The family didn't move, they reside in Queens, and he shared a belief which I found insightful, even semi-novel, as I'd never thought about it. “There are only a few windows of opportunity when you can move with kids,” he said, matter-of-factly. (As a child, I moved a lot — in the Northeast. Five years here, three there, then two, and finally we settled in for a couple decades. My dad had been a professor and moved for work.) Aside from the State of Washington, the friend said his family did consider Israel, but his mother-in-law, who was elderly, lived in the Queens area, so they can't move. An interesting aside that he mentioned is that when you transfer with a company to a cheaper housing market, they do lower your salary, commensurately.

Israel — as a relocation option — had come up before. It was a late afternoon shalosh seudos meal at a local synagogue, and a fellow who'd been active in the synagogue was discussing his imminent move from Kew Gardens Hills to Cedarhurst, a path in the direction of the Five Towns that others from Queens have taken before. They would rent for starters as they looked for a home, and basically the kids needed more grass, more yard.

Listening in at the table were a number of Israeli men. It's hard to say that Israelis just listen, and the move the fellow was talking about, obviously a chapter of note in his family's life, produced a discussion of aliyah — or, for many munching on tuna fish, potato chips, and challah rolls (plates of hummus too), going back to Israel. The joke goes that the many Israelis well-settled here in the US are only here temporarily. I don't know the exact formulation, but all jokes have kernels of truth and some have clumps.

Aliyah is a worthy goal, but many families are seeking a stateside solution. An aliyah expo, the community fair was not (this will be tapered slightly for the 2015 fair). Though once the discussion is being had, Israel could well surface, as an option pondered by some, the brave and idealistic.

Southeast, MI

Thumb through the 8.5x11-inch program guide, given out at the 2013 Communities Fair, and you might

stop momentarily when you see reference to Southeast, Michigan. It's a somewhat new way — intentional and strategic — of referring to the northern-suburbs-of-Detroit area where the concentrated observant Jewish community resides, places like Oak Park and Southfield. That's where it's at now, but before the outward migration that began in the 1950s, Jews lived in downtown Detroit. Of that era only architectural relics remain.

When the economy faltered in the last big recession, and the auto industry went down with it, the community got hit hard. A number of years later, that's not completely in the past, but Michael Zwick, who lives in Huntington Woods, located east of the Southfield and Oak Park communities, says “it's slowly picking up.” Huntington Woods is another emerging option for observant families (a more costly neighborhood and considered more stable in terms of property values), and the good news Michael shares is that, there, “houses are going briskly.”

Michael says the change is real. The first convincing sign — to him, at least — was when a “friend overbid on a housing purchase.” Since the Winter of 2013 or so, houses are going for the asking price, but “you still get a bargain here,” he says.

Monica Fishman, another “observer” in the Detroit Jewish community, elaborates on the name change: “unfortunately, [there's] a stigma of Detroit . . . we're suburbs.”

The dividing line between the city and the suburbs is Eight Mile Road. The cultural significance of the boundary is unavoidable, common knowledge. The more affluent, largely white suburbs are further north, away from the dividing line. Huntington Woods is closer to 10 Mile Road, and the city has a very large percentage of Jews and a few dozen Orthodox families. Most attend the Young Israel of Oak Park. This is where Michael heads — sometimes with his son — a mile walk from his home, a stroll through neighborhood parks.

The Kollel (Kollel Institute of Greater Detroit) is also located in Oak Park. The interaction between neighborhoods takes place as roshei yeshiva present shiurim at local shuls, and the people who live in other neighborhoods, or belong to other shuls, may daven on occasion at the Kollel.

The Modern Orthodox Akiva Hebrew Day School is a leading educational institution which starts at nursery and runs straight through high school. There are over 270 students and conversational Ivrit is commonplace in the classroom, including a Hebrew Immersion Program in Akiva's early childhood center, and an ulpan blended learning program being piloted, that began this year in grades 6–12. The

school's connection with Israel is paramount — nearly 100 percent of high school graduates attend an Israel program, and the school hosts two Sherut Leumi girls who work in the school, in addition to other shlichim. “Zionism is not just discussed or learned, but is part of the breathing fabric of every day life at Akiva,” says Jordana Wolfson, the school's chief administration officer, who is also a resident of Huntington Woods. As for the “Bnot Sherut,” Monica has seen them frequently. Two were living with her family last year and she appreciated that opportunity a lot. Two “replacements” came this fall, and Monica's neighbors — right next door — are the new hosts.

Compared to the general New York area (a perpetual comparison) buyers in these parts of suburban Detroit can expect to pay 20–30 percent less for a house. With that savings they get a “diversity of homes, diversity of people,” Monica says. There are jobs in town too. Monica knows about them since she has spoken to HR people who can't find enough talent. Engineering and IT are big. “Our shul has averaged 10 new members per year for the last five years,” she told me in one conversation, mentioning six new families that have joined since January 2014. A couple more moved into rentals or with parents, while looking for homes to buy. Monica is a member of the Young Israel of Southfield, which has approximately 125–135 families. A portion of the new families were in-town people who gravitated to their shul, and others were arrivals from places like New York and Indiana, but not only. People come for jobs, but for some, the primary motivation has been to be near family.

“Believe it or not, the community is growing,” confirms Aliza Sosne, who's lived in Oak Park for many years. She says that in 2008 and 2009 people were leaving Michigan. Foreclosures were common and a year or so after, “the future looked bleak . . . however, there are not many houses on the market lately.”

One influx, she says, are many Kollel and yeshivish families who are looking for an appropriate community after spending a few years studying in Israel. Housing and tuition are significantly lower than many other possibilities that they might consider, so Detroit becomes a natural and necessary choice. For doctors looking for Shomer Shabbos programs — which many Detroit hospitals offer — the community also seems a natural choice. (Aliza's husband is an ophthalmologist. Both are from out of town, he from Atlanta and she from Paris.)

New building construction is another indication of growth and community commitment — witness a huge Bais Chabad, a high school, and a preschool building for the Bais Yaakov. “Our population is growing and getting younger,” says Aliza, mentioning a retention of native Detroiters who don't feel the need to leave post-marriage. “Young couples used to migrate to New York or Lakewood after their wedding, but now they opt to stay in town.”



Aliza, who has more than a handful of children, can recite a list of youth group options available for kids, including Bnei Akiva, and Pirchei for boys and Bnos for girls. She touts the availability of separate swimming options and daily gym classes for women at a JCC located in the center of Oak Park — close enough to squeeze in to the daily busy schedules that many moms juggle.

Kosher food in Detroit is ample at the big supermarkets and specialty shops, and there are a few restaurants to dine in. And yet, Aliza confides that with all the food that her family and other families have available, she is still looking for one more kosher eating staple: “My only regret is that we do not have a Chinese option, but maybe some entrepreneur will come and open one!”

### Scranton, PA

While Detroit waits for a waiter to bring curled fried noodles, hot mustard, and a small bowl of duck sauce, those wanting to head straight to dessert can look two states away in Pennsylvania.

The afternoon of the fair, I had passed by Scranton's table more than once, noticing many blue, neatly-arranged presentation folders ready for taking, and a tray of fresh-baked square brownies ready for the same. I took neither, but there were those who responded more forcefully and actually took a bite of Mrs. Patty Schwartz's sweets (she's a local brand, “Patty Cakes,” under the supervision of the Scranton Orthodox Rabbinate — and you'll have to move to Scranton to partake more regularly).

The community left the fair with less baked goods as well the inedible (not mushrooms, kids!), 98 email addresses to follow up with in the months post-event. Their hopes, according to Dassy Ganz, a rep with 35 years behind her in Scranton, are to identify two to three families that would move over an 18-month period from the time of the fair. Scranton's aspirations are yet another illustration of how some communities will make an investment of this sort to gain even a couple new members (Scranton calls it their *hishtadlus*).

