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In Wake of Sandy, OU Educators at Queens College Re-Define Role of Community

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Mon, Nov 26, 2012 at 12:38 PM



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November 26, 2012

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

IN WAKE OF SANDY, INAUGURAL OU *JEWISH LEARNING INITIATIVE ON CAMPUS (JLIC)* TORAH EDUCATORS AT QUEENS COLLEGE RE-DEFINE THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY

By Batya Rosner

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Inaugural JLIC Torah Educators at Queens College
Rabbi Robby and Shoshana Charnoff, with their daughter Aliza.

Since Rabbi Robby and Shoshana Charnoff arrived this September as the inaugural Torah Educators of the [Orthodox Union's Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus \(JLIC\)](#) program at [Queens College](#), they have placed a strong emphasis on what they have termed, "transforming a commuter school mentality into a Queens College Jewish Community."

The Charnoffs' priority on community became even more significant after Hurricane Sandy struck and the focus of their work expanded from not only building a community but to comforting a community as well. They therefore had to face a challenge unique to the JLIC Torah Educators in the 13 years of the program's existence.

JLIC (currently found on 16 campuses across the United States and Canada) partners with Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life to support Jewish students attending secular universities by hiring Orthodox rabbinic couples to work as part of the Hillel professional team. The couple serves as Jewish educators; role models and community organizers on campus; and have developed a unique methodology centered on relationship building, Jewish learning, enhancing of community and communal infrastructure; pastoral and halachic counseling; and student leadership development.

Together with the Queens College Hillel staff, the Charnoffs immediately focused on practical efforts to assist students in need. They recognized that many students commute to Queens College every day . not only from Queens, but from Nassau County as well -- proving a challenge for many due to limited gas supply; ruined cars; delays in public transportation; and other factors, such as homes without heat or power.

Uri Cohen, Executive Director of Queens College Hillel, declared, "The new partnership between JLIC and Queens College Hillel is absolutely terrific. With the largest Orthodox student population of any campus outside of Yeshiva University, the potential for JLIC to add to the QC campus is enormous -- and Rabbi Robby and Shoshana Charnoff are certainly up to the task."

Mr. Cohen emphasized, "The Charnoffs have brought their entrepreneurial spirit, thoughtfulness, community-mindedness, and deep understanding of the concept of Jewish journey to our community, and we are working together in lock-step to promote vibrant, pluralistic, and far-reaching Jewish life on campus. The Charnoffs are full members of our team; have shown leadership; and continue to grow as professionals themselves from our work together. QC Hillel is so fortunate to have them on our team, and to have the OU and JLIC as partners in our work."

The Students Are Enthusiastic

Rabbi Ilan Haber, Director of JLIC, declared, "When I visited the campus a month ago and spoke to student leaders, I was pleasantly taken aback by the enthusiasm and pride that the students have in their burgeoning community; and the role that they attributed to the Charnoffs in galvanizing and supporting that community in the short time they have been on campus. The Charnoffs bring great warmth, energy and talent to their work.

However, their role as communal leaders was on particular display in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. They stepped up their efforts during a time of crisis, and came through for students and families that were experiencing great personal difficulties and trauma. They provide an

excellent support system and role models to the students.+

Rabbi Robby, a native New Yorker, graduated from Yeshiva University *summa cum laude* with a BA in Psychology; and holds a Master's Degree from YU's Azrieli School of Jewish Education and Administration. He studied for *semicha* at YU's Rabbeinu Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), during which he spent two years at the YU Gruss Institute in Israel. Rabbi Charnoff also served as a Rabbinic Intern at Congregation Ohab Zedek on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and as a Ramaz *Kollel* Fellow.

Shoshana Charnoff grew up in Philadelphia, where she graduated from Akiba Hebrew Academy High School. Following graduation, Shoshana studied at Midreshet HaRova in Jerusalem, where she earned a teaching certificate from the Israeli Ministry of Education to teach students in the Diaspora. Shoshana graduated with Honors from Stern College for Women with a B.A in English Literature. She and her husband are the proud parents of an infant daughter, Aliza.

In the difficult period following Hurricane Sandy, the Charnoffs have worked around the clock, dedicating their time, energy, and care to encourage and support the entire Queens College Jewish community.

