Manhattan Jewish Experience

By Ilana Rauch-NY

The choice of Jewish outreach organizations in New York City is as plentiful as the city's numerous Jewish groups. For the young professionals that populate the Jewish Upper West Side, the Manhattan Jewish Experience is an attractive option. At a small wine-and-cheese tasting fundraiser on Thursday night, Manhattanites in their 20s and 30s sipped and mingled while bidding on appealing items that ranged from private cooking lessons with a gourmet chef to a hat signed by Andy Roddick. Although the Manhattan Jewish Experience, or the MJE, caters primarily to the unaffiliated, the Modern Orthodox contingency of the Upper West Side is a valued asset to the organization. “It's important to create opportunities for the affiliated community to see what's happening on the other side of the curtain, to connect with the unaffiliated,” Rabbi Ezra Cohen, the organization's West Side director told The Algemeiner. “We're trying to bridge the gap between religious and secular, and show that there's a common bond.” Rabbi Cohen believes that the Modern Orthodox and the unaffiliated members can inspire one another.

The modus operandi of the MJE is to embody a truly warm and inclusive community, while incorporating a sophisticated take on Modern Orthodoxy. Eleven years ago, Rabbi Mark Wilkes founded the organization to supplement Jewish outreach and community in the Manhattan area, and it seeks to be a center for camaraderie, comfort, and networking. Cohen began working with the MJE after a part-time teaching job in its beginning years that blossomed into a full-time rabbinical position and partnership with the organization. Emphasizing the social as well as educational goals of the project, Cohen describes the MJE as a place where the interaction isn't limited to learning Torah or sipping a glass of wine, but “a place to call home, find a roommate, perhaps meet your soul mate... it's a community of people who care for each other, and hang out with each other beyond the walls of the organization.” In a city that competes for the attention of busy and critical professionals seeking out top-notch social and cultural events, the MJE matches their target audience's demands with what Cohen would describe as "relevant, applicable, exciting, and vibrant" programming which is marketable to busy city dwellers. Monday Night Conversations, for example, bring the young Jews of the Upper West Side together for sushi and discussions on topics like the Big Bang and Free Will, or networking sessions with big name speakers in fields such as finance and public relations.

The programming MJE offers is extraordinarily diverse, including one-on-one learning, a Shabbat beginner's service, trips to Israel, getaways, parties, and other social gatherings. “People can easily take the Jewish community for granted,” Cohen comments. “We're trying to show the beauty and celebration of what Judaism is about.” The MJE’s dedicated staff and continually engaged participants attest to that mission statement's success.

Although many Jewish outreach programs build off of each other, a notable example being the MJE’s adaptation of the Lincoln Square’s beginner’s service, Rabbi Cohen does not forget their primary inspiration and precedent. “All modern kiruv organizations owe a debt of gratitude to Chabad for pioneering the movement - part of our inspiration is definitely from the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” he says.