The nature of inquiries coming in some weeks after the fair, says Dassy, were a number of people who called asking to visit just for Shabbos. Not what they were looking for, she says, and the community politely told them so, though they still make effort to host people who inquire — in the spirit of *hachnasas orchim*.

Scranton is an older community. There's no hiding the fact. Locally, they've witnessed the changes in the day school population numbers. The direction is understood. “We don't have new young families coming in,” Dassy says. “We're trying to tell people that we're still here.” Scranton is a two-and-a-half

hour drive to New York City — or two hours to the George Washington and Verrazano-Narrows Bridges and the tunnels. Industry has changed and is less hands-on work — “more computer oriented,” says Dassy. “We have potential for real jobs,” she adds. The community freely shares opportunities; they list select jobs and other relocation considerations on their website, “Jewish Scranton,” where one can also read testimonials from current residents. Travelers may have been exposed to Scranton — or the basic surrounding area — en route to one of the Jewish summer camps that are located close by.

Rabbi Aryeh Jakubowicz, a Jewish educator in town, came to the fair for the last few hours — the staffers were working in shifts. He's five years in Scranton, having lived in Denver prior, where he was involved with a community kollel of the Lakewood Yeshiva in a learning and community-teaching capacity. Rabbi Jakubowicz, now in his mid-to-late 30s with a wife and eight children, studied in Lakewood for a number of years and had been at Philadelphia Yeshiva for high school. He was looking for a chinuch position, which seemed scarce in certain markets, but Scranton Hebrew Day School had an opportunity teaching fourth grade boys, which he accepted (the school has 90 children — mostly from yeshiva-oriented families).

The Scranton exhibit, he says, attracted those who were serious, families that “were not window shopping,” but could express with some clarity what they specifically needed in a community. “Housing is cheap,” says Rabbi Jakubowicz (a reaction to an economy that is not strong). Walk 12 minutes from Beth Shalom Synagogue, one of the Orthodox options, and there's a home that had been listed with four bedrooms, two full baths, with nice wood detail, hardwood floors and high ceilings. It was first listed at \$135,000, then was lowered to \$127,500. That's 2,555 square feet of space — a home built in 1930.

Who's a good fit, in his estimation? “Young or middle-age people with children to populate the shul, who will be active contributing members of the community,” says Rabbi Jakubowicz. Given the economic realities in Scranton, people who need a job will be tough to absorb (though they might consider opportunities in Tourism, a growing industry in the area, as well as the education, health, and social services sector). Religiously “the community is a mix,” Rabbi Jakubowicz says. There's the yeshiva, which is well established, a solid institution, but he notes that it's not in the neighborhood where the observant community lives — not even the rebbeim live there. Then there is the Modern Orthodox shul community, Beth Shalom Synagogue, led by Rabbi Yisroel Brotsky (Machzikeh Hadas, led by Rabbi Mordechai Dov Fine, is a more yeshivish option for shul goers).

What Scranton has in place — and most residents wholeheartedly affirm this — is the chance to grow

spiritually and physically. This is readily available, no matter the season, and Rabbi Jakubowicz, in town long enough to appreciate the community's assets, is a firm believer that the “hilly city” has some convincing selling points for those who'll be able to see past some lingering limitations. He doesn't feel a material lacking, for the most part, rather sees areas of chinuch that he had in more abundance prior to his move — in Denver, a much larger city — that need bolstering. “What's missing for us,” he says on a personal note . . . “it'ss very quiet, nice in a way, but it's a small metropolitan area, not a lot of opportunity for outreach, programming, to be mashpia on other people.” Comparatively, Denver has much larger numbers, 70,000–80,000 Jews to work with. Scranton has 75,000 as a total city population.

Five families did move to Scranton in 2013, and two or three since, adding significantly to the day school population. “It would be considered a victory if we got three a year,” says Rabbi Jakubowicz, picking a number that he feels confident could possibly happen on a regular basis.

“We are doing what we do best,” says Dassy, “welcoming visitors.” The Scranton website, she relays, is getting hundreds of hits weekly and people with serious relocation intent have asked about visiting for a Shabbos, but “whether they move here, remains to be seen.”

Patty, if she's one to err on the side of optimism, should bake a few more batches to be ready in case.

## Austin, TX

People think of Texas as having a certain level of mystique. It's often viewed as larger than life, but not in an unwarranted way. Firstly, it's a big state. And it's got oil. Oil is power — until we find more alternative ways to energize our lives. Second (and maybe third and fourth), there are at least as many cowboy types in the state as there are on TV. Or at least you can see them out and about, as I have, and they're wearing the hat correctly (buying one is the easy part).

Families, whose sole encounter with Texas may be the connecting flights at a Houston airport, might wonder what's it like being a Jewish Texan? When observance is of primary importance, Jewish relocation to the state offers three major choices. The big names would be Houston, Dallas (which was given some attention earlier on) and Austin. For the differences between them, I consulted a man named Joel Tandler, a fair representative from Austin who had moved to Texas — yes, from the East Coast — in 1996. Nearing two decades in town makes him an expert, a primary source to reckon with, even if not sporting a Western hat — at least on fair day when mingling with a heavily-New York

crowd.

Joel's an IBM patriarch, an IT architect. Houston is an older community, he says. "Austin is much younger, still growing." And he finds it more comfortable — he likes his weather over the Houston humidity. Hopefully he also likes college kids. The city is certainly a college community but also houses state government and hi-tech industry.

From Austin's perspective, Joel feels that the first OU fair they participated in was a "learning experience." This time they knew what to expect. "The OU did a very good job," says Joel, satisfied that people at the 2013 fair were folks truly looking to move, and appreciating that the event drew "three to four times the amount," in his estimation, that came to the prior one. That means more candidates for all cities — and Joel categorized them as more suitable ones too, this time around. Their first fair appearance found prospects were mostly interested in jobs, but in April 2013 there were other primary reasons for relocation being expressed, ones that could be more easily satiated.

The challenge Austin and other more remote-from-New York areas consistently face when marketing their communities is the cross-country factor. Joel provides contrast by comparing a more casual move (if there is such a thing) from the Five Towns to New Jersey. "Across the country is more demanding."

At the fair, Joel was joined by Rabbi Eliezer Langer of Tiferet Israel, the local Orthodox synagogue. I recognized him easily, having known him in the mid- and late-80s when I'd travel to California to recruit for Yeshiva University's undergraduate schools. He had been rabbi in San Diego from the late-70s till 1996, moved to Israel for 10 years, and then segued to Austin where his son-in-law had started a local kollel. Rabbi Langer came to the community to be a member of the kollel, to learn there, and to also become rabbi of the shul, the one Orthodox shul in Austin. (In September 2014, Rabbi Langer became Rabbi of Congregation Schomre Israel in Poughkeepsie, NY, and Rabbi Dan Millner, a Chovevei Torah musmach, who will also receive semicha from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi Zalman Nehamia Goldberg — and who also has chaplain experience in the US Navy — has filled the position in Austin). It's a small community, an outreach environment, as Rabbi Langer describes it. He feels there are reasons to anticipate future growth in the area, but readily acknowledges that there's a need to first strengthen observance, to "raise the level of chinuch in the community to meet the expectations of Torah families" who could potentially relocate to Austin.

The shul has a daily minyan, Torah studies classes, and visitors who stop in from time to time. It's a "hi-tech city," says Rabbi Langer, "so there a lot of hi-tech people who come here for their work, for a week or two, and daven with us." Fifty families are part of the shul and there are various levels of

observance among the membership, which includes some professors from area universities. In the adult educational realm, a Shmooze and Learn series of classes, started by Rabbi Langer in 2006, meets on a monthly basis. He doesn't need to be sole presenter, rather different people speak on their field of expertise. The engaging and varied talks draw people from outside the shul too, which is helping the outreach effort.

