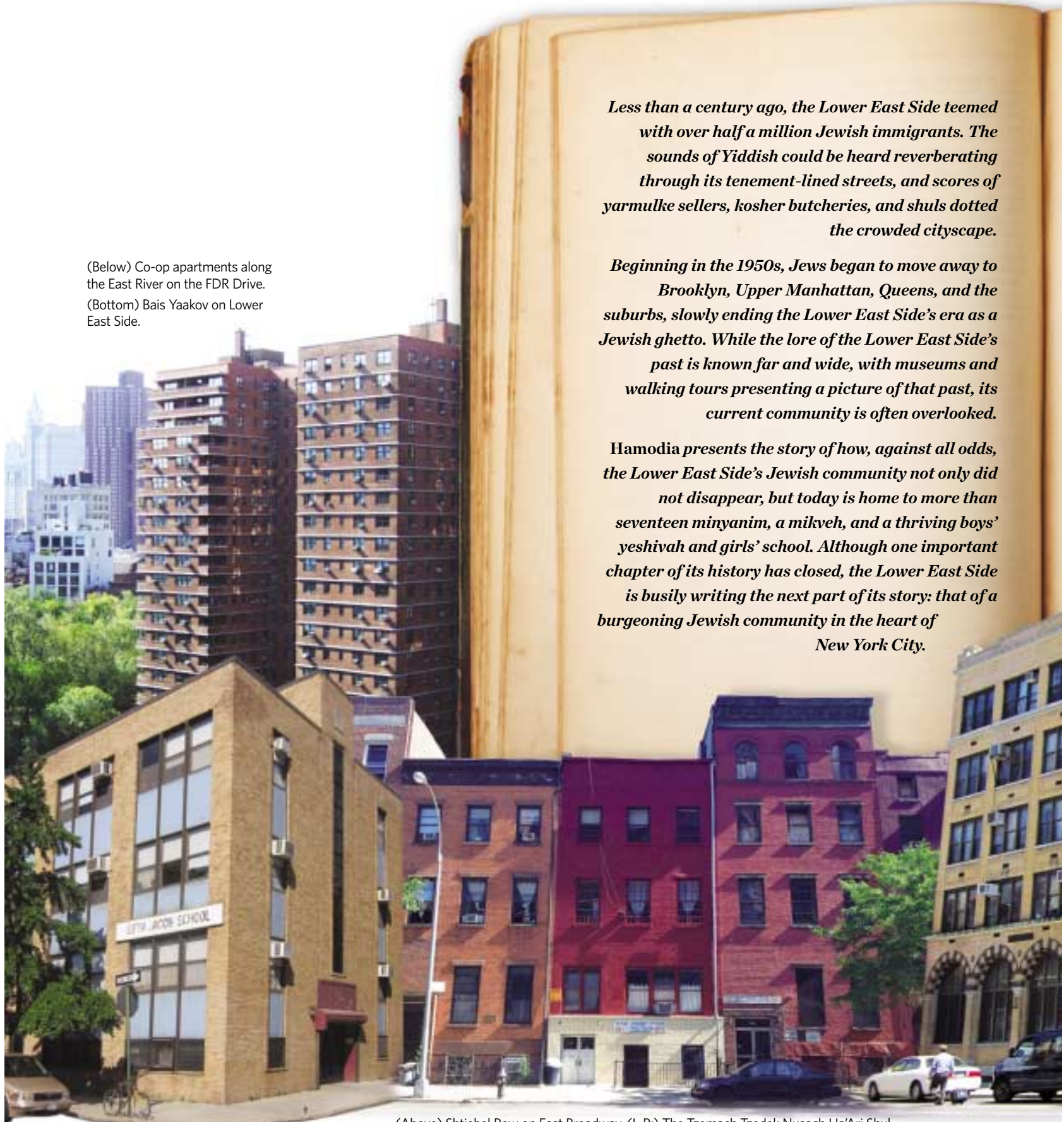


SPOTLIGHT ON COMMUNITIES



(Below) Co-op apartments along the East River on the FDR Drive.
(Bottom) Bais Yaakov on Lower East Side.

