

Man On A Mission



Rabbi Shneur Kesselman leads a public menorah lighting in Malmo.

Chabad emissary from Oak Park nurtures Jews in Malmo, Sweden – a hotbed of anti-Semitism.

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Since moving to Malmo, Sweden, eight years ago, Rabbi Shneur Kesselman, a Chabad envoy raised in Oak Park and educated at Lubavitch Cheder & Yeshiva-International School for Chabad Leadership, has been a frequent target of anti-Semitism. He moved there with wife, Reizel, who shared the goal of dedicating their lives to that small Jewish community of around 1,500 people.

“A friend of mine knew Chabad was looking to bring a rabbi to Malmo as the community rabbi was leaving and they needed someone,” Kesselman says. “At that time, Sweden had no special reputation of anti-Semitism. I wasn’t at all prepared for the reality. It wasn’t the image of Sweden I had in mind.”

All told, Kesselman has experienced more than 100 incidents since he arrived in the country.

He told the *Jerusalem Post* that once a car began backing toward him and his wife as they were crossing the street, and they were forced to run. Another time, he had to run in fear for his life from an aggressive driver who was pursuing him through the streets of Malmo.

Kesselman is the oldest of 16 children and son of a Chabad *shaliach* (emissary) who works for the Lubavitch Foundation. “As long as I remember, I wanted to be a rabbi,” he says.

In 1997, after graduating the high school and yeshivah in Detroit, he moved to Miami to study, and then to Houston as an exchange rabbinic student.

After his rabbinic studies, he met and married his wife, a French Jew. The couple then moved to Brooklyn to contemplate

their future. That’s when the opportunity came up to go to Malmo.

Welcome To Malmo

Prior to Kesselman’s arrival, there were not as many reported incidents of anti-Semitism in Malmo. In general, the Jews there are relatively secular. Most have been assimilated into the Swedish culture.

Then Kesselman came. “I wear a kippah, the beard,” he says. “You can see I’m a Jew from a mile away.”

Kesselman says he had experienced anti-Semitic incidences back in Detroit, “but they were few and sporadic,” he says. “Then came the first incident, and the second, the third and the fourth. It can happen at any place and at any time. There is nowhere here to walk calmly and feel at home.”

In general, Sweden is a secular, socialistic country, Kesselman says. Within the past few years, however, there has been a rise of the extreme right in the political arena as well as an increased anti-Israel sentiment in the media, which all too often holds a one-sided view on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Anti-Semitic hate crimes are on the rise in Sweden, the consequence of increased immigration from the Muslim world. In Malmo, things began to take a turn for the worse in 2009, when Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza sparked anti-Israel and anti-Semitic demonstrations in the city.

“Police were unable to protect the Jews,” Kesselman recalls. “People — Holocaust survivors — were fleeing for their lives.”

There were no reports of Jewish attacks on Muslims.

Some 50-100 anti-Semitic incidents occur in Malmo annually, from verbal attacks to violent assaults, according to police and community statistics. Many of the perpetrators are first- and second-

generation Muslim immigrants, who make up to 20-25 percent of Malmo’s population of 300,000.

A large percentage of people in Malmo’s small Jewish community are children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, who were welcomed to Sweden after World War II. “That’s the only reason there is an active Jewish community in Malmo and that Jewish life has survived here,” Kesselman says. More Jews later arrived from Poland in the 1960s and a small contingent from Russia in the 1990s.

The Jewish community also has big issues with Malmo’s longtime mayor Ilmar Reepalu, who is outspokenly anti-Israel. He once said that attacks on Jews in Malmo were not very serious and that “the city of Malmo cannot discriminate in favor of one of its minorities.” His rhetoric put the media on alert, and that’s when anti-Semitism turned into a major political discussion.

“It was still there before 2009,” Kesselman says. He was experiencing it and reporting it to police, but, in general, keeping it to himself. “After 2009, it just came to the surface in a new way.”

Malmo’s mayor started a dialogue forum that was supposed to improve things. “But it doesn’t have any teeth; it doesn’t do anything to help the burning issues,” says Kesselman, who adds that the mayor announced he will be stepping down this summer.

The Biggest Challenge

If you ask Kesselman what the biggest challenge is facing Malmo’s Jews, his answer is not anti-Semitism, although not much has changed in the city. Instead, he says, it is more existential.

“In past years, young people and young families have been leaving and not coming

back,” he says. “They don’t want to raise their families here. It is very sad. It’s a threat to the future of Jewish life here.”

Fredrik Sieradzki of the Jewish community of Malmo told *Die Presse*, an Austrian Internet publication, that approximately 30 Jewish families have emigrated from Malmo to Israel in the past year, estimating that the already-small Jewish population is shrinking by 5 percent a year.

“If Swedish Jewry were strong, the anti-Semitism wouldn’t be as hard to deal with,” Kesselman says, adding that the majority of Jews in Malmo do not experience hate crimes on a day-to-day basis. “The difficulty is that so much of the Jewish population is unaffiliated. Inter-marriage is common. There’s a great need to activate the people, to ignite them and pull them together to create a sense of belonging.”

And those Jews who do become more involved and want to lead a more Jewish way of life won’t stay in Malmo. “There isn’t enough to offer,” Kesselman says. “There are no Jewish schools, no kosher restaurants. Most people will move.”

Still, Jewish awareness and community participation are evident in the city. Purim parties and Shavuot celebrations have attracted hundreds of Jews. Security is always an issue, though. Guards are always on hand to ensure the crowd’s safety. The annual Chanukah menorah lighting in the Malmo town square drew 500 people, a public display that sent a powerful message.

The Hate Continues

Last June, anti-Semitic graffiti was spray-painted on the external wall of the old Jewish cemetery in Malmo. The graffiti read “A PIG” (*en gris* in Swedish) next to a swastika. Last September, an explosion occurred at the Malmo Jewish community building. No one was injured, but damage was caused to the building.

In November 2012, the ADL reports, two Jewish women in Malmo were robbed. A menorah, mezuzah and prayer book were stolen from their apartment, and their front door and balcony were painted with swastikas. The women told police they regularly encounter anti-Semitism in the city, being frequently called “Jewish whores” and “Jewish pigs.”

Despite the violence and the harassment, Kesselman continues to minister to the Jews of Malmo at births, bar mitzvahs, funerals — he’s presided over 200 since he arrived. “I’m the only rabbi in town,” he says. “And I’ve been able to touch the lives of so many families.”

He, his wife and their four children have no intention of leaving. “We were looking for a community to give to,” he says, “and here it is. We are here for the Jewish population. As long as there are Jews in Malmo, we are here to stay.” □