



A THRIVING JEWISH COMMUNITY: Rosh Hashana greeting card from the Sherman Family, c. 1924

ONTARIO JEWISH ARCHIVES

Back to the 'Hood

Young Jews are returning to and revitalizing Jewish life in Toronto's inner city neighborhoods

Renee Ghert-Zand Toronto

AS SHE STROLLS ALONG College Street, at the northern edge of Kensington Market in downtown Toronto, Sarah Brodbar-Nemzer sometimes imagines that she is walking back in time. Focusing on the past is strange for the 27-year-old Jewish community professional, but the way she sees it, she wouldn't be where she is, professionally, personally and even geographically, if she were not walking in the shoes of others, who did the very same thing in the very same place about a century ago.

At a time when the Toronto Jewish community is generally expanding ever northward along Bathurst Street into new suburbs

that were open farmland until recently, thousands of young Jews, most in their 20s and 30s, have been purposefully returning to and revitalizing Jewish life in the adjacent inner city neighborhoods, long-abandoned by their parents and grandparents, of Kensington Market and The Annex.

Arriving in Toronto initially from England and Germany and then, by the late 19th century, primarily from Eastern Europe to escape poverty and persecution, Jews settled in the area known as the The Ward. A small square area, Kensington Market was soon popularly known as "the Jewish Market," and by the 1930s was home to as many as 50,000 Jews. But even by the first decade of the 20th century, The Ward had become an overcrowded

slum filled with Jews and immigrants from other countries, especially Ireland and Italy. Those Jews who could moved westward to the streets surrounding Kensington Market.

The Annex, located several blocks to the north of Kensington Market and bordering the University of Toronto campus, was also home to many Jewish families. Most of the immigrants lived in small row houses, or in larger Victorian and Edwardian-era brick houses converted into multi-family dwellings.

Today, Kensington Market has a youthful, bohemian, multicultural cachet, with an open-air market along with cafés and funky second-hand clothing boutiques and bookshops that draw crowds of local visitors and tourists, especially on weekends. The Annex is now a

gentrified, residential neighborhood mainly for the upper-middle class, who can afford the expensive downtown real estate prices

The grittier, cacophonous, pedestrian and bicycling-oriented downtown lifestyle is not for everyone. Nor was it self-evident that downtown would be a source for Jewish revival.

“Kensington Market was an exotic destination and a historical site to visit with your day school or Hebrew school class,” recalls Brodbar-Nemzer. And Stephen Reich, 45, an earring-sporting legal strategy consultant and actor, says that when he told older Jews he was moving to downtown Toronto, friends told him that they were surprised he was “was moving back to the slums.”

But downtown definitely does suit a growing group of young Jews who do want to embrace Jewish pluralism, creativity and diversity, while also living in close proximity to Toronto’s cultural and civic centers. “This isn’t the *shtetl*. This is not where you live if you want an all-encompassing Jewish life,” says Reich, who relocated to The Annex from Winnipeg 20 years ago. “But now there is an option in Canada if you want hip, urbane, Jewish community.”

Indeed, downtown Toronto has become a magnet for young, educated, creative Jews who yearn for connection with Jewish community – but on their own terms. Uninterested in the preponderantly traditional, conservative Toronto Jewish community (Canada’s largest), they have returned to its cradle to enact a rebirth of sorts. It is on the old streets and through the historic buildings and institutions that these young liberal and progressive Jews are connecting with their roots. Unwilling to simply transport uptown Judaism downtown, they are reinvigorating, and even reinventing, the 25 synagogues and cultural and community centers in the area.

WITH ITS POPULATION OF approximately 2.5 million, Toronto, located on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, is Canada’s largest city. Toronto is popularly considered to be one of North America’s safest and is home to over 100 ethnic groups.

The Jewish population of the Greater Toronto Area is close to 200,000, according to Dr. Harold Troper, professor of education at the University of Toronto and an expert on Canadian Jewish history. Troper also tells *The Report* that some 70 percent of Toronto’s Jews

live within eight kilometers of the Bathurst Street corridor, which also houses some 200 Jewish schools, shops, synagogues and community centers. According to a recent Toronto UIA-Federation study, 21,000 Jews now live in and around the old Jewish neighborhoods – a 41 percent increase since 1991.

The YMHA (reorganized in 1994 as the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Center) has also stayed in place and has now been joined by the thriving Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School (PPDJDS), a congregational school, day-care programs and a plethora of community activities. Locals are patronizing hip new Jewish-owned establishments such as Caplansky’s Deli, Israeli-style Aroma espresso bar, and Free Times Café, as well as original holdovers like the famous Harbord Bakery, known city-wide for its incredible challa bread.