In addition to Tiferet Israel, Texas' capital city has a Chabad a mile and a half away. Other synagogues, from non-Orthodox denominations, are situated, together with Tiferet Israel, the Austin Jewish Academy, and the Jewish Community Association, on the Dell Jewish Community Campus that opened in 2000 on land purchased by Michael and Susan Dell. The couple donated it with the intent of having a center for Jewish life in Austin.

For the Orthodox family, synagogues and schools are tops on any checklist, as is food. There's "a surprisingly large amount of kashrus for a city of this size," says Rabbi Langer, singling out the H-E-B supermarket, a chain in Texas which has a North Austin branch selling deli, grilled foods, and that features a popular butchery, even drawing kosher shoppers from elsewhere in the state.

How many might move to Austin? "Three or four families in the next year would be great," Joel tells me, quantifying the community's realistic goals. Rabbi Langer describes the likely candidate as "someone willing to be one of the founders of the community, to shape what will take place" over the next few years. It's "a time of growth in our community," he says, and with some new arrivals will be "planting seeds for the future." (Five new families with children moved in during the fall season that followed the fair.)

Rabbi Langer says they are trying to publicize that "there are frum people here, one can live here — a lot less expensively." Local hopes are that when Austin participates again at the next Communities Fair, this reality will be a better-known fact.

That, indeed, is one of the most significant benefits offered by the OU Jewish Communities Fair program, a chance to hear about many different places with Jewish life and speak with actual residents — all in one short afternoon. But there's an added and underlying benefit, formative in its own right: the experience of changing one's mindset.

The notion that New York is the ideal place to live is ingrained and easily justified by a large percentage of the observant Jewish population. Other locations become travel destinations or places that appear occasionally in news stories or conversation snippets. They never can occupy prime time

when New York is the focus, the “mindset.” Just to learn that there are communities out there that are viable — and more than just viable — seems to be a blessing that the fair provides all participants. Less-familiar communities can become more tangible, more dimensional, more likely considerations for families that are exploring viable options to match their individual situations. The mindset change doesn't likely happen, or even begin, at one event, but a lot can transpire during a single afternoon.

## New Hyde Park, NY

But what about local choices — for those that can't get away? There are a number of lesser-known communities in the New York City vicinity that yield good value and provide solace for those that need to stay close for reasons of family or work. For instance, just a few blocks in from the Nassau County line on Union Turnpike you'll find the Yong Israel of New Hyde Park. It lies east of the more populated Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods of Queens, five to ten miles away. The Young Israel is a smaller shul with a nicely-designed, renovated sanctuary, a social room downstairs, and even a boutique clothing gemach on the same lower level. That amenity is a side room that has been transformed into a place where pricier brides dresses and other costly formal wear can be borrowed as needed, helping contain some of the costs that wedding planning demands.

If clothing selection — at least for some important functions — is immediate, kosher shopping is further, but still close by, a short drive or bus ride away to places like Kew Gardens Hills and Jamaica Estates. For those who can dispense on the idea of being in the heart of it all, New Hyde Park offers a lower-cost housing advantage. “The 'typical' house in the neighborhood,” says Rabbi Lawrence Teitelman of the Young Israel, is a detached cape running in the \$400,000s, however some people who want more space opt to expand to a larger second floor or even go up to a third floor.”

There's kosher pizza in town, which, in all seriousness, functions as one barometer or measuring stick of a community's conduciveness to Orthodox living. (It's not about the pizza, rather the availability being an implication that the Orthodox community is established, populated with necessary resources.) But more integral are an eruv (now enlarged) and Jewish day school (a five-minute drive from the shul). In April 2013, New Hyde Park celebrated the dedication of a new \$500,000 mikvah, which has pushed the desirability of the community up a few notches.

Many residents who live here commute to Manhattan, but there are doctors and a roster of other medical professionals who, over the years, have also opted for New Hyde Park in order to be close to

Long Island Jewish (six blocks from the shul) and associated hospitals for their training. “It’s nice to be able to walk home, rather than drive or take a bus after working 12–24 hours,” says Rabbi Teitelman, while stressing that medical professionals are not the core community.

Aside from proximity and home values, New Hyde Park incentives include, for an initial period of residence, free shul membership and home rental subsidies, and beyond the monetary, what the community feels is a “warm, out-of-town environment still inside the city (or just into Nassau County).” Rabbi Teitelman keeps everyone connected in his weekly shul bulletin, *The Park Page*, and this summer will celebrate his 450th consecutive issue. He is eight years at the synagogue and continues the good work of Rabbi Meir Bilitzky, his predecessor, whose decades of leadership forged a vitality of religious life in the immediate area. Rabbi Bilitzky, who passed away in December in his mid-80s, was a graduate of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin, a student of Rav Hutner, and a fighter for Orthodoxy. His legacy encompasses prayer, kashrus, Jewish education, family purity, and recreation — the Queens Jewish Community Baseball League, which he helped found in the 50s, enabled Sabbath-observant boys to play baseball on Sundays.

Mr. Nussi and Dr. Devorah Reich — she is a gynecologist and he sells dental materials to area dentists — are relative newcomers to the community and very satisfied with their relocation choice. They married in August 2013 and moved right away to New Hyde Park. Prior, he was living in Montreal, Canada; she was here in New York. They are a young couple, both in their mid-20s.

Devorah heard about New Hyde Park and found that Rabbi Teitelman exuded a warmth, says Nussi. “Not every rabbi has that feeling. He came across as really, really special.” The initial reception from the rabbi was “one of the driving forces” that influenced their decision to move to the community, as did the option for townhouse rental. They weren’t going to purchase, he says, since they “didn’t know what the situation would be after residency.” They suspected they were going to be “living the nomadic life.” Nussi gives rental figures as \$1500–\$1800 for a one-bedroom unit in a development a 10-minute walk from the shul, and 10 minutes to the hospital.

Nussi shares details about his life in New Hyde Park. His weekday schedule is to learn *Daf Yomi* in the mornings, followed by *shacharis*, and then there are the weekends. “*Shabbos* is a beautiful thing, nice crowd, *achdus* . . .” he says, a mixture of Sephardic, Litvishe — and even Chasidic people in town, if there are family members in the hospital they’ve come to visit. His wife, Devorah, attends shul “when able,” but it’s not always easy while immersed in a medical residency program. He describes the shul as very close-knit, “everyone has been here a very long time, they know each other, like a family.”

When the Reiches head out for provisions, they usually visit Main Street in Kew Gardens Hills, a place where they do most of their shopping. They had also enjoyed Mazurs, a nearby kosher grocery/bakery/butcher that was located in Little Neck, but the store closed last April because of competition from other kosher markets in the area and the bigger franchises like Fairway, which opened up a mile away. But home for them remains away from the more Jewishly-populated areas where they go out to shop, and Nussi says it was intentional, that they chose New Hyde Park over Kew Gardens Hills because his "wife felt it quiet and serene, not a lot of hustle bustle." Still, the rabbi "was the clincher," he says, coming back to their initial impressions of Rabbi Teitelman. The kindness impressed them.

The shul is glad to have the Reiches, too, as part of the community, but might be silently wondering how long they will stay, knowing that the medical student "nomads" are highly transitory. It's a four-year residency and Nussi has heard that people usually leave after that. But he's not there yet. For now they're quite committed to New Hyde Park. "Of the things I look for in a community, it has it all," he shares, also noting that it's a good religious fit. Both Nussi and Devorah grew up with Modern Orthodox machmir backgrounds. Both went to college. She's going to be a doctor; he majored in aeronautical engineering, but became involved with the dental industry, which he likes better. Their future chapters, whether as residents of New Hyde Park or another Orthodox community somewhere in the country, remain to be written. As still newly-marrieds in a relatively new home, this chapter is their focus for now.

