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Collected Knowledge, 2012, Robert Schefman

metro

» cover story



Rabbi Mendel Shemtov; Rabbi Bentzion Stein; Schneur Zalman Krinsky, Vilnius, Lithuania; Moshe Spalter, Costa Rica; Lavi Shemtov, West Bloomfield; Yudi Namdar, Gothenburg, Sweden; Shmuli Friedman, Bahia Blanca, Argentina; Moti Schusterman, Atlanta; Mendel Korf, Los Angeles; Mendel Marinovsky, Houston; Tzvi Alperovitch, Belmont, England; Rabbi Mendel Stein

Growing Outreach

Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center's expanded new home almost ready.

Shelli Liebman Dorfman | Contributing Writer

Perhaps you've seen them. Teenage boys in white shirts, black pants and hats walking on Northwestern Highway to visit business owners before Shabbat, or manning a sukkah on wheels in an Orchard Lake parking lot or driving in a parade of cars topped with hand-built Chanukah menorahs.

They are the middle school and high school students of the Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center in Oak Park.

Beyond their studies, which are immersed in the teachings of Chabad-Lubavitch, an Orthodox

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Not Your Mother's Mikvah

Putting a modern twist on an ancient tradition.

Rabbi Marla Hornsten at the Temple Israel mikvah

Ronelle Grier | Contributing Writer

The age-old custom of mikvah is taking some new turns as modern Jewish women expand the tradition and dispel some of the negative beliefs that have long been associated with the ritual.

Use of the mikvah has become more widespread in recent years, with a proliferation of ritual bath facilities throughout the United States and Europe. Many of these are quite spacious and luxurious, even with custom tile work, like Mikvah Israel in Oak Park. While the mikvah once was used primarily by prospective brides and observant wives in accordance with the Jewish laws of family purity, now the mikvah is used for a variety of other life-changing situations, including recovery from illness, becoming a grandparent or surviving a death or divorce.

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Jewish movement with roots in Chasidism, their precious few after-school hours are spent doing Jewish outreach. Currently, more than 100 male students in elementary, middle school, high school and rabbinical school rotate the use of five classrooms inside the Congregation Mishkan Israel synagogue building in Oak Park, where the school has been based since its founding in 1965 with three students.

Late this summer, the building will be left to the elementary students, with the upper divisions beginning the school year in a new educational facility built on the Harry and Wanda Zekelman Campus, with most also living in dorm rooms on the 4-acre site.

In 1990, there were about 25 students; now with 100, the school has more than outgrown its current facility.

"The students are in the building nearly 24/7, some of them for six years straight, so they really need the additional space," said Rabbi Mendel Shemtov, one of the school's directors. "The students and staff are very much looking forward to being in a more comfortable atmosphere more conducive to learning."

Continuing Legacy

A significant component of Chabad is commitment to Jewish outreach, with many in the movement becoming *shluchim*, or emissaries of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whose mission included sending young couples throughout the world to bring Jews closer to Judaism.

"The goal of the school is to secure the future of Judaism, and we can do that by preparing these young men for this work," said Shemtov, whose parents Rabbi Berel and Batsheva Shemtov came from Brooklyn in 1958 as Detroit's head *shluchim*, sent here directly by the Rebbe.

"In addition to receiving a Jewish education and going on to have Jewish homes with Jewish families, they are also fully committed to going to the far corners of the world doing whatever it takes to further the mission of the continuity of the Jewish people."

Shemtov, who attended the school from



Donors Alan and Lori Zekelman at the July 10 groundbreaking ceremony for the new campus

elementary through the rabbinate, said, "The education here is unique because we are primarily focused on not just imbuing a scholastic education, but in attracting students committed to devoting their lives to work hard to embrace the philosophy of the Rebbe in doing this outreach work. They learn that every Jew is highly important and should be a priority, no matter what his or her religious observance level.

"Our students devote their lives to the service of the Jewish people; it's Jewish education with a mission to instill compassion for every human being and a love for community service."

That was the impetus for Yudi Namdar, 15, who came to the school last year from Gothenburg, Sweden. "We chose Detroit because my parents based their decision on my education by the quality of the school and the learning, not on the convenience of a closer location," said Namdar, whose three older brothers also attended the school. "The plan to become a shaliach is the reason why most kids are here."

Many of his classmates are the sons of *shluchim*, as is he. "The *shluchim* found a great school for their kids, and the kids of *shluchim* make up a great school," Namdar said.

