

## LOCAL

# For Lisker Congregation Judaism is a family affair

By George Robinson  
Senior Writer

**WE SAY THE WORDS** every day: *vishinam tam l'vanecha*, you shall teach them to your children. At the Lisker Congregation, those words have an extra resonance. The synagogue's spiritual leader, Tzvi Hersch Friedlander, was one of "the children" not so long ago. The 24-year-old Friedlander is the sixth *rebbe* in a hereditary line, heir to his grandfather's chair at the head of this small congregation.

The gravity of the situation is not lost on him. "It's an awesome responsibility," he says quietly. He recounts a Hasidic tale whose moral is "Don't try to copy anybody."

Friedlander is big and boyish, slightly stoop-shouldered. He smiles easily and often defers to his mother, Judith. She is a buoyant woman in her 50s who teaches many of the classes the synagogue offers.

Friedlander is not intimidated by the legacy he must uphold. "I think it helps me that I didn't know any of the previous rebbes, except for my grandfather," Friedlander says. "But he was such a warm person. It depends on how you picture your role. He made it seem so natural." The congregation got its start in Liske, a small town in the Tokay countryside of Hungary, after moving from Poland, then moved to the United States, first to the South Bronx, then to East 69th Street. Throughout their wanderings, the Lisker followers tried hard to stay plugged in to their traditions.

"It's not just a rabbi or a synagogue," Mrs. Friedlander says. "It's our whole roots and heritage."

Friedlander's predecessors were scholars and authors, a family tradition he is working hard to live up to, studying privately for his *smicha*.

The congregation has literally carried with it other traditions. An observer is struck by the peculiar mixture of mismatched chandeliers and lighting fixtures that illuminate the sanctuary, a narrow room, made to seem darker by its brown wood paneling. Their story is indicative of the congregation's commitment to a Jewish past that has faded away.

"These lighting fixtures and the stained glass you see around you all come from former synagogues in the Bronx," Mrs. Friedlander explains. "This building was a carriage house," Mrs. Friedlander says. "When my father bought it and turned it into a synagogue 15 years ago, he brought these with him as a memorial to those congregations, none of which exist anymore."

The Friedlanders are very conscious of those long-dissolved synagogues. If they had stayed in the Bronx, theirs might have gone the same way. Perhaps that knowledge, coupled with the larger concern in the American Jewish community with issues of identity and survival, help to motivate their almost obsessive desire to do outreach on



(Left), The interior of the Lisker Congregation. (Right), Rabbi Tzvi Hersch Friedlander, 24, the spiritual leader of the Lisker Congregation, is shown with his mother, Judith, who teaches many of the classes the synagogue offers.

Photos by Robin Glasser

the affluent Upper East Side. It is an unlikely setting for an Orthodox *shul* with roots in Eastern Europe; the street has the quiet, understated elegance of serious money, and there are Rolls-Royces and Mercedes parked in a private garage next door that is almost as large as the Liskers' sanctuary.

Like many other Orthodox congregations in Manhattan, the Lisker offers crash Hebrew courses, beginners' classes in Torah and Talmud.

"We try to follow in the teaching of Samson Raphael Hirsch, that you can be Orthodox and still take the best of the modern ways," Friedlander says. "You can take the best from both."

"Our goal is to try to educate in a nice way," Mrs. Friedlander says. "Judaism is tough. It's not an easy lesson."

He chimes in, "Judaism is *sellable*. It must have something going for it to have survived all that has happened."

"We want the people who come to us to be religious, but we want them to go at their own pace,"

his mother says.

"People from the upper east side had no Jewish connections," he says. "I met guys who told me they were going to a bar for Yom Kippur 'to see in the new year' with a big party."

"My father always said, 'There is no such thing as a bad Jew,'" Mrs. Friedlander recalls. "We try to promote a unity within the Jewish people here. If you come here on a *shabbos*, you will see Hasidim praying alongside Sephardim alongside modern Orthodox."

Her son seconds that sentiment. "We have a cross-section, Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, coming in here. It amazes and thrills me how broad the spectrum of Judaism is. And we are very diverse."

And the Friedlanders strive to recognize the achievements of their students. Last week for *Shabbat Bereshit* they offered a special *kiddush* for all the graduates of their Hebrew crash courses and acknowledged their success from the *himah*.

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