While we will continue to feature solutions to the housing crisis in the New York area, some of our best options may be somewhere farther away. Moving out doesn’t necessarily mean pioneering, either. Sometimes you can find an established community that has everything you need, as we examine one such city this week.

Begin Thinking Cleveland

Over the past 15 years or so, the Orthodox Jewish community of Cleveland, Ohio, has witnessed something of a renaissance and rejuvenation. There has been a large upsurge in the amount of young people choosing to make their homes in Cleveland. Many native Clevelanders have returned to raise their own families in their hometown (something that used to be not so common) and many others have come as well, taking advantage of the relatively low real estate prices and many frum amenities, educational opportunities and chesed organizations. For young couples struggling to survive in the New York real estate market, buying a home in Cleveland—where prices may be a third or a quarter of Brooklyn’s—would seem to be a serious option to consider, and many have been happy to “discover” Cleveland.

There are currently over 1,000 frum families spread out over the large Jewish communities in the Cleveland Heights, University Heights and Beachwood neighborhoods, with a smaller neighborhood in Wickliffe built around the world-famous Telshe Yeshiva. There are over 20 vibrant shuls serving the community, which is comprised of a diverse collection of Jews ranging from Modern Orthodox to yeshivish and a sprinkling of Chabad and other chasidim, all living in harmony and neighborliness.

Cleveland boasts several outstanding frum schools and yeshivos. The Hebrew Academy of Cleveland was founded by the legendary Jewish education luminary, Rabbi Nachum Zev Dessler, zt”l. The school became known as the model Jewish day school in America and has educated thousands of Jewish youth. Currently, there are approximately 800 children in the Academy’s boys’ and girls’ divisions. The Mosdos Ohr HaTorah school system, founded almost a quarter of a century ago, currently has over 500 students. In Beachwood, the Fuchs Mizrachi School, a Modern Orthodox yeshiva, has an enrollment of upwards of 200 students. Another Cleveland landmark is the acclaimed Viznich Teachers Seminary, which has been led by the revered mechaneches, Rebbetzin Chaya Ausband, since 1963. (Although there is a chasidish shul, the yeshivos do not teach in Yiddish.)

All of the frum neighborhoods in Cleveland (with the exception of the Yeshiva Lane area surrounding Telshe Yeshiva) are within a 15-minute drive or a 1-hour walk from each other and can really almost be considered one contiguous kehillah. All of the neighborhoods are safe, with relatively low crime; residents feel very safe walking around at night.

Cleveland fits into the category of a mid-sized out-of-town frum community—not quite as big as Chicago or Los Angeles, but bigger than smaller communities like Pittsburgh, Milwaukee or St. Louis. Of course, it cannot offer all of the frum amenities that Brooklyn does—such as 24-hour minyan factories and a wide variety of different styles of kosher restaurants to eat in—and this is often a turn-off for Brooklyn families who are used to such things. However, Cleveland does offer a very impressive established religious structure with everything a frum community needs, albeit on a smaller level than New York. This includes high-level boys’ and girls’ yeshivos, kollelim, kosher groceries and a few eateries and take-out places.

Another impressive aspect of the community is the massive amount of chesed that is done internally. The Bikur Cholim of Cleveland provides for the needs of scores of Jews from around the world who come to Cleveland to make use of its renowned hospitals and medical facilities. Bikur Cholim provides myriad services for these families in their times of difficulty and stress. Additionally, the recent founding of a branch of Chaverim in...
Cleveland further illustrates the chessed growth in the community. Additional wonderful chesed organizations in Cleveland are Matan B’Sayyer, several gemachos, Tomchei Shabbos, and others.

The Jewish Federation of Cleveland works very closely with the Orthodox community and is well-versed in the unique needs and issues. They have a special program called “Strengthening and Growing Jewish Cleveland,” which deals with housing issues, as well as other issues that affect the community.

