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Chai Riders: 'Live to ride, ride to eat' is their motto

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One morning in the spring of 1969, my then-18-year old brother rode a city bus across Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn to his classes at Brooklyn College. He arrived home later that afternoon riding a motorcycle he impulsively had purchased for \$50 off a kid he met in the school's student union building, affectionately known as Subo.

Never mind that he didn't yet have a helmet or a license to operate the thing. A rebellious soul, he was taken with the Wild-One-cum-Easy-Rider image of himself burning up the open road, doing good while looking bad, and, more importantly, exuding cool. Anyway, he reasoned, who could pass up such a buy.

When my mother regained consciousness, she called my father, to share with him visions of my brother's body splattered across Brooklyn's asphalt roads.

That evening, with my mother moaning something about cemetery plots and money wasted on a yeshiva education, my father bombarded my brother with the top ten thousand reasons riding a motorcycle was a bad idea. All of which can be summed up thus: Jewish boys don't ride motorcycles.

Nice try. As it turns out, however, there are plenty of Jewish boys - and girls, for that matter - who would beg to differ.

"I've been riding since 1967, when my brother found an old Honda 50 - almost like a scooter - in the basement of an apartment building he had moved into. He started riding that and I started riding as well, because it seemed like fun," says Barnett Black, from Glastonbury. Unlike my brother, whose motorcycling career came to an end three months after it began, when he sold his bike for 100 bucks to another kid he met at Subo, Black never gave up riding. Now retired, from Pratt & Whitney, where he worked as an engineer, he rides today for the pure pleasure of it.

"We're more or less destination and fun riders," says Black, whose wife rides with him as a passenger or "pillion" - an English term originally used to refer to a horseback rider's passenger.

The Blacks have their "favorite rides" - such as one down to the shore - that take them through back roads. To help him navigate, Black recently added a GPS system to his BMW bike.

"Now, I can get myself lost and then un-lost," he laughs.

Riding with the (Jewish) herd

Though Black has, on occasion, participated in a charity ride - a group bike ride organized to benefit a good cause or charitable organization - concerns for safety keep him from joining any of the many motorcycle clubs that sponsor social, communal and charitable activities.

"I relate (group riding) to my flying experience," says Black, who had air force pilot training when he served with the National Guard many years ago.

"If you see a flight of airplanes fly over at an air show, like the Blue Angels, those planes are identical. The pilots are all well trained and there is a lot of experience there. When you go on a charity run with 500 motorcyclists you don't know what the training or what the experience level is. It's a dangerous situation."

Not everyone agrees.

"Riding is a dangerous thing, but I discovered that it's safer to ride in a group - the noise is louder

and drivers are more apt to see a group of bikes than they are to see one riding alone," says 72-year-old Stan Nayer, a retired attorney and certified public accountant who took up riding 12 years ago when he began cutting down on his work load.

"I went out to Arizona on an Elderhostel program. I learned how to play golf and I learned about the Pueblo Indians, and then I went to the University of Scottsdale and learned how to ride a motorcycle," he says.

For Nayer, who moved to Westport from New York's Long Island six years ago and is an active member of Temple Israel, the only thing better than a motorcycle club is a Jewish motorcycle club. So when he discovered one operating in the tri-state area, he quickly joined.

"When I found out about Chai Riders it just seemed a great thing to do, particularly because we do a lot of charitable things," says Nayer, referring to the Jewish motorcycle club he belongs to that is based in New York and numbers approximately 60 Jewish riders throughout the tri-state area.

It was through Chai Riders that Nayer met his close friend and motorcycle buddy Bob Zeisler, a retired lawyer from Fairfield who at 75, is the club's oldest member.

"I've met more interesting people riding a motorcycle than in any other phase of my life," notes Zeisler, who says he joined Chai Riders because "the thought of a Jewish biking club intrigued me. It seemed so incongruous - Jewish guys and motorcycles."

The two men both participate in the club's "mitzvah rides" that raise money for organizations such as the Rockland Holocaust Center, The Jewish Federation of Ulster County, Hadassah, and various local synagogues.

In addition, each summer club members also visit several Jewish camps for children with serious illnesses.

"Every summer the club visits Camp HASC (Hebrew Academy for Special Children) in Liberty, New York. The children are beyond their ability to be given rides, but we spend the afternoon with them and let them sit on our bikes and try on our helmets," says Lauren Secular of Manhattan, treasurer of Chai Riders and one of the club's charter founding members.

