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JEWISH freepress

news

Extending the Jewish connection in small town Alberta

Calgary rabbis have long taken a personal responsibility, despite their heavy congregational work, to try and provide Jewish services to smaller communities or to serve individual needs of families within reasonable travelling distance of Calgary.

Rabbi Yossi Matusof of Calgary (son of Rabbi Menachem Matusof) and Rabbi Moshe Raices of Iowa, travelled thousands of kilometres this summer, stopping in places such as Claresholm, Rumsey, Cochrane, Red Deer, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge,

and just started walking up and down main street.

In Didsbury, for example, their inquiries led them to discover a 16-year-old Jewish teenager who did not have the opportunity for a Bar Mitzvah. So they performed one right

and talk and pray with these two young men," said Ian Cohen of Cochrane. "It was enlightening and heart-warming to have them visit and chat. I may not be the most observant Jew but these gentlemen reaffirmed why I am so proud to be Jewish, they were accepting, they were proud to have their faith and wisdom."

"In Banff we met a woman who was visiting from New Mexico whose eyes filled with tears when we were able to give her a shabbat candle kit," said Rabbi Yossi Matusof. There were similarly emotional experiences elsewhere, such as the woman in Claresholm who for years had felt isolated and unconnected to Judaism.

Rabbi Raices said all their encounters were very positive.

"It seemed almost like people were waiting for us

Alberta it was more like finding a connection from the distant past. Some of these individuals were from mixed marriages and knew little about their Jewish connection. Others, because of isolation, perhaps, have never had the chance to experience life as a Jew.

Whatever the circumstances, it has convinced Rabbi Menachem Matusof, executive director of the local Chabad community, that more needs to be done to reach out to Jews outside the boundaries of southwest Calgary.

"We could probably sustain a full time presence in the Banff area, at least during peak tourist season in the summer. It would take a lot of effort and resources but I think it could be done," he said.

In their journey this summer, Rabbis Matusof and

some 500 young rabbis and senior rabbinical students visit over 10,000 cities world-wide to bring Jewish joy and learning to people of all ages.

The program was conceived by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, in 1943 and has been responsible for bolstering Jewish communities world-wide. The stories are legendary of Jewish travellers roaming the world and encountering Chabad centres in even the most remote and exotic places. There, they are always welcomed to a shabbat meal, to celebrate one of the high holidays, or just to relax and chat with fellow Jew.

For Rabbi Yossi Matusof it was kind of a personal journey as well. Growing up in Calgary and studying abroad, it was nice to return home to perform a need-



Yossi Matusof and an Israeli working at a kiosk in Parkland Mall of Red Deer

But Chabad Lubavitch of Alberta has put a whole new meaning to the term Jewish outreach by sending two young rabbis on a long distance tour of southern Alberta to seek out Jews in rural areas of the province.

Banff, Lake Louise and more.

The two young rabbis, both age 20 and just a few years away from completing their lengthy rabbinical studies, packed their car with videos, brochures, shabbat candles, mezuzahs and kosher food

on the spot. They performed a similar ceremony in Edson. In Red Deer they gave out six mezuzahs. They put tefillin on a store owner right in his shop in a Cochrane mall.

"It was a pleasure to sit



Moshe Raices and Mark Dimirsky of Red Deer in his home.

to show up. They were all interested in reconnecting with Judaism."

For some of the tourists visiting Banff and Lake Louise it was kind of a pleasant surprise to meet two youth Chassidic rabbis in an exotic mountain retreat. For others in rural

Raices were following in the footsteps of many other Chabad rabbis who are part of a world-wide program called the Roving Rabbis, or sometimes referred to as the Lubavitch Summer Peace Corps, which has been doing similar outreach work for decades. Each year

ed service for his fellow Jews. But it also served as a token to help observe the 20th anniversary of Chabad Lubavitch in Alberta, a movement his father and the entire Matusof family have fostered with incredible energy and commitment over the years.



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