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LONG ISLAND JewishWorld

Vol. 40 #20 June 10-16, 2011 • 8-14 Sivan 5771

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'Community of Inclusion'

Chabad of Great Neck celebrates 20 years with expansion



Photos of Silverstein Hebrew Academy students.



- Silverstein Hebrew Academy's new Middle School
- Chabad's new Friendship Circle Center

Sharyn Perlman reports on pages 8-10



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Community of Inclusion

Chabad of Great Neck celebrates 20 years with expansion

By SHARYN PERLMAN

Long Island natives might remember when the early Chabad rabbis first set foot on our shores; their European garb and Amish-looking beards seemed as unlikely in our suburban enclaves as, well, an Amish horse and buggy.

But today, some 30 years later, they have become as ubiquitous as our famed diners. By some counts, there are over 30 Chabad houses or synagogues in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. Some are relatively new, in places where one wouldn't traditionally think a Jewish center, of any kind, would thrive. Others, like the Chabad of Great Neck (Chabad GN), have simply added a new dimension and, some might say, option, to an already well-established Jewish community.

After navigating the political, religious and financial mines that

sometimes defeat even the most indefatigable start-ups, Chabad GN will celebrate its 20th anniversary on June 21. Like most Jewish organizations, there will be a festive dinner to honor those dedicated individuals who selflessly gave, and continue to give, their time and resources to make the "dream" happen (see box on page 11). But unlike many other organizations that are struggling in this tough economic climate, Chabad GN is expanding. Its school — the Sonia

and Max Silverstein Hebrew Academy (SHA) — will be adding a sixth grade, which will be the beginnings of its middle school (see, "The school is a blessing," page 9). And a new shul and Friendship Circle Center is currently under construction at the Chabad GN's Kings Point location (see, "New Chabad home will be 'good for the community,'" below).

According to Rabbi Yoseph Geisinsky, spiritual leader of



SHA benefactor Stanley Silverstein (second from right) and SHA Pre-school Director Ronnie Lichter (center) enjoy watching the children as Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, Israel, tells them a story.

'The beauty of being a Chabad school is the inclusion. No matter what the culture or the background, if you're a Jew, that's all that counts and you deserve a Jewish education.'

Chabad GN and SHA dean, the school's growth has been slow, but steady. "We started in 1998 with a pre-school. There was a demand for a kindergarten, then a first grade, and now we are through the fifth grade, with a sixth grade being added in the fall," says Geisinsky. The school just

announced that Rabbi David Leibtag, of the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway (HAFTR), will be the new SHA educational director for the elementary and middle school. And this Sunday, June 12, at 12 p.m., there will be an open house for all divisions of the school at its new campus in the Lake Success Business Park, 175 Community Drive, in Great Neck.

Originally housed in neighboring Little Neck, the school erected a new building, on Cutter Mill Road, which was opened in 2002. The East Shore Road campus, a nine-acre site in Kings Point that is currently being renovated, will eventually house the entire school, but at this point it is only used for the shul and the Friendship Circle Center. The Friendship Circle is a Chabad GN initiative where some 100 children with special needs are paired with volunteer high school students from the North Shore Hebrew Academy High School, Great Neck North Senior High School and Great Neck South Senior High School to provide social opportunities for the special needs children and a much needed respite for their parents and siblings. In addition to the Friendship Circle there is also a Sunday Circle, weekly trips and holiday events.

When school re-opens in September, according to Geisinsky, the pre-school will remain at the Cutter Mill Road campus and will be the "feeder" school for the elementary school (K-5th grade), which will be housed, together with the middle school, at the new Community Drive location.

"In the new building, we'll have 15,000 square feet of space, with room to grow. The Gruss foundation will help us create state-of-the-art computer and science labs

New Chabad home will be 'good for the community'

In a phone interview from his Great Neck office, Curtis Katz — lawyer, retired businessman and gifted raconteur — talks about why he has chosen to lend his significant support to the Chabad of Great Neck (Chabad GN).

Katz met Rabbi Yoseph Geisinsky, now spiritual leader of Chabad GN, 20 years ago when the rabbi came to Great Neck. At that time, Katz helped the rabbi secure a home, which also served as a place to have services. When the nine-acre site on East Shore Road in Kings Point became available, Katz helped to purchase the property with the help of his son Adam, "who negotiated a deal and helped secure the funding to purchase the \$2.2 million property."

The senior Katz, 85, has been involved since, "to a greater extent, in the financing of the Chabad, the construction of the new facility and helping with the legal problems that they had with the Village of Kings Point (VKP)," says Katz, himself a Kings Point resident.

But why Chabad?