Less than a century ago, the Lower East Side teemed with over half a million Jewish immigrants. The sounds of Yiddish could be heard reverberating through its tenement-lined streets, and scores of yarmulke sellers, kosher butcheries, and shuls dotted the crowded cityscape.

Beginning in the 1950s, Jews began to move away to Brooklyn, Upper Manhattan, Queens, and the suburbs, slowly ending the Lower East Side's era as a Jewish ghetto. While the lore of the Lower East Side's past is known far and wide, with museums and walking tours presenting a picture of that past, its current community is often overlooked.

Hamodia presents the story of how, against all odds, the Lower East Side's Jewish community not only did not disappear, but today is home to more than seventeen minyanim, a mikveh, and a thriving boys' yeshivah and girls' school. Although one important chapter of its history has closed, the Lower East Side is busily writing the next part of its story: that of a burgeoning Jewish community in the heart of New York City.

(Above) Shtiebel Row on East Broadway. (L-R:) The Tzemach Tzedek Nusach Ha'Ari Shul, Chevra Yeshuas Yaakov Anshei Sfard, and Beis Hamedrash Chasidei Belz (not currently open).

Once Upon a Time, Today

The story of the Lower East Side's flourishing Jewish community

BY DOVID MARGOLIN

(Below) Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim.

(Left) The Boyaner kloiz. Right next door to it is the Mizrachi shul.

World of Our Zeides

"My parents came to the Lower East Side from Minsk, Russia, long before I was born," begins Sheldon Silver, the New York State Assembly speaker and the Lower East Side's assemblyman since 1976.

"When I was born, we lived on Henry Street, and Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, lived two buildings down from me. I attended Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef [RJJ], which was also on Henry

Street, about two blocks from my house, and we *davened* at the Eldridge Street Shul, where my father's cousin, Rabbi Betzael Kadin, *z"l*, was the rabbi. When we moved to an apartment on Grand Street, across from the Bialystoker Shul, we began to *daven* there. I have *davened* there ever since."

Community leader Heshy Jacob's background mirrors that of Speaker Silver. "I was born on 5th Street, I moved to 4th Street, and now I live on Grand

Street," he proudly proclaims. "My mother's parents were Gerrer chassidim who came and settled here in 1910. I have lived here since I was born, three of my children live here, and my grandchildren live here.

"It wasn't always easy; things were difficult in America in those days. Being *shomer Shabbos* was hard. My father came here in 1919 and always held on to his *Yiddishkeit* and *frumkeit* no matter how many hurdles he had to overcome.

"At that time, every block on the Lower East Side probably had two shuls," reminisces Jacob. "If you needed a *Shabbos goy*, you just couldn't find one."

Throughout the world, the Lower East Side is known as having been home to millions of Jews between 1880 and 1950, and for being the cradle of American Jewry. However, it is easy to forget that

