



THE 'I-DEAL' LIFE

LEON SAKKAL

When people think of Deal, NJ, among the first things that come to mind are summer, the beach, bike riding, or a Sunday evening barbeque with friends and family. But for the many families living in Deal and its surrounding cities year-round, the word “Deal” takes on a whole different meaning.

This month, we take a look at why so many opt to live in the rural suburbs of New Jersey, by exploring the rich history and promising future of the Jersey Shore’s Sephardic community.

A Look Back

If you were a teen or in your 20’s in the 1960’s or 70’s, it’s probably safe to assume you were not among the few Sephardic families residing in New Jersey. And those Garden State “pioneers” who did grow up in the quiet surroundings of Deal or Long Branch during that area can only marvel at how the community has expanded and flourished over the last several decades.

One address permanently etched in the minds of Deal natives is 1515 Logan Road – the address of the community’s first yeshiva, Hillel Yeshiva. Established in 1951, Hillel began as a small elementary school. With just a small handful of Sephardic families living in New Jersey in the late 1960’s, the student body was almost completely Ashkenazic. Graduates typically attended Ocean Township High School, where, as former students recall, they endured a good deal of teasing, mistreatment, and bullying.

At that time, there was still no Sephardic synagogue, due to the small number of Sephardic families in the area. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services were held in the courtroom of the Deal Police Station, and later, as more families trickled in, weekly Shabbat services were incorporated. Finally, in 1974, the Deal Synagogue was built on Norwood Avenue, the product of the tireless efforts of the committee members: Charles E. Cohen, Amerique Ashcar, *a”h*, Eli Ashkenazi, *a”h*, and Morris I. Franco, *a”h*.

Soon after the building’s completion, the first major exodus of Brooklyn families to the Jersey Shore occurred. Many settled in nearby cities, such as Oakhurst and Elberon, where they began forming their own prayer services in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ronnie Terzi in 1976. This ultimately developed into what is today known as Congregation Ohel Simha, or the Park Avenue Synagogue. Next came the West Deal Synagogue in 1977, and the Synagogue of Oakhurst in 1979. Then, after a year of prayer services in Jack E. Mamiye’s garage, Ohel Yaakob on Lawrence Avenue was erected in 1982. That same year, a group of men started a weekly *minyán* in a small house on Hathaway Avenue. Five years later, Shaare Ezra on Cedar Avenue, was founded.

Life in the Suburbs

Mr. Sammy Saka was among those raised during the community's early years in Deal, and has since climbed the ranks to become the president of Hillel Yeshiva.

The Saka family has been instrumental in the growth and development of the Sephardic community on the Jersey Shore. The family came to Deal from Brooklyn, where Sammy spent many of his elementary school years. He learned in Magen David Yeshiva, where, he says, he received "the best education" and was privileged to sit in Hacham Baruch Ben-Haim's classroom. The move to Deal, he recalls, required a significant – and difficult – adjustment.

"It was not simple," he says. "It wasn't easy."

Mr. Saka was one of just 20 students graduating the eighth grade in the late 70's; a number that would more than triple over the next 10 years.

During the subsequent years in Ocean Township High School, Sammy says, he received a decent secular education, but was denied the opportunity of serious Torah study, which was just as scarce in the area as Jewish families.

Another community member who grew up in New Jersey at that time was Rabbi David Ashkenazi, who remembers the Talmud Torah he attended after his day at Asbury Park High. Rabbi Shlomo Diamond taught a number of boys from both Ocean Township and Asbury Park High in the newly-built Deal Synagogue, which was led by Rabbi Morris A. Schmidman, *a"h*, founder of Hillel Yeshiva.

Later, in the early 1980's, Rabbi Ezra Labaton, *a"h*, assumed the position of rabbi of Congregation Magen David, or the West Deal Shul, where Sammy Saka and others would go after school to learn. The knowledge and values they imbibed have remained with them ever since.

Recreation for community teens likewise took some time to develop. In the early 1980's, The "Big Deal" Youth Group was formed to allow the young adults of Deal the opportunity to get together in comfortable surroundings. The group organized numerous kinds of events, such as bingo nights, barbeques, trips, shows, and an annual summer tennis tournament.

Many young adults took part in a youth group called DSY, or Deal Synagogue Youth. They participated in youth *minyanim* and occasional events and Saturday night get-togethers. The JCC also served as a central meeting grounds and retreat for community youth.

Raising the Bar

The early 90's brought yet another influx of Brooklyn families to the Jersey Shore. By this time, the community had extended well beyond its borders, with vibrant community life now flourishing in West Long Branch and Eatontown. This period saw the establishment of Ilan High School (led by Rabbi Shlomo Diamond), the Eatontown Synagogue, and the completion of Magen Abraham's (the West Long Branch Shul's) magnificent new building.

The student body of Hillel Yeshiva had more than quadrupled, and Sephardic students had become the overwhelming majority of the student body. With the community thriving, its leaders recognized the need to advance the area's primary educational institution. Mr. Alan Tabush, a Hillel board member and chairman of the Hillel Car Raffle, requested the help of Mr. Sammy Saka, who was then a young father, for assistance with the school's fundraising activities. Although reluctant at first, Sammy agreed to join the board at Hillel in the summer of 1992.



(L-R) Morris I. Franco, Ely Ashkenazi, Jack D. Franco, and Saul E. Ashkenazi.



Hillel's President Mr. Sammy Saka alongside Founder Mr. Ely Ashkenazi, *A"H*.



Deal Police Station

Due to the fact that there were no Sephardic synagogues in the area, Shabbat and Holiday services were originally held at the Deal Police station.



