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## Ivy League School Celebrates Groundbreaking of Expanded Jewish Life Center

Darcy Silvers, *For Chabad.edu*

The University of Pennsylvania celebrated the groundbreaking of an expanded Chabad House last weekend, with philanthropists, administrators, students and alumni turning out to toast the soon-to-be-built Perelman Center for Jewish Life.



At the end of its construction, the center, named after its benefactor, billionaire businessman Ronald Perelman, will house the Lubavitch House at Penn as well as the Steinhardt/Cayne Jewish Heritage Programs. More than 100 people turned out for the Oct. 21 ceremony, which took place at the location that for nearly three decades has been the Lubavitch House's home. During construction, which will see the house expand to include a neighboring property, the organization's programs will be conducted out of another neighborhood building.

"I've been involved with Chabad since my freshman year," said senior Bryan Leeds, an economics major from Seattle. He credits the Lubavitch House for encouraging students – who probably would not have been involved otherwise – to be a part of Jewish life.

As he took the podium as emcee for the groundbreaking, Leeds began on a personal note: "This organization has had a profound impact on my personal development, a deep commitment to my faith that grows every day.

"Many of my fondest memories of college," he concluded, "are of my times here."

Students and Chabad officials stressed that the expansion has been long and coming, given the tremendous growth over the years in Lubavitch programming at Penn. In the group's first trip to Israel in 1993, Rabbi Ephraim Levin, then the on-campus rabbi but now director of the Perelman Center, took fewer than two dozen students. But 14 years later, the rabbi, along with his wife Flora Levin and current Campus Rabbi Levi Haskelevich, brought a record-breaking 140 students to Israel as part of Taglit-birthright Israel trips in conjunction with Mayanot.

Of course, trips to Israel are only part of the Jewish experience that Lubavitch House brings to Penn's campus and that of neighboring Drexel University. More than 1,000 students each year choose from a variety of programs, from attending Shabbat dinners to religious services, Torah and Talmud classes, a Purim carnival, Passover Seders, guest speakers and many more.

With the construction of the expanded facility – due to be completed by fall 2008 just in time for the start of classes – Lubavitch House will triple its usable space. The new location will be able to accommodate 150 students for Shabbat and holiday dinners, and its synagogue will expand to hold more than 100 students.

According to Boris Kalandar, treasurer of the capital campaign committee, \$2.1 million has already been raised for construction of the facility. The goal is to collect \$5.5 million, a chunk of which will fund an endowment. Kalandar noted that Perelman's donation "was the anchor gift that made this possible."

### A Moral Purpose

During the ceremony, Levin shared some Torah thoughts with the crowd, emphasizing that the building's "foundation needs to be connected to holiness."

Also in attendance was Penn chaplain Rev. William Gipson, who from the podium read remarks sent by university president Amy Gutmann, who was unable to attend: "Jewish life at Penn grows stronger and stronger," thanks in great part to the Lubavitch House, which reflects an "enormous pride in Jewish heritage."

The reverend added his own comments, asking the crowd, "How is a great university built?" With scholars, engaged students and a moral purpose, he answered.

"I could take the same question, and ask what makes a great Lubavitch House?" he went on. He concluded that it all depended on great rabbis, students who are leaders throughout the university and a moral purpose of doing good deeds.

Joining the dais was a diverse group of notables, including Haskelevich; Rabbi Abraham Shemtov, head Chabad-Lubavitch emissary to Philadelphia; Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, executive director of the Perelman Center for Jewish Life; Craig Carnaroli, the university's executive vice president, and many others. From the audience, students Emily Singer of New York and Kelly Sutton-Skinner of Florida, student leaders of the Healthy Living Task Force – a relatively new program that trains students to help peers cope with mental health issues – lauded Lubavitch House's staff.



"We're here to show our support," said Sutton-Skinner, a psychology major, "because they give their support to us."

Singer, also a psychology major, added: "Rabbi Ephraim is like our mentor."

At a reception following the groundbreaking, Haskelevich said that the new space will open up a world of possibilities. "This is a momentous event for Lubavitch House at Penn," he said. "It will now enable us to hold the many students we did not have room for at our larger functions." Nechama Haskelevich, his wife and Lubavitch House associate director, echoed the rabbi's sentiments.

"It's very exciting to see the beginnings of what's ahead," she said.

Elana Wilf, an intern with Jewish Heritage Programs, said that the organization – which sponsors mentoring events with Jewish professionals and conduct community service programs – has affected her life in a meaningful way.

What began as an opportunity to explore Judaism, "has turned into so much more," she said. It's been "an integral part of my experience at Penn."

"I haven't been involved in the Lubavitch movement," event chair Ilan Kaufthal admitted to the crowd.

But with the increasing number of Jewish people leaving the fold, he said, the businessman found that he had a mission. He joked that when he first met with the Lubavitch House rabbis, all sporting full-length beards, he thought they looked like members of the rock band ZZ Top. They won him over with their vision, and a demonstrable success, in making Judaism relevant in today's world.

He ended his impassioned speech with a toast: "*L'chaim* to more Jewish kids."

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