Linden, NJ

Though no award ceremony at the fair, I thought the staff at the Linden, NJ, booth should qualify for best costume. No face painting or anything elaborate, just orange outfits — tops — which confused me a bit when I saw them — at first from a distance — and I kept thinking West Orange, remembering how teens from that New Jersey town would consistently don orange suits at many NCSY youth-weekend shabbatons in my time, the late-80s (I was there as an adviser).

"The Linden Tigers," one of the reps explains to me. . . "local high school basketball and football teams, the school colors . . . ."

Now I got it. I guess you have to live there to know — or tune in regularly to local sports.

I stand there at the Linden exhibit table, and Josh Weiss, another one of the Linden reps, tells me a bit



about the community, as I adjust to the abundance of orange, but yet cleave to my penchant for earth tones. I've visited on a couple of occasions, but not of late. He says he's in town six years, originally from Passaic. In the last five years prior to the 2013 fair, 21 families have moved to Linden and five new families were to close on homes in the next few months. The Linden group expressed hopes of having a sum of 30 by the end of the calendar year.

Josh has been actively involved in the shul as vice president. Next to him stands the shul president, Sender Gross. Rabbi Steven Dworken, a professional Orthodox communal leader, had been rabbi of Congregation Anshe Chesed for 23 years, followed by Rabbi Cary Friedman — an empathetic author, creative educator, and pastoral consultant to law enforcement — for seven years, then Rabbi Aryeh Stechler. Since 2009, the shul has been led by Rabbi Joshua Hess, who couples his rabbinic responsibilities with employment as a chaplain at a rehabilitation center a few miles away. He's offered pastoral care and warmth there for those far along in their years and has likely met some centurions too, seniors who've reached that special milestone — just as his congregation did. The synagogue recently celebrated its 100-year mark.

The present shul building itself is an older edifice, built around 1958, with another side of the building constructed in 1960. A sizable sanctuary with a ballroom in the back occupies the majority of the ground floor. There's a gym on the premises, as well as a post-high school seminary for boys, Yeshivas Zichron Leyma, that uses a portion of the space. Some Anshe Chesed congregants are in their older years, recognizably so, many in their 90s, some survivors. The shul prefers to call them “established members.” Years ago, says Josh, there had been discernible age tension, as newer, younger members contributed to the revival of the synagogue, but also invariably changed the tenor of the shul. Josh assures me that now there's “nothing but peace and tranquility,” but Linden's situation is a balance that many synagogues grapple with as their populations age and especially if religious orientation or practices of recent arrivals differ from the tradition, a “certain way of doing things” that was fixed in place for decades.

The day of the event, the Linden orange-clad staff work the fair booth, but there have been ongoing recruitment efforts for quite a few years, in particular a noticeable advertising campaign — in black and white — that appeared at times in some Jewish publications and that first began well over a decade ago. Only 36 minutes to Manhattan by commuter train, along with affordable housing, seems to beckon many. This, together with Linden's promoted claim that they offer “the most affordable real estate for a Jewish community in the NY-metro area” is reason enough for younger families wanting the NY area

to at least take notice. A certified Kosher Dairy Queen, Rita's Ices, and, in the last two years or so, kosher cakes and breads at a nearby ShopRite supermarket, are, so to speak, the “icing on the cake.”

Ten families have moved into the community since April 2013, Rabbi Hess tells me, when I contacted him for updates. “I would say that we connected with two of the families through the OU fair, but we had other connections to them as well.” Linden's steady growth and the influx of families has kept a momentum going and spurred construction of a new mikvah. The groundbreaking took place July 2013 and the project has progressed smoothly, with an opening expected early this year.

At the tail end of the OU communities program, I noticed that a fellow, whom I guess to be in his 30s, was one of the later ones leaving. I caught him as he headed out of the building, and quickly — as he was nearly exiting to the street — inquired about what brought him to this latest communities fair. He resides in Rockland County, somewhere in the Monsey area, and told me he's considering a move out of town. He named a couple places on his short-list, but didn't want his own name used, and he'd probably prefer I not even mention his destination preferences. I remain, then, sworn to secrecy. If it hasn't already become public knowledge in the intervening couple of years, people in his community would be surprised to hear that he is looking — or was looking — that he's had his foot partially out the door. He wasn't ready then to publicize his exploration and requested that I help him preserve his anonymity. What responsibility — whew!

In close-knit communities, a possible departure is often kept under wraps during the consideration stage (but, understandably, once the 24-foot moving van is on the block, the cat is out of the bag). After fair day that April, I thought about the many people I sighted in 2009 and a husband and wife from the Five Towns I had interviewed then, he an attorney, she a teacher.

After the article I wrote about the 2009 OU Communities Fair appeared in a New York Jewish publication and in a couple of places online, I caused a little commotion in their lives. Nothing severe, and it was short-lived.

I had mentioned that the couple — and I gave their names — attended the fair and that they felt they don't need to stay in New York (though he was more the “possible-relocation” initiator, she preferring to stay closer to family). I quoted the husband as saying that out of town can be a nicer place for kids to grow up: “From my experience, the people I've met in New York who are from out of town and small communities have a different set of values and a different comfort level with themselves and with their

Judaism.” (I also included their photo in the article, showing them, together with a few others, at the Norfolk, VA, exhibit booth.)

It seems they became semi-celebrities in their shul and probably on their block in North Woodmere. Amy and Jordan Hiller had surprised some of their close friends and acquaintances, and I wondered about them. Had they moved somewhere since that 2009 event? I emailed Jordan a few weeks after the 2013 fair to find out, then spoke to him by phone.

I learned that he's still in New York and was president of his shul, the Young Israel of Woodmere (he currently serves as Corresponding Secretary). The need to stay closer to family, maintain their connections, and work considerations made a move a “dream type of thing,” Jordan explained to me, “hard to make a reality.” Any move to another locale would have involved sacrifices that they felt too hard to make. (Jordan told me on a later occasion that though his family was staying local, his brother-in-law had moved to Memphis, initially for his wife's social work program, but they loved it and subsequently bought a home a half year later.)

Interestingly, the qualities and values that Jordan was initially identifying more easily in other parts of the country do exist, he feels, right in his own New York community. “North Woodmere and my shul has a very out-of-town feel — warmth, openness — almost what you don't see anymore.” For now, his and Amy's focus is on raising their kids. The oldest child, their daughter, is in seventh grade, and any future move, when it happens, would be further than any communities represented at the OU fair. “My pull is now to Israel . . . that we can justify more,” says Jordan, “the sacrifices we make.” Amy is well on board for that idea, and many would likely concur that when the time comes to leave their community, Israel is the sole destination they would seriously consider.

## Springfield, MA

Here's a helpful tip: On moving day when you're packing up the house and heading to your new home in Springfield, be sure to tell the movers which state. The New Jersey emanation is in Union County, seven miles from Elizabeth, and 10 to West Orange, with a population of approximately 15,800. But Springfield, MA, is near the Connecticut border, with a population about 10 times the size of its New Jersey namesake — 153,000 is the current tally.

The Jewish community of this city, like others with a history that dates back a long ways, saw an influx

of European immigration in the 1890s, Orthodox in practice. The Jewish population then was 1000. Existing synagogues spawned others — in the North End, an Irish-immigrant area that became predominantly Jewish by the first decade of the 1900s. This was a location of the city more densely packed, in contrast to the Springfield suburbs where the Jewish community would eventually migrate.