Although a few of Toronto’s Jewish congregations, including the First Narayever, Anshei Minsk and the Kiever, are still at their original sites, most moved northward and into new buildings along the Bathurst Street corridor following World War II. Downtown Toronto Jews seeking a prayer experience have their choice of these historic synagogues or a number of local prayer services that span the observance and egalitarian spectrums.

The Annex Shul and Makom are two of these new communities that are gaining attention not only among the downtown crowd.

THE ANNEX SHUL WAS FOUNDED four and half years ago by friends Bram Belzberg, 30, and Richard Meloff, 33, who were looking to replicate what they viewed as the vibrant, intimate and participatory Jewish life they experienced as students and young professionals in cities like Montreal and New York.

Reuniting in Toronto, Belzberg and Meloff decided to see if they could recreate that experience for themselves and their friends. Typically, they gathered the first members of their community together through an e-mail, in which they wrote that they wanted to start a “Ghetto Shul-type”

minyán, a reference to the happening Carlebach-style synagogue in Montreal frequented by McGill University students.

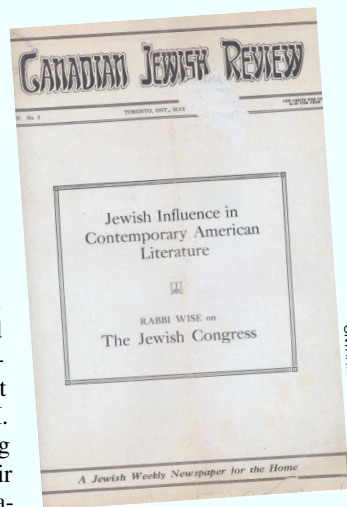
Meloff recalls that the message went viral and almost immediately they received hundreds of enthusiastic replies from contemporaries who recognized the reference and understood what they wanted to create. Meloff tells *The Report* he was not surprised to find that these young, cosmopolitan professionals were disillusioned, as he and Belzberg were, with what he refers to as “the alienating ‘big-box’ Reform and Conservative synagogue experiences of our uptown and suburban upbringings.” He thinks that downtown Jews are attracted to The Annex Shul because they “are searching for what they consider to be greater inclusiveness and Jewish authenticity.”

Belzberg and Meloff claim they were the first, back in 2006, to tap into the evident growing desire for downtown Jews to plug into a community where they could both feel and make a direct impact. With support from the UJA Federation and the Hillel of Greater Toronto, they began holding semi-regular Friday night ser-

VICES at the University of Toronto.

The motto of The Annex Shul is, “Come as you are, make it your own.” This, says Meloff, is in response to what he and Belzberg identified as the “untapped demand” for Jewish participation. “People want ownership, a stake, to make an impact now. Our generation does not want to wait 30 years to be invited onto the board,” Meloff says emphatically. They have developed a flat organizational structure, in which any community member could suggest an idea for an activity and receive resources and guidance from a leadership team.

In early 2011, The Annex Shul celebrated its “Milestone Weekend.” Scott McGrath, 37, the current head of the leadership team tells *The Report* that the recent initial membership



A RICH JEWISH LIFE: Toronto’s Jewish neighborhoods were filled with synagogues, schools, businesses, and culture, such as this issue of The Canadian Jewish Review, from 1923



COHEN PHOTOGRAPHY

REVITALIZING AND REINVENTING: The Annex Shul founders Bram Belzberg (left) and Richard Meloof (right) with spiritual leader Yakov Fruchter

drive surpassed its goal by 25 percent, bringing in 80 new members at the affordable rates of \$250 for an individual and \$450 for a family. The highlight of the “Milestone Weekend” was the installation of the community’s first full-time spiritual leader, Yakov Fruchter. On a cold, crisp Sunday evening, in the lobby of a Bang & Olufsen high-end audio accessories store in the tony Yorkville neighborhood, the hip “Beyond the Pale” band played klezmer and Eurofolk music as the crowd of a hundred or so young professionals, the women dressed in fashionable little black dresses and the men in dark suits, munched on kosher finger food, drank wine and feted Fruchter.

Fruchter, 28, who tells *The Report* that he grew up in a modern Orthodox home in Montreal, is not an ordained rabbi (although he says he is considering pursuing rabbinical studies). He views his role as one of “sharing my own journey of Jewish learning.” As spiritual leader, the slightly-built and earnest yet affable Fruchter helps lead semi-monthly Friday evening services and monthly Shabbat morning services, counsels community members, and provides guidance and resources for member-initiated programming that ranges from classes that meet at the local branch of the Aroma espresso bar chain to holiday celebrations to activities geared toward families with young children.