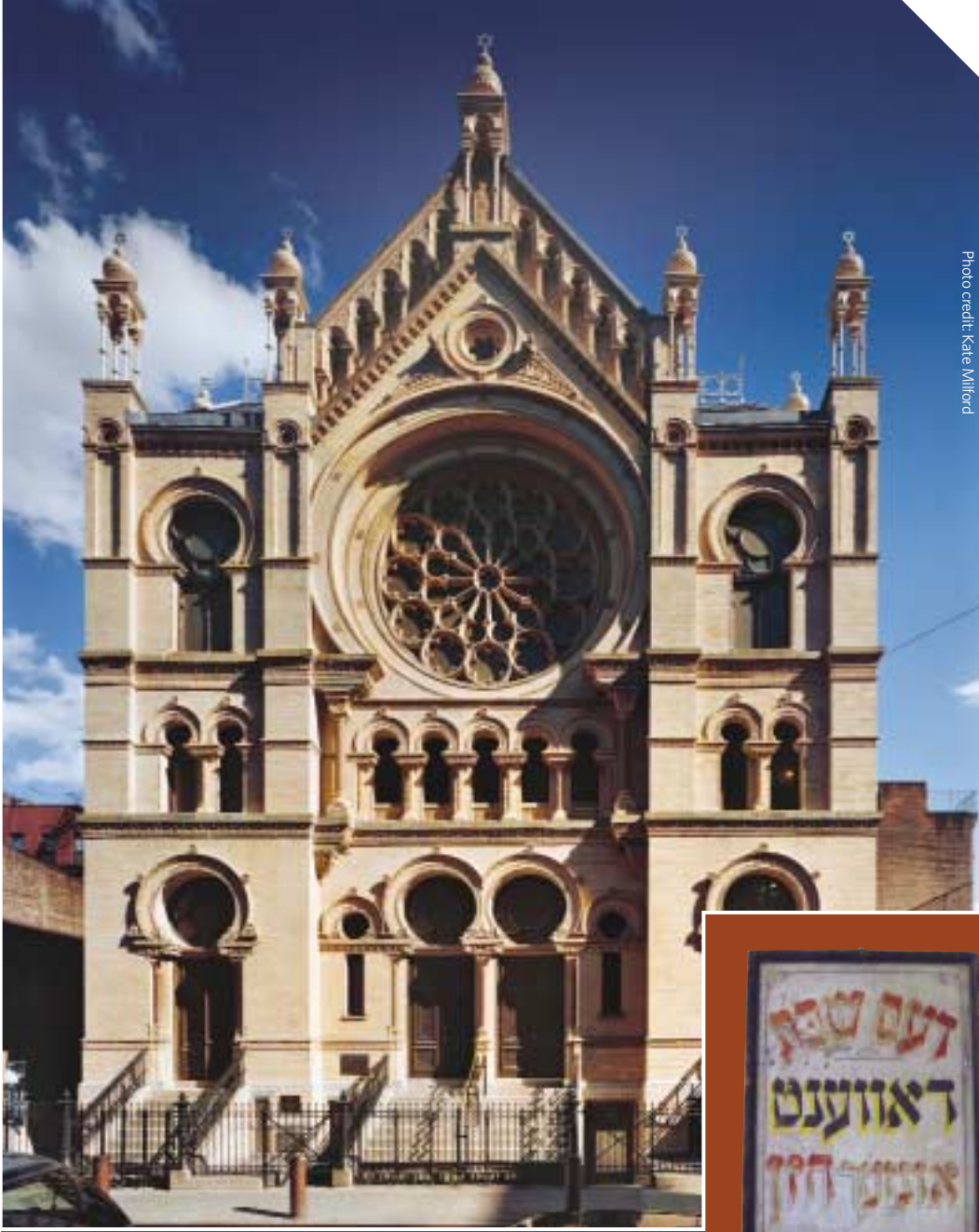
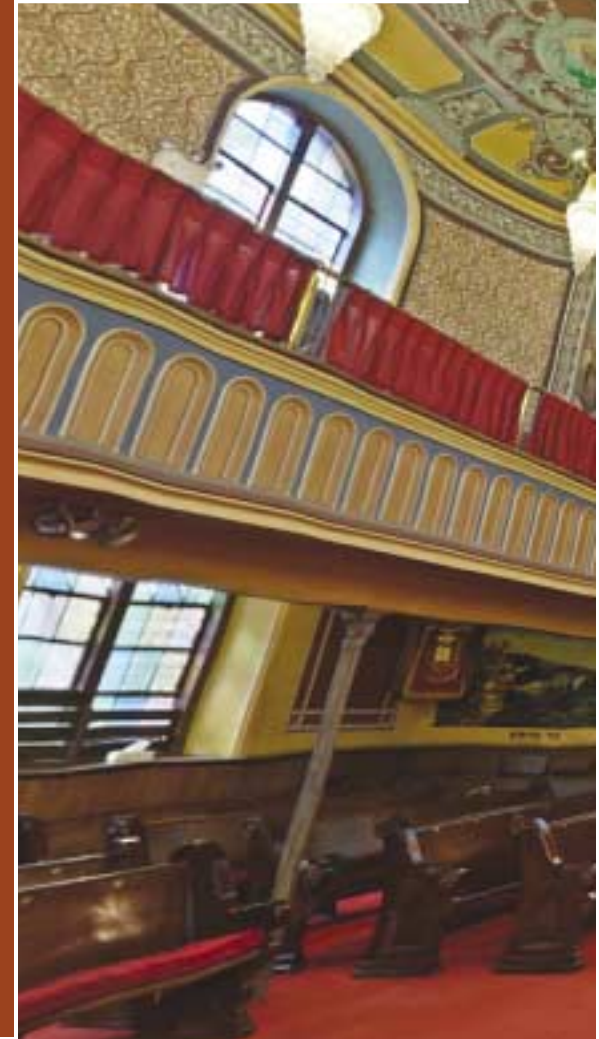


