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## Adding cities

### *The Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey welcomes south Hudson County*

by JOANNE PALMER

Cities are organic things.

Some of the metaphors are obvious, and they relate to mammalian life. The roads are arteries — sometimes they're even called that. The buildings are their skeleton, and the people rushing and dawdling and dreaming through their streets are their lifeblood.

Cities also change, as organic things do; they're formed, they grow, sprawl, reach upward, reach outward. They flourish, they glitter, they amaze. They age, sometimes they enter what seem to be death spirals, and sometimes they die.

But unlike organic things, sometimes they revive.

The three cities in southern Hudson County — Hoboken, Jersey City, and Bayonne — are prime examples of this principle, both in general and in specifically Jewish terms.

All once were booming cities; all went through hard times and are coming back. All had vibrant Jewish communities, which had withered, although none had died entirely. Many of the Jewish families and institutions that made up the community moved to Bergen County. And now the three cities are all coming back, both generally and Jewishly.

They all are at different stages of their revival; Hoboken is flourishing wildly, Jersey City is growing and doing very well, thank you, and Bayonne is on its way up. (And that makes sense; Hoboken, according to Rabbi Robert Scheinberg of the United Synagogue of Hoboken, was a second settlement, attracting people — in this case Jews — leaving the Lower East Side. South Harlem has a similar story; both peaked in the 1920s and are roaring back now.)

Those three cities have been on their own Jewishly, to some extent, for many years; they belonged to the independent network maintained by the Jewish Federations of North America, the North American Jewish federation system's umbrella group. That designation usually is reserved for small, rural, often dying communities. The Hudson County cities' status was a historic artifact, but there it was.

Now, after years of consideration and negotiation, those three cities are joining northern Hudson County, part of Passaic County, and all of Bergen County, all very different places, as part of the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey.

There is joy in the idea of diversity in unity.

"There was a need to be filled," Jayne Petak of River Vale, the federation's president, said. "It didn't make sense that we had only the northern half of Hudson County. And you look at Jersey City and Hoboken and Bayonne, and you see that they are growing, and a lot of the people who are populating it are the children who grew up in our communities. Now they're moving there and looking to create Jewish communities.

"Some of those young families may be coming back this way," to Bergen County, "and they will be familiar with us," she continued. And no matter whether they move north or stay, "Who better can help with creating Jewish community, with helping young Jewish families with children connect with other young Jewish families with children, than federation?"

It's not only young families with children, she added; it's single people, newly married couples, and more and more older families with older children and empty nesters, all looking for full Jewish lives.

"I had a conversation with a few women down there, who told me that we are doing good things, setting up toddler groups. And I asked what about children with special needs? Or God forbid if your mom needs hospice services? And they looked at me blankly, and I said 'We have the bandwidth.'

"They need the infrastructure to help them grow as a Jewish community," Ms. Petak said.

It is a learning experience for a fundamentally suburban organization to learn to work in a fundamentally urban environment, and there will be "a learning curve," she said. And that's exciting. She loves the three cities — Hoboken's established, "Jersey City has built some gorgeous housing, and I think that Bayonne is the next city that will explode; the new transportation it's planning will open the door to Manhattan and Brooklyn."

There also is some historical irony for her. "My grandmother was at the Jewish Home in Jersey City," Ms. Petak said.

And then there are the differences in style between suburbanites and city people. As the federation begins its work in south Hudson, it has established a regional community council with two co-chairs and about 15 members, she said. "We invited them to come to our board meetings — and then we realized that a lot of people who live there don't have cars. You don't need a car if you work in the city, or locally." (And of course you can't park a car in Hoboken anyway.) "So when people come to a meeting, we know it's really a hardship for them. So how do we meet those needs?"

The way to meld these communities into one organization is an ongoing process, exhilarating but at times exhausting. "Our goal is never for us to take over something, but to help them grow," Ms. Petak said. "It's a learning process for them and for us, as we all learn what we can help each other accomplish."

(To move the process of melding along, the federation is throwing a getting-to-know-you party on Saturday night, March 18. See the box for more information.)

