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Secular Jews in Brooklyn Courted by Two Faiths

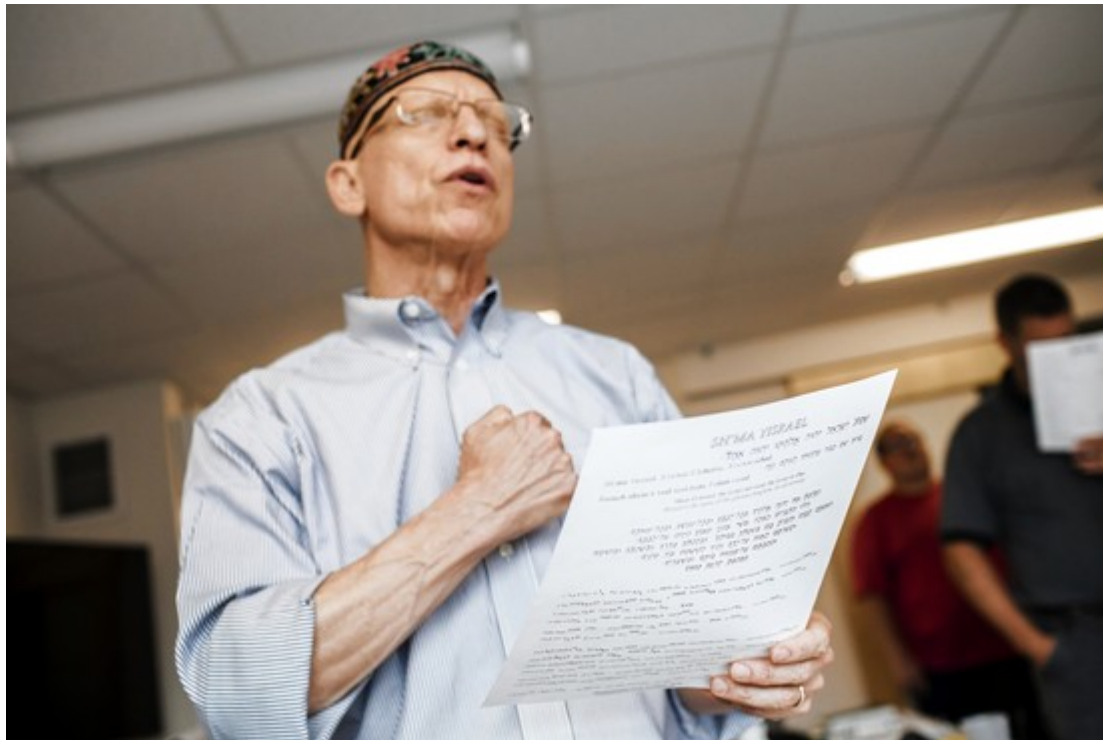
Chosen People Ministries and the Brooklyn Jewish Xperience Have Opened Outposts in Midwood

By

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Jeffrey Feinberg, a professor at the Chosen People Ministries' Charles L. Feinberg Center in Brooklyn *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*

A battle is brewing over secular Jews in the heart of Brooklyn.

On one side is Chosen People Ministries, a group that worships Jesus, but "in a Jewish way," says its leader, Mitch Glaser, a Brooklyn native who grew up in a Jewish home and now leads an international evangelical organization.

On the other side is the Brooklyn Jewish Xperience, known as BJX, an Orthodox Jewish group that aims to draw unaffiliated Jews closer to their religious heritage. Brothers Yitzchok and Moshe Fingerer, who are rabbis, lead BJX.

The two new organizations have set up outposts within four blocks of each other on a busy commercial stretch in Midwood. As the Jewish high holidays approach, each will offer a space for worship, religious study and social activities. Both will be doing street outreach.

"Our hope is to bring the message of the Jewish Jesus to the Jewish people of the very Jewish area of Midwood Brooklyn," Mr. Glaser said.

