

Destinations



Travels with Rabbi Y.Y.

THIS WEEK

Cincinnati





1 Five More Years

Perhaps the reason the old Soviet Union had a penchant for launching “five-years plans” is because five years is a period where change can be achieved and proven successful. Well, five years had passed since I last visited Cincinnati, Ohio, and when I arrived two weeks ago, change was very much in evidence.

Cincinnati International Airport though, still sits confusingly a few miles across the state line in Kentucky. Two police officers passed us as we left the airport, wearing pistols on each hip. This was clearly the American Midwest.

The 30-minute drive north to the Jewish area of Cincinnati took us across the Ohio River (Ohio means “good river” in the language of the local Native American tribes). The river flows westward from Pennsylvania until it turns south and merges with the Mississippi, and Cincinnati’s municipal flag features four blue wavy lines symbolizing the river upon which the city’s fortune was built. Four brown wavy lines might be more accurate though, as the river is an unappealing muddy color.

The skyline of the city was my first giveaway that things had changed since I had been gone. A brand new 41-story skyscraper, the Great American Tower, dominates the view. It is crowned by... well, a crown! The architect copied it from the late Princess Diana’s tiara.

If the amount of construction is any indication, the city’s economy is doing well too. Major American corporations like Proctor & Gamble and Macy’s have their headquarters here. And there are plenty of jobs. But it gets pretty hot and humid in the summer. On Shabbos as I walked to shul in 86-degree heat, I was also treated to a summer shower of pleasant, warm rain.



Detail: Cincinnati is known as the “Chili Capital of the World” because it has more chili restaurants than any other city. “Cincinnati chili,” developed by Macedonian-immigrant restaurateurs in the 1920s, is actually a meat sauce for spaghetti, and ingredients include ground beef, tomato paste, cinnamon, other Mediterranean spices, and sometimes chocolate.

3 Just Half of Shas

Rav Silver was born in Lithuania in 1882. At the age of 12 his father told him there was nothing more he could teach him and sent him to learn with Rav Chaim Brisker. The Rav listened with skepticism to the not-yet bar mitzvah boy and his explanation as to why he had come to Yeshivas Brisk.

“What have you learned so far?” he asked the child. Eliezer replied honestly, “*Halb Shas.*” Half of the entire Talmud.

Rav Chaim invited him to prepare the page of Gemara he was about to give *shiur* on and to come back when he had done so. A few minutes later the boy returned to report he had finished.

4 Body and Spirit

It’s been close to half a century since Rav Silver’s passing and the spiritual vacuum it created, but today, it’s not just

the skyline that has seen new buildings rising. There’s a renewed spiritual energy in Cincinnati, with three Orthodox shuls — including a community *kollel* and an active Chabad.

Five year ago, Rav Silver’s Kneseth Israel Synagogue opened a beautiful new building and renamed the congregation “Zichron Eliezer” with Rav Silver’s chair positioned at the front of the shul that proudly bears his name. The new *rav* is Rabbi Avrohom Weinrib, a *talmid* of Yeshivas Mir Yerushalayim and former member of the Chicago Community Kollel.

Rabbi Weinrib pointed to a growing community of some 200 *shomer Shabbos* families — ten new families moved in this year alone.

I pointed out that the size of his congregation to whom I had just given a *shiur* a few hours earlier is much larger than it was only five years previously. “Growth is what it’s all about,” he assured me, “but the real growth lies in ‘internal growth,’ not only numbers.”

I had not the slightest doubt that, partnered with the Cincinnati Community Kollel, he’ll make sure that the goal of both kinds of growth continue.

5 Please Feel Welcome

Rabbi Binyamin Teitelbaum of the Cincinnati Community Kollel is the *kollel*’s director of “Destination Cincinnati” and he’s very busy encouraging young families to see that the quality of *frum* life available alongside the Ohio can surpass the one alongside the Hudson.

Orthodox Cincinnati is indeed beautiful, with a creek running through the Jewish neighborhood of Amberly Village, and housing a third of New York prices. It’s surrounded by nearby woods, and deer wander around outside, gazing through the windows at families sitting at their Shabbos tables. And the generous state tuition vouchers of \$4,250 are a real game changer with regard to affordable living.

Rabbi Teitlebaum, whose wife Mrs. Penina Teitelbaum is principal of the newly opened Atara Girl’s High School, rushes from his learning *seder* to phone calls from those interested in spending a Shabbos to try the town out for themselves. He will help newcomers find accommodations and employment and makes sure the fridges of the in-demand visitor apartments are well stocked. Cincinnati wants its guests to know and feel how welcome they are.

6 Used Books

Meanwhile, the 700,000 Jewish books that sit forlornly on shelves in the Hebrew Union College wait for some curious student to perhaps open them for some project or other, while their counterparts in the *kollel* and Zichron Eliezer, and in the 200 homes in this pleasant midwestern Jewish city, surely sit more contentedly on their shelves, albeit battered and worn.

Those books have become so much more thumbled and frayed in the five years since I last saw them, an indication that Cincinnati has moved on to embrace a changed and changing future. I’ve visited and taught in many cities throughout the US, but haven’t come across many that are as eager to grow and face the future with the holy messages contained in those books.

Originally from the United Kingdom, Rabbi Yehudah Yonah Rubinstein currently lives in New York. An author and lecturer, regular BBC broadcaster, and former campus rabbi, he travels throughout the world, visiting Jewish communities near and far. His column appears every second week.

2

Seforim Behind Glass

Jewish Cincinnati is synonymous with the Reform movement whose college for training Reform clergy was founded there in 1875. Its massive Jewish library is the second largest in the world. On my first visit to the city when I was asked if I wanted to go and see it, the poignant words of an Abie Rotenberg song came to mind. It’s about a *sefer Torah* brought to America after the Holocaust where it sits crying, no longer opened or used, in a glass case in a museum. I declined.

The story of Orthodoxy in Cincinnati took a very different path, defined primarily by one name: Rav Eliezer Silver. An old *talmid* of Rav Silver told me a little about his *rebbe*.