Dr. Marni Kriegel of Hoboken is a regional council co-chair. She's lived in Hoboken for about 25 years, and is an active member of the United Synagogue of Hoboken, the town's Conservative shul. "There is a resurgence of urban life in Hoboken in general, and Jewish life along with it," she said. "We are very excited now to be part of something larger, part of a community with programming and funding expertise that we can use to help us.

"When I first came here, Hoboken was a place where people came right out of college and moved out when they got married and had kids. It's changed a lot. More families have stayed and are raising children here. Our Hebrew school has grown over maybe the last 10, 15 years from a few students to a few hundred students. We're also starting to get empty nesters leaving the suburbs and coming back here."

Parents have many choices for their kids' education, she added. There are excellent public, charter, and private elementary and middle schools, and people generally send their children there; for high school "we have two county magnet schools that you test or audition into, and a lot of people use private schools in Manhattan. Hoboken High School is coming around, and the public schools have come a long way and continue to improve."

Now Hoboken has become very expensive, and now that's happening to parts of Jersey City as well, particularly the parts of Jersey City that abut Hoboken. "Families there also are

starting to come and then stay. They are starting along the same process, and we are really excited to guide them a bit and watch it grow.

“My sense is that most young Jews are not affiliated” with any Jewish communal institution, Dr. Kriegel continued. “Particularly the young single people. There is some concern about how to bring them in.

“But we have a thriving Hebrew school, and so does Chabad, and there is a Reform synagogue in Jersey City with a Hebrew school that some people here send their kids to.

“We are in a unique situation because our synagogue is really thriving, even though others are not. We have such a unique community. We are diverse, and we have all levels of observance. Some people dress up, and some people dress down. And our rabbi is fantastic.

“We are so excited about being affiliated with federation,” she added. “The northern New Jersey federation has been fantastic to work with. We’ve done things in partnership with them for the last several years, while we had been talking about making the relationship more formal. In that time they brought us programming — leadership training programs that we were too small to do ourselves. They have been so helpful to us, without even knowing if the relationship would go anywhere.”

Now that everyone know that yes, the relationship has become formalized and will go everywhere, “we are really excited to help the Hudson County Jewish community grow and thrive, and to have a partner to help us do that,” Dr. Kriegel said.

Rabbi Robert Scheinberg has been at the United Synagogue of Hoboken — the name came from a merger — for 20 years. During that time, he’s worked with the JFNA’s network of independent communities. “We’ve always had a very good relationship with them, and we are grateful to them for their dedication,” he said. “Still it never seemed like the right fit for us, in an urban area in the center of a major metropolitan area.” The network’s mainly for “isolated Jewish communities in decline, like Wheeling, West Virginia, or Huntsville, Alabama,” he said. Hoboken, Jersey City, and Bayonne never really fit in, but because of the odd way the catchment areas were drawn, the area fell outside the federations as they existed back then. (They’ve since been merged, re-formed, and renamed; now the two federations near southern Hudson County are the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey and the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest, centered in Essex County.)

Rabbi Scheinberg’s wanted to be part of a federation for a long time. “I’ve thought that it was a situation that needed to be rectified because we would feel more like part of our larger region and also that we’d benefit from economies of scale. My sense was that an independent Jewish federation in south Hudson would not be viable.

“Hoboken’s Jewish community is uncharacteristically young,” he continued. “It has more people toward the beginning of their income stream, and they would require more investment. The other two communities were rapidly aging.”

The Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey already has done quite a bit of investing in Hoboken’s Jewish future, he said; “It provided a lot of funding for Moishe House of Hoboken, allows us into the Synagogue Leadership Initiative, gave us access to One Happy Camper and the Berrie Fellowships, as well as various other regional benefits that have been generously extended to us for the last few years.” The goal, he added, is for the region to be fully integrated into the federation, “with the understanding that there are some demographic and cultural differences.”

