

## Boro Park:

An orthodox smorgasbord

By Steve Mirsky

Travel deep into Brooklyn's interior on the elevated M train and get off at the 50<sup>th</sup> Street station. At the bottom of the stairs, an open air market greets you with fresh fruits and vegetables anytime of the year. One block away on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue is Borough Park, spelled by locals as Boro Park – the main thoroughfare of one of the world's largest Orthodox Jewish communities outside of Israel. Here you can learn a bit about Jewish culture by simply walking the streets and picking up a neighborhood newspaper. You'll quickly scratch beyond the surface of ubiquitous black top hats and discover that this Orthodox community is far from homogenous.

The primary residents of Boro Park are Hasidic and Hareidi families, although many other sects call this neighborhood home. Each family typically averages six children, creating a localized baby boom. Synagogues and yeshivas (schools) figure very prominently in the community, but not in the ways you may expect. Many synagogues aren't separate ornate structures, but instead occupy row houses along the side streets. Front entrances are rather unceremoniously marked with simple signs in Hebrew, sometimes outlining the Torah. In time, a good number of Hasidic rebbes (rabbis), as well as other rabbinical personalities, build a following and break away to establish their own synagogues. It's not uncommon to see some of these leaders walking through the crowds on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue singing praises or making proclamations.

Virtually all of Boro Park's school-age children attend private yeshivas for boys and Bais Yaakov schools for girls. This has caused the neighborhood's public school system to experience a precipitous decline in attendance. The few remaining students enjoy individualized attention in the classroom. Although you may see the typical yellow school busses driving about, most of them have Hebrew lettering emblazoned on their side panels and aren't headed toward institutionalized boxy looking buildings. Institutions such as the Miriam Locker Girls School appear to have been built during a more gilded age, with ornate mosaic tile walls and grand arches framing the entrances.

The Hasidic community has developed their own version of a neighborhood block watch by forming a Shomrim, a network of residents who volunteer to prevent crime and handle emergencies. The Boro Park Shomrim was originally established as "The Bakery Boys," a group of bakery delivery drivers who noticed that crime surged during their late night and early morning deliveries. The group now receives extensive training and has become a full citizen patrol in partnership with the New York Police Department's Community Affairs Division. Although they don't carry weapons and desist immediately upon NYPD orders, they maintain constant radio contact with the police department's central dispatch, investigate suspicious persons,



AP Images

The late Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, left, follows a reading of the sacred Jewish scripture known as the Torah, while men and boys gather closely around during a morning prayer session in Brooklyn, N.Y., in March 1992. The Torah scroll is brought out for prayer three times a week and on other special occasions.

assist residents with police matters, and conduct searches for missing persons.

Boro is globally renowned among Hasidic Jews and other tourists for its extensive shopping options. The 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue district, roughly one mile in length from 39<sup>th</sup> Street to about 55<sup>th</sup> Street, is the community's lifeblood. Among the prominent mix of banks, a staggering variety of shops, markets, and kosher eateries beckon the senses. But don't label puffy melt-in-your-mouth jelly donuts from The Donut Man, whole wheat personal pizzas and cheeseless calzones from Amnon's Kosher Pizza and Falafel, or truffles from Candy Land as junk food. Perhaps these delicacies taste too good to be wholesome, but you'll notice the flavor and how your stomach isn't doing handsprings after indulging. Chalk this up to the use of pure water, only fresh ingredients, and cooking done under strict supervision.

The 52-room Avenue Plaza Hotel built in 1999 on 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue is among the select few in the entire city that can accommodate Hasidic families. On the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup>, only one block from the 50<sup>th</sup> Street subway, sits the Park House Hotel. As far as NYC prices go, this hotel is a bargain, especially if you want to be only a 30 minute subway ride to both Manhattan and 20 minutes to Coney Island. It's perfect for the summer months when you can wake up and decide whether it will be a day for the beach or hitting the town. Rooms are spotless and ample-sized with full baths. In the hotel's guest information directory, you'll notice references to Shabbos (Sabbath) meals that can be ordered from the front desk. You certainly won't go away hungry from the kosher breakfast buffet (included in the room rate), served in the downstairs dining room every morning except Saturday. ■