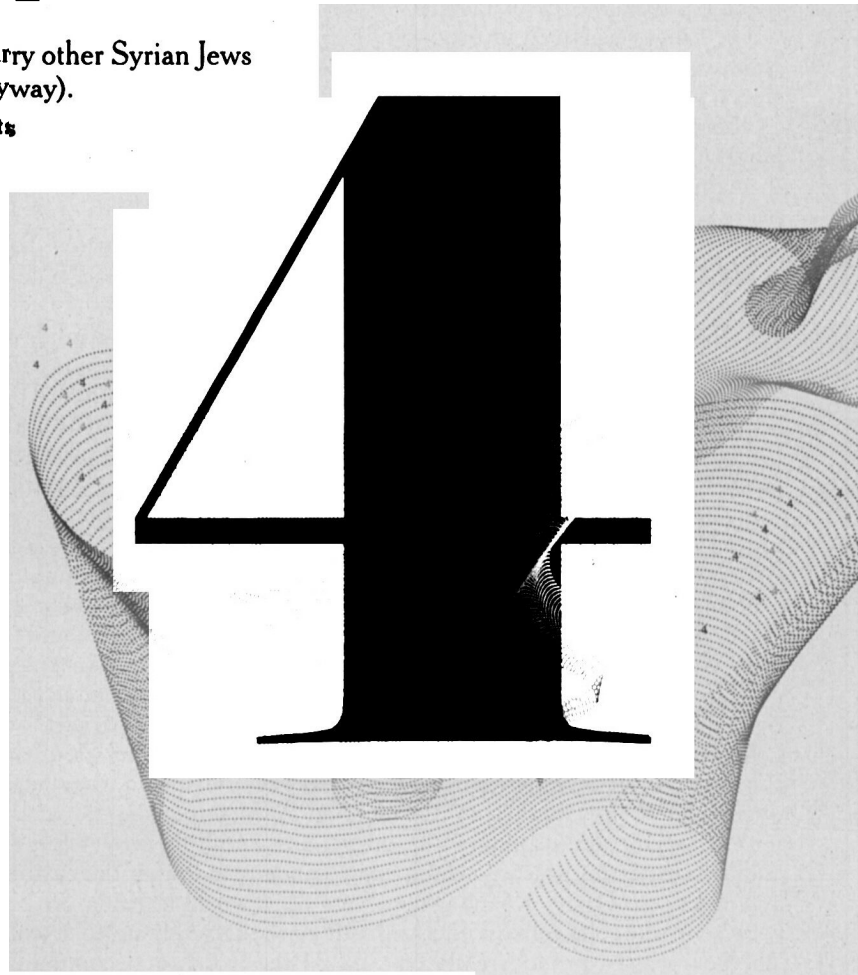




# The SY Empire

The Syrian Jews of Gravesend, Brooklyn,  
rear their children to marry other Syrian Jews  
and make a fortune (the boys, anyway).

By Zev Chafetz



Geographically speaking, the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn — 75,000 strong and growing fast — inhabits an enclave running from Avenue I in the north to Avenue V in the south and stretching eastward to Nostrand Avenue from West 6th Street. But the community's true boundaries are at once more expansive and more constricted.

The SY's, as the community members call themselves (pronounced "ess-why" — it's a shorthand for "Syrian"), live in a self-created entrepreneurial and mercantile empire whose current sources of wealth are found everywhere from Coney Island to Shanghai. They are rich beyond the dreams of their immigrant forebears. Many live in multimillion-dollar mansions in the Gravesend neighborhood of Brooklyn, summer in fabulous seafront homes

Photograph by Domingo Milella

- New York County (Manhattan) ranks No. 4 in the nation among median home values. The median home value for the county is \$788,000.

on the Jersey shore and repair to winter enclaves in Florida. They have their own synagogue in China. Businessmen from the community spend so much time on the road that a small shop called Seuda's in the Brooklyn enclave prepares packages of kosher Syrian delicacies that can be picked up on the way to the airport.

Yet no matter how far they roam or how worldly and successful they become, the SY's of Brooklyn are bound by an invisible fence known as the Edict — a rabbinical threat of excommunication so dire and so powerful that it has fixed the true parameters of the community for generations.

The Edict was issued in Brooklyn by five Syrian rabbis in 1935. They had a simple goal: to preserve the age-old Syrian Jewish community in the New World.