Although few of the members of The Annex Shul are religiously observant, they feel, says Fruchter, comfortable with a traditional framework with gender egalitarian elements. This framework, often referred to as the “partnership *minyan* model” in the independent *minyan* world, plays itself out at The Annex Shul with, on the one hand, the active participation of women and, on the other hand, a division of the room into a “tri-*chitza*” set-up (one section for men only, one for

‘Now there’s an option in Canada, if you want hip, urban Jewish community’

– *Torontonian* Stephen Reich

women only, and one for mixed seating).

This innovative take on the traditional separation of men and women by a *mehitza*, appeared to be an acceptable compromise at a recent Friday evening service. The chapel was packed with some 50 young people, with a slight majority of them seeking seating in the mixed-gender section. The worshipers joined in with Fruchter as he led the prayers and *niggunim* (wordless melodies), as the life-size photographic images of some of the original Jewish inhabitants of the neighborhood, artfully sandblasted into the windows of the chapel, appeared to gaze down silently on the scene.

ONLY SEVERAL CITY BLOCKS away from The Annex Shul, Makom also hosts Friday night services. And while the melodies are mostly the same, the atmosphere is decidedly different.

Makom (which, in Hebrew, can mean place or can be an allusion to God) bills itself as “a joyous, grass-roots, downtown community building traditional and progressive Jewish life in Toronto.” Some 50 members attend services once every two weeks, most of them young. In contrast to the somewhat corporate office milieu at The Annex Shul, Makom projects a more laid back, funky vibe, as the congregants stomp, sway, clap and sing the traditional prayers in an artist’s storefront studio that they use for a chapel.

Although other members of the group lead prayers, founder Rabbi Aaron Levy, 35, guides the service as he alternates between

nodding hello from his seat in the front row, as worshipers trickle in, and drumming vigorously, his eyes closed, on the low bookshelf that serves as a *mehitza*.

Levy, an American transplant, says he started Makom in early 2009 “because my own family’s Jewish life wasn’t as robust as we wanted it to be. There were no Jewish communal options that resonated for us.” He had originally helped set up The Annex Shul, and as an Orthodox rabbi (ordained by the left-wing Orthodox Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Manhattan), he prays daily at the Kiever synagogue, one of the several original syna-

gogues still operating in the historic downtown. But he and his wife, education policy researcher and analyst Miriam Kramer, sought, he tells *The Report*, “a more multifaceted, diverse and inclusive Jewish community that revolves as much around social and environmental activism and arts and culture as it does around prayer and learning.”

In just two years, Levy, working without pay and relying on limited grant-based revenue, has brought Makom’s e-mail list up to 900. “Slingshot, A Resource Guide to Jewish Innovation,” placed Makom on its highly respected list of North America’s 50 most innovative Jewish non-profits in 2010-2011. Makom is the first and only Canadian organization to be awarded this distinction.

Levy, Kramer and their two young sons live just outside Kensington Market, which the rabbi refers to as “the geographic center of gravity” for the community they are building together with likeminded young Jews, many of whom, Levy says, “are engaging in Judaism in a significant way for the first time in a long time.”

Brodbar-Nemzer, a member of Makom’s leadership team, agrees that the “downtown ethos” is key. She lives with six friends in a Jewish communal house a few blocks from Kensington Market that serves as a social hub for young Jews in the neighborhood. “People are choosing to live in close proximity to one another. They want to be engaged with others, to draw energy from the people around them,” she explains.

The connection to Kensington Market is a

means of reviving ties to a place that represents a historical sense of urbanism, neighborhood and progressive politics. Brodbar-Nemzer says that young Jews moving into the area feel “a very strong association with the history of the place,” especially those who, like she did, grew up in the suburbs or more residential areas of Toronto.

BAYLA CHAIKOFF WAS BORN IN 1930 and lived on Nassau Street in the heart of Kensington Market until she was 30. She went on to raise a family further north in the city, as well as to lead a busy and fulfilling life as a teacher and administrator in Jewish day schools and public schools.

Unlike those who warned Reich, she does not remember the neighborhood as a slum. She does admit, however, that “the market had such a negative connotation... It was not considered a good neighborhood, but it had no crime. Most people got out after World War II.”

