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For Staten Island Jews, a Central Address

Rabbi Abraham Unger will head the new Office of Jewish Community Affairs of Staten Island.

New effort to unite fast-growing but largely unaffiliated community.

By TAMAR SNYDER, Staff Writer

One of the fastest-growing Jewish areas in New York — which in recent years has seen an influx of thousands of Russian Jews — Staten Island is now getting a central address for all things Jewish. And it has the blessing of rabbis from all of the denominations.

“We hope to be one-stop shopping for all Jewish community needs,” said Rabbi Abraham Unger, who has worked for the past year to create the Office of Jewish Community Affairs of Staten Island (OJCA), an independent organization that aims to serve as a clearinghouse for Jewish information on Staten Island.

With just one phone call, Staten Island residents will be able to locate a synagogue, get a list of local bar/bat mitzvah tutors or find a mohel to perform a circumcision. They’ll also have access to a community-wide calendar showcasing the spiritual, cultural and social services offerings available.

Housed in the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island, OJCA is funded by a \$12,500 neighborhood improvement grant from the UJA-Federation of New York, as well as a \$2,500 gift from an anonymous donor. In addition, Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty provided a pro bono organizational consultant to help OJCA draft its bylaws and mission statement, pull together a board, and gain its nonprofit status.

Similar attempts to create a unified Jewish community on Staten Island in the past have been unsuccessful largely due to the difficulty in getting rabbis and community leaders from the various denominations to sit at the same table.

“The [Staten Island] community was missing a collective voice, whether for issues of crisis and response or opportunities for celebration,” said David Sorkin, executive director of the Jewish Community Center of Staten Island, and an adviser to OJCA. “Other than the synagogues on Staten Island, there are fairly few other Jewish organizations. In a sense, everybody’s working within their own silos.”

As the Jewish community grew, “it became more and more disjointed,” recalled Alan Weissglass, a community leader and philanthropist who has lived on Staten Island all of his life. It got to the point where “there is no unity of any organizations in Staten Island,” Rabbi Norman Linzer, an OJCA board member, told the Jewish Week. “Synagogues don’t talk to each other. Social services organizations don’t talk to each other.”

In recent years, the JCC has tried to play the role of Jewish unifying force on Staten Island. Most notably, the JCC has hosted an annual community-wide Yom HaShoah commemoration. While the event has brought together Jews from various walks of religious life, many Islanders prefer to attend their own synagogue’s service.

Rabbi Unger, a self-described “outreach rabbi,” is vowing to change the current reality. The former spiritual leader of Congregation Ahavath Israel, a traditional, nondenominational congregation located in the Staten Island community of Tottenville, believes that a unified Jewish community would not only strengthen the Island’s existing institutions, but would also make outreach to the largely unaffiliated Jewish population in Staten Island more effective.

“He’s a brilliant consensus builder,” says Sheila Selig, the organizational consultant from Met Council who helped get OJCA get off the ground. “Rabbi Unger went out to all the rabbis and tried to pull everyone together. He’s really phenomenal at that; he knows how to talk to people to get them involved.”

OJCA boasts the support of rabbis representing a wide swath of Jewish life, including Rabbi Yaakov Lehrfield of the Young Israel of Staten Island, Rabbi Michael Howald of Temple Israel Reform Congregation, and Rabbis Stephen Stern, Gerald Sussman, Judah Newberger and Judah Kogen of Conservative congregations. “Abe Unger met with each rabbi and each rabbi gave him a go,” Rabbi Linzer said. Rabbi Unger also brought on board a slew of Chabad rabbis and several under-the-radar organizations catering to Russian Jews on Staten Island, who make up more than a quarter of the population and represent a growing percentage of the Jewish families living in Staten Island.

Those who know Rabbi Unger refer to him as “charismatic.” “Without a doubt, he’s a driving force,” says Alan Katkin, an attorney on Staten Island who is the president of OJCA.

Community organizing is Rabbi Unger’s life’s work. A professor of political science at Wagner College in Staten Island, Rabbi Unger also serves as campus rabbi of the college’s Hillel. His academic background is in coalition building, or, as he puts it, “building communities from the inside out.” The goal, he says, is to “build communities using the assets it already possesses, and linking these resources tightly and purposefully.”

The Jews of Staten Island are largely unaffiliated; the island has the lowest rate of Jewish observance in the five boroughs. For people like Rabbi Unger, these statistics represent untapped potential: a target market that has yet to be embraced by the organized Jewish community on Staten Island. “The young families I’m meeting will go where they feel communally and spiritually warmly welcomed,” he said. “They’re very open to anything on the Jewish spectrum that speaks to them, from Reform to Orthodox.”

Given Rabbi Unger’s professorship, it is probably no surprise that he likens the role of OJCA to that of a college campus with several branches: The larger Jewish community is the college’s main campus, with each institution serving as a branch of that campus. “Even if you’re denominationally connected, you’re still a part of the same communal unit. You’re just going to your branch of the campus.”

Not every rabbi is interested in this pluralistic, collaborative approach — and that’s OK, said Rabbi Unger. “Not every organization has to become a member,” he said. “We have one synagogue from each denomination, the Jewish Community Center, the two Hillels, AMIT Women, The Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services; we’ve created a working mass.”

“One thing we can provide — if nothing else — is an organized, cohesive list of whatever is actively going on Jewishly in Staten Island,” says Rabbi Unger. “Even if someone never uses our resources, it can create a sense of belonging to a kehilla [community].”