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Selling a Neighborhood

March 03, 2011 - Bryan Schwartzman, Jewish Exponent Staff

Meir and Shira Reiner thought it was time to leave Queens behind and move to a more affordable Orthodox community.

Although Meir Reiner is an ordained rabbi, he works professionally as a high-tech entrepreneur. So basically, all he needs is a good Internet connection.

The couple looked into numerous options, but a year-and-a-half ago, they settled on a fixer-upper within easy walking distance of Young Israel of Elkins Park. The fact that Shira's parents live in Northeast Philadelphia had something to do with their decision, though plenty of other factors came into play, said Meir, a father of five.



"Downtown" Elkins Park, adjacent to the train station

Photo by Greg Bezanis

The couple, both in their early 30s, were enticed by relatively affordable housing, proximity to Orthodox day schools in Northeast Philadelphia and the Main Line, as well as the existence of an *eruv*, a nearby kosher bakery and a kosher meat restaurant.

"The core of the reason we moved here," said Meir, after davening Minchah on a recent afternoon, "is we felt like we wanted to be part of building a community. This community has a lot of the pieces already in place and has much more potential to grow."

Six years ago, Rachel and Jonathan Goldman were expecting their first child and ready for another major life change: trading in a Center City apartment for a suburban home with a driveway. They transformed, she said, from "cool, hip 20-somethings to parents. That was kind

of our leap."

They looked all over the Philadelphia suburbs, on both sides of the Schuylkill River, but ultimately settled on Elkins Park.





A shopper at Rollings Bakery picks up some challah rolls before Shabbat.

Rachel Saifer Goldman, 36, who works from home for *The New York Jewish Week*, said she was drawn by the proximity to Center City, the plethora of Jewish institutions, and the high quality of the public and private schools.

The mother of two has taken "Mommy & Me" classes at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel and enrolled her older son at Congregation Adath Jeshurun's preschool; he has since started at the Raymond and Ruth Perelman Jewish Day School. The couple belongs to Beth Sholom Congregation.

"Ultimately, we found the right house," said Goldman. "But apart from that, of course, we had to know that there was a strong Jewish community and good schools and all of those things that make up a life."

As it turns out, the Jewish community of Elkins Park -- actually, the whole area known as the Old York Road corridor -- is looking for more families like the Reiners and the Goldmans.

In fact, the seven area synagogues -- representing the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox streams -- have joined together to form the Old York Road Revitalization Group, and are on the verge of hiring a consultant to help make that happen.

The Attempt to Draw Them In

Plagued by a growing sense that many younger families are choosing to move to newer suburban communities that are farther from the city, the group is seeking a proactive plan to ensure that the Old York Road corridor -- which includes the municipalities of Cheltenham, Abington, Jenkintown and Lower Moreland -- will have a vital Jewish community for years to come.

Yet the task of enticing Jews to move to an area that may no longer be viewed as desirable as it once was appears to be a hefty one.

The leaders of the revitalization group say it's too early to discuss specific ideas. But they emphasize that the area's future shouldn't be left to chance, and that there are things that can be done to influence the outcome.

Mimi Schneirov, an Elkins Park resident since 1953 and former president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, said she helped organize the revitalization group out of a love for the area.

"We have seven synagogues from three different streams coming together with common purpose," said Schneirov, a member of Beth Sholom. It's about making this entire region "a more vibrant and exciting area so that the people who live here continue to want to live here, and we can attract new, young families to join us."

The synagogues, along with the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia, have pitched in to pay the roughly \$60,000 consultant's fee.

Part of the group's goal is to market all that the corridor has to offer, including the greatest concentration of Jewish institutions and services in the Philadelphia region.

The area is home to seven synagogues; six Jewish preschools; the sprawling Mandell Education Campus that houses Gratz College, a day school, a summer camp and an education/outreach center and more; the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; a host of Jewish



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Rabbinical College, a host of Jewish educational organizations and service agencies; a Chabad house; and Jewish-run sports leagues. There's also Rolling's kosher bakery and Max & David's, a kosher meat restaurant.

Shira and Meir Reiner, and their children, moved here from Queens, N.Y

"The Old York corridor is one of the two areas in Greater Philadelphia where you can live a rich and intentional Jewish life," said Rabbi David Glanzberg-Krainin of Beth Sholom Congregation, a Conservative synagogue in Elkins Park. He cited the Main Line as the other.

Those involved stress that the Jewish community has to partner with other religious groups, secular authorities and the business community in order to address broader challenges in the area. The revitalization group's request for a proposal for the prospective consultant specifically highlights a struggling business climate as a major issue, as evidenced by plenty of vacant storefronts along Old York Road.

