

# MANHATTAN



## We Are Family

*An Upper East Side shtiebel celebrates its 50th anniversary; other small shuls in the neighborhood gain adherents.*

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**B**y now Manhattan's more peripatetic shulgoers are used to intradenominational nuances: Not-So-Modern Orthodox, Egalitarian Conservative, Reformed Reform.

Davened there, done that, you could say. Then how about Modern Chasidic?

"That's what we are," says Rabbi Zvi Hersh Friedlander, head of the Lisker Congregation, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. "Right-wing — but with a twist," qualifies his widowed mother, Rebbetzin Judith Friedlander, ushering a visitor into the East 69th Street brownstone that serves as both spiritual and physical home.

Rabbi Friedlander, the 28-year-old scion of an early 19th century Hungarian chasidic dynasty, holds two Orthodox ordinations and a degree in communications from Queens College. At his weekly Friday night "Tisch experience," Hersh, as his fans call him, draws parallels between the Torah portion and the Yankees' weekly performance. His divar Torahs are in English, not Yiddish. Women pray behind a lace curtain, but the rebbetzin teaches classes at Lisker on the Prophets and is completing training in clinical pastoral education to become a professional hospital chaplain. Her daughter Chava works for an executive search firm and teaches a course on Ethics of the Fathers.

Modern pursuits notwithstanding, the Friedlanders scrupulously follow the principles that guided their founder, Zvi Hersh Friedmann, the rebbe of Olasz Liszke in the Tokay region of Hungary. The first principle is *ahavas Yisroel*, or love of all Jews. "The only way to help people is if you're not judgmental," says Rebbetzin Friedlander, who quickly adds, "I have a big mouth. My son is the one who knows how to listen to people."

"My first impression was, this is going to be very strict," recalls Elizabeth Levi Fenigaglia, 56, a donor professional at UJA-Federation, who started commuting from her home in Staten Island two years ago to attend Rebbetzin Friedlander's



**Rabbi Zvi Hersh Friedlander and his mother, Rebbetzin Judith Friedlander, offer a "modern chasidic" form of Judaism in a "little shul across the street." At top left, another neighborhood shtiebel, Manhattan Sephardic Congregation.**

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL DATKASH

Hebrew reading course. Thanks to Lisker, she has been able to "throw away preconceptions about what chasidism is all about," Fenigaglia says. "I've met Modern Orthodox people who are a lot more rigid."

The Lisker Congregation is one of several Upper East Side shtiebels — small, low-frills Orthodox shuls akin to those in Borough Park or on the Lower East Side — whose nonsense, two-hour Shabbat services, modest or non-existent membership fees, and homey atmospheres attract people turned off by the steep charges, cliquishness, and dress-up Saturdays of the larger synagogues in the area, as well as adventurous shul samplers who like to vary their routines.

"It's the little shul across the street," says Richard Bregman, 42, a money manager who attended a Rosh Chodesh minyan at Lisker a few years ago after his wife signed up for a Basic Judaism class. To his surprise, Lisker was as "embracing and inclusive" as Central, the "very Reform" synagogue he belongs to. Although he makes it clear that he is not about to embrace even a modern chasidic lifestyle, Bregman enjoys filling in at

the occasional Lisker minyan. "You go in and pray. There's no messing around. There's no spectacle."

Lois Katz, 46, a legal secretary, had no problem with Temple Israel, the East Side Reform synagogue, where she attended religious school as a child. But she says that Lisker, where she takes courses and attends holiday services, is "authentic; it's the right way." And she likes the personal touch. "Rebbetzin Judy is like my 'Dear Abby,'" she says.

"There's the main synagogue for special occasions but the shtiebel is

where you go regularly," says a 27-year-old woman, who grew up in Borough Park and doesn't want her name in print. "It's your bar; it's where you hang; it's your 'Cheers.'"

Lubavitcher chasidism also welcome Jews of all persuasions, Judith Friedlander acknowledges, but "they're a movement," she says. "We're a family."

Every one of Lisker's 50 members counts — literally. When there aren't enough men for a Rosh Chodesh or Monday or Thursday morning minyan, the spry, 61-year-old rebbetzin rounds up suspects on Third Avenue.

Michael Neustadter, 52, who is in printing sales and describes himself as "single and shopping," was recruited one Saturday night on his way to Park East Synagogue, where he is a member.

Neustadter also happens to be a regular on the Upper East Side shtiebel circuit. He has davened at Congregation Bnai Israel on 77th Street (aka "The Shtiebel"), Yorkville Synagogue on 78th Street, and Manhattan Sephardic Congregation on 75th Street. "Living in this neighborhood, I have the luxury of trying a number of different kinds of synagogues," he says.

At The Shtiebel, which draws about 100 people every Shabbat, men daven at the same long tables where the kiddush is set up. "Everybody is everything," says Alan Fuchs, son-in-law of the rabbi, Yehoseph Ralbag. There are no "positions,"