Now 81, Chaikoff was the daughter of socialist, intellectual Polish immigrants; her father was a furrier. “My parents were idealists. We had a culturally rich life even though we weren’t wealthy,” she recalls. She remembers Chaim Grade and other famous Yiddish writers eating dinner at her family’s home when they came to visit Toronto. And while other kids were out playing on the streets after school, she would be learning Yiddish and *Yiddishkeit* at the Borochov Shule or building her musical skills at then-pricey 50-cents-per-hour violin lessons.

Looking back, Chaikoff sees it as a “wonderful neighborhood” bursting with Jewish life. She tells *The Report* that on one block there were large synagogues on either end with six *shtieblech* (small prayer houses) in between. There were Talmud Torah religious schools, Zionist and Yiddishist shulen, and bar mitzva preparation options of every possible sort available to the youth, including lessons given by rabbis who ran small schools in their living rooms.

Only half a block from her home, her mother and grandmother could buy anything they needed for the day from any of the market’s many kosher butchers, bakers or pickle, cheese or fruit and vegetable sellers. “You could buy six daily Yiddish newspapers – two or three of them were local. And you barely ever heard English spoken in the streets,” she recalls.

Hindy Hirt, now an energetic 71-year-old

grandmother who works as a substitute teacher and goes to Israeli dancing several times a week, grew up in The Annex. She still owns her family’s house there, although she moved to the more residential areas when she married and had children. She, too, remembers the streets overflowing as people walked to and from the synagogues on the High Holidays. In her neighborhood, too, you did not have to go further than the corner to find kosher provisions. And she remembers the peddlers who delivered milk, fruits and vegetables to people’s doorsteps from their wagons.



HIP HOP HANUKKA: Yakov Fruchter at The Annex Shul, beer in hand

Her father earned only a modest electrician’s salary, so her family shared their home with tenants until Hirt was 16. “We had nine people using the bathroom,” she says. “But very few people could afford to live in their homes without either taking in tenants or living with extended family. It wasn’t fancy living.”

And though Kensington Market was actually very close, to Hirt it was “a whole different place. You didn’t have to go far, everything was right there. So as a kid, I rarely ventured beyond my block,” she relates to *The Report*.

WITH FOND MEMORIES OF their childhoods, both women think it is “wonderful” that young Jews are returning to downtown Toronto. But Troper, the Canadian Jewish history expert, cautions that “the mass exodus of Jews from downtown should be taken as a folk wisdom.”

Although it is true that the development of Jewish life in midtown and northward along Bathurst Street “exploded” in the 1950s due to the availability of serviced land at affordable prices and the influx of tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors at about

the same time, some Jews – especially small business owners, the elderly, and academics at University of Toronto – never left the downtown neighborhoods.

Troper, 68, has always lived downtown, he tells *The Report*.

Furthermore, what many perceive as a sudden influx of Jews into downtown in the last half decade or so has actually been “a slow reversal that began in the 1960s,” he says. Those who see a very recent spike in Jewish population downtown are not completely mistaken, but they may not realize that as “the city took on a rapturous love of itself in the 1960s and 1970s and the youth and counter-cultures took root,” some young Jews moved back downtown. Some wealthy professionals and retirees have been making their way back south and there has been a steady growth in Jewish faculty members at the University of Toronto over time.

“So, by the 1980s, there was already a base that had been built” for the increase that the younger generation of people like Reich and Brodbar-Nemzer are so pleased with.

Troper observes, “The cake takes the shape of the pan it is baked in,” and so it is not surprising that “downtown Jews tend to be more liberal, more accepting of gays and lesbians, and more accepting of intermarriage. They are less affiliated with Federation and its offshoots, and more progressive. They are also well educated and financially resourceful – or else they are the opposite and just don’t care much about money.”

Actor and writer Diane Flacks, who was raised in the suburbs, has lived downtown for the past 20 years and has witnessed the growth and change over time. “It never made sense for me to live anywhere else,” she shares. As a partner in a lesbian and interfaith marriage, she believes Jewish day school would not have been an option for her children had the diverse, arts-based PPDJDS not been established 13 years ago. School principal Rhonda Rosenheck says most of the parents are like Flacks. “Our families wanted to establish a school that could provide a strong Jewish identity without fear of the other. Our families want to be part of the broader community gleefully.”

Brodbar-Nemzer sees herself and others as “continuing the tradition of Jewish creativity, of starting from the ground up” as the immigrant generations did. She imagines “the historical Jews cheering us on as we make Judaism and Jewish living relevant and meaningful to our lives today.” ●