On a micro-level, several Jewish business owners are looking to liven up the strip across from the Elkins Park SEPTA train station. The owners of the soon-to-be-open Joyful Art Boutique -- both observant Jewish women -- are coordinating a "First Thursday" series that's set to begin in April. Evening commuters will be able check out open gallery space, grab a challah from Rolling's or stroll into the nearby Etz Chaim center for a discussion of "Mitzvah of the Month."

"People are invested in the community and want to see it thrive," said Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom, who for the past 33 years has served as religious leader of Adath Jeshurun in Elkins Park.

Dealing With the Demographics

The very notion of an "inner-ring" suburb, of a concentrated Jewish community apart from downtown, seems to fly in the face of demographic trends that show Jews moving farther out from the city center.

The 2009 "Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia" found the most rapid growth in more ex-urban environs like Chester County.

Historically, wealthy German Jews settled the Elkins Park area in the early part of the 20th century. But the Jewish population really grew in the years after World War II, when families from Logan, East and West Oak Lane and Northeast Philadelphia moved to neighborhoods like Elkins Park, Melrose Park, Cheltenham, Wyncote, Rydal, Meadowbrook, Huntingdon Valley and Jenkintown.

For decades, the community there came to be seen as the epitome of upward Jewish mobility; Frank Lloyd Wright's landmark design for Beth Sholom boldly proclaimed that Jews had arrived.

Yet by and large, the children and grandchildren of that founding generation chose -- and are still choosing -- to make their homes elsewhere.

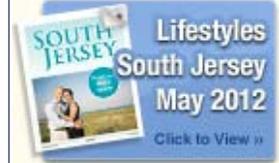


As large numbers of Jews have continued to move farther from the city, and as a greater number of ethnic groups -- mostly middle-class African-Americans and Asians -- have settled into the area, the reputation of the corridor, as well as the perception of many so-called "inner-ring suburbs" nationwide, has suffered.

It's practically taken for granted now that the Main Line represents a tonier address.

These perceptions have miffed longtime residents like Schneirov, who point to ethnic diversity as another asset for the area.

Residents enjoy a high quality of life, and "the perception of the place may not match the positive





reality that we have here" on a daily basis, she said.

Jonathan and Rachel Sailer Goldman with Max, 6, and Asher, 4 months. Six years ago, they relocated from Center City.

Nearly all of the major rabbis and communal leaders interviewed acknowledged, mostly based on anecdotal evidence, that the total number of Jews along the corridor has dipped from its high 20 to 30 years ago. But hard data is hard to come by.

According to the most recent population study, some 25,000 Jews live in what's known as the Kehillah of Old York Road, out of a total population of around 140,000 -- a significant percentage.

The problem in measuring the change is that the previous Jewish population study, conducted in 1997, offers no direct comparison. It reported that there were 30,000 Jews in the northern suburbs, but that also included areas like Horsham, Dresher and Blue Bell, along with the Old York Road corridor.

"There's no question that if you rolled the clock back 30 years, there was a larger Jewish population here," said Rabbi Lance Sussman, who is celebrating his 10th anniversary at Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel.

Noting that the previous generation "bequeathed to us an incredible infrastructure," Sussman said: "The critical mass is still here. We are all still running, but there are fewer people to pull upon, which makes things like membership recruitment more important."

Membership rolls have declined at the area's largest synagogues, with the possible exception of Old York Road Temple-Beth Am, a Reform congregation, which now has about 920 families and seems to be the only one that is growing. Two years ago, it dedicated an addition to its building.

At Congregation Adath Jeshurun, the number of family units is in the 700s, down from a high of about 1,000 two decades ago. In the past 20 years, Beth Sholom has dipped from 1,200 families to about 850. Keneseth Israel historically had the largest membership in the region; now the number is in the mid-900s. (It's been bolstered somewhat by the addition of a location in Blue Bell, an area northwest of the corridor that has seen an uptick in Jewish residents.)

But synagogues have lost members nationwide, and just because Jews are no longer affiliating doesn't mean that they have left the area, according to Rabbi Lawrence

Sernovitz of Old York Road Temple-Beth Am.

Sernovitz, a graduate of Cheltenham High School, is the rabbinic chair of the Kehillah of Old York, which isn't directly involved in the revitalization effort, and is instead concentrating on engaging families, especially interfaith families, that already call the area home.

"There is certainly a crisis in Jewish life and certainly on Old York Road," said the 38-year-old rabbi. "We look at the demographic trends and we debate -- we go back and forth -- on whether those trends tend to be that the Jews are leaving, or that the trends tend to be that people are simply unaffiliated. And I think both of those are true."

