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A New Shul Story

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Times have changed very dramatically here in the Five Towns, even as compared to the way they were less than a decade ago. Back then, as the area was still emerging as a desirable and much in demand location for residential living, there was very active opposition to the next logical step in such a demographic shift—the opening of new shuls in these residential areas. The opposition seemed to stem from fear of what the development of these new shuls might bring to the pristine, tree-lined, idyllic streets of the community.

Despite the early resistance, reason ultimately prevailed, and just about every shul that was once on the drawing board has opened its doors, although in some cases in limited fashion. What surprises some people who are not directly involved or whose homes are not in proximity to these shuls is that those opposed to the functioning of these shuls—which are, of course, Orthodox—are, in many cases, also Orthodox. This contravenes the notion that all Orthodox residents of Lawrence, Cedarhurst, Woodmere, or anywhere else are all lined up on one side of the issue and that the people in opposition are all either non-Jewish or affiliated with non-Orthodox Judaism. What this type of resistance does, more than anything else, is create additional vibrancy and greater vitality to the nature of observant Jewish life. People can share the same values but still have diametrically opposite positions on a matter.

So, disagreements over new shuls still do arise and need to be resolved. To that end, last week the zoning board of the Village of Lawrence—after months of analysis, deliberation, and consultation on the matter—consented to allow a new shul, Congregation Heichel Dovid, to shortly begin functioning on a daily basis. The shul had previously been granted permission to operate on Shabbos and yom tov as well as on several additional days on the Jewish calendar.

There was little to no animosity between those who held differing opinions on the matter of the new shul. Both sides retained attorneys to represent them, but still—although comments at meetings were sometimes testy—for the most part both sides realized that they simply disagreed, and they seemed to understand one another.

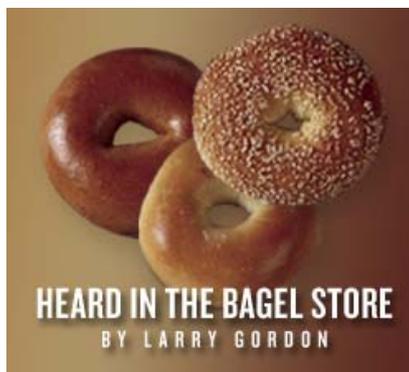
The issue was never whether the home purchased by the group should or should not be used as a shul, but rather whether the existence of the shul in such a residential setting would create more traffic flow that would pose additional risks to area residents. Some of the blocks adjacent and parallel to the new shul do not have sidewalks or have only limited sidewalks, which means that people need to be able to share the streets with moving traffic.

As the debate wound down last week, the sole issue seemed to be that of traffic and enforcement of the traffic laws, though there have been other issues in the debate leading up to this point. It seems that the village would have preferred that the new shul never come into existence, and considerations other than traffic flow may have come into play.

A major consideration in the debate over this and other shuls was the federal law known as the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000, or RLUIPA. This law is in the spirit of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which first and foremost calls for freedom of religion. While this type of freedom is a major part of why the United States is such a great country, governments can get involved and legislate to limit access to buildings where religion may be practiced if that is the only way to address a compelling government interest, such as public-safety concerns.

On a local level here, another consideration is the “competition” among shuls to draw and attract new members from the growing, but still relatively limited, population. (This consideration is, of course, beyond the scope of the zoning board.) So it’s probably safe to say that it wasn’t only the few immediate neighbors who would have preferred that the shul not have selected its current location.

Existing shuls in the area had expected to benefit significantly from people’s interest in moving



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here, but with the addition of several other shuls and minyanim over the last several years, each with its own dynamic, they have not necessarily seen that benefit. So, the establishment of yet another shul (this one catering to, for the most part, the age group of recent Five Towns immigrants), did not bode well for some of those shuls.

Though the federal law does not cover such developments, it still can be loosely described as yet another manifestation of the freedom to worship as one sees fit. In other words, people can daven wherever they so desire. Some have allegiances to certain shuls and rabbinical leaders, but often at the end of the day a young man is going to make his regular shul the place where his peers, or his wife's friends, or his children's friends, attend.

So there is a multifaceted dynamic at play here. One can oppose the development of this particular shul out of concern for potential dangers created by an increased traffic flow, while at the same time trying to benefit existing shuls in the area whose Shabbos attendance suffers when residents join a new shul. But just like the logic behind the RLUIPA legislation, we need to adopt a tolerant and welcoming approach to the building of new shuls, even when there is a perception by some that too many shuls exist in one area and that attendance at other shuls will wane as a result.

We live in very competitive times, where marketing affects everything on every level. And—fortunately or unfortunately—the same thing can be true when it comes to selecting the shul you want to join or the shul you want to make your Shabbos shul or your everyday shul. Shuls need to set up programs that will excite. Perhaps the weekly sermon needs to be more provocative and the cholent a little spicier. And you will certainly find those who make their selection based on finding a shul where there is no talking during davening.

The key is attractiveness and creating an allure that makes people want to be there. I don't believe that any shul is destined for a fate of having the majority of its seats vacant. It's a matter of utilizing appropriate branding tactics that induce people to want to be there. Of course, one of the best reasons to want to be in a particular shul is because everyone else is there, which leads to an upward spiral of events that keeps the place full. The most preferred reason is that this is where you feel inspired and feel connected and as one with your Creator. What else do you really need?

Shuls are not created in a vacuum. Every now and then a situation evolves where, whether for geographic or hashkafic reasons, a group feels the need to create something in its own image. Of course such a creation cannot be at the expense of others, but should rather be done with maximum consideration of others, as is the case here in Lawrence.

It's a valid criticism that in the recent Lawrence case permission should have first been sought and then the shul created, instead of the other way around. But then some of the greatest events in our history have had an unusual genesis. In time, this shul, just as others that have been created in a similar fashion, will make a valuable contribution and will make its mark on the community.

Comments for Larry Gordon are welcome at editor@5tjt.com.

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