

THE NEW YORK EDITION JERUSALEM POST

WWW.JPOST.COM

FEBRUARY 14, 2010

JP in NYC

Portrait in Blue and White: A weekly profile of a former New Yorker in Israel

UP TO THE
CHALLENGE.
Konstantyn.

Rabbi to the stars

Ariel Konstantyn took what he learned from The Hamptons and is applying it to the glitz and glamor of Tel Aviv

• By DAVID SHAMAH

When he made aliya with his family in 2005, Rabbi Ariel Konstantyn had in mind all the usual reasons – the return to Zion after 2,000 years, the opportunity to raise his children in a Jewish society, and the chance to help build what is still a relatively young society. He also had an important contribution to make: “I heard there was a shortage of rabbis here,” he said.

In a sense, Konstantyn wasn’t kidding: while Israel is awash with rabbis, Konstantyn’s kind – the American-style “pulpit rabbi” who shares his flock’s joys and pains – is rare. Now a congregational rabbi in Tel Aviv, he’s seeking to build a community of newcomers and veteran Israelis.

If anyone is up to the challenge, it’s Konstantyn: As “rabbi to the stars,” he has seen the likes of Steven Spielberg, Michael J. Fox and Dr. Ruth Westheimer davening with him at The Hampton Synagogue out on Long Island, where he served as assistant rabbi between 2001 and

2005. Now, his Tel Aviv synagogue is attracting a unique combination of religious and secular Israelis, English-speaking immigrants and well-known figures from the world of Israeli entertainment, politics and literature.

MOST ISRAELI synagogues aren’t community centers in the sense that American synagogues often are. That’s unfortunate, Konstantyn says, because it helps foster the continued animosity of secular Israelis to traditional Judaism. “Secular Israelis are often reluctant to come to synagogue because they feel they will be judged negatively by the ‘regulars,’” he says.

Now, as rabbi of The Tel Aviv Synagogue, he sponsors Friday night dinners for local residents and visitors (the synagogue is located near Tel Aviv’s “Hotel Row,” right off the beach), along with special holiday programs. The building is a local landmark, constructed in 1931, and still has a core of elderly members – who hired Konstantyn to revitalize the congregation and bring in “young blood.”

The rabbi says his synagogue’s ethos can be summed up in three words: “All are welcome.”

“As part of the national Tzohar movement, a group of Orthodox rabbis who seek to unveil the beauty of Jewish tradition to all Israelis, we have an ‘open door policy.’ Tel Aviv is exciting but it can be a lonely place, both for new immigrants and even for veteran Israelis, and we want anyone who comes to us to feel like they are part of a community.”

By way of example, Konstantyn quotes his wife’s doctor, who told him, “I’m not secular and



TIES OPTIONAL. Rabbi Marc Schneier (second from left) and Konstantyn (far right) welcome Israeli Chief Rabbi Yonah Metzger to The Hamptons.

I'm not Orthodox, so I have no place" in Israeli religious life.

"Life cycle events are non-personal unless you have a personal rabbi, and most non-Orthodox in Israel don't," Konstantyn says. "I see that as a real tragedy, and I hope the Tel Aviv Synagogue will be able to alleviate the problem for people in this area."

'As a rabbi for the rich and famous, I gained tremendous experience on competing with a beach and a golf course'

KONSTANTYN CUTS a charming and dynamic figure on his own, but says he's gotten a lot of help along the way.

"My previous experiences have prepared me for this venture," he says. "As a rabbi for the rich and famous in the Hamptons, I gained tremendous experience and know-how from Rabbi Marc Schneier [founding rabbi of the congregation] on how to attract Jews to synagogue while competing with a beach and a golf course."

Born on Long Island 35 years ago, Konstantyn has always "treaded the lines" of Jewish life.

"We were an Orthodox family from East Meadow, but we belonged to a Conservative synagogue because it was the only one in the neighborhood," he says. "I was definitely exposed to a lot of different viewpoints."

At The Hampton Synagogue, Konstantyn and Schneier hosted "the full spectrum of celebrity and communal leaders, including Israeli chief rabbis, IDF chiefs of staff, senators, congressman and governors – from Hillary Clinton clapping along to

Adon Olam to Dr. Ruth discussing sensitive topics in front of the Holy Ark."

Paul Reiser premiered a new film for members of the congregation, and in one of his most touching memories, Konstantyn tells the story of how Michael J. Fox, afflicted with Parkinson's Disease, once came to the Parenting Center to play "Ring Around the Rosie" with the children, who included Fox's daughter Esme. And, says Konstantyn, "Rabbi Schneier, who is renowned for his work in Black-Jewish relations, brought civil rights leaders and celebrity leaders, including Martin Luther King III and Russell Simmons."

After such a promising first act, you'd think Konstantyn would be familiar with the ins and outs of celebrity-hosting – but he didn't take into account the cantankerousness of the Israeli public.

"We recently organized a discussion, which was to feature Rabbi David Stav, director of Tzohar, and former Knesset member Yael Dayan, to discuss whether soldiers had the right to disobey orders that conflicted with their personal or religious beliefs, a hot topic in Israel right now," he says. But the plan didn't go off as smoothly as he had expected; many older members were dead-set against Dayan – considered by many to be vociferously anti-

religious. "There was a big to-do about it, even reaching the office of Tel Aviv Chief Rabbi Meir Lau, who supported the program."

In the end, Konstantyn cancelled the program, but the incident made him realize just how much his services were needed.

"I was reminded of a defining moment at The Hampton Synagogue," he says. "We had invited a guest speaker, a Hassid, who was dressed in full garb. He was sitting in the front row next to a guy wearing shorts and a polo shirt. This was the perfect picture of The Hampton Synagogue – two so dramatically different individuals sitting together in peace and harmony, the way it should be."

That was hard enough to pull off on Long Island. But in Israel, Konstantyn says, "it's next to impossible, because everything here is so polarized. Everyone is pegged and labeled and there is no mixing or acceptance of the other. You are either right or left, religious or secular." That's why he's in the shul business, he says. At The Tel Aviv Synagogue, "we are on the forefront of breaking down the walls between different communities and creating a spiritual home for Jews of all walks of life – a revolutionary endeavor." ●

Giving it all up for the pioneering life

While he loves life in Israel, Ariel Konstantyn, former associate rabbi at The Hampton Synagogue on Long Island, realizes that being a rabbi in Israel will never pay as well as it did in the US.

"We had a really nice house in Long Island," he says. "We have a nice one here [in Tel Aviv], too, but it doesn't have a pool and a backyard forest, like that one did."

Still, he says, he and his family are sure they did the right thing by making aliya, and he insists they're very happy.

"I thought that I could move to a quiet town and be a private citizen," he explains. "But the rabbinate is in my blood, and it drew me to Tel Aviv – Israel's most celebrated city, dominated by secular life, but thirsting for spirituality and connection."

A true pioneer.

– DS



'NO BACKYARD POOL.' With wife Cheryl and children (left to right) Eitan, 6; Yakir, 2; and Racheli, 11. A fourth child, Noam David, was born late last year.