The number of transients in the urban community is different than it is in the suburbs, he said. “It’s slowed down some, because more people are in town for the long haul, but it still

remains a transient community.” He likes using the metaphor of the community as pie to explain it, he said. The slice of pie that represents the long-term Hoboken resident is smaller than the transient slice. That slice is not growing proportionately, but the entire pie is expanding. There’s just more of everybody.”

“We are very excited and grateful,” Rabbi Scheinberg concluded. “We feel that there is a lot that we can give to the federation, and that we can benefit a lot from it. We see the relationship as going in both directions.”

Tal Shuster of Jersey City is the other regional council co-chair. She’s lived there for 21 years.

“The Jewish community was always here, but in the last few years we’ve seen a transition as many people move to the area from Manhattan and from Brooklyn,” she said. “It’s young professionals in their 20s and 30s, singles, couples, young families. The Jewish community always was here, but lately I feel that there is more a need for it than there was before.

“I have four kids, whom I am raising in Jersey City,” she added. “It was not at all a hard decision. I love going outside and seeing people around me. A few years ago I thought maybe I would move to the suburbs — maybe to Tenafly — but today this just feels right. Maybe a few years ago I had doubts, but today I don’t have any.”

More and more other people are staying, she added. “It’s all based on the community and the education.” Schools are not a problem. “There are amazing private options and two great charter schools, which are wonderful — you get in by lottery — and the public schools are changing, and some of them are wonderful too.” Chabad has a school, and it also offers Hebrew to children of Israelis.

“It’s all in transition,” she added.

Ms. Shuster, like many other people, pointed to a new and growing segment of the community, which she represents — Israelis. In fact, she is very involved with the IAC — the Israeli American Council. “We did a few programs here and a number of events there, but the wonderful population that is definitely looking for a connection to the community and to the services around them we did not have before the last few years.

“There are some beautiful synagogues in Jersey City,” she added. “This is a big city” — it’s the state’s second largest— “and it’s not like Hoboken, where everything is so small and dense, everything right next to each other. Here it’s spread around the city. That makes it more challenging to bring the city together. But there is a lot of energy, and everyone is willing to do it.”

She thinks that joining the federation is a great idea. “It is on the one hand an old-fashioned idea, but on the other hand people know about it from their parents and their grandparents. People feel comfortable with it. They know it.”

She’s excited by the move. “It’s nice to be part of the change,” she said.

Rabbi Aaron Katz is the still-fairly-new rabbi at the unaffiliated Temple B’nai Jacob. “I think it’s great,” he said of joining the federation. “The question is how can we make it work? What are the expectations? Both of us have to sit and talk about it, and find what will work for the benefit of all the communities.”

He thinks that there is important work that federation can do beyond providing programming and other services. “In the political situation that we are in now, and with the increase of anti-Semitism, I think that the Jewish federation, like a political organization, can represent the Jewish community,” he said. “I think that we have a lot of work to do together.

“I hope that we will concentrate on how to protect our communities — not only our buildings, but the identity of the community. What happens when anti-Semitism comes is that the Jewish identity is in crisis too, and then the question is how can we make sure that we have a positive Jewish identity. I want you to be a Jew because you want to be, not because someone else reminds you that you are a Jew.

“The role of the Jewish federation is to help all of us in small communities come together. We have to work to put our differences aside and begin to think, okay, there is something to be done, and we have to do it.

“We cannot be quiet. One of my rabbis once told me, ‘I don’t speak because I have the power of speech. I speak because I don’t have the power to be silent.

“The important part of this is being together. It’s in seeing how we all can work together.

“This is not about politics,” Rabbi Katz concluded. “This is about values.”

Even Steven Fulop, Jersey City’s mayor, who is Jewish, has an opinion about his area joining the federation. “I think this is great for Jersey City overall, as many in the county will now have better access to the social services that the federation provides,” he said. “Previously we weren’t covered, so we certainly welcome this change.”

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Unger took over Bayonne’s Congregation Ohav Zedek, an Orthodox shul, last summer. “I believe in communities working together, in the idea of federation, in the European kehilla model,” he said. “We’re here to support one another. Institutions may lack things, but together they can create a great synergy. And especially in a community like Hudson County, which was in decline but now is re-emerging.

