

Feature / By Yosef Rapaport

Know Your Neighbors

In a gesture of good will, a group of Chassidim, headed by Rabbi David Neiderman of the UJO, visited IS 318, a public school in Williamsburg, to explain the Chassidic lifestyle to young students.

In the wake of recent attacks against Chassidic Jews living on the outer edges of the Jewish neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz invited Rabbi David Niederman of the UJO (the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg) to lead a group of Chassidic representatives on a visit to a local public school to speak to an assembly of students at neighboring Intermediate High School 318.

None of the students attending I.S. 318 have been accused of assaulting any of their neighbors, but Mr. Markowitz felt that to maintain good community relations, it is important to build bridges of understanding.

At the invitation of Rabbi Niederman, *Hamodia* joined the visiting delegation. The group included Mr. David Pollock of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC), and Mr. Shia Bochner, M.A., a professor of psychology at Touro College and a counselor-therapist at The Satellite High School Academy, an alternative public school.

We are different, we celebrate our differences, and that's why we are here today. We are different but our needs are the same, our desires are the same, all of us want our children and grandchildren to achieve and that's why we go to school.

As the Chassidic population of Williamsburg grows, outlying streets are constantly being integrated into the traditional core of the neighborhood. Some of



Rabbi David Niederman speaking to the students.

these outer streets border commercially zoned blocks; some border on long-troubled housing projects.

The immediate vicinity of I.S.318 has seen a rising tide of attacks against Chassidim, leading to escalating tensions and fears of danger. *Hamodia* has reported on the many efforts being made to find ways to increase the safety and security of local families and their children.

A victim of a vicious attack by three thugs on the outer edges of the Chassidish Williamsburg, within a stone's throw of I.S. 318, is Rabbi Yoel Weinberger, a *rebbe* in a yeshivah. *Baruch Hashem*, he was just a week out of the hospital when he returned to his regular *seder* of learning during the day in the Vizhnitzer shul in Williamsburg. His three attackers, one adult and two juveniles, beat him in the face with brass irons in their fists. He broke away from them twice, only to be caught again. He offered them his wallet, but they were cursing him as a Jew; it is obvious that they had other motives than robbery. He repeatedly recited *Shema Yisrael*, thinking these were his final moments.

There has been a spate of attacks on Jews in that area before and after Rabbi Weinberger was victimized. After wide media attention to this ongoing problem with area thugs, police and politicians took notice.

When *Hamodia* met with Rabbi Weinberger, even after he described the horrific attack, the injuries he sustained, and the

metal plates the surgeons used to reconstruct the bones of his face, his major concern was that in retelling the story we should not be contributing to raising local tensions.

"I am a Satmar Chassid; our *Gedolim* and in particular the Rebbe, Rav Yoel of Satmar, *zt"l*, taught us not to escalate fights with our gentile neighbors," he told me. Rabbi Weinberger emphasized his adherence to the principle of not being antagonistic

toward others.

Being a great-grandson of the famous Rebbe, Harav Shulem Eliezer Halberstam of Ratzfert, *Hy"d*, who was murdered in Auschwitz, added poignancy to Rabbi Weinberger's attitude of remaining true to his beliefs as to how a Jew is to behave in *galus*, even in the face of a severe test.

This attitude is widely shared by the residents of the mostly Satmar Chassidic neigh-



The National Champion Chess Team of IS 318 posing with the delegation. Principal Fortunato Rubino is third from right.

borhood of Williamsburg. At local meetings held to raise awareness and funds for security, many repeatedly told *Hamodia* about their wish not to come across as belligerent, nor to seek any sort of vigilante action as a response to the attacks.

Concerned citizens have met to organize security and to seek ways to pressure the police to provide more patrols and a faster response.

These incidents and the efforts to curb the violence have prompted many concerned officials to meet with constituents, to offer their good offices in order to generate better relations within the area.

The always effervescent Marty Markowitz, who as Borough President is the chief booster of Brooklyn, came up with the idea of having Chassidim visit the school in order to acquaint the students with their different-looking immediate neighbors. The school also felt that the students should learn sensitivity to everyone who lives in the community.

The school is proud of its chess team, national chess champions in the under-16 age category. The student champions from the mostly minority school have been featured in national media.

Principal Forunato Rubino told *Hamodia* proudly:

“Our chess team is outrageous [sic]! We are national chess champions 12 years in a row. So if you live in Idaho or Indiana and you are going to the chess championships, you have only one thing in mind: How are you going to beat I.S. 318 from Williamsburg?? The Grand Master is Justus Williams.

