

Rabbi relishes being the life of the party

Chai Center's Schwartz tunes in to young Jews

By Jason Kleiner
Special to the Advocate

Under a clear night sky, some 100 young adults sit in the narrow yard of a Brookline house.

Rabbi Mayshe Schwartz – thick black beard flowing from his chin, his signature Chai baseball cap affixed to his head – stands on a chair while his wife, Shifra, shushes two of their seven children as they scurry around the tables.

And so it goes at First Friday Shabbat at the Chai Center.

The guests range in age from early 20s to late 30s. Some are dressed in jeans and T shirts; others in long skirts or button down shirts. Some wear kippot and prayer shawls.

When Mayshe addresses the crowd, he talks about the week's Torah portion and relates it to the world today. His tone is chatty, not preachy.

A part of the Orthodox Chabad movement, the Chai Center makes a point to be welcoming to Conservative, Reform and unaffiliated Jews. Just consider the name of its Web site: GetChai.com.

One of the center's biggest events is Dec. 22, when it expects to host more than 500 young adults at Jillian's in Fenway for the Lights and Strikes Chanukah Party. The event will feature bowling, kosher food and schmoozing. It will also include a candle-lighting ceremony at an ice sculpture menorah, co-sponsored by Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Consulate General of Israel, Havurah on the Hill and Boston's Israel Group, among others.

Mayshe is as at ease with razzmatazz as he is with religion. Both are in his blood. Born in Venice Beach, Calif., he is the son of Rabbi Shlomo "Schwartzie" Schwartz, the first Chabad campus rabbi in the United States. Schwartzie got his original marching orders from the revered Lubavitch Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

Shifra also was raised in a Chabad outreach family, the daughter of Rabbi David Shapiro of Miami.

Mayshe's sisters knew Shifra, and his aunt played matchmaker when the two met while vacationing in Israel. They married in Florida and moved to California, where Mayshe worked with his father.

In 2006, friends lured them to Boston, seeing the couple's potential to inspire young Jews in the college-dominated city. Using their wedding money and personal savings, Mayshe and Shifra set about stoking the flames of Judaism. Early on, it was a struggle, draining their money, but not their faith. At one point, their credit card debt alone was \$100,000.

Today, they are debt free and have attracted support from such established organizations as Combined Jewish Philanthropies.



Rabbi Mayshe Schwartz and his wife, Shifra.

So what is its mission?

"We want every Jew in Boston to know that they are an important piece of the larger puzzle and that without them the puzzle isn't complete," Mayshe said, while emphasizing that the goal is not to recruit an army of disciples sporting beards and payot.

"Who's to say that the decision to grow a beard is any harder or more meaningful than the decision to keep Shabbos?" he said.

Mayshe said he sees Jews as each having a unique religious path, and the center's role as helping them pursue it.

Just as his father was a trailblazer, Mayshe is helping pioneer Chabad's outreach movement among young adults. While the Chai Center provides typical Chabad functions of helping Jews of all ages connect to their faith, it is innovating with holiday events like Sushi in the Sukkah and hosting functions – with kosher food – at Boston clubs.

"We have no hidden agenda," Shifra says. "People come and take what they want. Our motto is zero pressure, total pleasure."

The center's activities include a Tuesday Torah Café, offering Scriptural study with modern-day applications; First Friday Shabbat, where a young professional crowd can meet for dinner and, if they wish, earlier for a service. The center also offers Hebrew school and bar and bat mitzvah lessons.

Ask Mayshe about his ubiquitous Chai baseball cap, and you'll understand his approach to being a rabbi. He'll tell you about how his father, Schwartzie, always wore Mickey Mouse suspenders. When young Mayshe asked why, his dad said: "When a person sees me, a rabbi, it can be intimidating. The notion that I am judging them based on some higher understanding might even cross their mind. But I want them to not be afraid so that I can get to know them, and who could be afraid of a rabbi wearing Mickey Mouse suspenders?"

And who could resist celebrating Chanukah in the shadow of Fenway Park? Weeks before, Mayshe already was savoring the scene: Hundreds of young Jews gathering together to recite the blessings.

"I believe there is something real and special in that," said Mayshe, "something people can take with them."

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