This was not a unique challenge. Every immigrant group in the United States has faced something like it. Most struggle for a generation or two to maintain some sense of identity and solidarity and then make their peace with the assimilative power of America.

The Syrian Jews might have done the same. They arrived in New York at the start of the last century and settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. But the Eastern European Jews who dominated the Lower East Side at the time disdained them as *Arabische Yidden* — Arab Jews. Some of the Ashkenazim openly doubted that these foreigners from farther east were Jews at all. The Syrian Jews were deeply insulted. They are a proud people; community legend boasts that King David built the first synagogue in Aleppo, in what is now Syria. The SY's came to derisively refer to the Ashkenazim as "J-Dubs," a play on the first and third letters of the English word "Jew." As soon as they could, the Syrians moved, en masse, to Brooklyn.

This independence was, in a way, natural. Back in the Ottoman Empire, religious communities that paid their taxes and kept out of trouble were generally allowed to live with a fair degree of autonomy. Why should the New World be different? But the Syrian Jews soon learned that in America, self-sufficiency alone did not ensure their survival. They hadn't reckoned on the additional risk posed by the allure of the open society.

In the old country, the Syrians had been merchants for generations, and they started off in America as peddlers. As they prospered, they began opening stores in Manhattan. Conducting business outside the enclave meant meeting and dealing with non-Syrians, speaking proper English and demonstrating at least a rudimentary understanding of the customs and practices of the new land. These were skills worth learning. SY kids were sent to public schools to assimilate — though only up to a point. The goal was to produce children who, in the words of a community maxim, were "100 percent American in Manhattan and 100 percent Syrian in Brooklyn."

In school, though, the SY kids mixed with other children, not only J-Dubs but also gentiles. The gentiles posed the gravest concern. Friendships with them developed, love affairs sprouted. There were intermarriages. Some Christian partners even volunteered to convert to Judaism.

Enter the rabbis with their Edict, in 1935. They wanted to build an iron wall of self-separation around the community. They couldn't do this the Hassidic way, dressing the men in costumes of ancient design, physically segregating women and making sure that children received

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# 65%

of New Yorkers think they pay too much for housing.

32% Do not think they pay too much

nothing in the way of useful secular education. After all, the Syrian men couldn't be expected to make money if they looked like figures from 18th-century Poland.

And so the rabbis turned to the heart of the matter: matrimony. Most American Jewish communities in those days (and many today) viewed intermarriage as a taboo. Conversion, however, was a loophole. The Edict intended to close that loophole. It proclaimed, "No male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non-Jews; this law covers conversion, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless."

A 1946 clarification added specifics: "The rabbi will not perform Religious Ceremonies" for such unkosher couples. "The Congregation's premises will be banned to them for use of any religious or social nature. ... After death of said person, he or she is not to be buried on the Cemetery of our community ... regardless of financial considerations."

With these words, Chief Rabbi Jacob Kassin effectively excommunicated any member of his flock who married a partner with gentile blood. (There have been exceptions for converts judged to be "sincere" — that is, those who converted without the intention to marry — but these have been extremely rare and always controversial.)

The Edict was a bold move. No Jewish community in the world (other than two small Syrian congregations in Mexico and Argentina) has ever had such an extreme rule.

Of course, enforcing it is something else. The rabbis had no means of coercion. If the Edict was going to work, it would be up to the tightly-knit clans of the enclave to enforce it on their own children.

**A**t the end of this past August, Jakie Kassin, a community leader, grandson of the author of the Edict and son of the current chief rabbi, received a laminated wooden plaque measuring 4 feet by 2 feet for his inspection. It was the most recent incarnation of the Edict. The original Edict was a document signed by five dignitaries.

Since then, it has been reaffirmed in each generation by a progressively larger number of signatories. The newest version, issued last year, was signed by 225 rabbis and lay leaders, testimony to the growth of the community and the enduring power of the Edict.

"Never accept a convert or a child born of a convert," Kassin told me by phone, summarizing the message. "Push them away with strong hands from our community. Why? Because we don't want gentile characteristics."

Rabbi Elie Abadie is a medical doctor, a university professor and the spiritual leader of the elegant Safra synagogue on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Born in Beirut and raised in Mexico City, Abadie is a leader of the younger generation of SY's, some of whom now split their time between the relative freedom of Manhattan and the demands of the Brooklyn enclave.