“I love the idea of a community like this being served by federation. It’s been a long time coming. And Hudson County is a new frontier.”

Rabbi Unger can look at the community from many vantage points. Although he spends every Shabbat and holiday in Bayonne, during the week he lives in Hoboken, his doctorate is in political science, and he is a tenured associate professor, teaching urban planning, at Wagner College on Staten Island.

“Hoboken has an awful lot of Jews coming in,” he said. “They’re not necessarily from an Orthodox background, and they are part of a larger flood of gentrification.” These new settlers are not disproportionately Jewish, he added; “there are a lot of Indians and a lot of others, both immigrants and the native-born. But because this is the New York metropolitan area, a certain percentage of them is Jewish.

“I can tell you as a political scientist that the idea of being a homeowner in the suburbs has been pushed away by more and more people since 2008. People still leave for the suburbs, for Bergen County, all the time, but they go much later than before, and a few are even starting to come back with kids.

“I have a friend — we used to run the Friday night kiddush club together — and he moved to Tenafly for a year, but now he’s back. The burbs weren’t for him.”

What’s most notable, he said, is the new take on Jewish life that Israelis bring with them. “It’s important to recognize a strong emergent Israeli population throughout Hudson County,” he said. “I am telling you on the ground, both as a rabbi and as a lay person, as a peer because I know them both as a rabbi and socially, that there is a huge Israeli population, because of the tech hub that’s emerged in Jersey City since 9/11.

“It’s very important for the American Jewish community because they are a very strongly Jewishly identifying population, but in a different way than American Jews historically have identified.

“While the Israelis are strongly secular, and the group in Hoboken are highly educated, often Tel Aviv-born, Orthodoxy still is the norm for them, religiously and politically. They are secular and liberal, and it seems that at first meeting they don’t fit the profile of non-Orthodox American Jews. Most of them are married, mostly with young children, probably in their 30s and 40s. And they are the strongest and most identifiable Jewish population in Hudson County.

“Most of them view themselves as transient, but they are staying here longer. A lot go back to Israel — but a lot stay here.

“The real variable here is this Israeli American population. They know that the Hebrew language in the diaspora has to be supplemented for their children. They have their own needs — but they are something refreshing.

“They are entirely post partisan. They are not involved in American Jewish internal politics. They are past those distinctions. They are looking for something else. They will go anywhere where there is something for their kids. They are not part of any ideology. They are looking at things educationally, spiritually, holistically. These are not American Jewish vantage points.

“Those debates aren’t their debates.”

Rabbi Unger doesn’t think that this group knows much about federation, and so “federation has an awful lot of outreach to do,” he said. “I think it might seem like a dated concept. Its agenda needs to be meeting the needs of local communities on the ground, should it be outreach to young families, innovating educational programming, Shabbat programming, cultural programming, Hebrew language programming for American Israelis. That has to be on their agenda, or they will fade away.

“As a lay person in Hoboken, I can tell you that the Jewish federation is not as much on my radar as it should be, and I don’t know as much about what it does. It hasn’t been as compelling to me as synagogue life or grassroots organizations have been. People don’t talk much about federation.

“But that’s where federation can go,” Rabbi Unger said. “It has a great chance here, a chance to really reinvent itself, to be known as a harbinger of Jewish continuity in Hudson County.”

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**Who:** The Hudson County Regional Council of the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey

**What:** Invites everyone to Hudson County Night Out, a wine and dessert reception

**When:** Saturday, March 18, from 8:30 to 10:30 p.m.

**Where:** At JCity Realty, 109 Christopher Columbus Drive in Jersey City

**Why:** To meet!

**How much:** Free!!

**For more information:** Go to [www.jfnnj.org/hudsonnightout](http://www.jfnnj.org/hudsonnightout), call Kim Schwartzman at (201) 820-3936, or email her at [kimberlys@jfnnj.org](mailto:kimberlys@jfnnj.org)