

On August 1, 2010 Rabbi David Senter became the new rabbi at Manetto Hill Jewish Center. An interview was held to introduce him to the congregation and the local communities. The interviewer was Elliot Morris, a member at MHJC.

E: Rabbi Senter, On behalf of the families of Manetto Hill Jewish Center, Plainview, and our local communities, I'd like to welcome you to MHJC where you have assumed the pulpit on August 1st.

Rabbi Senter: I'm very excited about this opportunity to be your Rabbi.

E: It is very exciting when a new Rabbi comes to a community. We'd all like to know about you. If you can talk about your previous experiences as a Rabbi, and what do you consider to be your best accomplishments?

Rabbi: That is a difficult question to answer. We're taught by tradition to be humble. On the other hand, Moshe (Moses), who is classified as a humble person, evolves to become a confident leader. He is initially reluctant to lead, pointing to his lack of speaking ability. Moshe says "I am not a man of words", yet in the final book of the Torah, begins with words Moses spoke to the entire nation. We have a man who is introduced to us as a person lacking speaking ability, he evolves into an accomplished preacher who addresses the entire nation publicly for a period of 36 days. That address makes up the final book of the Torah. Was he still a humble man? Could he possibly be humble as an accomplished leader? The Sfas Emes explains that humility is not defined as a denial of self. Humility is an understanding of your abilities and an appreciation that these abilities are a gift from G-d.

I am certainly not Moshe. Thank G-d I have been blessed with good friends, together we accomplished significant things in my career as a pulpit Rabbi- this is the 4th congregation I've served. My longest tenure was in Saratoga Springs, which was 6 years. My second longest was in Pompton Lakes, where I served for 5 years before coming to MHJC.

As a pulpit rabbi, I have been blessed with wonderful relationships in the greater community. As a result, I've had the opportunity to become acquainted with a broad spectrum of community leaders, different faith traditions and community cultures. I have had an opportunity to be a Rabbi to both the congregation and to the broader community. Growing up in a rabbinic home I learned by watching my father and grandfather. One builds a community by building personal relationships, relate to each person as they are, where they are. If I have to point to one great accomplishment, it is the relationships that I've been blessed to develop and cultivate. Relationships are the foundation upon which a community is built.

E: Well, you've obviously already had success growing and inspiring congregations. So, tell me what are those strengths that you have that will instill a sense of spirituality in people.

Rabbi: As I've mentioned before- communities are a collection of individual relationships. Communities are built by cultivating a spirit within a community that builds relationships and respect. We strive to welcome the individual as they are rather than trying to fit them into a specific box. By meeting each person where they are, with an understanding that each individual's journey is different, we are able to connect on a spiritual level. Such connections are the core of community. A spiritual community is a group of individuals who strengthen each other in their individual journeys. The struggle I might be going through will be eased by the fact that someone else is going through a struggle as well, and the simcha- the joy- that I might be experiencing will be enhanced because there are others that share that simcha as well.

It is a delicate balance - especially in a religious community. Each community has standards that help define the nature and identity of the community. Sometimes those standards may appear to conflict with the needs of the individual. Leadership within a religious community is challenged to maintain those standards that define who we are. We are also charged with the responsibility of meeting the individual where they are, and

helping them find their place within the community. This balance is our challenge and labor of love.

E: Well, on that same note- MHJC is a conservative, very egalitarian congregation. How do you feel that kind of approach- an egalitarian conservative approach- can be inclusive in the way you're talking about?

Rabbi: The history of the conservative movement is one of a broad tent. If one looks back at the heyday of the conservative movement, there was a broad spectrum of observance within the constituents of the movement. The movement represented a very traditional approach to Judaism- so much so, that some of the early essays of the Conservative movement identified as part of Orthodoxy. Historically, however, the Conservative movement grew out of Reform Judaism. We were the reaction to the left leaning tendencies of the Reform movement. That conservative reaction ultimately became an entity unto itself. I believe that the strength of the Conservative movement today is that is in the center of the Jewish community (that is with a "c" not with an "S"). Being in the center of Judaism is a strategic asset. Let me explain: outside of an Orthodox setting, it is very rare that people specifically look for a life partner from the same religious background. Quite often the husband comes from a conservative background and the wife from a reform, or vice versa, or one spouse may not be Jewish. They are looking for a congregation, a synagogue family that works for them.

The Hebrew School schedule may be more important than anything else. Conflicts with extra-curricular activities- sports, band, etc. can be a deciding factor in selecting a synagogue. The most significant factor in selecting a synagogue is the way in which the family relates to the congregation. Given the diverse demographics within the non-Orthodox community, we have the potential to appeal to the broadest spectrum of the Jewish community. That potential is both an asset and a challenge. As a community, we strive to meet the needs of families and individuals. We are charged with the mandate to serve each individual within the context of the standards and practices of the conservative movement. Some may perceive the two to be mutually exclusive. Having served as a

Rabbi in a conservative context for over ten years, I have realized that standards do not constrain us. We are only constrained by the limits of our creativity.

So, given the demographics of the constituency we serve, we are challenged to make the services more accessible with explanations and phonetic transliterations. Flexible and creative Hebrew School programming is necessary to meet the needs of families and individuals. Rabbis are compelled to hear the needs of the constituencies we serve in an effort to marry tradition and contemporary life.