Katz did not "grow up religious, but I'm a congregant [at Chabad] and Rabbi Geisinsky took me to meet the [Lubavitcher] rebbe, twice, and he gave me his blessing. I thought he was an awesome personality, a saint, except for the fact that he never went to Israel. But, he's infinitely smarter than any other Jew I know. I found him to be infinitely resourceful and hugely intelligent — 99 percent of what he thinks as a Jew is correct and I want to help the future of his legacy in any way I can," explains Katz.

Toward that end, Katz has his hand in several aspects of the construction of the new building: "I supply funds, help find and choose the contractors and try to help resolve the legal issues the Chabad had, and still has, with the Village of Kings Point. There are still many issues that need to be resolved."

According to Katz, VKP has only one building inspector, who has his hand in the minutia of the project.

"New York State licensed architects and engineers have signed off on the project, but the Village inspector still has issues. The community sup-

The Katz Family was honored by the Chabad of Great Neck at its annual dinner in 2005. Pictured are (l-r): Adam Katz; Mrs. Kessel; Curtis Katz; Rabbi Yoseph Geisinsky; and Jason Katz.



ports the new building; Temple Emanuel, which is across the street, supports the new building; only the inspector has issues. The mayor [of Kings Point] was trying to have the site declared a landmark so that the Chabad wouldn't be able to build. The Village caused years of delays and hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees," says an exasperated Katz.

According to Katz, the new building should be completed "by March or April" and, according to Geisinsky, the \$8 million project will house the synagogue, a Hebrew school and the Friendship Circle. Eventually, part of the Silverstein Hebrew Academy will also be moved to the new building.

Among his many philanthropic endeavors, Katz also supports Meyer Hospital, near Tel Aviv, as well as a health clinic that serves some 50,000 Jews and Arabs in the communities in Efrat and Hebron.

The Bronx-born Katz, who was educated at City College and New York Law School, sums up his involvement with Chabad: "I say a prayer every day that I was born in the most wonderful place in the world — New York — with all its opportunities and great Jewish community. I believe that the Jews are great for the world and I'm trying to help create an Orthodox center on East Shore Road because it's not only good for the Jews, it's good for the community." —SP

'[The Rebbe is] infinitely smarter than any other Jew I know, infinitely resourceful and hugely intelligent — 99 percent of what he thinks as a Jew is correct and I want to help the future of his legacy in any way I can.'

'The school is a blessing'

Looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows at his wife's magnificent garden on the shore of the Long Island Sound, Stanley Silverstein, benefactor of the Sonia and Max Silverstein Hebrew Academy (SHA), responds pensively to the question of why he and his wife, Raine, decided to memorialize his parents through a Chabad school.

"In the '60s, a Chabad truck was parked outside my office in the Empire State Building. A young man asked if I was Jewish and invited me into his truck to

put on *tefillin*. I remembered that experience the day Adam Katz invited me and other friends to his home and presented plans for a Chabad House on a site that his father, Curtis Katz, secured. I thought of my observant children and grandchildren and decided to help Chabad establish a school to honor the memory of my parents, Sonia and Max Silverstein, *ob"m.*"

When asked what the school means to him, Silverstein smiles and says, "I've learned a lot from Chabad. I've grown in my Jewishness from my involvement

SHA benefactors Stanley and Raine Silverstein (center) at the groundbreaking for the Silverstein Hebrew Academy campus in Great Neck.

in the school. My wife and I are blessed to be surrounded by our children, our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren, and the school turned out to be an additional blessing."

Silverstein, together with his wife, will be honored at the SHA dinner on June 21. —SP



and we'll also have a gym," says Geisinsky. Currently, there are 17 students — divided almost evenly between boys and girls — in the fifth grade who will be the first students in the new middle school. SHA will accept transfer students, even those who haven't previously attended a yeshiva, if they "show a certain level of dedication" to being able to catch up, says the school's dean.

Geisinsky is proud of the school's growth. "Right now we have 175 students in nursery through fifth grade. We are full, and we have a waiting list. In this economic time when everyone is trying to budget and scale down, we see a need to grow," the rabbi said in an interview in the school's current building. He also said that while there is some attrition from the pre-school to the elementary school, once the parents commit to sending their children to SHA for kindergarten, they stay with the school.

The guiding philosophy of SHA is a Chabad philosophy of inclusiveness, according to Geisinsky, who was born in Russia and raised in Israel. "We take the children where they are and we don't judge them, because each and every child deserves a Jewish

A Hanukkah play at the Silverstein Hebrew Academy.



education. We're a community school sponsored by Chabad, but we're not raising kids to become Chabadniks; we're raising them to become good Jewish kids so we will have a future," he explains.

