



## Elizabeth, New Jersey: A Kehillah In The Truest Sense

By: Tova Stulman, *Jewish Press Staff Reporter* Wednesday, November 28, 2007

When Naomi Stroock's family decided to move from Kew Gardens, Queens, in search of a bigger house, they came to visit one of Stroock's childhood friends, Efrona Hagler, for Shabbos. What they found in the Elizabeth/Hillside community was a wonderfully cohesive community with a warm and inviting atmosphere, and the rest is history.

"The community is very diverse," says Stroock, who found a house soon after her visit to the area. "The amazing thing about Elizabeth is that all types are welcomed. No one is judged by where they came from, which I think is an amazing thing in a New York area community." Stroock remarks that she has made friends with many people with whom she might not have come into contact in Queens, and also praises the relaxed pace of life in Elizabeth. "There is a lack of competition in all areas – dress, houses, cars and *frumkeit*."

Stroock is not the only one who recognizes Elizabeth as a premier Jewish neighborhood. In 1968, the Israeli government awarded the community a medal and pronounced it a model Jewish community.

Most residents consider the North Elizabeth/Hillside and Elmora neighborhoods as one inclusive community known as Elizabeth. One *eruv* encompasses both areas, which are adjacent to each other. Although Elizabeth was founded in 1664 by English settlers, it was in 1881 when a Jewish community first began taking root there. When the eminent Rabbi Pinchas M. Teitz accepted the rabbinate in 1935, he revitalized the community and made it into the vibrant center for Jewish life that it is today.



**RTMA students donating blood**

His son, Rabbi Elazar Mayer Teitz, is the current dean of the local Jewish school system under the banner the Jewish Educational Center, or as it is more popularly known, the JEC. He also serves the spiritual leader of the city, functioning as a quasi-chief rabbi of the community, much like his father did (although no one refers to them by that title).

The rabbinic dynasty extends to a third generation with Rabbi Eliyahu Teitz, who was the assistant rabbi of the neighborhood for 15 years while simultaneously working in the administration of the JEC school. After he stepped down from the rabbinate three years ago, he has worked full-time as the associate dean of the JEC. In addition, he is now also the acting assistant principal in the elementary division.

There are five shuls united under the same rabbinate: JEC Elmora, JEC Adath Israel, Adas Yeshurun, Beis Yitzchak Chevrah T'hillim, and the newest one, the Elmora Hills Minyan. Four years ago, Rabbi Teitz realized that the community of Elizabeth/Hillside was simply too much for one person to handle. So he decided to hire full-time *rav's* for the shuls. Deciding it was in the best interest of the shuls, as well as

the community, he oversaw the hirings of full-time rabbis for some of the shuls. Three years ago, Aduth Israel hired a new rabbi, and the JEC Elmora followed suit a year later.



**JEC's Yeshiva hockey team**

Rabbi Avrohom Herman is currently the rabbi of the JEC Elmora, arriving from Scranton, PA, two years ago. "Rabbi Teitz now is not directly involved with the regular activities of the shul," says Rabbi Herman. "I and the other rabbis have an excellent relationship with Rabbi Teitz, and we discuss all community matters with him. It is a unique system, unlike almost all other cities, and it is working out very well for everyone."

"People accept and respect each other despite their personal differences," says Rabbi Herman of Elizabeth. "There is a real sense of community here." Rabbi Herman lists the numerous *shiurim*, active sisterhood and great youth department as big draws of the shul.

The rabbi of Aduth Israel is Rabbi Jonathan Schwartz, a charismatic rav who is credited with attracting many new families to the area. Since most families who were moving to the area had come with children, the shul has grown at an incredible rate.



**Bruriah students at the Israel Day Parade**

Aside from the flourishing shuls and the JEC school system, the area is rife with other sights of Jewish life: Elizabeth is home to the first kosher Dunkin' Donuts in New Jersey. There are kosher restaurants and a fully stocked supermarket called One Stop Kosher Supermarket, which has a full-service food market with a deli, bakery and frozen foods. It also prepares traditional restaurant items, such as burgers, fried chicken and sushi. (Savvy shoppers will also recognize Elizabeth as the home of the Jersey Gardens Mall, the state's largest mall, as well as to a variety of retail shopping where there is only a three and a half percent sales tax, making Elizabeth an attractive shopping destination.) Like larger communities, there is a choice and variety of Jewish resources, yet the small size of Elizabeth, with its quiet tree-lined streets and actual backyards, symbolize its small-town charm.