Photo credit: Kate Milford



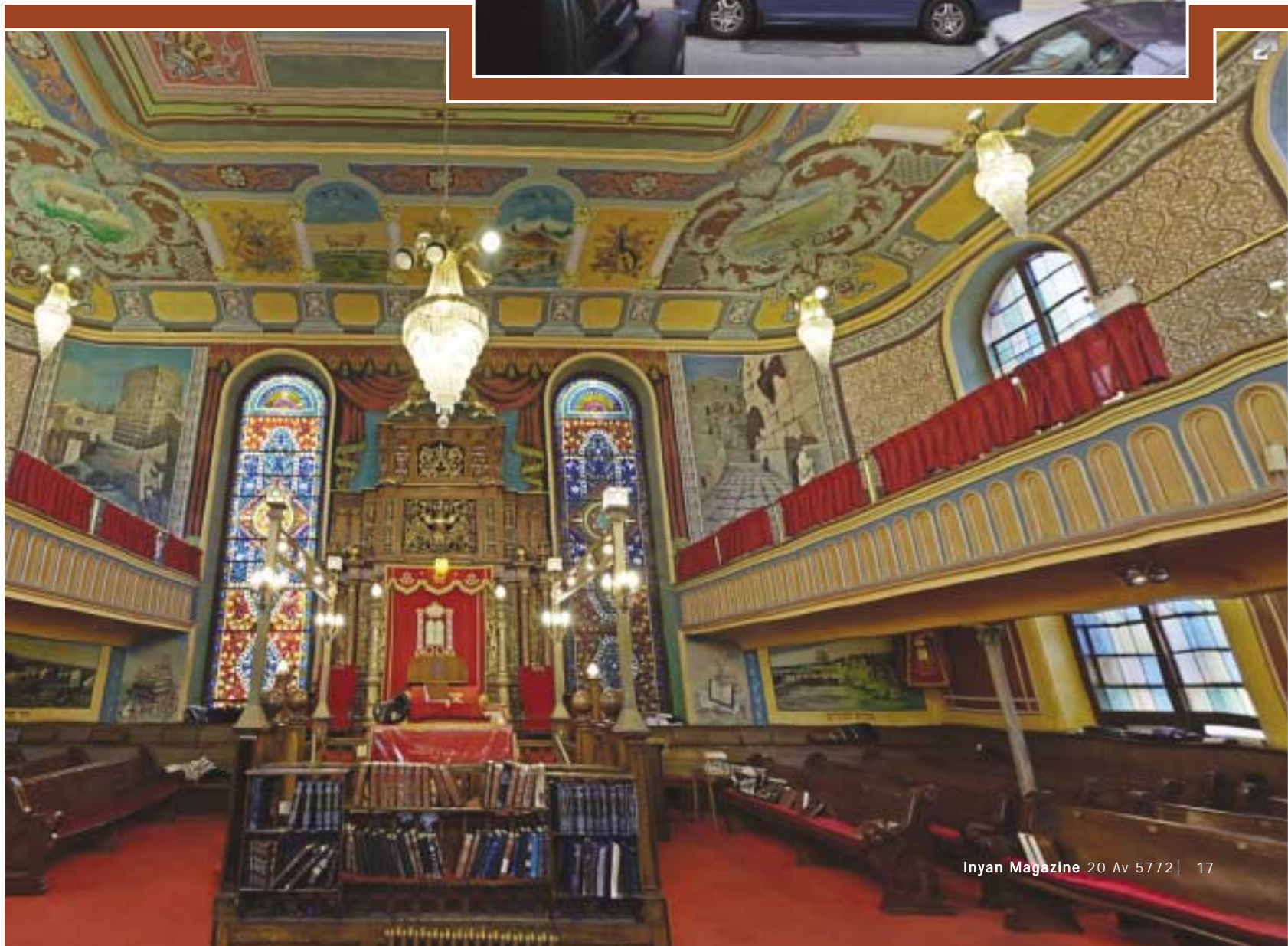
(Left) The Eldridge Street Shul. (Inset) "This Shabbos, our *chazzan daven*." (Below and right) Exterior and interior of the historic Bialystoker Shul, today the Lower East Side's largest shul .



along with the kosher pickle stores and bialy bakeries — one of which, Kossar's Bialys, still bakes fresh kosher bialys daily — came a poor standard of living resulting from overcrowding.