Likewise, in July, says Secular, women club members visit Camp Simcha - a program of Chai Lifeline - for the girl's session, where they give the children rides on their bikes.

Not that charitable works is Chai Riders only reason to be.

Our motto is 'Live to ride, ride to eat'," says Nayer referring to Chai Riders, which is described on its web site (www.chairiders.com) as a club that "stays in touch with Jewish culture and religion." Made up of members who represent all denominations of Judaism, Chai Riders meets once a month for dinner, followed by a ride. The club also sponsors Purim and Chanukah celebrations, and its "Blessing of the Bikes" rally, which occurs around Rosh Hashanah at a local synagogue to wish riders a safe journey over the course of the year, attracts a substantial number of non-Jewish riders as well.

"One of the reasons they come is because we serve great food," says Nayer. "Normally, you go to a rally and they serve donuts and coffee. But we serve bagels with whitefish salad, lox, eggs and onion..."

For Secular, who belongs to several other motorcycle clubs and associations, Chai Riders' stated mission to promote and encourage "the growth of Jewish traditions and knowledge within the context of motorcycling and social activities" provides her with an important link to Judaism.

"My parents are not practicing Jews. I don't belong to a shul. For me, Chai Riders is the only connection to Judaism I have," says the 40-something accounting professional who grew up on Long Island and has been riding since 1984. "This club in particular has a lot of 'shomer shabbos' people. It's a very observant crowd, and I've gotten more of a Jewish education from them than I could have gotten anywhere else."

Jewish clubs join forces

In 2004, Chai Riders and several other east coast clubs - including Hillel's Angels of New Jersey, The Tribe of Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., Yidden on Wheels (YOW) of Toronto and the King David Bikers of South Florida - formed an umbrella organization called the Jewish Motorcyclists Alliance (JMA). They were soon joined by clubs from all across the country and

Australia, including: Sabra Riders of Atlanta, Chai Riders of Detroit (no relation to the New York club), Chaiway Riders of Chicago, Or Tikva of Chicago and YOW of Australia.

Today, the organization includes 19 clubs as far flung as Israel, Sweden and the United Kingdom. A South African-based club is also expected to join the JMA in the near future.

Created to forge a bond and promote communication between the Jewish motorcycle clubs, the JMA's signature event is the 3- or 4-day Ride to Remember. Held annually each spring to commemorate the liberation from the Nazi concentration camps, last year's Ride to Remember brought close to 300 Jewish motorcyclists from all across North America and Australia to Whitwell, Tennessee - the small town that was made famous when its non-Jewish middle-school students collected six million paper clips, one for each victim of the Holocaust, in an effort to help them visualize the scope of Nazi crimes. At a ceremony held at the Whitwell Middle School on May 5, 2006, the JMA presented school principal Linda Hooper with a check for \$37,000 raised by the riders, to be used towards the purchase of computer equipment.

This year, the Ride to Remember is also designed to show the organization's solidarity with Israel.

With New York City as its destination, the ride will run from May 2 - 6 and will include visits to such sites as Ellis Island and the Museum of Jewish Heritage. It will culminate with a group ride up Fifth Avenue as part of the annual Israel Day parade. Hundreds of riders, including three from Israel, are expected to join in the ride, which will benefit Israel's Magen David Adom.

A word about the women

When it comes to women motorcyclists, Jewish or not, there still exists an undercurrent of bias, says Secular. Still, she adds, times are changing.

"The largest increasing category of new people on the road is women - partially because it's been lacking for so long," says the independent and outspoken Secular, who began riding when, as she puts it, "I got tired of having to date men to do it." A founding member of JMA, Secular is one of only three female members of Chai Riders and also belongs to an all-women's motorcycle club.

"There's a lot of the old boys club attitude out there," she notes. "Even in the Jewish club I find that motorcycling is what men come to do without their wives. It's like their golf."

But change is in the air. "There has been a definite shift. More and more men these days are bringing their wives to dinners, on rides, etc."

Safety first

For Barnett Black, the real issue, for Jewish riders and all others, is safety.

"There isn't enough attention paid to motorcycle safety," he says. "Cycling is not just transportation to go from here to there. You have to compare it to a skier, a swimmer, a bird. It takes a lot of training."

For more information on Chai Riders visit www.chairriders.org.

For more information on the Ride to Remember visit www.ride2remember.org.

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