Another question is whether the area's Jewish community is aging, even more so than other areas.

To some, the decision by Federation Housing to build a low-income, senior housing complex across the street from Adath Jeshurun and the Mandell campus has only reinforced the notion that the community is graying.

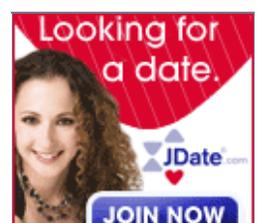
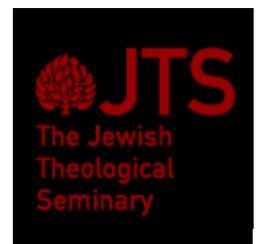


The 55-year-old Conservative Congregation Melrose B'nai Israel Emory El represents a case in



ADL'S WALK AGAINST HATE

ADL's Walk Against Hate is a national event that takes place in cities across the United States. The event is a walk that is held in support of the ADL's efforts to combat anti-Semitism and hate. The walk is held in support of the ADL's efforts to combat anti-Semitism and hate. The walk is held in support of the ADL's efforts to combat anti-Semitism and hate.



Emanuel represents a case in point. Once as popular as many of the other area shuls, it lies closest to the border of Philadelphia, which has undergone significant physical and demographic changes over the last 25 years. It has no religious school, let alone a day-care element.



The busy Old York Road corridor

Robert Evans, a longtime fundraiser for Jewish organizations and now a consultant, likes to state that synagogue buildings tend to have a life span of about 50 years.

"Nothing is forever in terms of where institutions call home," he said, noting that American Jewish families have tended not to remain in the same place for more than a generation. "I hate to be sounding cynical, I love living in Elkins Park, but I'm very concerned."

The area is home to a graying general population, not just Jews, said Evans, who lived for years in Huntingdon Valley before moving to a townhouse in Elkins Park. The lack of a strong business and corporate tax base had led to high municipal taxes, especially in Cheltenham township, and that's proved a financial disincentive for young families, he said.

Nonetheless, the fact that hundreds of children are enrolled in six Jewish preschools throughout the region -- and infant centers have recently opened and/or expanded at Keneseth Israel, Old York Road Temple-Beth Am and Beth Sholom -- would seem to point in the other direction.

Dire Predictions -- and the Opposite

Veterans of the Old York Road community have heard the dire predictions before.

It seems that at least once a decade, doom and gloom has been sounded about a Jewish exodus from the corridor. Still, it hasn't really happened.

When, in 1984, the Order of Gray Nuns decided to sell the former estate fronting Old York Road and bounded by Melrose Avenue and Ashbourne Road, there was hesitation about buying the property within Federation and the wider Jewish community, according to Steven Brown and Marcel Groen, two of the leaders of a grassroots effort to purchase the campus.

The reason, according to Brown, who at the time headed one of two Solomon Schechter-affiliated day schools in the area, was that many doubted the long-term viability of Jewish life in the region.

Brown -- now headmaster of the Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy in Bryn Mawr -- thought it would make a home for a merged Schechter school, as well as a "great anchor for the Jewish community." If it served its purpose for 20 years, it would be deemed a success.

Ultimately, Federation purchased the property for \$2 million -- with a combination of grassroots fundraising and major gifts -- and the Mandell Education Campus became home to what is now known as the Perelman Jewish Day School, Gratz College and a host of other agencies.

Brown said he thinks the campus, which Federation helps support financially, succeeded in stabilizing the community, though he is concerned about the future.

"For the life of me, I don't understand why more Jewish families don't look at it as a place to move into," he said. "People would rather pay hundreds of thousands more in the western suburbs, but this is the best buy in town."

Abby Fishman, a 36-year-old, has heard the sentiment that "Jews don't move to Cheltenham Township" anymore; she just doesn't get it.

When she and her husband Brian moved to Wyncote from Mount Airy in 2007, they weren't thinking about all the Jewish options. Their decision was based on the quality of the public schools, their taste in homes, the proximity to the school where she teaches and



the desire to be in an ethnically diverse area.

"I wanted an old home. I wanted lots of trees. I didn't want cookie-cutter, McMansion neighborhoods," she said.

Still, other young families have decided to move away. One Jewish communal professional in his 30s, who didn't wish to be identified for fear of alienating anyone, said that he and his wife had moved to the area with high hopes. But they found little to do at night and not enough other contemporaries to feel part of a community.

Six years ago, they decided to move to the Main Line. Even though the house cost them more there, the taxes were less, and the monthly payments came out to about the same.

