

A Florida Jewish community begins burying its dead after condo collapse

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue



Leo Soto, who created this memorial, pauses in front of photos of some of the missing people near the site of an oceanfront condo building that partially collapsed in Surfside, Florida, on June 24. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert)

As the search for missing people trapped in the rubble of a Surfside, Florida, condo building continued in late June, the town's large Jewish community began burying its first victims.

Leon Oliwkowicz, 81, and his wife, Christina Beatriz Elvira Oliwkowicz, 74, were among the first apartment dwellers identified after the 13-story Champlain Towers South collapsed in the middle of the night on June 24.

The couple immigrated to the United States from Venezuela and were members of the large Orthodox synagogue in Surfside known as the Shul of Bal Harbour. They

were known for their generosity and once donated a Torah scroll to an Orthodox Jewish high school in Chicago.

Stacie Fang, 54, and her 15-year-old son, Jonah Handler, were both rescued from the rubble. While Handler survived, Fang soon died of her injuries at nearby Aventura Hospital and Medical Center. She was buried in New Jersey on June 27 in a private Jewish funeral.

Surfside is a diverse community of many faiths, but the town has a large Jewish presence. At least 50 of the 150 still trapped in the Champlain condo at the end of June were believed to be Jewish, according to various lists that had been collected among Miami Jewish organizations.

Much of the Jewish life in Surfside is centered on the Shul. The thriving Chabad congregation—its name comes from the Yiddish for “synagogue”—takes up nearly a city block, and many businesses, schools, and restaurants catering to the Jewish community have grown up around it.

While the Shul has about 700 member families, many other Jews have ties to the congregation, even if they attend services elsewhere, said Motti Seligson, a spokesperson for the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, a subset of the Hasidic Jewish movement whose adherents lead a pious, strictly Orthodox lifestyle that prizes family and children. These Surfside families may send their kids to preschool or camp through the synagogue or attend adult education classes there.

Ira M. Sheskin, a professor of geography at the University of Miami who published a demographic study of the larger Miami Jewish community in 2014, said the Surfside zip code—33154—is about one-third Jewish, consisting of some 1,500 households or 5,000 people. A third are Orthodox, most of them part of Chabad.

Rabbi Sholom Lipskar, a Chabad emissary, founded the Shul in 1981, the same year the Champlain Towers South condo building opened. The synagogue now has multiple rabbis and numerous daily services.

In the days after the building collapsed, dozens of clergy took shifts at the reunification center located within the Grand Beach Hotel in Surfside, where families gathered, hoping to hear of loved ones found alive in the debris.

The arduous task of finding remains compounded the anxiety and grief of those longing to fulfill the Jewish tradition that burial should take place within one day of a death. Jewish tradition also requires that all bodily remains be buried.

Rabbi Julie Jacobs, of Miami's Beth David Congregation, said she wandered the halls of the reunification center, stopping to talk to anyone there who may have needed spiritual support. Many were non-Jewish.

"I tell them, 'I'm here for you,'" she said. "I'm here to listen, to hug, to pray."

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