Abadie is a cerebral fellow with a gentle manner, married to a J-Dub he met at Yeshiva University. But when it comes to the Edict, he is as unbending as Kassin, if a little more diplomatic. "It's really a matter of statistics," he explained to me. "Except for the Orthodox, the American Jewish community is shrinking, disappearing. In two generations, most

of their grandchildren won't even be Jews. But our community is growing. We have large families, five or six children. And only a tiny fraction of our kids leave. The Edict is what makes that true."

Abadie and Kassin agree that the vast majority of SY youth abide by the strictures of the Edict. "Ninety-nine percent accept it," Kassin said. "When someone doesn't, it's painful, but it's better to lose a kid here and there and save the community. Families get sick over it, sure, but that's how it is."

Kassin knows this from personal experience. His sister Anna ran off with a gentile. Naturally it was a great scandal in the community, but the chief rabbi didn't bend the rules for his daughter. "We cut her off," Jackie Kassin told me. "We didn't see her for 25 years. But we never stopped hoping she'd come back. Finally, after all these years, she made contact. We told her she was welcome to come back, but not with her husband or kids. She's not here yet, but we do talk on the telephone."

In addition to the strictures imposed by the Edict in instances of proposed intermarriage, any outsider who wants to marry into a Syrian family — even a fellow Jew — is subject to thorough genealogical investigation. That means producing proof, going back at least three generations and attested to by an Orthodox rabbi, of the candidates' kosher bona fides. This disqualifies the vast majority of American Jews, who have no such proof. "We won't take them — not even if we go back three or four generations — if someone in their line was married by a Reform or Conservative rabbi, because they don't perform marriages according to Orthodox law," Kassin said. Even Orthodox candidates are screened, to make sure there are no gentiles or converts lurking in the family tree. In addition, all prospective brides and grooms must take marital purity classes and pass a test for HIV.

The force of the Edict is lasting: the children of people who have been excluded under the terms of the Edict are themselves declared ineligible to marry into the community. A local rabbi in the community told me the remarkable story of a woman who confronted this fact. The woman, he explained, is the daughter of a Syrian Jewish man and a gentile who converted to Judaism. The woman was raised as a Jew, but the community regarded this as meaningless and had no contact with the family. Years later, the woman met and fell in love with a young SY. She moved to Israel and underwent a long and exacting Orthodox conversion. When she returned to the enclave, she was told that her conversion meant nothing — her father's sin still made her ineligible for marriage. (Speaking publicly about such matters is strongly discouraged among SY's; the rabbi spoke only on condition of anonymity and declined to name the woman.)

According to the rabbi, the community's refusal to recognize the woman's conversion drew the ire of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, at the time the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel. Rabbi Yosef, a man of volcanic temperament, came all the way from Jerusalem to Brooklyn and informed the local rabbis that he, himself, vouched for the girl's Jewish authenticity. "There he was, in person, in Shaare Zion" — the largest SY synagogue — "dressed in his robes and vestments," the rabbi, who was there, told me. "He gave an oath that he had personally affixed his name to the girl's conversion document. She was as Jewish as he was, and he wanted her recognized as a member of our community."

"And the answer was?" I asked the rabbi.

"No."

"No? You turned down the chief rabbi of Israel?"

"We felt it was necessary," the rabbi explained. "If we let our kids marry gentiles, they'll try to slip *their* kids back into the community via conversion. And then the Edict will lack teeth."

This affair nearly caused a schism in the Syrian community, which officially regards Rabbi Yosef as the world's most authoritative Talmudic scholar. A group of dissident rabbis later met at the summer enclave in Deal, N.J., and accepted the conversion as valid: she could marry. They reasoned that it was wrong to humiliate Ovadia Yosef. They also reasoned that accepting this case as precedent would actually have a deterrent effect: how many other converts could expect the chief rabbi of Israel to go to bat for them?

**EVERY SYRIAN RABBI** is supposed to discuss the Edict from the pulpit at least once a year. When Lance Suede was 15, he heard his rabbi explain the rule. "It struck me as racist," he recalls. "I was so upset by it that I went home and banged on the kitchen table in anger and frustration." Today, he says he thinks it may have been a premonition.

