

ON

a Community

Coverage by
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The Jewish community of Memphis, Tennessee, is one of the oldest and largest in the South. Today, it joins many other Jewish communities across the country which are experiencing a revitalization of Torah learning with the arrival of a community *kollel*, and has become a destination of choice for many looking to relocate to a smaller Jewish community.

As Mr. Ari Rashkin, who moved to Memphis a few years ago, shared, "Memphis is a place where people are more concerned about shmoozing with each other, rather than about *gashmiyus*. It is for people who value a slower pace of life, without a focus on what others are doing. We have a robust group of friends, in which relationships are valued."

Let's take a closer look.

Origins of a Community

The history of the Jewish community of Memphis dates back to the mid-1800s, when the city, located on the Mississippi River, became a destination for many European immigrants.

Memphis' Jewish community is unique in the South in that it is rooted in a community of European immigrants who set down roots in the city close to 200 years ago; most other Southern communities that are flourishing today are comprised mostly of newer residents of the city.

A Brief History

Mr. Allan Katz, who was born in Memphis in 1951, as was his father in 1927, shared some of the history and development of the Memphis Jewish community.

"My father's family moved to Memphis along with the wave of immigration in the beginning of the 20th cen-

SPOTLIGHT

A Look at the Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee

tury," Mr. Katz related. "In the late 1940s and early 1950s, my family was one of six *shomer Shabbos* families in Memphis. Although there were several Orthodox shuls with large memberships, there were only a handful of families who were truly *shomer Shabbos*."

At that time, the Jewish community was centered downtown in what was known as the Pinch district. Years later, the Baron Hirsch Synagogue built a new shul, whose building took up an entire block, the size of an avenue block in New York today, and sat over 1,000 people in its sanctuary. Baron Hirsch also had an afternoon Talmud Torah, where children would come after public school to learn Torah.

One of the big influences and leaders of the Memphis community around that time was Harav Nota Greenblatt, *shlita*, who had come to Memphis in February 1949 at the behest of his Rabbi, Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, to teach in the Talmud Torah. He was also the *chazzan* in Anshei Sphard Congregation, and served as a *moheh*, *shochet* and head of the local *vaad* and took care of many vital aspects of Jewish communal life. Additionally, for decades Rav Nota traveled the South as a world-renowned *mesader gittin*, and served as the go-to address for complicated halachic issues in the entire region. His nephew, Harav Efraim Greenblatt, *zt"l*, author of the multi-volume *Rivavos Efraim*, also came to Memphis, where he taught Torah in many venues for decades, and had a great influence on many people.

In August 1949, Rav Greenblatt, together with Rabbi Yehoshua Kutner, *zt"l*, assistant Rabbi of Baron Hirsch, decided it was time to open a day school, and established the Memphis Hebrew Academy. At that time, there were many Holocaust survivors who had arrived in Memphis, and Rabbi Greenblatt and Rabbi Kutner went door to door urging them to send their children to the new school, even offering free tuition.

In the 1950s, Memphis' Jewish community migrated to the eastern area of the city, and the school and shuls followed shortly thereafter. This is where the community is located today.

In 1963, Rabbi Meir Belsky, *zt"l*,



Members of the Memphis Community Kollel.

At the *hachnasat sefer Torah* and building dedication at the Young Israel of Memphis, in August 2021. L-R: Rabbi Shmuel Fromowitz, *Rosh Kollel* of Memphis Community Kollel, and Rabbi Akiva Males, *Mara d'Asra*.



established the Yeshiva of the South — with separate boys' and girls' high school divisions, as well as a *beis medrash*. Many children in the day school became *shomer Shabbos* and influenced their parents to do the same. Dozens of families became frum due to Rabbi Belsky's influence.

Another impetus in the growth of Memphis was the Shabbatonim held in Gatlinberg, Tennessee. For 25 years, beginning in the 1960s, a Jewish com-

munity leader named Mr. Al Thomas sponsored a huge yearly Shabbaton, which was attended by people from all over the South, including New Orleans, Atlanta, Dallas and St. Louis. Distinguished *Roshei Yeshivah*, such as Harav Mordechai Gifter, *zt"l*, and Harav Shlomo Freifeld, *zt"l*, joined the Shabbaton, and showed the attendees the beauty of Torah and Yiddishkeit. Many people became *baalei teshuvah* because of those Shabbatonim.