The revitalization of youth in the Cleveland community over the past 15 years has been based mostly around two sectors. The first would be the thriving kollelim in Cleveland. Cleveland has deservedly earned the name ‘Kollel City’ because it is home to more kollelim and more kollel students than any other Midwest community, and more per capita than any other out-of-town community in the US or Canada. Until two decades ago, the only kollel in town was the one that was attached to the Telshe yeshiva. Even today, a very large percentage of the community is home to the world-famous Cleveland Clinic, is well known for its medical community as it is home to the fast-paced hustle and bustle of the mega-urban metropolis. Cleveland possesses a continental climate with very warm summers and cold, snowy winters. Lake Erie shoreline, which borders Cleveland, is the principal contributor to the lake effect snow that typically affects Cleveland from mid-November until the surface of Lake Erie freezes, usually in late January or early February. Cleveland is the second snowiest major city in North America (behind Denver). Seasonal totals exceeding 100 inches (254 cm) are not uncommon.

Cleveland has attracted many professionals eager to bring more Kollelim and more Torah learning into the city. Over the ensuing years, five more high-level kollelim opened, scattered around the various neighborhoods. Dozens of young kollel families flocked to Cleveland to take advantage of the opportunity to learn full-time in a city where they could actually afford to live. The local kollelim in every neighborhood proved more than happy to support these kollelim and to personally take advantage of the prominent Torah scholars that joined the kollelim by spending their mornings and evenings learning with them. This includes several philanthropists who have pumped millions of dollars into turning Cleveland into a true place of Torah.

The influx of youth that began with the kollelim has attracted many young working families to settle in Cleveland as well. Additionally, tens of kollelim have already joined the workforce after years of full-time learning, thus strengthening the community further. A large amount of both the kollel men and the working men who have settled in Cleveland are native Clevelanders who were overjoyed at the chance to return home and live near their parents. The other sector that has steadily grown is the professional community, made up of frum doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other such professionals. Cleveland is well known for its medical community as it is home to the world-famous Cleveland Clinic, the number one cardiac care center in the country and one of the top-ranked overall medical centers (by US News & World Report), as well as many other high-level medical facilities.

Many frum doctors have moved to Cleveland to take advantage of the myriad opportunities in the field, as have many lawyers and accountants who have found career opportunities in their fields. A main downside for many New Yorkers is how different the business market in Cleveland is. Many New Yorkers tend to gravitate towards employment opportunities within the frum community. Such opportunities are fewer in Cleveland, and New Yorkers may fear that they won’t find any suitable employment opportunities.

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Many people in Brooklyn are living in cramped small apartments or condo-miniums they purchased for a fortune of money. I find this plight when they could have moved to a nice out-of-town community for a fraction of the cost.

I grew up in Boro Park and I am a product of the Bobov yeshivah system and now make my home in Cleveland. I moved here after I married my wife who grew up in Cleveland.

Most people with a chaotic background like mine find it very difficult to entertain the idea of leaving the culture in which they were raised and moving several hundred miles from their familiar chaotic courts, batei midrash, chadorim and yeshivos and the “heimshe getl” and lifestyle that they were raised in. Those willing to leave Brooklyn mostly choose to remain close to home, in pithes like Monsey or Lakewood. They simply cannot imagine moving “way out” to a place like Cleveland. I once brought up the idea of moving to Cleveland to a childhood friend, and the man replied that he could never move to a place that’s “even farther away than Chicago.” He was genuinely surprised when I informed him that Cleveland was actually several hundred miles closer to New York than Chicago.

At the core, you’re looking at an establishment community that has everything available and is growing and has affordable housing. All you need is a leap of faith. Remember, you’re looking to switch from living in a sandine in Brooklyn that you’re paying $1,800 a month in rent, or paid for a fortune, to a nice spacious house in a wonderful and established community with good schools, kollelim, batei midrash, everything needed to raise your family. That’s the real choice.

At the last Parnasah Expo in New Jersey, I rented a booth in order to draw businessmen to Cleveland. One young man from Brooklyn approached me and said he could never move to a place like Cleveland. I once brought up the idea of moving to Cleveland to a childhood friend, and the man replied that he could never move to a place that’s “even farther away than Chicago.” He was genuinely surprised when I informed him that Cleveland was actually several hundred miles closer to New York than Chicago.

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