The Hurricane relief effort was an extension of the larger community building initiatives of the QC JLIC Torah Educators. According to Shoshana Charnoff, "When we first arrived, our initial goals were to literally build the foundation for Jewish life. As we saw it, two integral keys to that were in consistent *minyanim* and in Shabbat programming.+

"Something like this forces us re-evaluate what it means to have a rabbinic figure on campus and what it means to create a campus community,+emphasized Rabbi Charnoff. "In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, our goal as Queens College JLIC Torah Educators is to respond in a way in which we can help college students beyond the assistance offered by their shul or home communities. We want them to be able to focus on their schoolwork and social lives and resume as normal a life as possible as college students.+

"Will Never View This Job The Same Way Again+

Rabbi Charnoff asserted that his recent efforts "on the one hand strengthened what we initially set out to do. On other hand, I will never view this job the same way again. As a JLIC rabbi, I never imagined taking leadership on this kind of communal level -- the entire experience continues to be a real eye-opener, as there was seemingly no pre-existing model for how a campus rabbi should respond to such a crisis. We are doing our best to create the model.+

To meet these challenges, the Charnoffs worked with students who live in the area to find temporary homes for commuter students. With approximately 50 Orthodox students residing in the Queens College dormitory and hundreds in apartments within the outlying area, everyone who needed somewhere to go was offered a place to stay. Additionally, they worked with Hillel staff to extend the Hillel's hours that week from 8:00 a.m.-10:00 p.m. offering students the ability to have a well-lit, warm, dry place to hang out with friends, study, or just disconnect for a while.

Shoshana Charnoff explained, "Part of the role that I played in Hurricane Sandy was to sit down with the students who were directly affected, and to just literally let them vent. They are in a situation where they can't really vent to their families who are going through it with them, and they don't necessarily feel comfortable talking about what they are going through with their friends...seeing that off the bat, I have been a sort of emotional resource for them, which is a role that I have been very happy to fill."

Not wanting the students to feel like they were imposing on their hosts, Rabbi Charnoff went door-to-door to local kosher establishments seeking food donations for communal student meals throughout the week. Additionally, the Charnoffs wanted students, "to feel like they were not only being cared for by the QC Community, but by the greater Kew Gardens Hills community as well." In terms of the response, "local vendors such as *Sushi Fussion*, *Carlos and Gabby's*, *Mechie's Deli Counter* at *Season's Kosher Supermarket*, and *L'Bella Pizzeria* really came through for the students, and went above and beyond in their generous donations," he said.

In addition to the communal foundations created hand-in-hand with the Hillel staff and its student leaders, Shoshana Charnoff has made it her personal goal to build and cultivate the community of women at Queens College through monthly *Rosh Chodesh* programs at their home. "Our first ever JLIC Women's Rosh Chodesh event -- *Candy Sushi and Shiur* -- was a big hit with the female students. It created a relaxed social environment and also an enlivening forum for Torah," she shared.

Eliana Sohn, an English major and active participant in JLIC programs, noted, "to create thriving Jewish life on campus takes effort, and the Charnoffs make my campus experience a lot more full. Whoever wants time with them, they make the time for. Whoever wants to take a leadership role, they team with and empower. They have totally committed themselves to our community, and to make sure that everyone feels welcome. They make us feel like we haven't asked them to do any of this, because they see it all as their mission and responsibility. It's something to really look up to."

Looking forward to Shabbat with the students each week, the Charnoffs expressed, "Our weekly *Shabbatot* on campus have typically seen no less than 40-50 students -- for *Shabbatonim*, up to 80. Our biggest personal Shabbat initiative is that we open our home for *seudat shlishit* every week for anywhere from 30-80 students, followed by *maariv* and *havdallah*. That plays a big role in letting the students know that we are here for them both on and off campus. The phenomenal turnout at this early stage is a great indication of what is to come."

Rabbi Charnoff reflected on their first few months on campus, "Shoshana and I cannot imagine doing anything else other than this job. We're working tirelessly 24/7, but every day is a joy. Our days and are filled with speaking with students, and learning with students. We are re-envisioning Jewish life here at Queens College -- the student leadership is here, the passion is here, the Hillel staff is here, and with JLIC here, Queens College will be a massive force on Jewish campus life within the next few years."

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