“At the turn of the twentieth century this was a very poor immigrant community,” explains William Rapfogel, executive director of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty and a lifelong Lower East Sider. “People would get off the boat at Ellis Island and then settle here. When immigration from Europe swelled again after World War II, thousands more joined the already packed community. Yes, there was a thriving Jewish life here, but people were crushed into their tiny tenement apartments. For them, their thoughts were, ‘How do we escape it?’

“Growing up here, I still remember the



Jewish merchants selling things from their pushcarts; it was a different era," recalls Rapfogel. "But with all the nostalgia for what the Lower East Side once was, you can't forget that poverty came along with diseases and malnutrition. I'm not sure we really want to go back to those days."

While unhealthy conditions were not as widespread by the 1950s and the quality of life had improved, people still felt confined by their small apartments. As members of the older generation started to pass away and the means to buy a comfortable home in Brooklyn or even farther out became available to the younger generation, families began to move out of the Lower East Side, and the Jewish community slowly began to shrink.

'This Is Where Our Roots Are'

Although many families moved to the greener pastures of the suburbs, there were still a number of people, led by *Gedolim* such as Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, and Harav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, *zt"l*, who insisted on staying on the Lower East Side. When asked why, community members will inevitably respond, "Why would I ever want to move away?"

Locals point to a variety of amenities that continue to make their community a special place to live. "When you have a person like Rav Dovid Feinstein, *shlita*, eating together with you in your building's *sukkah*, that's something special," says Rapfogel. "That's not to mention the convenience of living in the heart of Manhattan, just a few short minutes from Wall Street and not much farther from midtown."

Jacob agrees with Rapfogel's assessment. "We used to have Rav Henkin and Rav Moshe here; now we have Rav Dovid and Rav Reuven Feinstein, *shlita*. They walk down the street like anyone else, and they make such a profound impression on the community.

"I also don't really understand how, after a long day of work in the city, someone can get on the subway or get

into their car — or get on the subway and *then* get into their car — and travel home. You can walk to Wall Street from here. You can spend time with your family every evening."

Ben Tuchman was born and raised on the Lower East Side, where he attended Rabbeinu Shlomo Kluger Yeshivah. He served as the treasurer of the Bialystoker Shul for close to twenty-five years and is still an active member of the community. Tuchman says there were times when he considered moving away, but he

remained drawn to the warmth of the close-knit community of the Lower East Side.

"I would visit a suburb for Shabbos and my host would point out the sporadic Jewish homes to me. I thought to myself, 'Why do I need this? I have four hundred Jews living in my building.' My neighbors are not just people that I say, 'Hi' and 'Bye' to — they're also my friends."

"This is where our roots are," says Speaker Silver. "My father opened a



Speaker of the New York Assembly
Sheldon Silver in his
Lower Manhattan office.

hardware store in 1929 on Ludlow Street, and he stayed there until the day he passed away in 1982.”

Silver explains that for him and his wife, Rosa, who is also from the Lower East Side, in addition to its convenient location, the neighborhood was also an economical place to live for a second-year law-student. Although real estate prices have risen considerably since the 1960s and '70s, the Lower East Side still remains inexpensive relative to other Manhattan neighborhoods.

Jacob highlights the construction of the thousands of co-op apartments along the East River as a stabilizing force in the community. “People were able to get themselves bigger apartments than what had been available before the co-ops. If not for the co-ops, there would have been practically no place for people to go in this area. Rav Moshe moved into them; Rav Henkin did, too. Now, not only were there bigger apartments, but there was green park space constructed for the benefit of each building.”

