

## Synagogues reach out to unaffiliated Jews

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For decades, Reform and Conservative synagogues across the Hudson Valley have strategized, plotted and prayed over how to connect with some of the many unaffiliated suburban Jews who have few ties to Jewish life other than Philip Roth books. Now the smaller but fast-growing modern Orthodox community is joining the expedition.



Rabbi Chaim Marder leads a Bible study group with Yetta and Leo Kaplan, left, and Bernie Scheiman at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. A 2002 study by the UJA-Federation of New York found that only half of Westchester County's Jewish residents lived in a home where someone belonged to a synagogue. (Stuart Bayer/The Journal News)

The Orthodox Union, the influential representative of more than 1,000 Orthodox congregations, is working with three New York synagogues on novel ways to reach disconnected Jews — starting with small steps and a non-judgmental approach.

The three congregations are the Hebrew Institute of White Plains, the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation and the Bialystoker Synagogue on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Stephen J. Savitsky, president of the Orthodox Union, said Orthodox synagogues need not concede that the more liberal movements are in better position to reach out to Jews who have strayed from observance but may have a curiosity about the religious lives of their ancestors.

"The only segment of Jewish life that's growing is Orthodox Jewry," Savitsky said. "When you listen to all the things that Jewish leaders talk about - why aren't we able to grow? Why aren't our kids more involved in Jewish life? - Orthodox Judaism has it going. If people opened their eyes, they would see that Torah is the glue that holds the Jewish people together. Without Torah, you cannot survive long term."

Savitsky spent Friday and Saturday -the Jewish Sabbath - at the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation, the only Orthodox synagogue in northern Westchester, which recently joined the Orthodox Union. The congregation almost shut down during the early 1990s, but was revived by a few members and is now thriving with more than 100 families.

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider of the Mount Kisco Hebrew Congregation said his congregants were excited to be working with national OU leaders on new ways to reach Jews who have lost touch with their religious roots.

"It is a big leap, but people are looking for something spiritual in their lives," he said. "During these difficult economic times, people are looking for answers, a sense of security. It may be an opportunity for them to turn to something steeped in tradition with a great spiritual dimension."

A 2002 study by the UJA-Federation of New York found that only half of Westchester County's Jewish residents lived in a home where someone belonged to a synagogue. About 130,000 Jews live in the county, and 9 percent identified themselves as Orthodox in the 2002 study.

The UJA study did not cover Rockland County, but the synagogue-affiliation rate there is believed to be higher because of the larger numbers of Hasidic and ultra-Orthodox Jews. More than 100,000 Jews are believed to make their homes in Rockland.

It has long been assumed by many that non-Orthodox congregations were in the best position to connect with unaffiliated Jews because they were more comfortable with different levels of observance and could offer a less intimidating entranceway to Jewish life.

But the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement, which has been greatly increasing its profile in the Lower Hudson Valley, is well-known for its worldwide commitment to trying to interest secular Jews in an observant life.

Those participating in the new OU initiative - called "Reaching Out, Changing Lives" - know that it will be a steep challenge to draw less-observant, unaffiliated Jews to an Orthodox lifestyle centered on Jewish law. Their more immediate goal is to interest Jews in a ritual or two, answer questions, offer education and see where it goes.

"We live in a Jewish community that is experientially rich with synagogues of all stripes doing good work," said Rabbi Chaim Marder of the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. "But lots of folks, for whatever reason, have not made a connection. Some may be looking for something different. Reaching them is hard, but we want to explore whatever avenues we have."

Marder and Goldscheider said they would need their members to actively talk up the meaning of ritual and belonging.

Their synagogues are generally considered to be "modern" Orthodox, meaning that their members are engaged with the secular world - in business, culture, politics - even as they live their lives by Jewish law. As a result, many are in a position to know Jewish co-workers, neighbors and others who might be interested in checking out a synagogue program if they received a personal and non-threatening invitation.

"We're not talking about a marketing strategy, but reaching out to people one on one, inviting them to a Shabbat dinner, a Hanukkah event, a class," Goldscheider said. "It's one person, a family, then another family."

Marder said Orthodox congregations could not become safe havens for people who are comfortable with strict observance.

"We have to give all Jews access to a beautiful, rich tradition," he said. "Think about Abraham's tent being open to all who come his way. People don't have to be Orthodox to enter."

Hanukkah, which begins at sundown Dec. 21, presents a perfect starting point. Both synagogues are planning public candle-lighting ceremonies.

The Mount Kisco congregation will hold a communitywide menorah lighting in the center of town, on Main Street, at 3:30 p.m. on the 21st.

The Hebrew Institute of White Plains is aiming to disburse squads of people to some of the city's many apartment buildings on Dec. 22 and 23 for brief ceremonies with song and prayer.

In Mount Kisco, they're also planning to offer "crash courses" on the basics of Judaism, Hebrew and other subjects in the months ahead. And the White Plains synagogue will offer an exploratory service for beginners at 10 a.m. Jan. 10.

The OU's Savitsky has been visiting Orthodox congregations across the country — in Charleston, S.C., Atlanta, Kansas City, Portland, Ore., Minneapolis, Los Angeles and elsewhere. He said the OU is committed to helping its congregations grow, in part by reaching out to unaffiliated Jews.

"I believe in nonjudgmental Judaism," Savitsky said. "Wherever they are in their religious lives, people should feel totally comfortable coming into an Orthodox synagogue. Any movement to get unaffiliated Jews to become affiliated is a step in the right direction. But why not strive for the ultimate, which is an Orthodox congregation, where your grandparents and great-grandparents practiced Judaism."