

A return to their roots

Freehold Jewish Center tours the Lower East Side's Jewish landmarks

Jason Cohen



Rabbi Kenneth Greene and the Freehold Jewish Center congregants stopped for lunch at Noah's Ark during their Nov. 2 trip to the Lower East Side.

Rabbi Kenneth Greene, along with about 15 congregants of the Freehold Jewish Center, took a walking tour of Manhattan's Lower East Side Nov. 2. Some came to visit their family roots, while others came to see the historic Jewish area. The afternoon began with lunch at a Noah's Ark restaurant on Grand Street. Lawrence Edelstein, a resident of Manalapan and the president of the temple, said his family comes from the Lower East Side.

"My father grew up here, Seward park High School, Grand street settlement house, and I had been told by my aunt that he davened at the Eldridge Street synagogue," Edelstein told *The Jewish State* during the tour. Edelstein said his father and uncle were basketball legends on the Lower East Side.

"It's not like I've never been here before, but it's different when it's organized, when there actually is a tour guide," Edelstein said.

Joel Storm of Freehold said his family grew up on the Lower East Side then moved to Brooklyn. "And the black sheep of the family moved to the Bronx," Storm joked. "Just historically, culturally, the Lower East Side is a hotbed of Jewish immigration," he added. Miriam Kapelushnik of Freehold said she came on the tour because she was very interested in the history of the early Jews in New York. "This is where it all happened," Kapelushnik said

She said she had family that grew up on the Lower East Side. "Actually my aunt, when she first came to this country, lived on Rivington Street," she said.

Another congregant on the tour, Vicki Herbst of Monroe, is also originally from the Lower East Side. "I'm looking forward to revisiting my roots," Herbst said. "My parents lived here; my grandparents came here from Europe." "I was intrigued regarding the history," Vicki's husband, Harry Herbst, said about why he joined his wife on the trip. "My brother-in-law was bar mitzvahed here on the Lower East Side, so we are revisiting our roots."

The tour guide for the afternoon was Stuart Goldstein, who has been a resident of the Lower East Side for his entire life. He said all of the synagogues in the Lower East Side today are Orthodox. At one point in time, there were more than 500 synagogues in the Lower East Side, he said. The first Jews that immigrated to the Lower East Side were Sephardic Jews,

Goldstein said. “Twenty-three Sephardic Jews landed in New York and, they were part of the non-Catholic population in Brazil that was thrown out of Brazil when Portugal gained control of Brazil,” he said. Goldstein said New York was originally the colony of New Amsterdam, owned by the Dutch West Indian Company and was governed by Peter Stuyvesant. “He was not exactly the friendliest man to the Jews, he didn’t want them here,” Goldstein said. Goldstein said the Jews wanted to stay in New York because they were traders, and trading and commodities was very big at the time. Also, there were a couple directors of the Dutch that were rumored to be Jewish. “These 23 Sephardic Jews were very industrious; they wound up making a name for themselves and survived the anti-Semitism, and wound up quite prosperous,” he said. He said in the mid 1800s a large amount of German Jews came to New York. At that time, he said, New York was called little Germany. “The largest immigration to New York came in the late 1860s-1900s when you had Jews that came here from Poland, Romania, Hungary,” he said. “The German Jews were now moving up in the neighborhood and were quite affluent.” Goldstein said the Jews of the Lower East Side didn’t want their status in New York to change because of the new immigrants coming in behind them. One of the stops on the tour was the Bialystoker synagogue, which originally was the Willett Street Methodist Episcopal Church, Goldstein said. “The building was purchased in 1905 and converted into a synagogue,” he said. “I don’t believe they’ve missed a day having a minyan.” Goldstein said in the corner of the women’s gallery on the second floor there is a small break in the wall that leads to a ladder going up to an attic, lit by two windows where there is allegedly a crawl space for hiding slaves that was part of the Underground Railroad. “We don’t know why there are balconies up top,” he said. “One or two reasons either for additional seating or perhaps they had slaves or domestic employees.” Additionally, Goldstein said when the shul first opened in 1905, most of its members came from the Polish town of Bialystok.

The ceiling, walls, and windows throughout the sanctuary are filled with art. “There’s a lot of symbolism in the art,” Goldstein said.

Many famous people also attended Bialystoker Synagogue, he said. “One of the most famous was Bugsy Siegel,” Goldstein said. “There is a yahrtzeit memorial plaque for him on the back wall. It doesn’t say Bugsy, it says Benjamin.” The tour also saw the Henry Street playhouse, which is a national historic landmark. Most stores used to be closed in New York on Sundays with the exception of Orchard Street in the Lower East Side, where all of the stores were open because they were closed on Saturdays, Goldstein said. Therefore, Sundays on Orchard Street were jam packed with not just Jews, but everyone in New York. Goldstein, who is a member of Congregation Young Israel, said Young Israel began on the Lower East Side.

“It actually started out with a Friday night lecture series with which its time was very progressive because the lectures were given in English; it became so popular that it migrated into a synagogue,” Goldstein said. Felicia Malkin, a resident of Freehold, thought the tour would be interesting for her two children who attend Solomon Schechter Day School in Marlboro. “As a child, I remember coming into the city all of the time and getting pickles and lox,” Malkin said. “I think they loved the Bialystoker synagogue. That was very interesting for them.” Greene said he had done the tour in the past with high school students and it had received a very warm reaction. “I think it gives people a sense of roots and also helps them identify,” Greene said.