

HIGH PROFILE

Marc Schneier: NY's Most Influential Rabbi

BY TODD SHAPIRO

While it may seem unconventional for a rabbi to consider the coming High Holy Days as down time, Rabbi Marc Schneier would be forgiven if that is how he sees it.

Schneier, 64, founded The Hampton Synagogue in Westhampton Beach 33 years ago. For the past 10 years, he has attracted the country's biggest names there. Those big names are, primarily, Jewish business leaders and influencers who vacation in the Hamptons and attend services at the synagogue. The congregation has hosted a dizzying array of dignitaries — New York City Mayor Eric Adams and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, to name a few. Guests in previous years have included First Lady Hillary Clinton and presidential candidates Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, Mike Huckabee, Ted Cruz and Lindsay Graham.

Schneier attracts them all through his force of personality, knowing the movers and shakers as he does. Well-respected, this is an invitation that is easily accepted. The invitations aren't about being seen, or who is trending. The Hampton Synagogue's aim is to address and connect with the American Jewish community during the summer for 16 weeks, from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend. The doors are thrown open to an array of dignitaries, elected officials and others as they step foot through the doors to be heard, not just be seen. While one could easily be star-struck, Schneier never loses sight of what truly drives his passion and recharges him — his family and his congregation.

"This year, we celebrated the completion of their new \$20 million dollar children's center — Jack's House, Levin Family Children's Campus, Gan Gloria and Camp Mona — that will ensure the future vibrancy and vitality of The Hampton Synagogue," Schneier says.

"I couldn't do what I do without them," Schneier says. "To have balance in my life, my congregation comes first. If one of them sneezes, they'll hear from me. That is my commitment to them. Everything else grows from that. It is not just the congregation, but also my family, my beautiful wife Simi, my son Brendan, daughter Brooke and three-and-a-half-year-old Liam."

This summer alone, in addition to Hochul and Adams, they welcomed U.S. House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries; NYS Attorney General Letitia James; and U.S. Congress members Kirsten Gillibrand, Nick Lalota, Nicole Malliotakis, Ritchie Torres and Debbi Wasserman Schultz.

They come. They share their thoughts. They walk away having been exposed to a loving congregation that is engaged and educated about the issues and whose mantra is "Making the Ordinary Extraordinary."

His goal is not to be the place for influential people to come. His goal is to bring people together, a goal he has pursued his entire career. An 18th-generation rabbi and author, he says his energy to get up



RABBI MARC SCHNEIER

each day and take part in the many things his congregation is involved in comes from his congregants and he hopes that those who visit, whether dignitary, elected official or person who drops in off the street, will feel that same energy flowing into them.

"We have a theme of bringing people together," Schneier explains. Rabbi Schneier founded the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding in 1989, that today is hailed as the global address for the building of Muslim-Jewish relations. Thus, it is no wonder that this summer witnessed a lineup of diplomats who chose to visit The Hampton Synagogue.

The summer saw a lineup of diplomats from around the world (ambassadors to the United States from Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Singapore and Turkey), most of whom attended a synagogue for the first time. The Hampton Synagogue is the platform where global and national issues are addressed. Most engaging and thought-provoking conversations focus on diplomacy, politics and matters of faith. The rapprochement between President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Isaac Herzog, between Turkey and Israel, began at The Hampton Synagogue.

That assertion seems less surprising when you hear that Schneier for years has been in the business of bringing people together. As president for the Foundation For Ethnic Understanding, he has worked to shine a light upon the cooperative relations between blacks and Jews, going back to the time of Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1999, he authored *Shared Dreams: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Jewish Community*. In 2013, he co-authored with Imam Shamsi Ali the book *Sons of Abraham: A Candid Conversation About the Issues that Divide and Unite Jews and Muslims*.

Not all the issues are global. The synagogue hosted CUNY Chancellor Félix Matos Rodriguez during a breakfast Q&A surrounding what is being done about the rise in anti-semitism on its campuses and the celebrated lawyer Alan Dershowitz discussing the subject of justice in the Bible.

The Hampton Synagogue is also the summer destination of the leadership of American and global Jewish organizations. They hosted William Daroff, chief executive officer of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organization; Izzy Tapoochi, president and CEO of the Birthright Israel Foundation; Eric Fingerhut, president and CEO of The Jewish Federations of North America; Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League; and Dani Dayan, chairman of Yad Vashem.

"I do feel blessed," says Schneier, who adds that his only problem with God is that he doesn't have a 36-hour day. "I get up every morning with a passion about what I do. I have gained a lot of wisdom in life going through what I call the classroom of adversity. I have been a rabbi for 40 years and there is still more I want to accomplish."

Todd Shapiro is an award-winning publicist and associate publisher of Dan's Papers.