Until a few years ago, there was a kosher B&B in Springfield which had opened in 2004. Despite a dedicated hostess and appreciative guests, the tax liabilities, according to the owner, were excessively high. It's hard to run an inn and even tougher to keep a kosher inn afloat. To keep synagogues functioning and the doors open, in places where the population shifts over time, also presents a hefty challenge. The older structures need repair, and they, invariably, need a cadre of worshipers. In the North End many majestic structures no longer stand, or they function as non-Jewish houses of worship or serve other public use.

Congregation B'nai Torah is Springfield's amalgam of three area Orthodox synagogues, Beth Israel, Kodimoh, and Kesser Israel, that merged back in 2009, having agreed a few years earlier to do so. It was the correct and only decision, given shrinking membership and large buildings that were too expansive for present need.

Rabbi Max Davis has led the congregation for the past four years, a Yeshivat Chovevei Torah graduate who came east from a position in Berkeley, CA. He graduated Harvard, was an Urban Studies major, and is adept at serving a congregation of “different lifestyles and religious background,” as he phrases it, in a community with well over a 100-year history of organized Jewish life.

The shul itself has been a bedrock for Jewish leaders and has “tremendous yichus,” says Rabbi Davis, as he informs me of Kodimoh being Rabbi Norman Lamm's first pulpit at age 26 (he led the congregation for six years, then occupied the rabbinate at Manhattan's The Jewish Center for 18 years). Rabbi Davis also evokes the names of Rabbi Alex Weisfogel, a 1939 graduate of the Mirrer yeshiva and active leader in Springfield's Jewish and general community; Rabbi Isaac Klein, Czechoslovakian-born, an author, and respected as a traditionalist leader in the Conservative movement; and — more recently — Rabbi Yisroel Edelman of Kesser Israel, who now leads the Young Israel of Deerfield Beach, with its population of retirees who winter in the Florida community.

The beacons of these rabbis shine brightly for Rabbi Davis who singles out the inspiration he's received from some of the Vietnam-era sermons that Rabbi Lamm delivered during a tumultuous time in more-recent American history. In serving as rabbi of the merged congregations, now one, he is looking to the accomplishments of religious leaders he considers exemplary, striving to infuse his community with his

own leadership and some innovative ideas to enrich local Jewish life.

Springfield is benefiting from Rabbi Davis' creativity — both in the manner in which he teaches and in the programs he develops for various age groups. He feels he has a receptive audience: “People are very passionate about their Judaism,” he affirms.

Springfield's geographic location is also a plus, for people considering a move, but not too far. The city is highly commutable to New Haven and Stamford (a somewhat longer, hour-and-a-half drive), or even New York City, for those who can stay over during the week (one school dean does just that). Then there are the local jobs in Springfield, or the short 35-minute drive to nearby Hartford, or an hour, perhaps hour and a quarter to Worcester.

Recruitment success for a community like Springfield doesn't require numbers in the double digits. “If we get one family — even five times is worth it,” says Rabbi Davis, referring to repeat participation at the OU Communities Fairs, where Springfield has chosen to exhibit. They have attended only two of the past four, though. The shul even joined the OU to gain access to the fair (and to stress their Orthodox ideology). “We take recruitment very seriously,” says Rabbi Davis. They met with eight families at the 2013 fair and then extended invites for Shabbos. One couple called the following November to visit, Rabbi Davis says, and he also tried concentrating on the nearby Worcester community, meeting with families who felt the need to relocate to a more Jewishly-vibrant place. Worcester, home to about 60 observant families, has experienced attrition but yet maintains a day school and has a kosher dining option now open to all at Clark University (\$9 for a meal — and tasters say the food is great).

Worcester, in the end, didn't yield the hoped for results — a couple prospects regained job opportunities there, so stayed — but there's an Israeli family in town on shlichut and another Israeli family who live in a nearby town who participate in synagogue programs that are not Shabbat-based. A family from West Hartford also joined the shul, a move motivated by jobs in the area, and another smaller-sized family from Amherst, 25 miles north, is planning to sell their home to be closer to the synagogue community. Then there's an inreach effort to people who live nearby who might gravitate towards a communal setting of stronger observance, even if they're not Orthodox themselves. A “massive website overhaul,” says Rabbi Davis, is being enlisted to support the general recruitment effort and strengthen the shul.

Elementary Jewish education in Springfield is provided by the community day school, Heritage Academy — about 60 kids, a diverse student body, says Rabbi Davis — and high-school age can travel

daily to the coed school in Hartford.

For parents of younger children, an item of interest will be Springfield's eruv which has been expanded (a three-year project), bringing more homes, Rabbi Davis says, "within walking distance."

Rabbi Davis calls the first fair they exhibited at "disappointing" and is hoping for some more response to eventually emanate from this last effort. He feels that despite the large crowds on the day of the event, the numbers that actually move somewhere are low.

Those that do move to his area will actually be heading to a place called Longmeadow, a suburb five or six miles from Springfield's North End where the immigrants first settled. Jewish migration at play might seem on par with Rabbi Davis' urban studies interests, but he also finds other subjects compelling, including nature. The synagogue is situated alongside a large forest area, a 736-acre municipal park with a zoo, walking trails and lakes. Huge pines and oak trees, says Rabbi Davis — eagles, deer, turkey, and owls. Parts of the animal kingdom have meandered in the synagogue parking lot (surely ignoring the "Reserved for Rabbi" signs), but Rabbi Davis — and his congregants — are hopeful for sightings of some new families too.

Meanwhile he's pretty certain that a lawn on the side of the building will be just right for a cultivated garden. Congregation B'nai Torah has some former farmers among the membership and could grow vegetables, keeping some and donating the rest to local food charities, he tells me. A communal activity that not every shul can program on their calendar.

## Savannah, GA

Savannah is a city that offers connection to one of the earliest stages of American Jewish history. The first Jews came to Savannah on July 11, 1733 aboard the *William and Sarah*, and their transport was funded by Jewish Londoners who subscribed to a popular plan of the time which envisioned the new colonies as a better habitat for financially-dependent groups. Indigent Jews had been stressing local Jewish communal resources.

There were 42 Jewish passengers that sailed aboard the ship, and except for eight, they were of Spanish/Portuguese descent who had arrived in London seven, or possibly 10 years earlier. They brought with them to the colonies a Torah scroll and a box of instruments used for circumcision. For religious communal observance, they first met in people's homes, and in 1735 founded a congregation, Kahal Kodesh Mickva Israel, the third synagogue founded in the US, following Shearith Israel in New

York and Jeshuat Israel (Touro Synagogue) in Newport.

Chapters of Savannah's Jewish origins and other glimpses of rich American history can be experienced on tours that can be arranged in town for visitors seeking to discover the city, irrespective of a possible move.

For those pondering relocation, even if not by boat, one of the identifiable benefits will invariably be that Savannah is a combination of Southern living coupled with Jewish living. The city is host to one synagogue for each of the major Jewish religious denominations, and there's a kollel in town led by a younger rabbinical staff — for example, Rabbi Avi Nitekman, a Chicago native who studied in Scranton and Lakewood and who teaches a number of courses at the Kollel, including an In-Depth Analysis of Creation, which meets on Tuesday evenings. For children, the Rambam Day School serves the entire community, and even within 10 blocks of the school campus families can find affordable homes.

Harry Portman is one of the locals that came to the fair to speak with people. He's a third-generation Savannah native with roots that envelop some of this country's poignant and painful moments. His father's mother's grandfather fought in the Civil War (Harry's aunt has a framed photograph of his soldier ancestor wearing Confederate uniform, riding a horse.)