Elizabeth is a place where the monthly shul newsletter heartily welcomes new members of the community, and where new families can expect to find themselves invited out for Shabbos meals almost as soon as they settle in.

Jeffrey Strashun is a proud native of the community. "We are one of the oldest Torah communities in New Jersey," he says, "but due to its relatively small size, it has the feel and many of the benefits of a larger community." A graduate of JEC, Yeshiva College and Cardozo Law School, Strashun briefly worked in Maryland before returning to his hometown in 1981, and has not left since. "Warmth, openness and

lack of competitiveness are some of the feelings one gets living out here,” he says. “It has the best of both in town and out of town – less than 30 minutes from New York City, less than an hour away from Monsey or Lakewood but still miles away from the hustle, bustle and coldness of the city.”

Strashun, who is the past president and current programming chair of Adath Israel – informally known as AI – of the JEC, offers many stories about the shul to highlight its identifying characteristics of warmth and friendliness. There is the “*Perek* on the Lawn Program,” where the shul hosts some 100-200 people every Shabbos in the summer for a *shiur* – along with a buffet – given by a member or visiting guest. The shul often hosts guests stranded at the nearby Newark International Airport, refusing to let them stay at airport hotels and instead opening up their homes to people far from home. (Additionally, Rabbi Elazar Teitz extends an open invitation to anyone at the airport needing a *minyan* to contact him.)



**First grade siddur play**

“One person even voluntarily returns every year, since he calls AI his home away from home – in Efrat,” remarks Strashun. Another shul member hosts a dairy lunch on Shavuot in her sprawling backyard, where all attendees contribute a food item and are treated to a *d’var Torah* by one of the college students.

“The school system here is renowned for its excellence,” says Stroock. The JEC has three divisions: the Yeshiva of Elizabeth, the Rav Teitz Mesivta Academy (RTMA), and Bruria High School for Girls. Bruria is an immensely popular and extremely well regarded girls’ high school. Not only do 100 percent of graduates continue on to higher education, but an amazing 90 percent spend the year after high school studying in Israel, exemplifying the love of Israel that the curriculum instills in its students. The establishment of the JEC made Elizabeth one of the first American cities to offer a comprehensive Jewish and secular education.

Michael Poppers is another proud and active member of the Jewish community, as well as an ardent admirer of Rav Teitz. He is a member of the *chevrah kadisha* and the secretary of the JEC Elmora board of trustees. “The community is one that welcomes Jews of all backgrounds to an environment firmly based on Torah, *avodah* and *gemillus chasadim*,” says Poppers, who lives in Elizabeth with his wife, Leah, and their three children.

He notes that the diversity of Jewish backgrounds runs the gamut from *chassidish*, Israeli, Litvak, Moroccan, etc. “We still have that unified rabbinate which is crucial to a properly functioning *kehillah*.” On a more technical note, Poppers points out that real-estate taxes in Elizabeth are far more reasonable than in most other New Jersey neighborhoods, and all the typical resources of a Jewish community are present. “There’s the world-renowned Bruria High School, fast-food places like Carvel, Chinese, pizza and Dunkin Donuts, activities for youth, seniors and everyone in between.”

“The community is a diverse one,” says Rabbi Elazar Teitz. “The goal my father, Rav Pinchas Teitz, set was that all Jews should feel comfortable in Elizabeth. We are not members of OU, Young Israel, Agudah or any other organization. Having a central rabbinate means that there is one standard of *halachah* for the entire community.”

The enthusiasm, with which residents of Elizabeth speak of their city, is exemplified by Jeffrey Strashun. “It’s like the commercial says,” he quips, “once you test drive our community, you will surely want to buy here.”