

Not Just a History Lesson: Rejuvenation of the Lower East Side

By Miriam Bader

Ask a random Jewish tourist about the Lower East Side (LES) and you are likely to hear about a historic community, built on cobblestone and filled with the noisy haggling of pushcart vendors and Yiddish chatter. Many mistakenly presume that the Jewish Lower East Side community died almost a hundred years ago with the mass Jewish exodus to Brooklyn and upper Manhattan

David Kelsey of Yonah Schimmel's Knish Bakery, home of the World's Finest Knish, sheds light on the confusion experienced by visitors who presume the Jewish Lower East Side lives purely as a historic vestige. "Sometimes we are treated like a museum. That's what people think of when they think Yiddish... But we are not a museum. This is living Yiddish culture." Today people still value a tasty traditional treat, and Schimmel's keeps its head above water by giving people what they want. One hint to the changing of the times, however, can be found on his menu: Along with the traditional Eastern European potato and kasha knish, today a cheese and jalapeno variety is available, influenced by the growing taste for Mexican food throughout New York City.



The Educational Alliance (EA), another century old Jewish institution, continues its tradition of service to the downtown neighborhood. Originally opened as a settlement house and agent of assimilation for Eastern European Jews, the EA provided tools for the newcomers to establish themselves as Americans, such as English and dance classes. Today, its involvement with Jewish life aims to invigorate Jewish culture, hoping to attract urban Jews back to their roots. At "Menorah Horah," one of the many programs sponsored by the EA, attendants sing and dance with the who's who of Jews on the cabaret scene as they celebrate the Chanukah miracle. The popular event harkens back to and acknowledges the tradition of Jewish theater born on the LES a century ago, while providing a contemporary and relevant Jewish spin for its packed audience.

The Lower East Side Jewish Conservancy is another example of the reinvigoration of Jewish life on the LES, as well as its memorialization. The organization works towards the preservation of the historic LES synagogues and provides unique tours of its sacred sites, shedding light on the worshipping Jewish communities of the past and present. Of the over 400 synagogues that originally existed in the area, it points out those that flourished, those that were abandoned or converted, and those whose doors have remained open, testifying to the neighborhood's evolution.

Eldridge Street Synagogue, the first great house of worship built on the LES in 1887 to rave reviews, has recently been restored to its former splendor after decades of decay. During its glory days, thousands participated in religious services, including the artist Ben Shahn, performer Eddie Cantor, and scientist Jonas Salk. Today, the highly decorative Moorish-style synagogue is not only home to prayer services, but also to the newly created Museum at Eldridge Street, which utilizes this powerful setting to house programs exploring cultural continuity and change. At the annual “Egg Rolls and Egg Creams Block Party,” Ashkenazic and Chinese culture interface to commemorate the long history of both groups’ overlap and coexistence in the neighborhood. The festival sets the stage for contemporary New Yorkers to experience the music, dance, storytelling, folk art—and of course the food—of both cultural groups, giving tribute to their vibrant life in the LES.

Nearby on Stanton Street stands one of the last functioning tenement synagogues. Built in 1914, thirteen years after its founding by Eastern European Jews, Congregation Bnai Jacob Anshei Brzezan, known today simply as the Stanton Street Shul, is home to a diverse Jewish congregation. It claims an Open Orthodox philosophy, welcoming all Jews. The shul’s Facebook page, the existence of which testifies to the type of community they’re hoping to draw, describes it as a place where “The Hip Meets The Hip Replacement!” As it continues to reinvent itself as a community synagogue, Stanton Street is attracting younger Jewish families and increasing its membership. For the first time in years, children can be seen running through its hallways during Sabbath services.

The Jewish LES draws myriads of tourists daily. My own fascination with the LES began with

its history, when my first grade teacher introduced Sydney Taylor’s *All-of-a-Kind Family*. I can still hear her voice reading the tales of the five mischievous sisters living in Manhattan’s LES at the turn of the 20th century. “The East Side was not pretty,” Taylor describes, but it was filled with fabulous urban adventures that I never could imagine experiencing myself as a young girl growing up in clipped and clean suburbia. That sort of life could only take place in the most densely populated area of New York and the largest Jewish community in the world. The stark contrast of most contemporary Jews’ ordered suburban lifestyles to the urban reality and congestion of the historic LES fosters a fascination with the neighborhood, leading to preservation efforts and growing tourist numbers. People come to explore their roots, to buy sour pickles from barrels, and marvel at age-old architecture. But the present area isn’t only a tribute to its own



illustrious past. Jews indeed continue to eat, pray, perform, and live on the streets of the LES. The dynamic nature of the LES facilitates the mingling of old and new. For many, the combination of old world and contemporary life is compelling. For others, the neighborhood's immense popularity, gentrification, and memorialization facilitate its demise. Some of the scenes often frustrating to residents are the tourist groups crowding street corners gesturing wildly at building facades, long lines at neighborhood eateries, and the constant snapping of digital cameras at every turn. Not to mention that the neighborhood's hipness drives real estate values higher, causing many long time Jewish residents to sell their apartments for a profit. Only 20 out of over 400 synagogues that thrived a century ago still exist. According to one longtime resident, "Even God left the East Side for suburbia." This point remains to be debated. For the present-day community that continues to make its home on the streets of the LES, Jewish life is not only a tribute to the neighborhood's history, but also represents its transformation. The complex relationship between preservation efforts and revitalization speaks to the precarious line that the Jewish Lower East Side walks between inadvertently creating a kitschy attraction while striving to remain a dynamic, living neighborhood.

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