After college, Harry chose the medical school route. He didn't like it and now is pursuing prosthetics and orthotics. He married in 2010 and moved back to Savannah a year later (and is now in Atlanta for schooling). He tells me about Savannah's Orthodox Jewish population and that they reside in an area called Habersham Woods. Bnai Brith Jacob (BBJ), the sole Orthodox synagogue option available today (it broke from the Reform synagogue in 1862), attracts 200 shul-goers on any given Shabbos, a traditional crowd of various leanings — approximately 40 families are observant out of the 400 member families. As congregants take their seats, art and prayer mesh in the synagogue space. A unique and captivating painted mural from the early-60s, done by artist Gisbert Palmie, and designed by the previous rabbi, Abraham I. Rosenberg — who served BBJ for three decades — depicts the Jewish calendar's months and holidays, and historical and Biblical reference. It occupies a significant amount of sanctuary wall space. The weekly hot kiddush is an additional enticement and abides by health-consciousness trends — look for the pareve cholent which might win raves even from dedicated carnivores (the kiddush is usually dairy).

Rabbi Avigdor Slatius has been the rabbi of BBJ since arriving in 1981. It's evident that he's increased Torah learning in the community significantly. The day school attendance is four times larger than upon

his arrival (now approximately 130 students), and there still remains a lot of outreach opportunity present, along with ever-increasing desires for a high school to enable in-town Jewish education to span all ages.

This was Savannah's first time at an OU Communities Fair as an exhibitor. Harry had peeked in at the 2009 fair while at a wedding in New York City, to survey the scene and gauge if it was a place to be for next time. Attending was a good move, he feels. "We were talking for six hours straight." A total of four reps handled the table throughout the day. They were "full of positive energy after the fair was over," Harry relates.

What Savannah is looking for are the younger couples and also retirees who want a slower — and warmer— spot to spend their more senior years. As for the high school plans, they are more serious than before. "There have been efforts in the past," Harry shares, but as the recruitment effort become more serious, so does discussion of instituting post-elementary school full-time Jewish education. They know they need to plan ahead for a high school, to envision a place that can compete with out-of-town options, as well as established public schools that may also be, for some observant families, a legitimate choice to consider.

Harry's own background is from a traditional family. His parents now observe kashrus and are more observant of Shabbos, "finding more meaning it," he says, explaining that their religious growth resulted from a combination of his sister's and his own commitment, coupled with his dad being president of the shul for two years, along with other roles. His parents own a chain of musical stores (his dad's instrument of choice is French horn, his mom's, guitar), and Harry used to be involved in the business when younger. During his public school years, Harry was also involved with NCSY youth activities. Savannah today has active junior and senior (high school age) chapters that are influencing youth, including the spending of a formative year of post-high school Jewish study abroad. "More teens than every before are going to Israel," Harry says.

In the last couple years, Savannah has welcomed a number of new families, including one from Lakewood, NJ, and another from Texas, the husband working as an engineer in the aircraft industry, and currently at Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation located near Savannah/Hilton Head International Airport.

The "positive energy" from fair season had resulted initially in five families who expressed heightened interest. The community also spoke with a grocery store manager who could fill a position at a local Kroger Grocery store which has a number of aisles with kosher selections. There was another market



under construction, which Harry initially thought “will be the biggest Kroger in America” (123,678 sq. ft., according to company reports, which is an average size of many warehouse supermarkets). It opened last April, is the largest Kroger at least in Georgia, and the Orthodox community did work with them to give kosher food prime-time attention in the new space — making “a justification for it,” says Harry. They have also tried to find positions for lawyers by networking with a number of prominent attorneys in town.

Savannah is a close-knit Jewish community of 4000 strong. It's a family environment — meaning that members of the community, though not biologically related, feel a family-like connection. Harry refers to his parents' generation as uncle and aunt. It's an etiquette stylistically different from the practices in other places, such as Teaneck, NJ, where his wife Elana is from. She too came to the fair last April to share her story of what it's like to move from a Northeast community such as Teaneck to Savannah, Georgia.

Homes, for one thing, are cheaper than anything that Metro New York can offer observant families — \$225,000, or slightly higher, for a four-bedroom house (rentals are available, though Savannah is more of a buyer's market than a rental one, at present). The southern states offer weather that is pleasant year-round, which is conducive to retirement, and things are very close by, making the community senior friendly (there's even a kosher assisted living facility near the shul). The downtown area is 10–15 minutes, says Harry, and the beach is a half hour. Harry describes the beach as an activity, not just a destination. People “walk on the beach, there's a pier down there . . . . Some people from the frum community own beach houses.” They are trying to get an active minyan going, he says.

Harry can well imagine what it's like for families to transition from the New York City area. He's had a lot of New York experience, attending Yeshiva University, then spending some time in the Chaver Program, which provides a kollel learning schedule on the campus for relatively recent college grads who will be pursuing higher-level professional studies in fields such as medicine, law, psychology and business. He appreciates all his time spent in the Big Apple, but staying in the city was not his interest.

“I don't miss New York, I miss YU,” he confesses, acknowledging that living in a Jewishly-rich place like the NYC area would seem a plus for religious observance. But Harry's not convinced that holds true for everybody. He feels there's a tangible cost of religiosity in these prime locations. Judaism is “a little more scarce in Savannah, less available, we appreciate it more . . . .” He explains the equation more fully: “We make it more meaningful to us.”

Out-of-town living invariably requires more effort, more sweat. But it builds muscle.

Richmond, VA

Another southern-feel option, and not so far from the Northeast, is Richmond — a Virginia place with the requisite culture, bona fide history, and outdoors experience that offer residents lots to enjoy and encourage non-residents to visit for starters.

The good news for potentially-relocating families is that older kids will have an option beyond the eighth grade — not a given in many smaller communities. Both a boys and girls high school exist in Richmond, and full first-year tuition is offered graciously. Beyond that period, in collaboration with a state educational scholarship, there's free tuition for grades K–12. The qualifications require modest annual family income, and there's a schedule based on family size (e.g., a family with four children and two parents would need to come in under \$95,910 to qualify).

It's a tax credit program, explains Stuart Cantor, a community rep and Jewish-educational lay leader who can help decipher it for those hearing about the offer for the first, or even second time. Simply put, family income can't exceed 300 percent of the federal poverty level. There's also Turbo Charged Donations at play. A donor could reap a \$10,000 donation with only \$150 out-of-pocket cost. The community, basically, has means to provide free ongoing tuition to those that need it most. That's the most important thing to know.

At the community fair, 100 families signed up expressing a level of interest in learning more about what Richmond can offer, and Memorial Day weekend at the start of that summer drew some of them to a local shabbaton. How many have joined the community in recent years? I inquire, a few weeks after the fair. “We have had about 10 Shomer Shabbos families move to Richmond in the past two years,” Stuart answers. “None from past OU fairs. Roughly half of the families are individuals that grew up in Richmond that have moved back with their spouses.”

After the 2013 fair, two families moved in the summer and one in the winter. This last summer “was even stronger,” said Stuart, when I reached out to him last August. Richmond was excited to be getting 10 new families; some had already moved in, others were on their way. “Two of the families that are coming this summer came directly from the OU community fair. We also are in touch with a number of families that are considering a move next summer.”

Stuart conveys that the community is starting to see a “good number” of the graduates of their local high school come back to town to raise their families, which he considers a strong indicator of the

“positive experience” that students have had in Richmond “during their formative years.” A Richmond upbringing has been a causative factor in close to 45 percent of those who've moved in recent years, says Stuart, and since the 2013 fair, “five of the families that have joined the community . . . have at least one spouse that grew up in Richmond.”

Ariel Klestzick is one of those people who moved back to Richmond (almost three and a half years ago) — after being away for 15 years. He spent a handful of early years in Richmond, third through eighth grade, and recalls well the lessons in middos that he was taught locally — how to have respect for rabbis, parents, teachers, and friends. An impression was made. “I very much enjoyed my childhood in Richmond and always wanted to come back to make that the place where my kids would grow up to appreciate it as well,” he tells me.