On the flip side, 30-year-old Laura Wintroub said that she and her husband, Jeremy, were priced out of the western suburbs. Both transplants to the area, they knew little about the suburbs, but heard good things about Elkins Park.

"It's impossible to drive up Old York Road and not notice all of the synagogues," said Laura Wintroub, who works for the Jewish Funds for Justice's Jenkintown office. While Judaism and belonging to a community was important, it wasn't necessarily the major factor, she said.

The couple moved to the area a year ago -- drawn by the short distance to the city and the promise of strong public schools -- and soon after, joined Kol Ami, a Reform synagogue in Elkins Park.

"I think that if there is a more concerted effort to market this area to young families thinking about next steps and possible moving, it could work," said Wintroub. "I think there are a lot of selling points."

See also: [Two Jews Meet in a Storefront](#)

A Slice of Elkins Park Jewish Life

8:00 a.m. Though Beth Sholom Congregation in Elkins Park is housed in a large, maze-like -- and very famous -- structure, it wasn't hard to find the post-minyan breakfast on a recent Thursday morning.

All you had to do was follow the cacophony of voices.

More than 45 people, mostly seniors -- both working and retired -- had stuck around for bagels, lox and whitefish immediately after the Shacharit service.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, but Harold Paul remained quiet. The Huntington Valley resident, who just celebrated his 63rd wedding anniversary, has been coming to morning services since his mother died in 1969.



Folks line up for the buffet during a recent Tu B'Shevat seder at Congregation Kol Ami in Elkins Park.

For 35 years, he's been the leader, or *gabbai*, for services, attending six days a week. On this particular morning, he didn't hang around for too long -- he and his wife Sylvia had to get to work. They run a fabric shop that his parents opened in 1919. He grew up in the house above the store.

Why does he keep attending minyan, day in, day out?

"It's the camaraderie, the friendship. It's the people I've helped. It's such a nice group of

people," he said.

One floor up, it was an entirely different scene. Eileen Weingram, director of the synagogue's preschool, showed off the well-lit hallways, posters and drawings seemingly everywhere. On one side of the building are the Montessori classes; on the other, the more traditional track. A glimpse or two into a few toddler and pre-K rooms revealed kids enraptured in story time or engrossed in more individual play.

Weingram said that when she took over several years ago, the preschool was down to 30 students, but now it tops more than 100, though she couldn't really explain why.

12:30 p.m. Max & David's, a three-year-old kosher meat restaurant in Elkins Park, is buzzing with activity. Table after table is filled up with a smattering of Jewish communal professionals and at least four rabbis, including owner Steve Katz's brother-in-law, Saul Grife.

On Sundays, the restaurant is a popular spot for family outings.

Katz, dressed in a snazzy shirt and tie paired with jeans, insisted his guest try the nondairy ice-cream before their conversation got under way. Today's soup was just a little too spicy,

he said, and he had to point it out to the chef.

When he returned from the kitchen, he acknowledged that some businesses in the area are struggling, and that many had suggested that he open his restaurant on the Main Line. But he never had any doubt where he'd set up shop, he said, in part because this area is home.

"I really wanted to do something to secure this area as a vibrant Jewish community," said the member of Congregation Beth Sholom, as well as Grife's synagogue, Beth Tikvah B'nai Jeshurun in Erdenheim. "I love this area. It's 20 minutes from downtown. It's very haimische."

Katz recently purchased a warehouse in Willow Grove in order to expand his catering business. And he's got his sites set on opening a stand in both Citizens Bank Ballpark and Lincoln Financial Field, though nothing concrete has yet transpired.

1:55 p.m. Less than three minutes to go until the scheduled start of Minchah, afternoon prayers: The front door to Young Israel of Elkins Park was locked and the lot was empty, save for the rays of the snow-melting sun.

Finally, at 2 p.m. on the dot, a few cars started to pull in; others arrived on foot.

"It's a working man's minyan," said 42-year-old attorney Barry J. Dubrow, whose office is in Jenkintown. He drives over to the 20-minute service and heads right back to work.

Then roughly 15 men -- spanning the age range from 20s to 60s -- showed up to daven, in rapid-fire fashion. Dubrow, who apart from law school and yeshiva has lived in the area his whole life, happens to belong to the shul, but many of the worshippers do not.

A few said they live in Lakewood, N.J., but work in real estate in the area. Another lives on the Main Line, but works on Old York Road.

Afterwards, there wasn't much chitchat; the minyan disbursed as quickly as it came together. One member, Meir Reiner, said that he normally drives but wanted to walk in such fine weather -- a breather from a hectic business day.

With the parking lot empty once again, Reiner took off down the sidewalk, soon disappearing from view behind a string of large stone houses framed by bare trees.

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