

# New Jersey JEWISH STANDARD

THE STATE'S OLDEST AWARD - WINNING JEWISH NEWSPAPER

## Born to be vild

ELAINE KAHN

**W**e're here, we're in gear, and we're not gonna take it anymore — not the official motto of the Jewish Motorcyclists Alliance about to make a historic ride on Washington, but that's its flavor.

Up to 200 Jewish bikers from five groups in the United States and Canada plan to set out for Washington during the first week of May and converge on the U.S. Holocaust Museum on Yom HaShoah. Pride of place will be given to a Holocaust-era Torah arriving on the Harley of Rabbi Zachery Betesh, in-house spiritual leader of the King David Bikers of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

There are 45,000 registered Jewish motorcyclists in the U.S. alone, said KDB member George Liss, but misguided common wisdom is still "Jews don't bike." Less of a surprise is that they eat - interviews with local Jewish bikers indicate the 'eating is as much part of the agenda as the open road.

"Our rides are kind of neat," said Liss, a past president of the former, Jewish Federation of North Jersey who splits his time between homes in Boca Raton, Fla., and North Haledon. "We go from - restaurant to restaurant." The premise behind Jewish bikers groups is to celebrate being both Jews and bikers, getting together with people "who don't want to go to bars, but go to restaurants."

Nor do Jewish bikers just bike and eat - they study and pray. Betesh, a founder of Chabad Lubavitch of Fort Lauderdale, offers the KDB education classes a couple of times a month, Liss said, and prayers and kosher breakfasts are available Sundays before the rides begin.

KDB, the "world's largest" Jewish biker group, has over 200 members, over 30 of whom plan to ride to Washington, said 'the 64-year-old retired investment banker. A biker for 40 years, Liss describes the attraction as "a meeting of you and the machine and the road. At times, it feels like flying." He'll go about as far as Daytona, then will turn back his Harley; he needs to be in New Jersey May 5 when his wife, Jeanne, will be honored by the women's division of the UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey at its spring luncheon.

Jewish bikers, like members of the older Christian Motorcycle Association, raise money for charities. The registration for the ride to Washington costs - \$30; whatever is left after expenses will be split between the Holocaust museum and Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. KDB worked Super Sunday last month for the

South Palm Beach federation, Liss said. Mel Morris, of Hillel's Angels at Temple Beth Rishon in Wyckoff, said his group raises \$500 to \$1,000 every year for the congregation's cultural arts fund. And, at just one April fund-raiser, the Chai Riders raised about \$800 for Temple Beth Sholom in Fair Lawn, said member Dr. Charles Knapp. The Chai Riders draws members from the tri-state area.

Knapp, a dentist living and working in Fair Lawn, commuted to college on a motorcycle and said he prefers it to his car, weather permitting. He rides a black Honda Gold Wing, a luxury cruiser with a one-passenger back seat that's like a couch" and has cruise control. There's an AM/FM cassette player in his helmet. The 52-year-old doesn't ride a Harley because, despite its "mystique," it "rides like a brick."

Knapp can't join the ride until the morning of May 6, as he'll be in shul for Yom HaShoah services the night before. The ride will, show that "yes, there are Jews who ride 'motorcycles who also support Jewish stuff."

Some biker Jews are women, Knapp said. There are a few in the Chai Riders, including its treasurer. And there will be women among both riders and the passengers for the Yom HaShoah ride, Morris said.

There's an old joke, said Morris, vice president of sales and marketing for a manufacturing company, that the worst thing a Jewish boy can say to his mother is "Mom, I bought a motorcycle." Suiting up for a ride allows the Mahwah resident to take on a different persona, just as putting on an army uniform can. After hearing for so long that Jews are "weak little people who walked to the gas chambers," he said, there is something special about being "associated with the non-docile people." Cars sometimes pull over when they see him coming - in his black leather jacket and white half-helmet, on his white and gray touring Kawasaki "it's very often mistaken for a police bike."

The 67-year-old Morris, an engineer by training, said there's a "certain mechanical beauty" to a motorcycle, beyond the "feeling of freedom" that comes along for the ride. Riding a motor cycle was a lifelong dream, and he got his license shortly after turning 60.

But the attention garnered by the mere fact of Jews on motorcycles should not be allowed to overshadow the reason for the Yom HaShoah ride, he said. The Holocaust was the "worst tragedy of humankind" and the Jewish bikers going to Washington with their Torah make a statement that "we're here, we'll never forget, we ride to remember."



*Mel Morris riding tall and feeling free.*