



April 1, 2018

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center:

A few days ago, someone whose name escapes my mind right now, sent me by email a link to an article that was published in Commentary Magazine on January 1, 1955, over 63 years ago.

The article, a 17-page-long-one, available online and entitled "*New Jewish Community in Formation: A Conservative Center Catering to Present-Day Needs*," was written by Morris Freedman, and focuses entirely on the Hillcrest Jewish Center of 1955. I will try to make the article available on the Hillcrest Jewish Center website, but in the meantime, you can search for it online by the title.

Quoting from the introduction of the article: "*Here Morris Freedman essays a portrait of a community institution today typical (though of course not totally representative) of Conservative Judaism, a movement which began in large part as an effort to counter what many regarded as Reform's 'dilution' of traditional Judaism and excessive accommodation to the American environment. In Mr. Freedman's sketch of the Hillcrest Jewish Center in Queens, New York City, it is hoped that readers may see concrete manifestations bearing on some of the widely mooted questions concerning American Jews today.*"

The article is a must read not only for those, like me, who wish to understand the history and idiosyncrasies of Rabbi Israel Mowshowitz and the founders of Hillcrest Jewish Center, but also for those who wish to comprehend the nature of the model of a synagogue as a community center, of which our shul is the best example.

The article is a jewel in many regards. First, Rabbi Mowshowitz, only five years after his arrival at Hillcrest Jewish Center, is interviewed at length, sharing not only his vision for Hillcrest, but also his daily challenges. Second, Rabbi Mowshowitz and the author describe in detail the history and plans for the shul's physical plant, including its design, art, and use of facilities. Rabbi Mowshowitz also addresses what was the make-up of Hillcrest in 1955, who were the Jews who moved to the area, what were their professions, occupations, and what was their religious observance. From the article we learned what the cost of a house was in 1955 and how much a family paid in dues. We also learn about the leadership expectations in terms of Jewish education, b'nai mitzvah, involvement in committees, etc.

Finally, reading the article, was, for me, a sobering and humbling experience. Arriving 12 years ago from a 100-family congregation in Roanoke, VA, a shul comprised of 400 family units seemed huge to me. The article puts things back in perspective. The article describes how our shul was a product of a massive Jewish immigration of traditional Conservative Jews to the borough of Queens, a successful experiment not only for Hillcrest Jewish Center, but also for the many other Conservative synagogues that flourished and thrived at that time in eastern Queens, many of which have since

closed their doors or merged. "*Rabbi Kogan, you should have seen this place 50 years ago! Hillcrest Jewish Center had over 2000 families and hundreds of students in its religious school!*" – is a phrase repeated to me many times by older members or even by some of the non-Jewish vendors in the neighborhood.

Sadly, or realistically, this is not the situation any longer. Things are not the same at Hillcrest Jewish Center as in 1955, or 1975, or 1995, because our neighborhood is not the same, because our constituency is not the same, because our society in its entirety is not the same.

Synagogues operate with paradigms, models, and visions. The paradigm, model, and vision of Rabbi Mowshowitz's Hillcrest Jewish Center in 1955 cannot be transplanted to the Hillcrest Jewish Center of 2018. A new paradigm, model, vision, is necessary. What worked then doesn't work any longer, and what works today may not work 10, 15, or 20 years from now. Reading Morris Freedman's article should make this evident to everybody.

To have a congregation that is friendly, welcoming, efficient, and financially sustainable is a necessary part of the picture, but it is not the whole picture. Like in the time of Rabbi Mowshowitz, we need a paradigm, a vision that will reflect our unique reality and the challenges and opportunities of our community and our time. In my humble opinion, developing such a paradigm, such a vision, is the task that the klai kodesh and lay leadership of Hillcrest Jewish Center has in front of us.

Rabbi Manes Kogan