But to most it was undoubtedly close personal access to people such as Rav Moshe that remained the primary incentive for living in the neighborhood. One local recalls often observing Rav Moshe standing at the Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim bus stop, where he would wait to kiss his grandson on his way to school.

“Why would someone want to leave that for the suburbs?” Tuchman wonders.

Morning Again: The Resurgence of the '80s

“Things really hit rock bottom for us in the late '60s and '70s,” says Rapfogel. “New York City had this reputation for being basically ungovernable, and crime was rampant. Between around 1977 and 1985, the city began to reclaim crime-ridden areas, and because of its proximity to City Hall and Police Plaza, one of the first places to get cleaned up was the Lower East Side. Young couples that had wanted to stay in Manhattan so they could commute easily to work or to medical schools but had been too afraid ten years earlier now started to view the neighborhood as safe.”

With a vibrant, albeit diminished, Jewish community infrastructure still in place, including kosher stores, restaurants, a butcher shop, and two bakeries, the new young families did not have to go about creating a community from scratch.

“The community still had so much to offer. It still had the institutions, beautiful shuls, yeshivos — and it still had the beautiful community members who had never moved away,” explains Silver.

“What we started seeing were college-age kids, some single, some married, taking their grandparents’ empty apartments,” says Rapfogel. “A lot of the growth was a result of the institutions that had never moved away, and it was almost the reverse pattern of what we had seen years earlier. Since then, this has become a very attractive community for a lot of young people.”



A co-op village building, most members of the community live in the co-op buildings.

The Lower East Side Today

Rabbi Zvi Romm and his wife, Shira, moved to the Lower East Side ten years ago, when he assumed leadership of the historic Bialystoker Shul, the community's largest active shul. Originally from Long Island and a *musmach* of Yeshiva University, where he continues to teach, Rabbi Romm notes that there is a special sense of camaraderie in the four-hundred-family-strong community.

"It's a very lively community, and there's a unique sense of *achdus* here," observes Rabbi Romm. "On a typical Shabbos, if there is a *simchah* in one shul, you'll see people hopping from one shul to the other. You might have one person in a knitted yarmulke and someone sitting at the same table wearing a *shtreimel*."

As if to illustrate this idea, one community member pointed out that the Boyaner Kloiz, the first Boyaner shul in America and the original shul of the Boyaner Rebbe, Harav Mordechai Shlomo Friedman, *zt"l*, is next door to

the Mizrachi Shul. When either one is looking for a tenth man for a *minyán*, they will not hesitate to knock on the other's door.

"I *daven* in the Agudah and in the Bialystoker," says Jacob. "Sitting at one table can be the biggest *gevir*, and right next to him can be the poorest person. There are no class distinctions here."

Adds Speaker Silver, "There is no competition, there's no class system, no pressure on people on how they dress their children or what kind of furniture they have in their home. That's something very significant that you don't often find in other communities."

Rabbi Romm also points to the many children in the community as a sign of growth for the future. "Both MTJ and Bais Yaakov — which, by the way, is the oldest Bais Yaakov in America — are not overcrowded but are thriving schools. Pirchei, Bnos, and *Avos U'banim* are all very well attended, so there's a visible nucleus of kids in the neighborhood. The fact that each co-op has its own park is also very nice; you can go down

on a Shabbos and children meet friends. It's a very nice place to live."

William Rapfogel's thirty-two-year-old son Michael was born and raised on the Lower East Side. Today he lives with his young family in the neighborhood. "I loved growing up here; it's in Manhattan, but it's really removed from the hustle and bustle of the city. People used to say to me, 'Oh, you're from the Lower East Side? My grandmother lived there.' But the truth is that it's an active community with a lot of young families.

"We send one of our daughters to the nearby Bais Yaakov, and it's really a great school; we're very happy there. They get a lot of girls from upper Manhattan, as well as girls from Brooklyn, just because people are looking for a good school for their daughters. Another daughter will begin preschool in Bais Shlomo Zalman here on the Lower East Side in the fall."

Michael Rapfogel also publishes the "Lower East Side Jewish Weekly," a community newsletter listing *minyanim*, *shiurim*, children's programs, and

(Below) The Boyaner Kloiz at 247 East Broadway. To the left is the Mizrachi Shul. (Right) Bais Yaakov of Manhattan. (Below right) Signs for the Boyaner Kloiz and Tzeirei Agudas Yisrael.



