

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

If you check any congregation's website – and I am not talking only about Jewish congregations – you will read that they refer to themselves as thriving and welcoming. Of course, no congregation will “sell” itself as dying and excluding.

Indeed, being welcoming is the first characteristic old and new members alike, are looking for in any congregation, including ours.

But what does it mean to be welcoming?

While each of us may have a take on the above question, I wanted to share with you a unique and personal response, from a 12-year-old member. I hope you will find it meaningful, or at least, that it will help you reframe the welcoming vs. excluding conversation.

*Here at Hillcrest, we all want to be welcomed. Each Shabbat we say ‘Shabbat Shalom’ to one another. We ask each other how they are, and we pray for someone who is sick. But when you consider the concept of welcoming, what does it really mean? Is it just a simple ‘hello’ and ‘how are you?’*

*In thinking about our congregation, ‘is our entire community represented?’ I would ask everyone to think deeper as to what this question means. Do we have braille signs on doors? Is your shul handicap friendly?*

*An integral aspect of inclusivity is equity. A community that is equitable takes the needs of everyone into account, acknowledging that people are different, with different needs.*

*For example, here at Hillcrest Jewish Center, there are some members of our congregation who have certain dietary restrictions. Are these needs represented in the Kiddish after services? Are they represented at special events where food is served?*

*As a member of Hillcrest with Celiac Disease, I have noticed that the answer to these questions is frequently no. There is usually no food that is safe for me or my sister to eat at any kiddish. Aside from there not being any exclusively gluten free food, anything that is naturally gluten free is cross contaminated with gluten from other foods.*

*For those who aren't familiar with cross contamination and what it does to gluten free food, here is an example: Let's say that there is a container of cream cheese, someone will dip a knife into the cream cheese and spread it onto their bagel. However, he or she may want more cream cheese and put the same knife back in the container. The cream cheese is now contaminated with gluten. Another example is if someone uses a spoon to serve themselves fruit salad and when the person puts the fruit on his or her plate the same spoon touches their bagel. If they return the spoon to the fruit salad, the fruit salad is now cross contaminated and will, most likely, make someone with Celiac Disease sick.*

*I would like to suggest that for everyone to feel included, in addition to saying “shabbat shalom” and “how are you,” we should be more mindful of congregants who have dietary restrictions. Not having food options available for those individuals will make them feel excluded and unwelcome. On the other hand, members of the congregation should share their allergens with the Hillcrest office so those in charge of putting together the meals can be aware and make special arrangements.*

*I have decided to make creating awareness about Celiac Disease my Bat Mitzvah project and I thank Rabbi Kogan for giving me space in the Bulletin to share my thoughts with you.*

*Alexa Solomon*