



Travels with Rabbi Y.Y.

THIS WEEK

San Jose, California



1 On the King's Highway When the Spanish empire was at its peak at the end of the 18th century, what was known as "New Spain" covered all of Central America, reaching all the way to San Francisco. To link their outposts, Catholic missionaries built a road 600 miles long from San Diego in the south to Sonoma in the north. It was called El Camino Real, the Royal (or King's) Road.

The road, as it threaded its way, stitched northern and southern California together. It would be the first strand of many that would eventually combine to create the fabric of a territory and then a state. Today that ancient road (or at least sections of it) is marked by bells that hang on lamppost-like poles, letting travelers on California's modern highways know that they're actually traveling along a historic route.

Not too far south of San Francisco, El Camino Real passed through a tiny town called San Jose, which was founded in 1777. It was the sort of place you might stop by to purchase food before either horse or mule plodded its way further north to the big city.

Detail: *High economic growth during the tech bubble caused both employment and housing prices — and traffic congestion — to peak in the late 1990s. Today, San Jose residents have the highest median household income of any city in the US with a population over 280,000.*

2 Freeway of the Future

Today, San Jose — which was the second incorporated city in California and in 1850 served as the state's first capital — is the center of Silicon Valley, the country's leading hub for high-tech innovation and development. That was a natural progression from the city's World War II economy, which shifted from agriculture to industry, including military manufacturing. This change continued after the war; San Jose's factories designed and manufactured the Bradley Fighting Vehicle and various subsystems of the M1 Abrams Battle Tank.

But it was when IBM (founded by a fellow Scotsman) established its West Coast headquarters in San Jose, and in 1952 opened a downtown research and development facility, that San Jose found itself at the gate of the information superhighway. From that moment, the city's new road was laid out. Technology would drive San Jose's economy. The city mushroomed, as Vice Mayor Rose Herrera (who is Jewish) told me a few weeks ago, into what is now the home of a million people. The pace of that change was marked in 1990 as San Jose overtook San Francisco as the most populous city in the Bay Area.

San Jose is clean and beautiful. It lies close to the Pacific Ocean and a small portion of its northern border touches San Francisco Bay. The hills in the distance add to the city's charm. Vice Mayor Herrera pointed out everything the place had to offer to both visitors and potential new residents (but a word of caution: real estate in San Jose is among the most expensive in the world).



3 Are You Jewish?



When El Camino Real was built, New Spain followed the practice of its mother country Old Spain and made sure that its territories were free of Jews. The purging and expulsion of Jews in 1492 was enforced by the Inquisition, making sure not even a hidden presence would remain in Spanish territory. New Spain too had its Inquisition and even in sleepy San Jose, no Jews traveled along the King's Road in 1777.

Today's postmodern San Jose strangely echoes that tradition. Like most of Northern California's Jews, they exist in large numbers but do so discreetly, almost as though they fear being discovered and found out.

But try as hard as Jews may to hide their Jewishness, it never really works. My good friend Rabbi Paysach Krohn told me recently of a friend of his who discovered this the hard way. He worked for the German pharmaceutical giant Bayer and had to travel to a conference of a thousand employees in Munich.

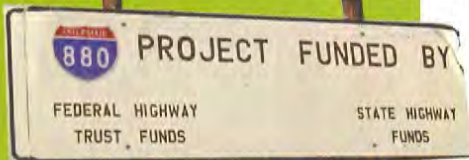
This Jew actually came from a German-Jewish family and was not at all comfortable being back in the country from which his family was expelled. He sat at the dinner pecking at fruit without a yarmulke, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. There was a strolling violinist who wandered from table to table, playing melodies to the guests. When he came to Rabbi Krohn's friend's table, he smiled broadly, gave a little nod and started playing "Havah Nagilah."

4 Raining Blessings

But of the 40,000 Jews who live in San Jose, there are an increasing number who are more than happy to wear their identity and their yarmulkes with pride and send their children to the town's Chabad school or South Peninsula Hebrew Day School for a Torah-based education (there's even a girl's yeshiva high school, Meira Academy, in nearby Palo Alto). Pars Kosher Market makes sure the town's growing *frum kehillah* is well-supplied with kosher food, and the Jerusalem Grill restaurant is no grade-B "only kosher place in town," but a superb culinary experience. I was there a few weeks ago to speak over Shabbos for the Orthodox *kiruv*-oriented Am Echad Synagogue and be their keynote speaker at their annual banquet. The shul's dynamic *rav*, Rabbi Menachem Levine, told me I would be staying with someone from my hometown of Glasgow — Jonathan Kaye

and his family. I was very happy to have someone who would be able to translate for me, if anyone was struggling with my accent.

The moment we arrived we brought blessings to the city, as many people were quick to point out. It poured the entire time and the wind made sure the rain soaked any unprotected piece of clothing. I felt quite at home as Scotland is similarly blessed almost every day of the year.



Detail: Last year *Forbes* magazine reported that *CancerBills.com* had ranked the San Jose metro area as the happiest place to work in the USA.

5 Celebrate the Future

I spoke in the intriguingly designed round Am Echad shul on Friday night and people were invited to return after the meal for a longer *shiur*. I thought the possibility of this very unlikely as the wind continued to howl and deluge more blessings on those braving the outdoors. But I was wrong. When Rav Levine and I returned, the shul filled up as more and more defied the rain and filled the hall to capacity. Shabbos day was no different — neither in amounts of precipitation nor the determination of these Jews to ignore it and come to hear Torah. Motzaei Shabbos was most inspiring, as young boys came with their dads to learn within San Jose's Avos U'Banim.

On Sunday night, friends, family, and supporters of the synagogue gathered downtown in a stunning new building called "The GlassHouse" for their annual banquet and fundraiser. It was a chance for them to celebrate their honorees, who really were deserving of all the honor showered on them (yes, it was still raining), to consider the past year, and to contemplate their shul's future.

As we parked our car and walked along those San Jose streets, others — black-hatted and yarmulked, *sheiteled* and *ticheled* — walked with us between the downpours wearing their Jewishness and their Orthodoxy with pride.

6 The Way to San Jose

I couldn't help but point out that these San Jose Jews lived in a place where two and half centuries ago, the leaders would have expelled them and torn down their shul. I was able to remind them that most of the Jews in their town would find it difficult to comprehend why they were so proud and fearless to wear yarmulkes in public. That pride, of course, meant that they also had an enormous responsibility: to reach out and invite those other "discreet" San Jose Jews to see what makes us all "Am Echad." I was also able to bring them another *brachah*, aside from the rain. The Orthodox shul of San Jose, which could barely accommodate the Jews who defied the rain to come to hear Torah 238 years after the founding of the town, has to be torn down! It will be replaced *im yirtzeh Hashem* by a much bigger one for a growing congregation that's reaching out to expand even more.

Originally from the United Kingdom, Rabbi Yehudah Yonah Rubinstein currently lives in New York, where he is a maggid shiur at Yeshivas Sh'or Yeshuv. An author and lecturer, regular BBC broadcaster, and former campus rabbi, he travels throughout the world, visiting Jewish communities near and far. His column appears every second week.