Almost all the children — 99 percent — come from within the Great Neck community. About 70 percent are Sephardi, from Persian

families, and 30 percent are Ashkenazi. SHA teaches both traditions so the children are familiar and comfortable with each other's customs. Geisinsky says there are about "half a dozen children from intermarried families" where the mother is Jewish, so according to Halachah, the children are too. "The hope is that the fathers will be one day Jewish. In the meantime, we encourage the mother to bring the children on Shabbat to shul and to be part of the community," says the rabbi.

Indeed, he says, some 70 percent of the students come from traditional homes that do some form of Shabbat every week. "The parents are not yeshiva educated but

they understand that in order to stay Jewish, they must give their children something more than they had."

Rabbi Dovid Ezagui, who for the past five years serves as head of Judaic Studies in the elementary school as well as the school's chief operating officer, says that not only are the parents giving their

Moroccan Jewish community who was educated in England, New York, South Africa and Singapore, says, "The beauty of being a Chabad school is the inclusion. No matter what the culture or the background, if you're a Jew, that's all that counts and you deserve a Jewish education. It's all about the continuation of the Jewish people.

totally coed, according to Ezagui, even in Judaic Studies. Once they add additional grades to include bar/bat mitzvah age students, then the Judaic Studies will be taught single sex.

Ronnie Lichter, the SHA pre-school director for the past six years, says that the pre-school "deals not just with the child, but with the whole family." Lichter's door is always open, as she guides not only her young charges, but also mentors their parents.

Agreeing with Lichter's sentiment that educating young children is about more than just the classroom, elementary school general studies principal Gilda Tesser says that the school's

continued on next page

'We want to help the children be not only good citizens, but also good individuals who care about each other and care about their community.'

children an education, but "the children are bringing the parents to a more Jewish life."

Ezagui, a native of Montreal's

You look around at the [intermarriage] numbers today and it's scary," Ezagui says.

Academically speaking, SHA is



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Inclusion

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“responsibility is to take care of the whole child — socially, emotionally and, especially, academically. The Great Neck public schools are terrific and the parents want to be sure that their kids are getting everything they would be getting in the public schools. And I believe that they are.”

Children who need extra “help” receive one-on-one instruction in the school provided for by the Great Neck public schools. And a school psychologist also visits the school once a week to do role playing and have small discussion groups to talk about such issues as bullying, which, according to Tesser, is “not really a problem.”

Tesser, who joined SHA four years ago from the public school sector where she worked “for

many years” in both staff and curriculum development and is a literacy expert, says the children receive “the most up-to-date programs, beginning in kindergarten, including whole language programs, full mathematics approach and the use of manipulatives.” Writing is strongly emphasized, in every grade beginning in kindergarten and, says Tesser, the children excel on the New York State standardized tests.

Each class, which averages in size between 15 to 19, learns ethics and citizenship in addition to the academic studies, according to Tesser. “We want to help them be not only good citizens, but also good individuals who care about each other and care about their community,” she explains.

The beauty of SHA, says Tesser, is that “we’re a small school, like a family. All the teachers know all the children and we have close relationships with the parents.”

SHA is a Zionist school that supports the land of Israel, the State of Israel and the people of Israel. But, as is the Chabad tradition, they do not sing Hatikvah. The school also integrates the secular and the Jewish studies. According to Ezagui, when they did a unit on nutrition in the secular studies, the Hebrew teacher joined the class and taught the children the Hebrew words for the concepts and foods.

The average tuition for SHA is between \$8,000 and \$10,000;



A Silverstein Hebrew Academy sampler.
(Above): The annual second-grade Chumash play.
(Left): The computer lab.
(Below): Floor hockey is part of the physical education.
(Bottom): Artist's rendition of the new Chabad of Great Neck campus, currently under construction in Kings Point.



there is a scholarship committee that works with the parents, according to Geisinsky, who says, “We try to work with parents so no child will be deprived of a Jewish education.” Tuition for the middle school will be \$10,000.

To offset costs, SHA engages in significant fundraising, including the upcoming annual dinner and an auction. According to COO Ezagui, “We also have wise spend-



‘We’re a community school sponsored by Chabad, but we’re not raising kids to become Chabadniks; we’re raising them to become good Jewish kids so we will have a future.’

ing. One common complaint against yeshivas is that they don’t spend their money wisely. We don’t waste,” he says. And to verify the spending, Geisinsky says that “all funds are being overseen by an executive board.”

In a national contest last summer to see how many Facebook “likes” a school could garner from its network of parents and extended family and friends, SHA received 144,000 “likes,” and a grant of \$500,000 from Kohl’s,

which sponsored the contest. A very pleased Ezagui said, “Out of the 20 schools that received half a million dollars each, 12 were Jewish schools; and of those 12, all were Chabad schools. Amazing.”

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