"We are praying for them," said Rabbi Moshe Fingerer. "A Jew is a Jew. It's a sin that they believe in Jesus."

Midwood, and the surrounding neighborhoods of Flatbush and Kensington, is home to 108,500 Jews, according to a 2011 report from the UJA-Federation of New York. More than half of the population is Orthodox Jewish, and 27% of all of the households are Russian-speaking, according to the report. Some 60% of Jews in these neighborhoods are under the age of 39. Messianic Judaism, the faith espoused by Chosen People Ministries, blends Christian beliefs with some aspects of Jewish practice.

Leaders of BJX say they selected a loft-like, second-story space for its proximity to both Chosen People Ministries and a subway and bus-line stop. In the coming weeks, BJX will begin offering Torah study, Shabbos dinners and a regular mixer featuring kosher pizza and beer. The secular Jews they are trying to reach are young professionals and college students.

BJX has developed a website and videos to air their sharp critique of Chosen People Ministries. The ministry is "preying upon Jews that don't know any better," said Rabbi Yitzchok Fingerer.

"I have nothing against them opening a center, but not operating under the premise that they are authentic Jews," he said. "If they are parading around with our garb, wearing our head-coverings...to ... disguise themselves as authentic Jews while doing Jewish outreach, then I have an issue."

Midwood residents interviewed seemed unaware of the coming religious campaigns.

Ofra Tregerman, 52 years old and Jewish, said she didn't believe her Orthodox neighbors would go to a church to learn about Jesus. "My Christian friends will love it," she said. "But if you're Jewish, no."

Alex Stolyar is also Jewish and co-owns the ANB Baby store near Chosen People Ministries. "If you don't know much about religion and what they are all about, you might think they are a synagogue," he said.

Mr. Glaser, who earned a doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission in Pasadena, Calif., said his congregation's beliefs were reflected in its name: Beth Sar Shalom, the house of the prince of peace. "Now, that should be a giveaway," he said. "The name tells the story."

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Brooklyn Jewish Xperience's space on East 16th Street in Brooklyn. *Claudio Papapietro for The Wall Street Journal*

The beliefs of Chosen People Ministries are "almost completely in line with mainstream Christianity," said Michael Peppard, an assistant professor of theology at Fordham University. Most major Christian denominations, including the Roman Catholic church, have no mission to evangelize Jews, he said, and, overall, such appeals have "dramatically decreased in the past 50 years."

Chosen People Ministries' 11,000-square-foot site in Midwood was formerly a Jewish funeral home. Beside a chapel, the site has a community room, offices and dormitory space for students studying messianic Judaism.

Messianic Jews, said Mr. Glaser, are just at home in a synagogue as they are in an evangelical church. Some celebrate Easter and Christmas and others, such as Mr. Glaser, don't. No crucifix hangs in the ministry's chapel, but there is a Torah. Mr. Glaser's daughters had bat mitzvah celebrations, not confirmations. "We are convinced you can be Jewish and believe in Jesus," said Mr. Glaser.

A third group, which hasn't been part of the back-and-forth between Chosen People Ministries and BJX, also is set to join the neighborhood. Chabad of Kings Highway plans to open a worship space across the street from Chosen People Ministries. Rabbi Zalmen Drizin said he and his wife, Frumie, had chosen the space not out of spite, but for its location. "It's a very good block," said Rabbi Drizin. "Kings Highway and Coney Island Avenue is the most happening junction of cars and people."

Mr. Glaser was out of the country and couldn't be reached for comment about Chabad's arrival, but David Sedaca, a spokesman for Chosen People Ministries, said in an email that the group's center was surrounded by synagogues, yeshivas and Chabad houses. "We are not in competition with any of them in any way," he said

Rabbi Moshe Fingerer stated no objection, either. "We're Jewish, they're Jewish," he said, referring to Chabad. "The more people out there doing God's work and following our equation, I see no problem with that."