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numerous *gemachim*. The newsletter lists a night *kollel* and a *shiur* that takes place every evening at the Lutowisker shul, headed by Rabbi Yosef Tuvia Horowitz, and a nightly *Gemara shiur* at the Tzemach Tzedek *shtiebel*. One quick glance at the small type filling the paper and a reader can easily see that the Jewish Lower East Side is not limited to a history lesson.

The world's first Young Israel was founded on the Lower East Side in 1912, and Rabbi Yeshaya Siff has headed the shul since 1964. Rabbi Siff was also the first faculty member hired for Yeshiva University's James Striar School (JSS), where he taught for forty-nine years. While times have changed since he originally took the pulpit there, Rabbi Siff insists his shul is still alive and well.

"It's true that when I came here, there were 250 to 300 people showing up in shul every week, and we don't have that anymore," says Rabbi Siff. "But there was never a flood of people leaving — it was more of a trickle. The community has stabilized during the last twenty

years, and today we have about eighty to ninety congregants on Shabbos, with *shiurim* and other activities. Look around here; this is by no means a dead community!"

**Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim:
Rav Moshe's Yeshivah**

Founded on Eldridge Street in 1907, Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim — or MTJ, as it is commonly called — moved into its current East Broadway building in 1912. Today the yeshivah has hundreds of *talmidim* in kindergarten through *kollel*. At its helm is its venerable *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Dovid Feinstein, *shlita*, who took over the position when his father, Rav Moshe, passed away in 1986.

With an average of ten to fifteen boys in each class, the teacher-student ratio at MTJ is low enough that *rebbeim* are able to cater to the individual needs of their *talmidim*.

"The kids in our school start learning Rashi in the first grade. It's not because they're smarter; it's because the teacher is able to forge ahead at a steady pace

because of the individual attention they can afford to give," explains Rabbi Yissachar Ginzberg, MTJ's *menahel* for the last fourteen years. "We have the *zechus* of having Harav Dovid here, too. The boys have a great opportunity to learn from such a person on a daily basis.

"We're also fortunate to have a *kollel* downstairs, so when a child needs a tutor or any extra help, we have *yungeleit* readily available to help."

Rabbi Ginzberg explains that because the neighborhood is big enough to have decent class sizes but small enough that people know each other and *daven* in each other's shuls, programs such as *Avos U'banim* have a high attendance rate.

"The Rav of the Polisher *shtiebel*, Rav Shmuel Spiegel, opens up his *beis medrash* on the long winter Friday nights, and boys and fathers will go there to learn. At the same time, the teachers are there, too, so the boys can always go up to their teachers to ask them a question or for help with a *mishnah*. Yeshivah doesn't stop at the doors of MTJ."

(Below) The Lutowisker shul, Bais Shlomo Zalman, under the leadership of Rabbi Yosef Tuvia Horowitz.
(Right) Rabbi Yeshaya Siff outside the Young Israel.





A Community of Volunteers

"There is a very high percentage of Hatzolah volunteers here, which shows you what kind of people live here," explains Speaker Silver.

Heshy Jacob was part of the second class of Hatzolah volunteers, joining their ranks in 1968. Today, more than thirty-five volunteers are with the Lower East Side division of Hatzolah.

With its proximity to such hospitals as New York University and Beth Israel, a dedicated group of Lower East Side women have run a Bikur Cholim there for many years. Mrs. Miriam Katz was born and raised in the neighborhood and is very involved in the daily operations of Bikur Cholim.

"NYU Hospital is about two and a half miles from here," Mrs. Katz explains. "Every Shabbos we go there to visit people. But it's not only the adults who do this; the children of the community are raised in this way, too.

"Not long ago there was a six-year-old boy in the hospital with *yenne machalah*, and every week, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade boys would go visit him. This boy would wait every Shabbos for them to come; he wouldn't even look at

anyone else, just the boys."

In recent years Bikur Cholim rooms have been established in many New York-area hospitals, but before that, the Bikur Cholim volunteers of the Lower East Side had full Shabbos meals packed and ready in case they got a phone call from the hospital.

