

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

You may not be aware of it, but early in January our community in Queens was at the center of the Jewish news, both in America and in Israel. The *Jewish Week*, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, and the *Times of Israel*, among others, reflected on the fact that North America's first Solomon Schechter Conservative day school turned Orthodox. Yes, the Solomon Schechter School of Queens (SSSQ) as we knew it, is gone.

The news hit very close to home for many of us, and I suggest that all of us should at least be reflecting on the implications of this development.

But first, let me direct you to two online articles on the subject, both worth reading.

- First-ever Solomon Schechter day school in North America goes Orthodox, by Jackie Hajdenberg. That article was reprinted in the *Times of Israel* and *Jerusalem Post*, among others.
- My Solomon Schechter school embodied a bygone American, Zionist and New York Jewish dream, by Gil Troy.

Those of us who have been part of the Schechter community have seen this development brewing in the last several years.

Those of you who have not been part of the Schechter community should not be very surprised either, as the change in the school reflects the change in the community – yes, our own community.

I wrote about this subject many times, but just for those who need a reminder, and paraphrasing Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, "Toto, we are not in the times of Rabbi Mowshowitz any longer."

While all Conservative congregations in Queens have seen a sharp decline in membership in the last 25 years, and many have closed their doors and merged, the former SSSQ didn't close its doors or merge, but went through a slow, subtle, and I would like to add, intentional, takeover. We don't need confirmation. Many of us experienced it.

Argentinean author Julio Cortazar wrote a short story, *House Taken Over*, in which he describes the story of a brother and sister living in a large house in Buenos Aires, who feel that their house is gradually being taken over by some mysterious intruders.

To make things clear, the Bukharian families of the Queens Hebrew Academy (former SSSQ) are not intruders, but members of the community. Yet, they took over a school with a particular mission and made it into a different school, with a different mission.

I also don't believe there are guilty parties here. The change in the school demographics reflects the change in the community demographics. It is what it is.

And yet, it makes me think if we, religious and lay leaders of the non-Orthodox congregations in Queens, could have done something different – maybe think outside the box, together – could have salvaged not only the school but also non-Orthodox Judaism in Queens. I guess when we are all in surviving mode and focusing our energy on being *the last shul standing*, there is no time and creativity left to think outside the box.

Last, but not least, I would like to share with you, including the few Hillcrest Jewish Center families of the new Queens Hebrew Academy, some cautionary words. The pluralism we celebrate and promote in the liberal Jewish community, the more-than-one-way to live our Judaism, is not shared by the overwhelming majority of our new neighbors. The average new occupant of the former Solomon Schechter school of Queens didn't react to the news of the change in name with words of appreciation to the countless Conservative Jews, synagogues, rabbis, and cantors, who built the school throughout the years.

Instead, this is a post that appeared in the Instagram account of the Bukharian Community:

*Solomon Schechter School of Queens the once upon a time reform Jewish school has decided to rename their school Queens Hebrew Academy. The school used to be associated with Reform Judaism but in recent years thanks to the push of Bukharian Rabbis such as Rabbi Babachanov and community member and President of the school Roy Moussaieff the school is once again on the right path and the only way: the orthodox Jewish path.*

As you may see, this message contains a mixture of sadness, anger, and resignation. Yes, the pendulum may swing back in the future (it always does), but most probably when it does, we won't be here to see it.

Among those who founded SSSQ were the historic leaders of Hillcrest Jewish Center, a bygone generation, whose presence still echoes within the walls of our beloved shul. We owe them to be mindful of their efforts and contributions and celebrate their legacy by keeping our shul, strong, vibrant, and relevant.

With many blessings,

*Rabbi Manes Kogan*