

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5770

What is it that makes a community?

Certainly it is not physical facilities that determine the effectiveness of community life. While these are important, they are not the decisive factor.

Is it then the number of people who affiliate themselves with the community?

Bigness in itself, it seems to me, is neither a virtue nor a vice. It is what we do with bigness that determines its value. Sometimes a community grows in size at the expense of cohesion and unity. The more a community grows, the more effort must be expended to keep it united and to develop a sense of belonging in each of the members. A community is as strong and as meaningful as its members choose to make it. If a community develops a desire for service in the hearts of its individual members, it will be able to develop a dynamic program. A community that fails to involve its members as active participants will fail to achieve its aims.

A community is not to be measured by the number of members that it has on the books, but rather by the number of members who work in any of its projects. The decisive question is: how many members give at least an hour or two a week to participation in the planning and work for community welfare?

The words above, I must confess, are not my own words. They were written nine years before I was born, on March 1957 by Rabbi Israel Mowshowitz, of blessed memory.

These meaningful words were written by someone who was the rabbi of one of the largest congregations in New York and yet knew that the key to a synagogue's survival was not the numbers written on its books.

Rabbi Mowshowitz was a successful rabbi and he was well known inside and outside the Jewish community. Yet, in his message is the hope for something yet to be accomplished: the active connection and involvement of the shul members beyond the numbers written on the books and beyond the High Holy days, the super bowl of the Jewish calendar.

The story goes that Moishe Goldberg was heading out of the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, and as always, the rabbi was standing at the door, shaking hands as the congregants departed.

The rabbi grabbed Moishe by the hand, pulled him aside and whispered these words to him, "You need to join the Army of God!"

Moishe replied, "I'm already in the Army of God, Rabbi."

The rabbi questioned, "How come I don't see you except for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?"

Moishe whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

The truth is that "Uncle Hillcrest" needs you out of the secret service!

People know that I don't like to brag. Great and humble people like me don't have the need to brag.

Nonetheless, I would like to tell you that we have a great shul here at Hillcrest Jewish Center and it is getting better and better!

However, I am aware, as Rabbi Mowshowitz was aware 52 years ago, that *"if a community fails to involve its members as active participants, it will fail to achieve its aims."*

Hillcrest Jewish Center is celebrating this year 70 years of existence. It is not the same Hillcrest Jewish Center that Rabbi Mowshowitz knew, but our world, our country, and certainly our neighborhood, are not the same either. Yet I believe Rabbi Mowshowitz would have been proud of what we have achieved in our smaller, yet vibrant congregation.

Rabbi Mowshowitz, however, would have said to me (as an experienced colleague would say to a younger one), "It is not enough, Manes! You have to take them to the next level!"

Hillcrest Jewish Center is celebrating this year 70 years of existence and we are celebrating by taking our beloved shul and its members to the next level, one of a deeper commitment and deeper involvement.

Hillcrest Jewish Center will be celebrating its 70th anniversary by launching and sustaining a "mitzvah initiative."

Most of you know that "mitzvah" means commandment, but you may not know that it also means connection.

A single mitzvah has the potential to connect us with one another, with our shul, with our Judaism, with our inner soul, and with God.

A single mitzvah has the potential to help us bring joy, blessing, and healing to others and to ourselves.

Some of us are already involved in a "mitzvah initiative." We visit the sick, comfort the mourners, cook for those in need, volunteer in a food pantry, study Torah on a weekly basis, attend minyan regularly, or deliver Shabbat goodies.

The idea is to extend this “mitzvah initiative” to everybody here and to those who couldn’t make it today. We need (and I am going to quote you, Michael) 100% participation! And for those of us who are already involved, the goal is to take our involvement and commitment a step higher.

I am afraid this is a practical dvar Torah. Today, if the *only* thing you do is listen to the rabbi, you will not have fulfilled your obligation.

You will find in your seats, personalized leaflets describing several opportunities for you to grow spiritually and religiously and to connect with your Judaism, with one another, and with God.

Choose one or two mitzvot, one or two ways to connect, and place a sticker on them. Someone will very soon collect the leaflets, and as the saying goes, “My people will get in touch with your people.”

The leaflets have your name. Only you can answer the call. As you guessed correctly, this is something nobody can do for you. This is something nobody *should* do for you.

Again, this is a practical dvar Torah, one which will have achieved its goal *only* if you choose a mitzvah, place a sticker, make a commitment, and follow through. It is not between you and me. It is between you and God, and you and the rest of the world, which is waiting for you to do your share!

We have been in the secret service long enough! It is time for us to reconnect, and to do our share.

I am sure, Rabbi Mowshowitz, we will all make you proud!

Leshanah tovah tikatavu! May all of us be inscribed for a good, sweet and meaningful new year!