

Bikers head to D.C. for Holocaust memorial day

By ABIGAIL LEICHMAN

STAFF WRITER

Q: What's the worst, thing a Jewish boy can say to his mother?

A: I just bought a motorcycle.

Mel Morris, a 67-year-old engineer from Mahwah, repeats this joke to illustrate a stereotype: Jewish guys aren't biker types.

But Morris and his buddies in Hillel's Angels - not to mention members of Chai Riders, Yidden, on Wheels, King David Bikers and The Tribe - are living proof that stereotypes don't always hold up to the light of reality.

Morris and hundreds of other Jewish motorcycle enthusiasts, male and female, are converging on Washington, D.C., this week to mark Holocaust Remembrance Day in a unique style. Rumbling up from Florida, down from Canada and east from Pittsburgh and Detroit, the bikers plan to meet up today and cycle en masse Friday to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The idea for Ride to Remember surfaced last October at the inaugural gathering of the Jewish Motorcyclists Alliance, held at Mike's Famous Harley-Davidson in Delaware. Members of JMA, an umbrella group for clubs all over the continent, chose this event as a way to raise awareness about the Nazi genocide that left six million Jews dead, and also to raise money for the Israel Defense Forces.

"It won't be the equivalent of Rolling Thunder," Morris acknowledged in an interview last week, "but this is just the first time. I envision JMA as the Jewish equivalent to the Christian Motorcyclists Association, which has chapters all over the United States."

Hillel's Angels - whose name evokes both the better-known Hells Angels and the ancient Jewish sage Hillel the Elder - was founded as Wheels of Peace seven years ago at Temple Beth Rishon of Wyckoff by its cantor, Han Mamber.

Morris, who joined the temple and bought a motorcycle at about the same time, took over a few years later. The group's scenic rides and fund-raisers attract men and women - not all of



THOMAS FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Charlie Knapp, on bike, and other members of Chai Riders gathering at Fair Lawn's Temple Beth Shalom after their first charity ride of the season. At far left are Steve Kaplowitz and Mel Morris of Hillel's Angels.

them Jewish - in their 20s to 60s, from as far away as Pennsylvania and Long Island.

Some of the benefit events are done together with Chai Riders, a 10-year-old group whose tongue-in-cheek motto is "Live to Ride, Ride to Eat," according to veteran member Charlie Knapp, a 52 year-old Fair Lawn dentist.

"Our charity events are all around food and having fun," said Knapp, who was also heading to Washington. About 50 members from around the tri-state area fueled a recent fund-raising trip with a bagel-and-lox breakfast and refueled afterward with a kosher barbecue in the parking lot of Fair Lawn's Temple Beth Shalom, where Knapp is a member.

In the summer, Chai Riders travel to camps for special-needs kids, hand out Frisbees and T-shirts with their logo, and take pictures of delighted campers on the backs of their motorcycles. "We come home with a nice gooey feeling," said Knapp.

They also put in an annual appearance at the Salute to Israel parade down Fifth Avenue, scheduled this year for June 5. While not all members are Jewish - slain Fair Lawn police officer: Mary Ann Collura was Knapp's rid-

ing buddy - rides are never scheduled on Jewish holidays and strive to maintain a Jewish flavor.

"The vibe is like being at your best friend's son's bar mitzvah or daughter's wedding," said Jeff Mustard, 47, founder of South Florida's King David Bikers, which has a 35-member delegation heading to the Holocaust Museum.

"My mission was to create an environment that respects and honors our religion," said Mustard. "We have a remarkable bond through our faith that we share with all Jews around the world. Our organization is part motorcycle club and part Jewish culture club and part chamber of commerce."

Rabbi Zach Betesh, an associate rabbi at Chabad Lubavitch of Fort Lauderdale and "spiritual leader" of King David Bikers, planned to bring along on the 1,100-mile journey from Miami Beach a Torah scroll that was used secretly by German Jews during World War II.

"We are riding to remember in the face of the Holocaust and it's going to be a very powerful, moving event," predicted Mustard.

E-mail: leichman@northjersey.com.