"I used to have schnitzel and kugel in my freezer, ready to go. We would get phone calls right before Shabbos — 'We're in the hospital, can you help us?' My children would prepare my family's Shabbos meal, and I or another woman would rush down to the hospital to deliver the food.

"A lot of women are involved," continues Mrs. Katz. "We have a driving committee and a phone committee, and we have people who visit hospitals and homebound patients."

The East Side Glatt Butcher on Grand Street, which has been at almost the same location for over sixty years, is owned today by Boro Park resident Boruch Weiss. "Some communities have Tomchei Shabbos," says Weiss. "Here they have Ashirus Shabbos — the 'riches of Shabbos.' When people here order meat to send to someone's house, they



don't just send them basic staples; they will send them the best cuts of roast that I have. That's just the way people do things here."

Standing outside a nondescript building along Shtiebel Row on East Broadway, Rabbi Noson Goldberg points out the headquarters of the world-renowned Ezras Torah relief organization, whose East Broadway branch he manages. Ezras Torah was founded in war-torn Europe in 1915 at the behest of the Chofetz Chaim and Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, *zt"l*, to provide aid to rabbis and *Roshei Yeshivah*. In 1926, shortly after leaving Russia and arriving in New York, Rav Henkin assumed the leadership of Ezras Torah and headed it until his passing in 1973. Today, led by its current president, Rabbi



(Far Left) Harav Dovid Feinstein with MTJ's first grade after testing them on *Chumash*. (Top Left) Harav Reuven Feinstein, who divides his time between the Lower East Side and his yeshivah in Staten Island, does *hataras nedarim* at MTJ. (Bottom Left) Outside East Side Glatt. (Above) Rabbi Yeshaya Siff (L) of Young Israel and Rabbi Noson Goldberg of Ezras Torah stand in front of Ezras Torah.

Emanuel Gettinger, it continues its vital work of supplying funds to needy families primarily in Israel.

Expansion and Growth

In 2005, Rabbi Yisroel and Mrs. Chanie Stone moved into the community and established Chabad of the Lower East Side. Reaching out to the unaffiliated in the neighborhood, including areas that were once considered part of the Jewish community but have since been ceded to Chinatown and the East Village, Rabbi and Mrs. Stone's events — including 'Cholent on Orchard Street' and a popular annual Purim bash — have drawn hundreds of people, and countless Lower East Side locals and newcomers have benefited from Chabad's presence.

"There are more than 2,500 *mezuzos* on apartments just along Grand Street," Rabbi Stone says. "That gives you a small idea of how many Jews actually live here, and we try to reach out to all of them. We have been *davening* at the Blue Moon Hotel on Orchard Street rent-free until now, and *baruch Hashem*, we are bursting at the seams there. Things are very tight now, and we are slowly starting to look for a bigger location.

"One young doctor who has started coming to us now lives in his grandparents' apartment. They never sold the apartment, and it was a very convenient place for him to live. He and his wife got involved in Chabad, and I officiated at their son's *bris* last week."

With slow and stable expansion the trend, the community looks forward to a flourishing future. While most shuls are confined to the area around Grand Street, the newly renovated Chasam Sopher Shul, which is headed by Rabbi Yeshaya Siff's son, Rabbi Azriel Siff, is located near the corner of Clinton and E. Houston Streets.

"At the end of the day, this is a very attractive community for young

couples," concludes the elder Rapfogel. "Recently, a building called the Madison-Jackson was renovated, and the developer wants to build a shul there and install a Shabbos elevator. He had thirty or forty Jewish families visit for a Shabbaton."

Mrs. Pessie Rosen is also a native of the Lower East Side, and for the last few years she has been giving *frum* tours of the neighborhood to school groups and tourists with the Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy. For her, the story of the neighborhood's past is intertwined with its present.

"I always tell the groups that come here what Rav Moshe used to say when he was asked why other communities had disappeared but the Lower East Side was still alive. He always answered that it was in the *zechus* of the *gemilus chassadim*, the kind deeds, of those who were here long ago that this community survived," she says. "Immigrants came off the boats, and they would be welcomed with open arms by their families and their fellow *landsmen*. This community has continued in that spirit, and we're not planning on going anywhere." ■