An iconic spiritual leader in the global Jewish community visited Richmond yesterday, dispensing wisdom and guidance to those who sought his counsel.

The Grand Rabbi Moses Taub, a Holocaust survivor and one of the leaders of the Hasidic movement of Judaism, spoke with scores of people who came to see him at a Jewish community center and a synagogue in his first visit to Richmond.

Aaron Fast, 24, of Merry Point in Lancaster County, traveled about 90 miles with his parents for a five-minute audience with Taub at the Weinstein JCC at 5403 Monument Ave.

"It's really rare for me to have the opportunity to talk with someone who is certifiably committed to a holy path," said Fast after his short meeting. "It was cool to meet someone with an unshakable faith."

Their conversation dealt with the possibility of Fast furthering his study of Hebrew and Judaism.

Fast said he is unsure if he will take Taub's advice, but described it as meaningful to him.

Henrico County resident Barton Ruden waited with his wife, Lyn, and 10-year old daughter Andrea to speak to Taub. Ruden said he came for the experience, adding "we'll take all the blessings we can get."

During his consultations Taub asked people a few questions about themselves and their families. Then, clasping each person's right hand with both of his hands, Taub offered advice in a hushed tone.

Taub said his goal is to give people "advice of what they should do to come back to their roots, which will give them, especially nowadays, happiness and joy."

Taub's stop in Richmond in part came about through a personal relationship he has with Rabbi Joseph Kolakowski of Congregation Kol Emes, an Orthodox synagogue at 4811 Patterson Ave. The grand rabbi, or rebbe, visited the synagogue last night.

Kolakowski, at whose wedding Taub officiated, said, "His point is to show [people] that God cares about them personally and God loves them.

"He's a very warm and loving person. The point of going to a Hasidic rebbe... it's like a mystical experience. It's something that can't be put into words. Oftentimes, a Hasidic rebbe can tell you a semi-prophetic view into a person's soul."

One member of Taub's traveling party, Shmuel Abraham, downplayed talk of mysticism.

"The bottom line is he's devoted to helping people with minimum comfort of his own, by spending his own money," said Abraham, a member of Taub's synagogue in Brooklyn, N.Y. "He's trying, with a true heart, to help people."

Hasidism is an orthodox branch of Judaism. Its origins date to the 1700s in southern Poland.

Taub is a member of the Kaalov dynasty of Hasidism, and according to his Web site he is a descendant of the founder of the religious tradition.

His presence in Richmond was an event to celebrate, according to Jack D. Spiro, director of the Center for Judaic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University and rabbi emeritus at Beth Ahabah synagogue, 1111 W. Franklin St.

"I'm inspired that he came here," said Spiro, comparing Taub's visit to the significance of an appearance by other pre-eminent spiritual figures, such as the Dalai Lama. "It's very nice to have someone of his stature in our small town."

"Great spiritual leaders - we need them in Richmond. Especially with all the political problems we have," Spiro said. "It
Hasidic movement leader meets scores / They get messages of faith, guidance in brief audiences - Richm...

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