Ariel married in 2006, has an affinity for Israel and warmer weather, but for now is committed to helping get the word out about Richmond and the significant financial incentives in place. “Free tuition” even for those who don't qualify based on financial need, after two paying children, he stresses, adding an additional detail to the already favorable-sounding tuition program, where every family who moves gets free education in their first year for all their kids. “The only thing missing now are more people,” he says.

Amit Cahana and his family are another relatively recent arrival to the city, having moved close to three years ago from Virginia Beach. Both adults are employed. His wife is an RN, working for a local hospital; Amit has a small consulting business that provides environmental cost reduction services.

They opted to move to Richmond because it's "central" — close to their family and friends in Virginia Beach, close to Washington, DC, and Baltimore, and less than a day's drive to New York City.

When not driving to other places, the Cahanas enjoy their greenery, the choice of many nature areas and parks nearby. Richmond is a river city with water activities. The weather is right for Amit — mild winters, not very cold. "I am originally from Israel," he says, “and I don't like cold weather."

Richmond has a strong economy, relatively speaking, and Amit characterizes it as very affordable — "prices are low and housing not expensive." His own home seems to be in an ideal spot, maybe even a perfect one. "We are located in the heart of a Jewish neighborhood," he tells me, “with a shul just a few blocks from our house on one side, yeshiva on the other side, a JCC in walking distance, and the RTA school (Rudlin Torah Academy) within 10-minutes driving."

“What is the South like, in contrast to Northern living?” I ask Stuart in an email and from the “safety”

of my own New York pad.

“I always tell people that 'Southern flavor' is intangible and difficult to define,” he responds. (I read slowly, with some anticipation . . . hoping he'll succeed in defining it for me.) “I explain that people are happy to greet you when they are walking down the street, courteous in grocery stores, and motorists will cheerfully slow down for pedestrians and wave regardless of whether or not there is a crosswalk.”

Stuart sees materialism as more present in the North. The South focuses less on that, he suggests in a gentle manner, "which results in a less hustle-and-bustle lifestyle and creates an environment that promotes the appreciation of others."

Stuart tells a bicycle story to illustrate his belief. His son, together with a friend, was out bike riding when his pedal loosened and he couldn't continue. While wondering what to do, the man who lived in the house they were stopped in front of asked if he could help them. He brought them to his tool shed, and there he repaired the bike. "They had never met this man," says Stuart, summing up his prized story, "but these sorts of occurrences are the norm in a place like Richmond."

Boynton Beach, FL

Rome wasn't built in a day, we're told. Not even two days (and a winter trip to that city two years ago ratified that). But how long does it take to build a Jewish community in our parts? The population, the infrastructure — two elements inextricably connected, each determining the other.

One South Florida Jewish community gives an idea of what's involved, the stages, the time span — Boynton Beach.

Florida is not a new commodity for Orthodox living. What's shifted in certain ways is the median age in some parts: Jewish Florida has been getting younger. A couple decades ago, Boca Raton emerged on the scene, adding to the already long-established Miami Beach and North Miami communities, Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood, and some other spots.

Boynton Beach is almost 60 miles north of Miami and experiencing a growing younger demographic, but not to the exclusion of a senior population, or retirees still drawn to the more friendly climate and comfortable lifestyle.

Adam and Tzippi Rosen and their family moved down in 2004. He works as a consultant in investor relations and she's a social worker. Prior to Boynton Beach they were living in Forest Hills, a Queens

neighborhood of note, now with high real estate prices, but his origins are in Charleston, SC, hers in Rochester, NY. They chose Boynton Beach primarily for its immediate value, realizing that even with the financial advantages of a move, their family would in some sense be pioneers. An Orthodox presence had begun around the mid-90s with a Chabad representation, but the first influx of young families to Boynton Beach started later in 2003–2004. These were families from a range of Jewish backgrounds, cognizant of their need and desire for solid community offerings, but wanting more for less. The area seemed to hold promise, even if the community needed some serious building.

As the families moved down, acclimated to the area, and settled into their affordable spaces, the missing ingredients became more felt. “We realized we need something — more infrastructure,” Adam recounts.

The main structure they needed was an Orthodox synagogue, in its traditional form — one that offered a place for prayer, along with full physical and programmatic amenities. Seventeen families began the shul, the first Orthodox Ashkenazic minyan in the city, an initial communal gathering that would proceed an actual edifice. “It started Shabbos Parshas Noach, November 2005 . . . we went house to house for 10 months, but all the while seeking a steady location we could call our own,” says Adam, speaking of the early origins of the shul group. “We wanted to make sure we had staying power.” They needed a minyan that would be regular, supported.

Five families in particular helped raise enough funds to purchase a home that was modified to be suitable for the minyan (they had been davening at the Chabad prior to that). That was September 2006 and Adam says from that time they still kept an eye out for a right property on which they could build the permanent synagogue that they saw as their end goal.

In May 2009, aided by the generosity of one of the member families, they purchased a piece of land and began a \$1.2 million capital campaign to raise the needed funds. It took another 20 months for building to commence. It was an opportune time to break ground from a financial perspective.

“Ironically, we built the new building for far less than the norm,” Adam says. “Contractors were laying idle and bids were well below what they could have been in a robust market . . . but no rougher time to raise money.”

Anshei Chesed Congregation is in the new building since April 2012. Adam, who had been president of the shul for the first six years, sums up the construction as “a leap of faith.” The building is made exceptionally well, he says, “replete with cinder block walls top to bottom, the blocks being insulated for outstanding acoustics — it has become a true centerpiece of the community.”

As I hear him tell the story, I think of “If you build it, they will come,” a misquote of “. . . he will come,” Field of Dreams lingo, the 1989 Kevin Costner film about a baseball playing field built in Dyersville, Iowa on a farmer's corn field, that brings back the baseball greats of yesteryear. It's hard to forget the monumental closing scene of miles of approaching cars along the road, bumper to bumper, inching their way towards the field where a fantastic dream has come true, materialized. The dream in Boynton Beach? In the last few years, more than 20 families moved down, and drawing in local residents, the shul's membership has jumped from about 72 to nearly 185 families since the new building opened its doors.

It's still Florida, so retirees and semi-retirees are indeed an integral part of the shul community and make November to April the more plentiful months of Jewish activity. But the building was designed to support the effort to attract younger families, to facilitate programs that would appeal to them, a full spectrum of Modern Orthodox. The shul is led by Rabbi Avi Billet, who came with Adam to stand at the Boynton Beach fair table, and who serves in a part-time position (soon to be full-time) which brings him, his wife and family to the congregation three weekends a month, in addition to all yomim tovim. The rabbi's Friday evening oneg series, begun this year, is open to the entire community. Rabbi Billet is a Speech and Drama major from Yeshiva University with semicha from its rabbinical seminary, RIETS. He studied at Gush Etzion, teaches in local Jewish schools, and at times is a traveling mohel (he chronicles some of his assignments on his blog), as well as a writer.

Summers are hot in Florida, so AC is mandatory. The beach is there, but Adam and family prefer the pool. “Every day of the year is an outdoor day for kids,” he says, extolling a difference that Northerners might find hard to imagine. For adults, blue water is nice, but location, from an employment and housing perspective, is a more basic human necessity. The stretch of 15 to 18 miles between Boynton Beach and West Palm Beach has become a sizable jobs corridor, and the Boynton housing values offer more than other South Florida communities with Orthodox life. Three to six bedrooms now fall in the \$225,000–\$550,000 range (prices are inching up steadily). Right before the 2007–2008 collapse, homes were listing for 30-35 percent more.

