

Hang- Out

Coby's Judaica at the JCC is like a one-stop "Little Israel."

Stories by Barbara Lewis | Contributing Writer

A small Judaica shop nestled next to the gym in West Bloomfield's Jewish Community Center has become a happy hangout for expat Israelis. They come to drink tea, eat Israeli *vaffelim* (wafer cookies), watch Israeli TV and complain, usually in Hebrew, about everything from politics to the unavailability of good falafel in Detroit.

Non-Israelis are welcome, too. Coby Goutkovitch, 55, owner of Coby's Judaica, grew up in Zichron Ya'akov in northern Israel and came to Michigan in 1989 to work for General Dynamics.

In 2000, he purchased Esther's Judaica in the Sugar Tree Plaza in West Bloomfield. "Esther used mostly vendors from New York, and a lot of the merchandise was made in China," said Goutkovitch of West Bloomfield. "There was an intifada going on in Israel and no one was going there. I brought in made-in-Israel products to help the artists in Israel."

Coby's Judaica still sells mostly made-in-Israel merchandise, though Goutkovitch also has items made by local artists, including well-known glass artist Dani Katsir.

"I'm very fanatic that most of the inven-



A limited edition menorah commissioned by the Israeli government, \$1,800, at Coby's Judaica

tory comes from Israel," he said. "My shop is helping keep seven or eight Israel families alive."

Michigan's economic recession hit Coby's Judaica hard, and when his lease on the Sugar Tree store was up in 2007, he accepted an invitation from Mark Litt, the JCC's executive director at the time, to move his store to the center.

"It's become a little institution of its own," Goutkovitch said. "Even people who don't usually come to the JCC come here."

One of those is Hai Eretz, 55, of Oak Park. He grew up with Goutkovitch in



Alex Raab, left, and Hai Eretz, right, enjoy the "Little Israel" feel of Coby Goutkovitch's Judaica store at the JCC in West Bloomfield.

Israel and moved to Detroit last summer to join his now-wife, Sharon Sullivan, whom he met in Israel. He teaches Hebrew at Temple Israel's religious school.

Alex Raab, 82, is another regular. He works out at the JCC health club a few times a week and always stops in at Coby's afterward for a good shmooze.

Raab was born in Poland, survived the Holocaust and lived in Ramle, Israel, for 14 years after World War II. He came to the U.S. with his family in 1962 and is a retired plumber.

"I've been coming here since he opened," said Raab of West Bloomfield. "It gives me a feeling of Israel."

Goutkovitch keeps half a dozen chairs along a side wall of his shop for his visitors. The chairs are just behind his desk,

so everyone can watch the Israeli television shows Goutkovitch likes to stream on his computer. Some of his visitors call his shop "Little Israel."

The store also functions like an information center.

"One day a guy came in and said he had an auto mechanic shop, but he wasn't getting any business," Raab said. "Coby started talking up his shop to his customers, and he started getting busier. When I needed a dentist, I asked Coby where I should go and he told me.

"It's like a kiosk," he said, referring to the Israeli street stands where locals congregate and community information is posted.

"This is a big asset for the community," Raab said. "We're very fortunate to have a place like this here." ❄️

Photos by Brandon Schwartz