Student Outreach

"The students work so hard in school and

have only three or four hours of free time each week from after school on Friday until Shabbat," Shemtov said. "But instead of buying doughnuts or playing games, they choose to do work with the Jewish community."

The teens run the school's Chabad Student Outreach program.

On Chanukah, they distribute small menorahs throughout the community — in malls, shopping plazas and universities — and build *huge* ones to attach to vehicles and drive through town in a parade. On Passover, they distribute handmade *shmurah* matzah; on Sukkot, they build and park mobile sukkot, inviting Jewish passersby to come in and make the blessing over the lulav and etrog. The Megillah Hotline is set up on Purim for homebound callers who want to have a student come read Megillat Esther to them.

Many also go to senior apartments to visit with residents.

And, on a weekly basis during the school year, the middle and high school students visit Jewish businessmen and women on Friday afternoons before Shabbat.

"They walk one, two, three miles to meet with them in their offices or stores," Shemtov said. "This is not mandatory; it's completely on their own, and both the business owners and the students benefit. The students share what they've learned with

the business owners and they, in turn, get hands-on experience, which is so vital to them, by spending every week for years and years having conversations with people not in their 'shtetl.' Sometimes they meet with the same people three or four years in a row. They develop a relationship and many keep in touch after they finish school."

Friday Boys

Jerry Beale met his first pair of students when they came into his office 12 years ago. "They asked directly if there were any Jewish employees in the office," Beale said. A dozen years later, several pairs of students have visited both Beale and other Jewish men who work at the Beale Group in Southfield.

"I absolutely look forward to the visits of the young men; it is one of the highlights of my week," he said. "We discuss the weekly portion of the Torah and get into questions relative to Judaism that have relevance to my beliefs." Many students help the businessmen put on tefillin during their visits, but Beale does that on his own earlier in the day.

"I have kept in touch with a few of the young men after they have graduated," he said. "We have gone boating and gotten together for various other occasions. Since some have moved out of the country, our involvement is basically a call and discussion of life as we have become friends over the years."

In addition to the Friday meetings, the students read the megillah on Purim for a group that includes Beale's wife, Gail, and other community members.

"What I have liked over the years is that these young men have been non-judgmental and have been very supportive of me and my family," Beale said. "We have achieved a strong bond and friendship. These young men have been a source of light when our family endured a tragedy as well as on happy occasions."

Near And Very Far

Remarkably, the students of the Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center come to the Detroit area to study and do outreach work



Neumann Smith Architecture

from 17 states and 10 countries.

“The school has about 400 graduates, with 90 percent choosing to become shluchim,” said Rabbi Mendel Stein, the school’s development director.



Rabbi Mendel Stein

Alumni who join the 4,500 shluchim in 70 countries are working throughout the United States and Canada and as far as Australia, Israel, South Africa and China and at the more than 20 synagogues, university Chabad Houses, community centers, schools, camps and organizations in Michigan.

Many, now settled in new cities, also send their sons back to Detroit for their educations.

“Perhaps what I learned most during my years there is the value of every Jewish soul and how much each person and mitzvah matter in the battle for Jewish continuity,” said Rabbi Mendel Druk, a school alumnus, who grew up in Oak Park. Now director of Chabad-Lubavitch of Cancun in Mexico, along with his wife Rachel, his Jewish outreach work took him throughout the Detroit area and to Eastern Europe and the Far East. He also led the Chabad search-and-rescue team in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and the Chabad relief effort in Thailand following a recent tsunami.

“This value has been infused in every aspect of our Chasidut curriculum and Friday and holiday activity,” said Druk, who has been visited by many Detroiters traveling to Cancun. “Going at times to great lengths to meet with one Jew to perform one mitzvah, in return connects the finite to the infinite.”

Everything's New

The new Harry and Wanda Zekelman Campus will house a 25,000-square-foot building and a 20,000-square-foot dormitory with space for 120 boarders. Currently, 60 students live in a 14-unit apartment

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What Is Chabad?

Chabad-Lubavitch is a branch of Chasidim, an Orthodox sect of Judaism. “Lubavitch,” defined as “brotherly love,” was the name of the town in White Russia where the movement was first based 250 years ago. “Chabad” is a Hebrew acronym for *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (comprehension) and *da’at* (knowledge).

Headquartered in Crown Heights, N.Y., Chabad-Lubavitch is guided by the teachings of its seven leaders, Rebbes, beginning with Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi through the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died in 1994.