“We have more than 1,600 students at our Academy of the Arts and Sciences, and I have been here for 32 years; and we have never had an incident with our Jewish neighbors.

“Around the school we have many Chassidic neighbors, there are a lot of baby carriages parked on the sidewalks around the school, and just last week, two Chassidic men came into my office to thank us for how well-behaved the students are when they leave school and how careful they are in avoiding any mishaps.”

As some 500 students filed into the auditorium the background din was deafening, but as soon as principal Rubino took the microphone in his hand to speak, total silence reigned.

Mr. Markowitz spoke first, and in his usual humorous, bantering tone he told the children what they were about to hear and who was going to speak. He commended the Satmar community, represented by the UJO, for agreeing to come speak to the students.

“Buenos días (Spanish), *git morgen* (Yiddish) and good morning are actually the same greeting,” Rabbi Niederman began.



Shia Bochner speaking to the students.

“We are much more similar than different. I will tell you why: I am a son of immigrants and we are going through similar struggles, struggling to get jobs, struggling in various areas of commerce because of the way we look and the way we dress and also the way we conduct ourselves in the public.

“We have different holidays, but we have the same problems feeding our children, and it’s not easy here in New York.

“But when we work together we can achieve wonders for the community as a

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whole. I have worked with the African-American and Latino communities before to stop a monster incineration plant in the old Navy Yard that would have had disastrous effects on our community. The environment and the air [you and] we breathe are the same! What’s good for you is good for us, and what bad for us is bad for you.”

Rabbi Niederman then described to the students some of the many difference in the life of Chassidic children.

“We are different not only in what we read. In our homes, believe it or not, we do

not have TV; and we don’t go to movies either. [Gasps from the audience.] The children don’t feel deprived, they are just as happy as you are. We have our own newspapers printed in Yiddish which unlike English is read from right to left. That is how everyone is kept current with the news. All the children speak English with an accent, like me [laughs].”

Speaking of the way Chassidim dress, Rabbi Niederman said that it might be compared to different baseball teams, each wearing a particular uniform. He also mentioned some kosher standards.

After going through the list of customs of things that make Chassidic life unique, Rabbi Niederman proclaimed:

“We are different, we celebrate our differences, and that’s why we are here today. We are different but our needs are the same, our desires are the same, all of us want our children and grandchildren to achieve and that’s why we go to school.”

The audience, which was perhaps slow to warm to Rabbi Niederman, at the end heartily applauded his appeal to “live in harmony with one another.”

The other speaker, Mr. Bochner, enthralled his listeners with an account of his experiences as a Chassidic therapist for troubled high-school students in Manhattan.

Mr. Bochner cited the initial hostile reactions to the sight of a Chassidic person in the hallways of the school, and how over time the students came to respect him. Mr. Bochner explained the need to establish trust between therapist and client.

A boy who was initially reluctant to open up to the counselor later told him, “My uncle owns a

pizzeria in a Jewish Chassidic neighborhood, but none of the people there buy by him.” After hearing that the reason the Chassidim didn’t patronize the pizzeria is not personal “or being snobby,” but rather for religious reasons in keeping with kosher rules, the feelings of mistrust evaporated. “The kid went back to his uncle suggesting that he change his menu [laughter],” Mr. Bochner told the rapt audience.

In a subsequent email to *Hamodia* Mr. Bochner wrote:

“I was invited to participate in an important community event regarding the recent increase in violence perpetrated by young public school teens against *Chassidishe yungeleit*. While I am not a community activist, I was extremely eager to participate in this event. For the past two years, I have been working with African-American and Latino teenagers at the Satellite High School Academy.

“Those of us who attended this gathering were impressed by how respectful and receptive the children were to accepting us and learning about our culture. Certainly we present as very different and even odd to those unfamiliar with us. Yet no one snickered or laughed. When I got up to speak, I felt that the children were eager to learn about us.

“My experience working in these populations has benefited me because, while we legitimately want to shield our children from secular influences and our intentions are pure, I believe that communicating to our children that every human being deserves respect is a worthy endeavor that can potentially alleviate some of the animosity that has built up between the communities.”



Afterthoughts

Jeremy (R): “The thing that impressed me the most is the way the kids aren’t able to watch TV... and hear radios.” Asked if he thinks there is something good about it he simply said “no” but his friend Curtis (L) said that he does see some similarities between his Jewish neighbors and himself. “We both read the Bible, and I think that not having a TV is a little bit better; I think that some kids get caught up on TV and they can’t remember what they are doing. They might have a test the next day and they watched and forgot everything about the test.”