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JN OPINION: RABBI ARYEH SUFRIN, RABBI LAURA JANNER - KLAUSNER & RICHARD

Reports of the demise of Jewish Ilford are greatly exaggerated

WHENEVER I mention to anyone that I live in Ilford, Essex, and have done for the past 32 years: the first question I get asked is whether there are even enough Jews left to make a minyan?

People assume the community in Ilford is dwindling and that there couldn't possibly be a need for a rabbinic couple to be based there, let alone the four couples that Chabad currently has servicing the area between north-east London and Essex.

To be fair, I wouldn't blame them. In 2013, Institute for Jewish Policy Research (IJPR) published a report called *Thinning and Thickening: Geographical change in the UK's Jewish Population, 2001-2011*, which recognised the top 10 growing ('thickening') communities and the top 10 communities in decline ('thinning'). Redbridge, one of the communities Chabad services, was on the list of the top 10 'thinning' communities.

Contrary to the IJPR report, having lived and breathed Essex Jewry together with my wife Devorah and my family for some 32 years, I passionately believe that the broader Essex community is facing change, but not a collapse.

In fact, our Chabad synagogues are, on many Shabbatot, overflowing. We have daily services, three times a day, every day, regular b'naymitzvahs and weekly learning programmes for both adults and children. Not only

are the existing Chabad communities in Gants Hill and Buckhurst Hill growing, but we are also expanding to reach the Jews migrating further out to places such as Epping, while continuing to underpin the Jewish infrastructure of existing communities, such as Southend and Westcliff.

Over the years, many things have contributed to the changing face of the Jewish community in north-east London and Essex.

As house prices and the demography of certain areas have changed, many families from the traditional Jewish communities, in particular Gants Hill and Chigwell, are moving to other areas in Essex and we have been moving with them.

The organisations that used to engage with the north-east London Jewish community, the communal infrastructure that used to be in Essex have changed their focus and are now focusing their attention north-westwards.

We have enhanced our presence and, with the change, one thing stays the same: Essex Jewry's love for Jewish values continue to run deep and north-east London and Essex is still very much a viable place for Jews to live. We have Jewish primary and secondary schools, kosher shops, community activities, and several Jewish communities.

Chabad has sent ambassadors (shlichim) to engage with every new Jewish community in north-east London. Our experience has shown

that, when Judaism is presented as relevant and enjoyable, the Essex community has always risen to the challenge to get involved with Jewish communal life. Essex Jewry continues to strive for a sense of Jewish identity. Young families are starting to create their own new communities in new-build housing estates, moving in clusters with friends while still looking for a connection to Jewish life.

This is where we come in. We help provide the connection and community they are searching for through Shabbatons, High Holiday services and learning programmes.

Chabad North East London and Essex has a five-year development plan, which is looking at the broader community and the circumstances that have brought a real change to the community that we know so well.

This is a reality check, evaluating the past 30 years and planning what we hope will be our next 30. We've taken into consideration all the demographic changes, the need for more manpower underpinning the Jewish community and strengthening the current infrastructure.

Our aim is to serve every Jew in Essex. Whether you're in Gants Hill, Harlow or Epping and everywhere in between, we will endeavour to do our best to provide and preserve a long-standing, successful Jewish community for you, which may be changing, but has no plans on dissipating.



Rabbi Aryeh Sufrin

Executive Director of
Chabad Lubavitch Centres for
N.E. London and Essex

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