By SY standards, Suede had an unconventional upbringing. When he was 7, his parents moved from the enclave to Long Island — Ashkenazi territory. There he met J-Dubs. The experience left him both admiring and unsettled. "They made me see the Syrian community in a different way," told me recently. We were sitting in the starkly beautiful conference room of the Midtown law firm where he is a partner specializing in white-collar criminal defense. "In Brooklyn," he went on, "the materialism was so far over the top it's hard to even explain. I found Ashkenazi Jews more intellectual. They valued scholarship and education. They could be materialistic, too — this is America, after all — but it was tempered by their love of learning."

Syrian Jews have always regarded advanced secular education with something like suspicion. Not only does it promote outside values, it also distracts a boy from his proper role as an apprentice in the family business. "To understand us, you have to know that we are profoundly Middle Eastern," Suede said. "Education is never the most important thing. People in the community thought we were weird because my older brothers and I became professionals."

Suede's parents grew homesick for the enclave and returned when he was 15. But he had already been bitten by the bug of secular education and liberalism. He attended Brandeis University and Harvard Law School. Then he willingly returned to the community. "It's a magical



**Other than housing, what do you think is most overpriced in New York City?**

<b>27%</b> Private school	<b>12%</b> Movies and other entertainment	<b>2%</b> Other
<b>19%</b> Parking	<b>9%</b> Taxis	<b>14%</b> Not sure/No answer
<b>18%</b> Food and restaurants		

place," he told me. "You come home from school and there are 10 women in the kitchen, your mother and aunts and cousins, cooking special Syrian delicacies. Every celebration is large, full of relatives. The etiquette is what they call *fadal* — just come over, don't be formal. Very Middle Eastern. Very seductive and sensual."

Suede began breaking the rules when he attended a convention in Manhattan for the National Organization for Women, where he met a gentile woman from Idaho named Kim Croffoot. Just attending a feminist gathering was an odd thing for a Syrian man to do; SY females are expected to stay home, rear children, socialize and, if possible, dazzle. To be assessed *bijan*, or gorgeous, is a high compliment.

Suede and Croffoot fell in love. She received a Reconstructionist conversion to Judaism and they made plans to marry. Suede expected resistance, but he underestimated its force. "Of course I knew my parents would be upset," he said. "But I thought time would heal the rift. What son wouldn't think that?"

He was wrong. "To this day, my wife and I and our children aren't welcome in the family," he told me. "I knew that generally you weren't supposed to marry a convert. But when I heard the rabbi say that in shul, I thought that was just, you know, a strongly held opinion." This is not as implausible as it seems. In Long Island, nobody knew anything about Edicts. And Suede's parents never said a word: "When they saw how strongly I felt about racism, how I had banged on the table when I was 15, well, maybe they just didn't want to get into a fight over it."

Suede, who now uses the surname Croffoot-Suede, had another reason to suppose his family would eventually relent. Back in the 1920s, he told me, his grandmother's sister married a gentile. "There was a scandal, but it eventually blew over," he said. "I thought that's how it would be for us." But the Edict applies only to events after 1935. Croffoot-Suede's grandmother's sister had been effectively grandfathered into the community. He had no such luck.

Croffoot-Suede expressed his feelings by writing a play, "Syria, America," which was performed in 2000 at the Greenwich Street Theater. Its subject was love and betrayal among four SY young men.

Last year, Croffoot-Suede's grandmother died. He attended the funeral, although he didn't sit with the rest of the family. Sensing a thaw, he brought his wife to the house of mourning in Brooklyn. It turned out to be a serious mistake. "My sister simply refused to meet my wife and she left to avoid it. She stormed out and we left, too. Next morning, my father called at 6 and told me not to come back to the shiva. He said he'd call later, and we could meet in the city for a meal and discuss it. That felt a little better. But he never called about it. My parents have sacrificed their relationship with me for the sake of the community."

Despite his being ostracized, Croffoot-Suede says he still feels the emotional power of the enclave and affords the community a kind of grudging respect. "There are thousands of people who grew up in the community and are raising kids there who would say that it's a fulfilling life," he told me. "It can be very warm and loving — if you follow the rules."

ONE OF THE RULES OF THE community forbids indulging in promiscuous chitchat with outsiders. This is a practice the Syrians brought with them from the old country, where a nosy stranger might be a business rival or a representative of the tax collector. Reporters, an American inconvenience, are equally unpopular. The community is still stewing about an article published in *The New York Times* last year that revealed the astronomical cost of real estate in the enclave — one house sold in 2003 for \$11 million, which may have made it the most expensive house in Brooklyn.

