

Building unity among local Jews

Chabad-Lubavitch rabbi expects long-term stay in Waterloo Region

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RECORD STAFF

As Rabbi Moshe Goldman and his wife were packing up their Brooklyn apartment a couple of weeks ago, a phone call came bearing tragic news.

A man from Waterloo was on the line, conveying his condolences.

Goldman knew terrorists had attacked the Jewish centre in Mumbai, India. And he knew that the staff at the Chabad-Lubavitch world headquarters in New York had lost contact with its rabbi there. But he hadn't heard any reports about a death.

So Goldman, a Lubavitcher rabbi, greeted the phone call from Waterloo with suspicion.

"In my heart, I didn't really believe it," Goldman said in an interview this week as he recalled those moments.

But indeed, the rabbi, his wife and four others at the Jewish centre in Mumbai were among the 171 people killed in the attacks.

Chabad-Lubavitch rabbis establish Jewish centres all over the world. And those who serve in far-flung regions, places where few Jews live, are considered to be real troopers, Goldman said.

"When one of your most admired soldiers go down, it's a big blow," he said.

Rivky Goldman, Rabbi Goldman's wife, said she was a longtime classmate of the murdered rabbi's sister.

Walking in their Brooklyn neighbourhood last week, she said, she felt the overwhelming sense that people were confounded by the Mumbai tragedy.

"How do you get past this?" she asked.

A minute later, she offered an answer.

"You continue and build even more," she said. "That would be a proper legacy for them."

So building is exactly what the Goldmans intend to do. But rather than boosting the Jewish community in Brooklyn, they plan to leave their legacy in Waterloo.

They're opening a new Jewish centre in a rented house near both Waterloo universities. Called Chabad House, it's where they will teach classes, conduct religious services and run programs for local Jews. The house will also be home for the couple and their 17-month-old son, Mendel.

Typically, Chabad-Lubavitch rabbis get to town and stay in town, Goldman said from a seat at a large dining room table where he hopes to host Shabbat dinners for local Jews.

"People come to a place and buy a burial plot," he said. "We're parked. That's the way it works."

As with most world religions, it almost requires a program to tell the players.

In Judaism, there are a number of groups, or for lack of a better word, denominations. The three major groups are called Orthodox, Conservative and Reform.

Under the Orthodox umbrella there is a movement called Hasidism. It originated in 18th century Poland and Lithuania.

The Hasidic community includes smaller groups, one of which is called Chabad.

Pronounced Ha-bawd, the word is an acronym that is composed of parts of the Hebrew words for wisdom, understanding and knowledge.

Each Hasidic group has its own lineage of chief rabbis whose teachings are revered. Followers seek their blessing before making any major life decision, Goldman said.

The Chabad-Lubavitch group was centred in the town of Lubavitch, in Russia, for more than a century.

Many Hasidic Jews immigrated to the United States during the 19th century. In the 20th century, during the Holocaust, Chabad-Lubavitch leaders escaped from Europe to Brooklyn, New York.

While living in Europe, Lubavitcher men always wore caps over their skullcaps, Goldman said. But in New York, most men wore fedoras. So Chabad members adopted the custom of their new home and started wearing black fedoras, he said.

It's a tradition that today gives them the appearance of being stuck in the old world.

Hasidic Jews are often called ultra-Orthodox, but Goldman bristles at the label.

"Would you call Mother Teresa ultra-Catholic?" he asks.

Despite their traditional religious practices and old-fashioned appearance, Goldman said Lubavitchers embrace modern technology.

"Everything in the world was created for a godly purpose," he said.

So there's no contradiction to dressing traditionally and using computers, he said.

"He (God) animates BlackBerrys," Goldman quipped, referring to the made-in-Waterloo communications device. "Not to take anything away from RIM."

Chabad focuses on discerning the spiritual meaning of following Jewish religious laws and on recognizing godliness in every thing in the world, Goldman said.

In some of the various classes he plans to conduct in Waterloo, Goldman intends to explain the esoteric teachings of Jewish mysticism, called Kabbalah.

Thanks to Madonna, the iconoclastic pop star who started studying Jewish mysticism several years ago, Kabbalah has received lots of attention.

For Goldman, that's a mixed blessing.

"Kabbalah is not something that will turn your life around in 30 days or your money back," he said.

But if it takes pop culture to get Jews interested in taking a class, "so be it," he said.

Goldman and his wife plan to share most of the duties at Chabad House in Waterloo, but some of the responsibilities will fall exclusively on each of them.

Rabbi Goldman will solicit donations to keep Chabad House, and his family, financially afloat.

Rivky Goldman, as the only rabbi's wife (rebbetzin) in the region, will be a unique resource for Jewish women and will lead a monthly women's circle.

While they will serve all local Jews, Rivky Goldman said they want to provide a "home away from home" for students.

They will host Friday night Shabbat dinners in their large dining room and Shabbat services on Saturdays.

And if students feel under the weather, the Goldmans will even deliver some homemade chicken soup. As their website advertises: "Just like Bubby's."

Chabad House isn't meant to duplicate services of Beth Jacob Congregation and Temple Shalom, the two local synagogues.

One of Chabad's main missions is to help Jews love each other, Goldman said.

"Not just to tolerate each other, but to love each other."

Goldman said together they hope to build more unity among local Jews. And as a tangible legacy, they hope some day to build a Jewish ritual bath (mikveh) in the region.

It's a tall order for a couple. He's 25. She's 24. But they seem mature beyond their years.

And this is an auspicious year to build unity, Rabbi Goldman said.

In the Jewish calendar, every seventh year is known as a "Hakhel Year" -- based on verses in Deuteronomy 31:10-12 in which Moses instructs all the people of Israel to assemble and listen to God's teachings.

"We feel blessed," Rabbi Goldman said. "We've started this venture at an important time."

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The Chabad House grand opening and Hanukkah party will take place at 3 p.m. on Sunday, Dec. 21 at 259 Albert St., Waterloo.

On the web: www.jewishwaterloo.com

The Record.com

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