

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Last June 1, at the Libby Mowshowitz breakfast, her son, Sol, shared a few words about his mother. His reflections highlighted one of the principles that has guided my rabbinate, namely, that no particular issue is more important than the unity of the congregation. While this is true about congregations, it applies the same to families, communities, and the Jewish people in its entirety.

I asked Sol permission to share his words. I hope you will find them as meaningful and inspiring as I did.

Many blessings,

Rabbi Kogan

Dear Friends:

First of all, I want to congratulate Helene for her upcoming honor at the Region Woman of Achievement Gala on June 12th. I can vouch personally for her marvelous leadership; in organizing this event, checking all the boxes, getting everyone working together, and herding our family cats.

There was once a Chassidic Rebbe in a small *shtetl*. So small, that the train ran through the town without so much as a whistle stop. Yet every day, precisely at 3:17 PM, he would stop whatever he was doing, walk down to the railroad tracks and watch the train race through town. After many years, his Chassidim got the courage to ask him what the spiritual significance of this practice was. He told them: "I go down to watch the train every day, because that train is the only thing in this town that moves, that I don't have to push."

Thank you, Helene, for your pushing.

Before Bertha introduces our distinguished speaker, I want to channel my Mother a little, and give a message I hope she would have endorsed.

We have to stick together!

In *Iggrot Moshe*, a book of responsa by the renowned *posek* (decisor of Jewish Law) Moshe Feinstein, he tends to focus on cases out of the ordinary.

One such case in the late 1950s was of an Orthodox Young Israel congregation that was in an uproar. Members of the congregation had placed two flags, one of the United States, the other of Israel, on the *bimah* on each side of the Holy Ark. Some members of the congregation were pleased, but others were horrified. This is idolatry, they said, and demanded that the flags be removed. The others got defensive. They said: We are not idolaters, and if you take those flags out, we will

leave the congregation and form another schul. They took their dispute to Moshe Feinstein.

His answer is a masterpiece of political savvy.

First, he said, it is not idolatry (calming the ones accused of it). By placing the flags there, people are merely expressing their affection for the political entities represented by the flags. Nobody is worshipping the flags or the political entities. On the other hand, it is not a good practice, and (here's the key phrase) if you could sneak the flags out of there WITHOUT DIVIDING THE CONGREGATION, *mah tov* – well and good. But if it divides the congregation, then *shoy'n*, leave them there. They got the message and removed the flags.

What message was that? Congregational unity was more important than the issue that divided them.

I recall now some unpleasant history of Hillcrest. For a time, long after Dad had retired, and before Rabbi Kogan came, the congregation was bitterly divided into factions for and against increased participation of women in communal ritual. On *Shabbat*, the two factions alternated meeting in the Sanctuary and downstairs. Mother, I remember, adamantly refused to take sides. She sat in her regular seat in the Sanctuary no matter which faction's *shabbes* it was. The division in the congregation made her heartsick, as did all divisions within the Jewish community. She was a champion of *ACHDUT*, unity. She loved all Jews: Rich and poor, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, Democrat and Republican, religious and secular.

As some of you know, in 1919 in Elizabetgrad (now called Kirovograd), Mom survived her own October 7th, a pogrom in which 3,000 Jews – more than one third of the Jewish population -- were murdered in two days, and she didn't even come to hate goyim, and who could blame her if she did?

Mom was brilliant. She could have been a great mathematician, and she chose to become a rebbetzin. But it was in loving that she most excelled. Sylvia and I won the Mother lottery. All of you who knew her understood that you were loved. It's not a mistake that she was named Liebe! (love).

In these terrible times, when many Jews feel that they are forced to choose between being hated and being pitied, between their survival and their values, when their own values are being used as a weapon against them by those who don't share those values, we have to have *rachmones* (*compassion*) on those who are trying their best to deal with an almost impossible situation for our community, but differ with us on how to do it.

By all means, let's advocate and debate ferociously within the peoplehood. There's too much at stake not to. But let's continue to respect and love other Jews despite our differences. With *ACHDUT*, only and truly, *am yisrael chai!*

Solomon Mowshowitz