My first trip to the enclave was conducted by a guide who insisted on being granted anonymity. He emphasized the need for discretion by recounting the cautionary tale of a man I later learned was named Sam Toussie. Some years ago, a reporter had come from some unremembered publication to write an "inside" story on the enclave. At the time, Toussie was a member of the community in good standing, but he made the colossal error of talking about SY affairs, on the record, to the journalist. When this was discovered, he was ostracized. But that did not go far enough for some of the hardliners, who, I was told, actually prayed for his death. When he *did* die, at a relatively young age, his passing was taken as a sign. "Somebody put the evil eye on him," my guide told me darkly.

But the solidarity of the SY community is based on more than fear of excommunication and the evil eye. There are positive inducements as well. Chief among these are the support and charity that the community shows to its members. It is an intensely social place; weddings of 1,000 guests or more are common (there are volunteer societies that loan out dishes, silverware and even tables and chairs to enable everyone to entertain in a respectable fashion). Grown children often live within walking distance of the parents, and family Sabbath dinners of 30 or 40 are the norm. Being an SY means never having to say you are hungry. The community is charitable to a fault: at Sunday-morning house parties and festive holiday cruises, grantees compete by making donations to one another's pet charities.

The result is the most generous cradle-to-grave mutual-welfare society this side of the Saudi royal family. The community's annual spending on charity and other civic services, including education, is around \$100 million. "The services here are preconception to postmortem," David Greenfield, executive director of the recently formed Sephardic Community Federation, told me.

An SY in good standing can expect free K-12 parochial education and summer camps for the kids, access to a palatial communal ritual bath, use of grand recreational facilities in a community center now being doubled in size, high-level care for the aged and attention to whatever material problems life may present.

"If there are poor people among us, we try to help," Jakie Kassin told me. "If a person falters in business, other men step in. I've even seen people in the *same* business, direct competitors, raise money to put the man back on his feet."

In the early 1990s, President Hafez Assad of Syria allowed his country's remaining Jews, numbering 6,000 or so, to emigrate on condition that they didn't go to Israel. Naturally, they went to Brooklyn instead.



Private residences in the insular Brooklyn SY enclave.



Ahi Ezer Congregation, an SY synagogue off of Ocean Parkway. Defiance of the SY Edict against intermarriage (even to converts) means expulsion from temples like this one and the community that is centered on them.

The new SY's, as they are called, provided the enclave with fresh faces and some old-country authenticity. In return they were given housing, free schooling and whatever assistance they needed to establish themselves. "They even got us lawyers to take care of the citizenship process," a recent immigrant told me. "It's not just the money. We came to the U.S. with some money. It was the way they took care of us as brothers."

Nonetheless, the SY's say they do not want to be portrayed as enormously rich. "That's a misperception," Greenfield said. "There are about 50 very successful SY families. Another 20 to 30 percent are what you could call upper-middle class. But maybe a third of the community lives at twice the poverty level."

These statistics are based on broad interpretation of what counts as the community. Many of those on the bottom rungs of the income ladder are non-Syrian Sephardic Jews, an inclusive term of art the community uses for Jews from Muslim countries. You can find Egyptians, Moroccans and Iraqis in the Syrian community. Even so, they are considered second-class citizens. "Let's just say that the real SY's are dominant," my guide told me. "We set the tone. *They* join *us*, not the other way around."

The non-Syrian Sephardim, many of whom are Israeli citizens, do a lot of the labor and neighborhood shopkeeping. "Israelis own the local grocery stores," my guide informed me in a dismissive tone as we cruised down the enclave's commercial strip on Kings Highway. "How much can a grocery store bring in, enough to take care of one or two families?" The community's major institutions tend to be administered by J-Dubs like David Greenfield — experienced professionals willing, unlike most SY's, to do white-collar work for hire.

Greenfield, who once was a staff member for Senator Joe Lieberman, is currently running a voter-registration drive in the enclave. Traditionally, the SY's haven't voted much, largely because of an aversion to showing up on government registries. That has changed, though, mostly because of

the realization that voting can result in money for faith-based enterprises. The community is 2-to-1 Democratic, but they are ardent free-traders and hawkish on Israel and security; it is generally assumed that Bush took a majority of the community's votes in 2004.

