

Coast to Coast



A store owner at Parkland Mall in Red Deer, Alta., dons tfillin with Yossi Matusof. [RovingRabbis.com photo]

'Roving rabbis' make connections in Alberta

By LAUREN KRAMER
Pacific Correspondent

This summer marked the first time in 20 years that Chabad Alberta, in conjunction with Chabad headquarters in New York City, has sent rabbinical students roving over the plains and mountains of Alberta.

Moshe Raices of Postville, Iowa, and Yossi Matusof of Calgary spent three weeks in the province, driving close to 3,000 kilometres as they visited tourist hot spots such as Banff and Lake Louise and quieter centres such as Medicine Hat and Lethbridge in their search for Jewish brethren.

Their purpose? To reconnect with members of the tribe.

"After everything I'd learned and studied at rabbinical school during the year, this was a chance to share my knowledge with people who never have access to it," said Matusof, 20. "I had a few weeks open and thought it would be a great way to spend it, especially because it would put me near Calgary, where I grew up."

Matusof and Raices packed their trunk with kosher food in Calgary, returning intermittently to the city to replenish their supplies.

But it was the variety of touching experiences they had en route that stand out in their memory, not the abundance of tuna sandwiches they consumed.

Matusof recalls an encounter in Banff with a Jewish family from New York, during which he learned that their teenage son had never had a bar mitzvah.

When given the opportunity, the young man opted to put on tfillin for the first time right then and there, on Banff Avenue.

"We did about seven bar mitzvahs in those three weeks, one of them for an 89-year-old man outside the cemetery where his wife was buried," Matusof said.

"There were so many moving moments as we made connections with Jews who had little or no ties to Judaism at all."

The two students were among some 400 "roving rabbis" and rabbinical students who travelled all over the world con-

necting Jews to Judaism this summer.

There were 15 pairs of rabbinical students in Canada, travelling in Saskatchewan, the Maritimes, Ontario, Quebec and Alberta, according to Mendy Kotlarsky, who helps co-ordinate Chabad's Roving Rabbis program. The program has been ongoing since 1947, with funding from private donors and foundations.

"It's a costly program, but the precise cost depends on where they are going," Kotlarsky said.

"For example, it's more expensive to send the men to Saskatchewan, where they need to rent a car and stay in motels, than it is to send them to Richmond Hill, Ont., where they can stay with a local family."

The criteria to become a "roving rabbi" are dedication, devotion and study at, or graduation from, rabbinical college.

Chabad supplies its own candidates for the program with seminars and material, offering a co-ordinator, website, resources and a whole infrastructure to help them along the way.

"They have to be serious and want to give up their summer for the greater good and assist Jewish communities worldwide," Kotlarsky said. "A lot of times it can be tiring, and you could be living on cans of tuna for a long time. But in a way, this is like a residency for them."

According to Rabbi Menachem Matusof, Yossi's father and the voice of Chabad Alberta, this program is definitely necessary.

"Ideally, I'd need two pairs of rabbinical students to come – one for southern Alberta and one for northern Alberta," he said. "To really do it right, we would need their presence for two to three months in the Canadian Rockies, just for the tourists. But it's an issue of funding, and making it happen."

His son, who will be studying at a yeshiva in Manchester, England, this year, said he returned from the Roving Rabbis assignment enthused and invigorated.

"You just feel how much you've helped and all the people you've touched, knowing at the same time how much there still is to do," he said. "Being part of the Roving Rabbis left us with an urge to return and do everything we can to help out again."

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