

CITY/FAITH & REASON

Roving rabbis make cultural connections

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Two young Hasidic Jewish rabbis have cut a distinctive figure through rural Alberta and along Banff's main streets in the past month.

Rabbis Yossi Matusof of Calgary and Moshe Raices of Postville, Iowa, both 20, spent most of August piling up thousands of kilometres on their car and sharing their faith by seeking out Jews in small Alberta centres and talking with tourists in Banff National Park.

Their work was part of the Roving Rabbis, an international outreach program sponsored locally by the Chabad Lubavitch of Alberta.

"It's the first time in many years we've been able to host the program here and from the feedback, it's very clear there's a demand for it," says Rabbi Menachem Matusof, executive director of the local Chabad community.

"It worked out well because Yossi (his son) knew his way around southern Alberta and the culture here, so



Courtesy, Chabad Lubavitch

Yossi Matusof of Calgary and Moshe Raices of Iowa visit the Columbia Icefields.

they could operate very independently," Matusof said.

The two young rabbis, who are about two years away from full ordination, spent part of their three weeks on the

road in towns and cities such as Cochrane, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Rumsey and Claresholm, seeking out the local Jewish population.

"We'd literally stop people on the streets of small towns and ask them if they knew of any Jewish people," says Raices.

"It can be difficult to maintain your faith when you're the only Jew for miles around. There's a feeling of disconnection, of not knowing where to look for resources and support. We brought people shabbat candles, literature they could study and, hopefully a sense of pride and friendship," adds the younger Matusof.

Raices says one Jewish woman in Claresholm was moved to tears by their visit, saying she felt "like I had been forgotten."

Other days were spent strolling the busy streets of Banff and Canmore, talking to people and connecting with Jewish tourists, part of the influx of summer visitors who flock to Alberta's mountain playgrounds.

"I'll never forget conducting a bar

mitzvah right on Banff Avenue for a young man who was working in the town," says Matusof. "He took off his ball cap for the ceremony and he had this bright red Mohawk haircut."

Two young Hasidic Jews strolling down Main Street is not a common sight in rural Alberta, but Matusof said they were generally warmly received wherever they went.

Both Matusof and Raices say their outreach field work was an ideal complement to their ongoing, formal religious training.

"It was a real education interacting with people on a one-on-one basis in their homes or on the street," says Raices, who comes from a town of about 2,500 people in the American midwest. "You learn what is important to people, what speaks to their heart and what their needs are."

Raices will continue his studies this fall in Connecticut while Matusof is bound for further education in Manchester, England.