Rabbi Moshe Malka of Ohel Yaacob (the Lawrence Avenue synagogue)



Rabbi Moshe Douek of the Eatontown Synagogue



The Sephardic Torah Center Kollel

The son of the West Deal Shul's President, Charles Saka, Sammy was no stranger to community involvement, and excelled as a fundraising chairman. Upon joining the ranks, Sammy worked alongside community icons such as Morris I. Franco, *a"h*, Saul Ashkenazi, *a"h*, Ely Ashkenazi, *a"h*, Joel Rishty, *a"h*, and Jack D. Franco. This experience inspired Sammy to continue building Hillel and the Deal community with tireless zeal and passion.

"I've learned so much from their hard work," Sammy says. "I feel it is my responsibility to continue their legacy."

In 2003, Sammy was asked by Mr. Morris I. Franco, *a"h*, to assume the role of president of Deal Yeshiva. Sammy agreed, and quickly proved himself to be the best man for the job. Under his leadership, the school's level of education was significantly enhanced, while tuition rates remained remarkably affordable. The new magnificent Founders Hall was built, and the Hillel Yeshiva Leadership Academy was initiated to train and develop the leaders of the future.

Sammy brought in a young and dynamic team to bolster the school and raise its disciplinary standards. As Hillel Yeshiva grew in quality and quantity, the number of alumni choosing to remain in the Jersey Shore began to rise. Unlike in the past, Deal and its surroundings were now a better choice for many young men and women looking to build families in a strong Sephardic community.

Keeping the Community Abuzz

In 2007, a new initiative was launched in order to keep the Sephardic community of the Jersey Shore vibrant and buzzing.

Housed in the 30,000-square-foot Harry & Ruby Franco Building, DSN, or the Deal Sephardic Network, organizes a wide array of activities for hundreds of community youth, including weekly sports leagues, trips, holiday events, and more. With its impressively large and energetic team of volunteer parents, DSN has grown rapidly and revitalized community life in the area. The building has become a part-of-life for so many, and there is hardly a family in the Deal community that has not benefited from its programs.

The DSN offers organized baseball and softball leagues in the spring, flag football and soccer in the fall, and basketball in the winter. The basketball and dodgeball tournaments have grown to



Future Home of the Ohel Yaacob Synagogue

Ohel Yaacob Synagogue was started in 1980 to meet the needs of the growing Syrian Community of the Jersey Shore. The Congregation began as a neighborhood minyan, held in the backyards and garages of dedicated community members. Due to the growth in the community, as well as the draw from their outstanding team of Rabbi's, spearheaded by Rabbi Eli Mansour and Rabbi Moshe Malka, Ohel Yaacob recently announced its plans of expansion and held a successful groundbreaking event this past July.

become among the summer's most popular events. A large variety of programs are held on Sundays and Fridays throughout the year, such as baking, crafts, music, dance, magic, field trips and much more.

The reconstruction of the Sephardic Social Center (SSC) has further reinvigorated the community. Between spring and fall, the SSC is host to over 100 senior community members who make their way to the stunning building to get together and enjoy games such as mahjong and backgammon.

DSN and the SSC are just a small part of the pulsating community life along the Jersey Shore. Since the turn of the millennium, several new resoundingly successful institutions were established, including Bet Yaakov of the Jersey Shore (under the leadership of Rabbi Shmuel Choueka), Yeshivat Keter Torah (under the leadership of Rabbi Mordechai Dabbah), and Ma'or Yeshiva High School (under the leadership of Rabbi Reuven Semah), all of whom have had a profound impact on the Deal community. Another recent milestone was the completion of Shaare Tefila Bene Moshe's (the Eatontown Shul's) magnificent new building.

In an interview with *Community*, Rabbi Moshe Douek, rabbi of the Eatontown Synagogue, described the synagogue's significant growth in recent years, reporting that the congregation's membership has more than tripled in the last eight years. In the last year alone, he exuberantly boasts, over 20 families have moved to Eatontown. When asked to identify the reason for the significant increase, the rabbi said that he feels much of it has to do with the new building, and perhaps even more so – its dynamic youth minyan.

Torah life has flourished along the Shore, as evidenced by the exponential growth of the Sephardic Torah Center in Long Branch. Established in 1978 with just a small group of dedicated scholars, in the last three years alone the Sephardic Torah Center Kollel has brought nearly 50 young scholars and their families to the community. Many of them now teach in local schools, synagogues, and nightly learning programs. All community synagogues in the area offer a wide variety of lectures and educational programs for men, women and children of all levels. A new evening learning program held in the West Long Branch Synagogue is attended by throngs of men eager to delve into our ancient texts and immerse themselves in Torah wisdom.

Sammy Saka says that quality kosher dining was also a high priority in his efforts to develop the Jersey Shore community. New restaurants like Tutto Bene and Posh Kosher Pizza offer not just great tasting food, but also superior service and a serene and comfortable ambiance. No longer must residents cruise the Garden State Parkway in search of good kosher cuisine. Both high-class restaurants and walk-in cafes are available to please all palates – right down the block.

“The Ideal Life”

With quality schools, bustling synagogues, a vibrant social life, Torah classes, and the serene suburban atmosphere, Deal and its surrounding offer, in Mr. Saka's words, “the ideal life.”

“It possesses nearly all the advantages of living in Brooklyn, but with an added serenity and tranquility,” says Rabbi Moshe Douek.

Affordable living, great education, nurturing atmosphere... these are just some of the amenities that the growing community of the Jersey Shore has to offer. This beautiful and warm community seems to be the ideal choice for many. From its humble beginnings, the Jersey Shore community has emerged as an attractive option for young Sephardic couples, and the picture perfect place to raise their families.



DSN Community Center



DSN president Jeffrey Saka, left, and executive director Sammy Sitt during the DSN grand opening celebration.



Senior community members at the SSC social center.