“Affordable!?! That's not even close,” insists Cyndi Schoenbrun, who moved with her husband from Passaic, NJ, to Southeast Florida in the summer of 2012. “It is incredibly cheap to still move down to Boynton Beach,” she says, both in terms of actual costs to purchase and also the expenses to upkeep and maintain residences. Cyndi dropped her property taxes from \$12,000 to \$2900; lowered her electric from \$500 a month to just over \$100 — and that's with AC running “most of the time.” Water dropped

from \$190 each month to \$27. Yes, they're drinking.

The Schoenbruns still have to go to Boca Raton if they want a real kosher food selection, and local kids have to trek 20 minutes there to attend school. Not so bad, and significant enrollment from the Boynton Beach area has resulted in round trip bus service to and from Boca's Hillel Day School.

“True, Boca has more to offer. It is the Teaneck of the area,” Cyndi acknowledges. “Boynton has a bit of a short/long haul until the community really becomes established.”

But the tangibles are there already — a full-time kosher meat restaurant that's in place for over four years (was Golda's, now King David, with new ownership), and a local BJ's store that was the first one outside of the New York and New Jersey area to have baked goods supervised by the Chaf-K kosher supervision service (there are pareve cakes and breads, and challah, as opposed to the usual dairy assortment found in these larger chain food stores). The BJ kosher bakery plan is expected to be rolled out to as many as 90 of the 190 company stores according to earlier press reports.

Cyndi has connection with the Chabad shul in the city and credits its head, Rabbi Sholom Ciment, as “the one really responsible for getting Boynton started for all intents and purposes.” He worked with one of the developers to make the family homes more “conducive” to younger frum families, getting gas installed for cooking instead of electric — which is highly unusual — and convincing several gated communities to install “Shabbos gates” locked with a key, which community members can purchase giving them a closer route to the shul.

More than happy with her choice of Boynton, Cyndi does miss the largeness of their Passaic three-story home, four bedrooms that wouldn't move with them, 3200 square feet. “We had a great backyard,” she laments, without anguish. “The house here in Boynton Beach is one floor, open space, three bedrooms — about half the square footage.”

Though there's smaller space for them in their new neighborhood, there's a lot of chesed. Cyndi's husband, Stewart, had a heart attack a couple years ago, a few months after arriving in Boynton Beach. Anshei Chesed members, he recounts, “were overwhelming, people helped in every way they could — they're just wonderful people.” Stewart in his Boynton Beach emanation is involved in the activities he enjoys and finds beneficial. He's taken on landscaping projects for the shul, has an opportunity for increased Torah study — “learn more than I did before . . . it's just fabulous” — goes to friends' homes, eats with them, plays occasional golf. This was always a wish of his, the weather and the pace. He turned to his wife one day and said “we made it.”

As young marrieds they would discuss “places” where to live. He said Florida, but she said she “can't take heat,” Stuart tells me. “You go to Florida, I'll go to Alaska,” was her steadfast response.” Florida living won out, though many years later, and initially the Schoenbruns came down to Boynton as a vacation. That was February 2012. It was a good vacation, influencing, and they wound up putting money down on a home. Now they're advocates for a lifestyle they know can please others — if they'd only get to discover it.

The OU fair in Spring 2013 was real good for Boynton Beach — “off the charts,” declares Adam, who tallies 57 families that spoke with him and Rabbi Billet. Emails after the fair brought another 83 inquiries. One family of six from Montreal moved that August, and a family of similar size from L.A. was serious about Boynton, the husband just waiting for the opportunity to transfer his business, or build a strong base by bringing his existing clients with him. Adam mentions a Houston family that has been in touch for many months. The husband's company transferred him to Florida, but gave him job territory that necessitated their renting in the Hollywood area. He's now trying to move his responsibilities northward so he can consider residence in Boynton. Adam also mentions families from Brooklyn and Far Rockaway that are interested (they've visited and are seeking jobs locally).

Interestingly, even Boca Raton families have “discovered” Boynton. Three moved in since this past summer, bringing 17 new children to the community. Two other Boca families are actively looking and Adam expects more to follow. Of those Boca families who've expressed interest over time, the ones who've actually taken the step, he feels, are the “Nachshon, first to test the waters.”

“If we can have even four to five families a year moving in, I can only imagine what it will be like,” Adam says with hope. But he stresses that time is really of the essence for families wanting to benefit from current property prices in the city. The Boynton Beach affordability differential may not be there forever.

Listening to and getting caught up in the story of Boynton Beach, Florida, I wonder about how this young, recently-rooted, growing community might develop in the next five to eight years, what form it might take. And I wonder what it might look like beyond that, decades from now. I can attempt to guess, but certainty only comes with hindsight.

As my mind pulls away from Boynton Beach, it seems to hover above an obscure, imagined semblance of a map, but with nowhere specific chosen where to land next. I realize that, as a writer, I could go on to other communities, get to know them, get others to know them . . . But I really can't. I wish I could visit each in person; each certainly deserves a modest treatise of its own. These shorter profiles



represent only half of the communities that were present at the 2013 OU Communities Fair. In addition, there are so many more Jewish living options across the country (and even over the borderline, in Canada) that didn't display their essence, or reveal their names, at the Metropolitan Pavilion that Sunday afternoon.

Because today we do have choices of Jewish communities, and no two are the same (similar, perhaps, but not the same), there is a dire need for information-gathering events like the communities fair. Onward from there, those individuals or families who are interested can explore further. They can research online, then speak to people, and there is still no reliable substitute for an actual visit. Choosing the correct community is a weighty decision, not easy. Psychology-driven consumer marketing studies prove that having too many choices may not be a plus at all. It can breed inactivity, confusion, rash decisions. Hopefully, the residential community that wins the vote now is the correct one for those families, couples, or individuals who'll need to live with their decision, at least for a segment of time. Aside from the expenses and agonies of any uprooting, there are serious ramifications to relocation: Each location, because of its unique character, will impact differently on family dynamic, education, physical and mental health, spiritual health, and shape the inclinations of future life choices.

While the topic of “Jewish community options” is essentially about relocation, I've understood, as have others I have spoken with and often quoted, that it's really also about change. The whole step-by-step analytical and heavily-emotional process of considering a variety of communities for potential relocation and then choosing one as the finalist (even if the decision might be to remain “right here at home” — and not move at all) reflects on the imperative we have to change aspects of our lives in order to better our situation. The Talmud-influenced pitgam phrases it as “Mishaneh makom, mishaneh mazal,” implying that people should change their physical place, their locale, in order to change their luck or destiny for the better. It's not merely a magical or astrological phenomenon, rather one's essence changes when influenced by a physical change in location.

Exacerbating the relocation dilemmas of “should I stay or should I go” (I borrow from the name of a song by the English punk band, The Clash — though they had love relationships in mind) is the fact that we remain creatures of habit. We define ourselves in a certain way, and from one day to the next that identification doesn't change much. There's a consistency. It shouldn't shock us to know that we define ourselves by our street address — a number combined with the name of a road — and the physical representation, the facade of our home. That's where we live, that's home, that's us. Even the dry cleaners where we drop off our shirts and skirts, or the local stores we regularly shop at form a part

of our self-definition. Human existence only survives with levels of regularity.

Where we physically live at present — our home, our community — can be categorized, then, as a habit, something harder to break or change, even if we want to. A lot of our habits are a response to social norm (positive habits and negative ones). Social or cultural norms exert influence on what we consider a “proper” or “acceptable” place to live. This in itself is not problematic, but unchecked it can stifle important questions that need to be asked: “Where do I belong?” “Where's the right place for my family now?” In most of my discussions — and there were many — people have told me about wanting to make a communal difference, in addition to receiving the various benefits offered them by their host community (the ability to make a difference is one of the ultimate benefits). What's best for an individual or family, from many perspectives, might be to not stay in the same residential location. Fortunately, the activities of altering our habits — including changing our homes — can take place at practically any stage in life.

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