

October 1, 2019

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

There is an old joke about an atheist who goes to shul every Shabbos and sits next to his friend Ginsburg. One day, someone asks the atheist why he keeps coming to services if he doesn't believe in God. He replies, "Ginsburg goes to shul to talk to God. I go to shul to talk to Ginsburg."

While every joke possesses a kernel of truth, the joke about the atheist who goes to shul to talk to Ginsburg, holds more than just a kernel.

Individuals join synagogues for different reasons. While some of them wish to study Torah, to educate their children, and to "talk to God," almost everybody who joins a synagogue, including Hillcrest Jewish Center, does so with the explicit or implicit expectation of finding, creating, or expanding, a circle of friends.

As Elliot D. Cohen, PhD reminds us: *"According to Aristotle, human beings are 'social animals' and therefore naturally seek the companionship of others as part of their wellbeing. And, as Baruch Spinoza observes, 'men do derive from social life much more convenience than injury.' This human social dynamic includes building and maintaining intimate or close social relationships."*¹

Indeed, forging meaningful relationships is the number one reason people joined, join, and will continue to join synagogues. Paraphrasing our joke, everybody wishes to find "one Ginsburg," if not more, with whom to talk. While this is true also in Orthodox shuls, it is even more palpable in liberal congregations.

The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Ta'anit 23a) relates a story about Ḥoni HaMe'aggel, Ḥoni "the circle drawer."

In the story, Ḥoni is distressed over the meaning of the verse: *"When the Lord brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers"* (Psalms 126:1). He said to himself: Is there really a person who can sleep and dream for seventy years?

In this fascinating story – which I encourage you to read in its entirety – God causes Ḥoni to sleep for 70 years. When he wakes up, he goes back to his home and tells his grandchildren who he is, but they don't believe him. Then he turns to the study hall where he hears the Sages say about one scholar: *"His halakhot are as enlightening and as clear as in the years of Ḥoni."* Ḥoni says to them: "I am he," but they don't believe him. Ḥoni, distressed and lonely, prays for mercy, and dies. Rava, a later Sage, commenting on Ḥoni's fate said: This explains the folk saying: Either friendship or death - חברותא או מיתותא.

The above story illustrates how all of us are in need of meaningful relationships, and how, in absence of them, we become depressed and wither.

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-would-aristotle-do/201009/you-are-social-animal>

How does a synagogue become a welcoming sacred space?² I would like to suggest that the process begins with a series of practical, almost mechanical steps; followed by a conscious and cognizant welcoming attitude by its klai kodesh, professionals, staff, and members; and must conclude inevitably with meaningful relationships.

What are these practical, almost mechanical steps?

A neat facility, clear signs indicating where different activities take place, accessibility for people with physical and mental disabilities, food accommodations for members and guests who are vegan, vegetarian, or suffer allergies, greeters at the doors, a children's corner in the sanctuary, learning possibilities at different hours of the day, an engaging website, abundant but not overwhelming clear communications, safety from outside threats that doesn't impede accessibility to the building to current and prospective members, a menu of worthy programs and activities for different constituents and interests, participatory religious services, etc.

What does entail a conscious and cognizant welcoming attitude by its klai kodesh, professionals, staff, and members?

There is no other way to put it: a welcoming, caring synagogue is made up of welcoming, caring individuals. Klai kodesh, for example, should know their congregants and make an effort to learn more about them. Staff members and professionals must be genuinely helpful, attentive, and go out of their way to help members. If a regular attendee doesn't come to shul, his or her absence should not go unnoticed. Everybody's presence should be acknowledged by everybody else with a "Shabbat Shalom," a "good morning," a handshake. "Thank you" and "please," should be used profusely, and nobody, no matter how frustrated they are, should raise their voice, roll their eyes, make nasty, or sarcastic remarks about others, or put people down.

This summer I rented a car in Israel. As I entered the rental car location, I saw written in big letters the motto of the rental car agency: "*We Give You Our Soul.*" The problem is that they didn't even give me a "good morning," or a "how can I help you?" Two of the employees were on their phones and a third one was chewing gum while talking to a customer.

If you say about yourself "*We Give You Our Soul,*" you are expected at least to care enough to lift your eyes and look at the other person in her or his eyes and say "hi."

Finally, while practical steps and a conscious and cognizant welcoming attitude are a must in a welcoming, caring, sacred place, they are not enough. The survey we did last year confirmed what I mentioned at the opening of this article: the main reason people join a shul, I am afraid, is not to pray, or to study Torah but to foster meaningful relationships. While not everybody needs to be close with everybody else, everybody needs to be able to find one, two or three individuals he or she feels close to.

Many members of Hillcrest Jewish Center fostered lifelong friendships within the walls of our shul. Some of you nurtured these relationships while working

² Dr. Ron Wolfson dedicated an entire book to this subject: *The Spirituality of Welcoming: How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community.* Jewish Lights Publishing. 2013.

together on a particular project, serving on the board, or attending minyan for many years. Others achieved this as part of the "Young Marrieds," an HJC version of Youth and Family in the 70s and 80s. Many HJC members met their lifelong friends as parents of the HJC early childhood program, that flourished for many decades at Hillcrest Jewish Center.

Not long ago, I mentioned to a long-time HJC member that people were joining the shul because they wanted to make friends. This fine individual replied: "Rabbi I already have friends."

Indeed, there are established friendship groups in our shul but they don't have to be closed groups. We should be able to make room at our table, literally and figuratively, for new faces. We will give meaning to their lives, and they will enrich ours as well.

The High Holy Days are a wonderful opportunity not only to explore, rethink, and transform our personal lives, but also to explore, rethink, and transform our congregational lives. We are doing well – but we can do better!

The way to effect meaningful transformation is one step at a time, not with grandiose declarations, but with small actions. This is true both in our personal lives as well as in our congregational lives.

I wish to invite you during the High Holy Days and throughout this coming year, to reach out to one or two individuals you don't know well, to one or two individuals who are longing for friendship and meaningful relationships, and to bring them into your circle of friends if you have one, or to establish together a new circle of friends. It is hard work and you may have to go out of your way, but if we strive to become a welcoming sacred space, there is no other way.

Silvia, Daniela, Ilan and Abby join me in wishing all of you and your loved ones a year of friendship and meaningful relationships, a healthy, sweet, and good year.

Rabbi Manes Kogan