In 1995, Rabbi Abraham Hecht of Shaare Zion synagogue made one of the community's first international political headlines. Hecht is a J-Dub, a Chabadnik preacher widely admired in the community for his polemical skills in English. During the days of the Oslo Peace Accords, Hecht displayed his eloquence by instructing an assembly that Israeli leaders who hand over territory in the Holy Land may, according to Jewish law, be killed. Five months later, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in Tel Aviv by a Sephardic Israeli yeshiva student with a similar point of view. The Israeli government banned Hecht as a security threat, and he was suspended from his pulpit, but he still has supporters in the enclave. So does Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who, despite his softness on converts, has found financial backers for his theocratic Shas Party. Jakie Kassin claims, in fact, that the party's seed money was raised in his living room in Deal, N.J., in the early '80s.

**THERE AREN'T MANY FAMOUS SY'S.** The actor Dan Hedaya, who played Carla's sleazy ex-husband, Nick, on the TV comedy "Cheers," grew up in the community. So did the designer Isaac Mizrahi, although his open homosexuality has made him persona non grata. Jerry Seinfeld's mother, Betty, is an SY, but she married a J-Dub (not that there's anything wrong with that, as Jerry might say) and brought up her family in Long Island, far from the enclave. Still, according to one Seinfeld biographer, Jerry Oppenheimer, she retained enough of her early training to warn her son never to marry a convert.

For many years, the most famous SY in the world was Eddie Antar, known professionally as Crazy Eddie. In the '70s, he revolutionized the home electronics business and created an empire.

Nobody did retail theater better than Crazy Eddie. His souk-smart

salesmen — many of them relatives and friends from the enclave — choreographed the shopping experience, waltzing the *zboon* (SY slang for “customer”) in well-rehearsed steps toward the *be’aaah*, the sale. His ads (“His prices are *insane!*”) were commercial performance art. And when he was caught defrauding his investors for almost \$100 million dollars and subsequently fled to Israel, Eddie provided an international drama that ended in extradition and prison.

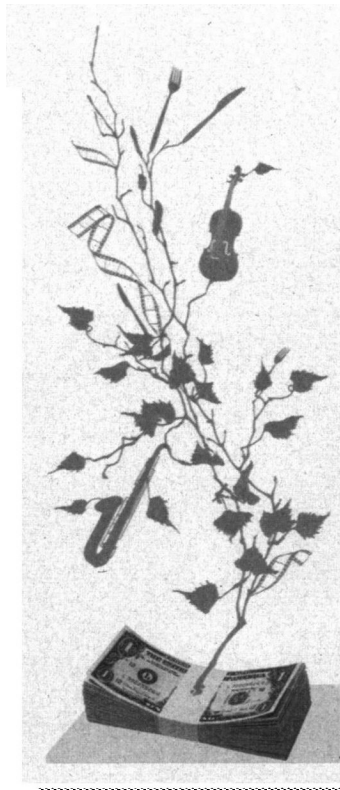
The Crazy Eddie case became a cause célèbre, shattering longstanding community rules of silence and decorum. Eddie’s J-Dub wife, Diane, caught him *in flagrante delicto* with his mistress, who also happened to be a J-Dub named Diane, on the last day of December 1983 — a confrontation remembered among old-timers as the New Year’s Eve massacre. The massacre was a real bean-spiller, and it was followed by the testimony of Eddie’s first cousin (and partner and C.F.O.) Sam E. Antar on how the illegal schemes had been carried out. This gave the United States Attorney prosecuting the case, Michael Chertoff (now the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security), more than enough to work with. Eddie went away for six years.

Unlike the late Toussie, however, Eddie Antar was not expelled from the community. In fact, both Sam and Eddie live in the enclave today. Sam has a simple explanation. “They don’t usually take back rats,” he told me. “But everybody in our community knew that Eddie was setting me up to take the fall, especially after he skipped out to Israel leaving me holding the bag. I had worked for the Antar family my whole life. But because of the betrayal factor, I haven’t been ostracized. There was no edict against me.” As for Eddie, he is still considered *mi’shelanu*, “one of us.” “He did his time,” Sam said. “He paid the price. That’s the way people see it.”

