

CLEVELAND Jewish News

The city of brotherly love

Jewish Philadelphia stakes its reputation on more than cheese



PHOTO / NATIONAL MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History

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Jews have been in Philadelphia for a long time: since before William Penn obtained his charter for the state in 1682. The city's first synagogue opened in 1740, well before the Revolutionary War, and is still a wellspring of hope more than 270 years later.

Given Philadelphia's 300-plus years of continuous Jewish life, one might expect a staid and traditional community. Not so. In fact, Philadelphia Jewry boasts all sorts of innovations:

- Synagogues in former 19th-century Quaker meeting places as well as those designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.
- A 100,000-square-foot Jewish museum across from Independence Mall.
- The oldest Jewish publication society in the country.
- The home of the newest American Jewish denomination's rabbinical school, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.
- An important center of Jewish scholarship in the Center for Jewish Studies, connected to the University of Pennsylvania.

The Center City neighborhood of Philadelphia is clearly a town on the rise, with real estate more than 30 percent cheaper than New York City, yet with a bustling city atmosphere and proximity to New York and other East Coast cities. Philadelphia is attracting both more permanent residents and more tourists –37.4 million of them in 2010, according to a study conducted by Longwoods International.

Tourists who want to see things of Jewish interest will certainly be kept busy. If you start downtown, check out the spectacular new National Museum of American Jewish History, or a museum at the University of Pennsylvania that houses an exceptional trove of ancient Near Eastern archeological finds.

The National Museum of American Jewish History showcases all kinds of objects unique to America—vaccines invented by Jonas Salk, a Torah from Morocco that arrived in Savannah via London in 1733, and the telegram received by Rabbi Stephen Wise in 1942 informing him of Hitler’s plans for extermination camps. There are frequent public events there, so it is worth checking to see if any will occur during your visit.

You can see works of modern Philadelphia artists – among them people with names like Rosenthal, Feldman and Heyman – at the notable collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Unfortunately, you missed a recent exhibit about “Rembrandt and the Jews,” but the very fact that a major art museum like this would stage such an exhibit lends visitors the notion of how central Jews are to the fabric of this city.

If being cooped up inside is not your thing, try a Jewish-themed walking tour at Shalom Philly Tours. The site has garnered kudos from those who have gone on the tours, both professors from the University of Pennsylvania and various Jewish groups.

If you need to grab a coffee along the way, try the Jewish-owned Old City Coffee, at 221 Church Street (<http://www.oldcitycoffee.com/location-hours>). One of the co-owners, Jack Treatman, is a past president of the Society Hill Synagogue and an expert on the pleasures of Jewish life in Center City, which he is happy to share with visitors.

After all this viewing of museums and walking, Jews must ask: “When do we eat?” Not a problem, depending on tastes and budget. At the highest end is Zahav, run by chef Michael Solomonov.

Solomonov takes the tastes of his native Israel and produces them with local ingredients. The restaurant is right across from the Ritz on the Bourse movie theater, making it a good option for evening entertainment.

For kosher fare, the options are varied. Krispy Kreme Donuts? Check. Gluten-free kosher baked goods? Try Sweet Freedom Bakery Shwarma? Hamifgash. Soft Pretzels? Yes.

When kosher establishments are frequented by those who aren’t bound by their dietary restriction, you know they are good. This was the during a visit to the MiLah vegetarian restaurant. Some establishments are able to get their kashrut certificates because of volunteer

supervisors from the Mekor Habracha synagogue – this is the list the synagogue maintains of such establishments both inside and outside Center City.

The Jewish worship options within Center City is quite large. Mikveh Israel Congregation and its adjoining cemetery are worth a visit for their historical significance. Also of interest are the Society Hill Synagogue and Rodef Shalom, in a Frank Furness-designed 1871 building. The synagogue houses the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art as well. The newest addition to the list of Center City shuls is Mekor HaBracha, an Orthodox shul incorporated in 2008, though with a longer history.

Shalom Philly!

Explore online:

- <http://www.societyhillsynagogue.org/>
- <http://www.bethsholompreservation.org/history.aspx>
- <http://www.nmajh.org/>
- <http://www.jps.org/>
- <http://www.rrc.edu/>
- <http://katz.sas.upenn.edu/>
- <http://www.jns.org/latest-articles/2011/11/21/where-jewish-and-american-history-collide.html>
- <http://www.shalomphillytours.com/>
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- <http://www.sweetfreedombakery.com/>
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- <http://www.mikvehisrael.org/>
- http://www.rodephshalom.org/our_history/
- <http://www.ccsul.com/>