In addition to synagogues and university Chabad Houses, in Michigan there are Chabad organizations, including Friendship Circle in West Bloomfield, providing programs and support to the families of individuals with special needs; the Daniel B. Sobel Friendship House in West Bloomfield, providing friendship and support for individuals and families dealing with addiction and other isolating crises; F.R.E.E. of Michigan, a Russian immigrant program in Southfield; and Lubavitch Outreach in Oak Park, with services including hospital and senior visitations.

The Lubavitch Foundation of Michigan in Oak Park, directed by Rabbi Berel Shemtov, is the regional Lubavitch headquarters and includes day and overnight camps, a mikvah and the Michigan Jewish Institute in Oak Park, a college degree program with a focus on technology, business and Judaic studies. ■

Brett Mountain



Construction on the new Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center in Oak Park



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complex owned by the school across from Mishkan Israel. The purchase of the building was enabled by a donation and interest-free loan from Sheldon Yellen of Bloomfield Hills, CEO of Belfor USA. Until that time, students boarded with families in the community. The future use of the building has not yet been determined.

The educational building will be large enough for 180 students and will include a large study hall, where daily and Shabbat prayer services will be held as well as eight large classrooms, a dining room, teachers' lounge and staff offices.

The outdoor area will include basketball courts and a courtyard.

The hope, according to Stein, is that once the campus is complete, the school will attract more students.

"We already hired two new staff members at the beginning of this school year in preparation for our future growth," he said. "Next year, we will hire an additional two and continue our growth slowly."

The campus was built with the space option to add 20 dorm rooms for 60 students and a second level to the main building. There is no funding yet for this phase. An endowment campaign has been launched to raise \$10 million for the campus upkeep.

The new Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center is being built on land on West Ten Mile Road in Oak Park, between Coolidge and Greenfield roads on the former sites

of Machon L'Torah, a vacant home and land owned by Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit.

"Both structures were torn down in preparation for the new building," Stein said.

A Dream Come True

Stein's parents, Rabbi Bentzion and Chana Stein, principal of the school's girls elementary division, came to the Detroit area as shlichim from Brooklyn, N.Y., to teach at the school in 1973. After nearly 40 years here, Stein, a director of the school, looks forward to moving to the new campus.

"It is unbelievable; a dream we didn't believe would ever come true," he said. "Now the students will have a spacious, modern campus with every convenience they can dream of. This will surely impact their daily studies and help give them a rich Jewish education to become the future Jewish ambassadors to the world."

There are 75 Chabad-based schools in the U.S., not including the many preschools, with about 35 with high school and rabbinical school divisions. The Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center has one of the highest rates of graduates who go on to become Chabad shlichim.

Stein said, "We are registered with the Department of Education as are all Michigan private schools. The oldest grade just over high school is registered as a branch of the Michigan Jewish Institute, an accredited college in the state of Michigan."

The school's girls division, the Lillian Schwarcz Education Center,

Rabbinical students Avner Antin of Swampscott, Mass., Akiva Steinmetz of Southfield, Chaim Samama of Strasbourg, France, Mendel Mimoun of Paris, and Yudi Browd of Queens, N.Y., all 19



based in Oak Park, has 120 students. It was renovated with a donation from Edward and Gloria Meer and family in 1997. The girls all live in the Metro Detroit area, Toledo, Ann Arbor and Flint and commute daily.

Longtime Chabad supporters Alan and Lori Zekelman of Bloomfield Hills set out to help upgrade the current 12,000-square-foot Mishkan Israel facility more than five years ago, after Alan Zekelman began frequenting the building to say Kaddish for his mother. Instead, in November 2010, they funded the \$5 million project for the new campus.

The campus has been named in memory of Alan Zekelman's parents, Harry and Wanda Zekelman, who lived in Windsor, Ontario. Alan Zekelman has expressed pleasure in knowing his family's investment goes beyond a local one, touching Jews throughout the world.

"I personally know and knew the Zekelmans and their passion for Jewish education," Rabbi Bentzion Stein said. "This campus will surely continue their legacy of educating Jewish children who will in turn educate others and strengthen the never-ending chain of our heritage." □

For further information on the new Lubavitch Yeshiva Educational Center in Oak Park, call (248) 721-9871 or email info@lubavitchyeshiva.org. To view live ongoing construction, go to www.zekelmancampus.com.

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