Since the demise of Crazy Eddie and Nobody Beats the Wiz (another SY-owned business, sold on the verge of bankruptcy by the Jemal family to Cablevision for a reported \$101 million in 1998), the *shmatte* trade has supplanted electronics as the signature Syrian business. Various V.I.P.’s

own national companies like Century 21 department stores, the Rainbow shops, Conway stores, and Jordache and Bonjour jeans. Most of the merchandise these days is imported from the Far East, much of it through Wal-Mart and other chains. Sam Walton was a mentor to many young SY businessmen, who, now grown old and rich, still speak of him with a veneration usually reserved for high-class cantorial singers and first-class kosher chefs.

The Cayre brothers, from one of the world’s richest families, according to *Forbes* magazine, got rich in the ’70s



**What has been the best thing about New York becoming a wealthier city?**

- 23% More restaurants and cultural activities
- 19% Safer streets
- 17% Better public schools
- 16% Better city services
- 9% Cleaner streets
- 5% Nothing (Volunteered only)
- 5% Other
- 7% Not sure/No answer

producing Latin music on the Sal-soul label and then got much richer distributing videocassettes via Wal-Mart. Joseph Cayre was also among the major financiers behind the World Trade Center’s Larry Silverstein.

Joe Sitt is another Sam Walton disciple, who has fondly recalled playing at the old man’s knee on his father’s sales trips to Arkansas. Sitt made his own money with Ashley Stewart, a line of upscale clothing marketed to plus-size African-American women. Since then, he has branched out. His company, Thor Equities, is currently engaged in a controversial effort to buy up most of Coney Island and recreate it as a modern entertainment district.

SY moguls tend to prefer the family-business model. Of course, they tend to be related to everyone else in the community. Including, it turns out, Solomon Dwek. Dwek, universally known as “the rabbi’s son,” is indeed the scion of a prestigious clan. His father is a highly regarded spiritual leader in the SY summer enclave in Deal, N.J. Solomon, still in his early 30s, made a name for himself as a high-stakes real estate developer in

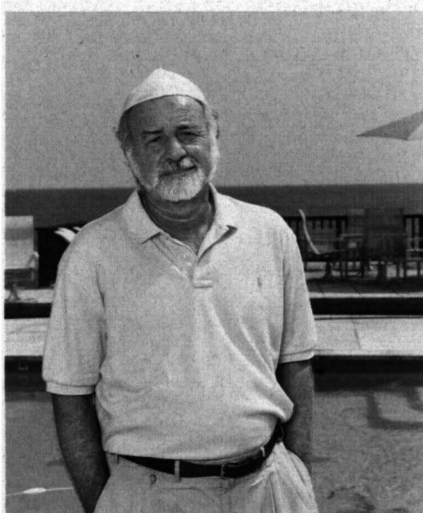
Monmouth County, N.J. Then, one memorable day in April 2006, according to an F.B.I. statement filed in federal court, he rolled up to the window of a PNC Bank branch in Eatontown, N.J., deposited a personal check for \$25.2 million and later wired out by telephone \$22.8 million against it. After the check bounced, Dwek was arrested by the F.B.I. for bank fraud.

In the wake of the bust, Dwek’s investors naturally began wondering what happened to their money. Solomon Dwek’s uncle Joseph Dwek claimed to be owed upward of \$60 million. A close associate, Isaac Franco, demanded \$30 million. Criminal and civil trials are pending in New Jersey. In all, the names of the allegedly defrauded investors reads like the guest list of an enclave bar mitzvah. It remains to be seen whether, under the circumstances, the SY community can once more display the unity, forgiveness and sangfroid it mustered for Crazy Eddie and Rabbi Hecht.

It’s a good bet they will. In March of this year, Chief Rabbi Saul Kassin wrote this in an open letter to his followers: “There is nothing more important than our unity.” Every ethnic leader in America talks about unity, but there are precious few willing and able to sacrifice their own children for its sake.

Seventy years after the promulgation of the Edict, it seems fair to say that, taken on its own terms, it has been an almost uniquely successful tool of social engineering. The enclave grows and thrives beyond the dreams of its founders. It offers a secure economic future and a sweet family life to those who remain within its confines. As for those who could not or would not fit in, well, every fight for survival has its collateral damage.

“People have to make a choice,” Jackie Kassin told me. “Sure, it’s rough sometimes. But I’ll tell you something — we should be an example to others. We’re building the No. 1 Jewish community on planet Earth, right here in Brooklyn.” ■



Jackie Kassin, son of the current SY chief rabbi, by the pool at his home in Deal, N.J.