E: Let's continue talking about the service. In your opinion, what do you think makes a service interesting and, if you can, give us some examples of how you would keep up congregant interest during a service. You mentioned some of these things but let's drill down and see what else you do.

Rabbi: On a very basic level, if I am not having fun, if I'm not enjoying the service, I can't expect that somebody else will. For me, singing is one of the most amazing components in connecting on a spiritual level. It was said that the Baal Shem Tov, the father of Hasidic Judaism, would pray and his soul would depart from his body. It would go up to the heavenly throne, and plead on behalf of his congregation. The closest I have come to that experience, is getting lost in song. The Baal Shem Tov explains "A melody brings you from where you are to where you want to be". So song is a significant component in making a service spiritual and engaging. Also, providing an opportunity for people to understand what's going on is key. The use of translation is universal at this point. The next logical step is a side by side at one point was almost a radical transition; the siddur did not have, at one point, a side by side phonetic transliteration.

Dr. Ron Wolfson, of Synagogue 3000, speaks about transitioning the visitor into a guest. Congregations are at their best when every individual perceives themselves as a greeter. As a spiritual community, we are compelled to welcome the visitor into our community as an honored guest.

E: We would love to know about your family and what they're doing, and how do you feel they will integrate into the congregation?

Rabbi: My wife has just finished her tenure as a chaplain at a long-term care facility in Pompton Plains, New Jersey. She generally has taken a very active role in the congregation. She's one of the few Rabbi's wives that enjoys being called "Rebbitzen." There are those that cringe at the Yiddish title of Rebbitzen. She's been involved in sisterhood, had formed a choir and is very active in social action projects. She is a professional singer trained at the High School of Performing Arts (Fame) and Julliard School of Music. Between us we have 5 children and 4 grandchildren. My children are adult and live in different communities. Tracy will be living with us and attending Plainview- Old Bethpage High School. She's looking forward to getting involved in some of the youth activities.

E: What kind of interests and hobbies do you have? How do they influence your skills as a Rabbi?

Rabbi: I love playing with computers. In fact, many of the outreach materials that I've used in my rabbinate I've developed myself. In many ways, my computer hobby has influenced my rabbinate. Most texts I access are either online or on CD rom. A few years ago I started a listserve for colleagues to share ideas and resources. What began with ten Rabbis is now network of over a hundred Rabbis. My fascination with computers has certainly impacted my Rabbinate.

My other hobby is my dog Angie. She is an Australian Cattle dog mix who adopted me at the Saratoga County Animal Shelter. Together we explore and peruse our neighborhood.

When you ask about hobbies, I remember my Rebbe (teacher) lecturing how you have to have a hobby. It was in response to somebody being critical of a group getting together to play basketball. One of the students asked if the Rebbe had a hobby? "I study Torah" was his response. My reaction to you is somewhat similar. I have been blessed with a

profession that allows me to engage in an endeavor that I would do for free if I were able to. So, in many ways, my profession is my hobby.

E: OK. Just a couple of more things. This is obviously the first time you're going to be living on LI. What are you looking forward to on LI, on a personal level?

Rabbi: Having kosher restaurants in town, which is something I don't have where I live right now. Both Elissa and I have family on LI. Elissa's sister- lives in Dix Hills, and I have a daughter about 20 miles away in Far Rockaway. My aunt and uncle live in Old Westbury. We're very pleased to be near family, and that's a tremendous added benefit of taking this job.

E: Is there a particular demographic you will be focusing on as you look towards growing MHJC?

Rabbi: One of the demographics that interests me is the non members who attend High Holiday services. The ratio of members and non-members is disproportionately high. This represents a significant opportunity to bring some of the outer circle into the synagogue. While there is a lot of discussion about Jewish demographics shrinking on LI, the reality is that we still have a huge number of non-affiliated Jews within this general geography. We can be successful in both inreach and outreach. Inreach is engaging those who are affiliated with the synagogue but not necessarily engaged in synagogue life. In a conservative synagogue that's generally around 80% of our members. I don't have the fantasy that I'm going to turn everyone into a minyanaire, nor is that my objective. If we can create two opportunities during the year that our unengaged look at something and say "I'm going to go to the synagogue this weekend" we're doing well. If we engage them four times a year that is absolutely phenomenal.

Outreach is connecting with those who are not yet affiliated. Inreach and outreach are directly connected. A synagogue can outreach when its congregants firmly believe that they belong to the best synagogue in the area. Successful inreach ultimately leads to successful outreach and I think the foundation is here at Manetto Hill Jewish Center.

E: Relying on word of mouth- word of mouth advertising?

Rabbi: Yes- clearly one has to engage in all forms of advertising. Advertising is a very mercenary word- we refer to it as outreach. It is all about is getting the word out. There needs to be multiple ways of reaching out to people. I firmly believe that the best way is to have good will ambassadors out there that are fully convinced that we are the best institution in the area, the best synagogue in the area. We need to create an understanding bringing someone into MHJC is giving them a gift.

E: Now, other than inreach and outreach, what other things would you like to accomplish here at MHJC.

Rabbi: I'd like to get to know everybody on a personal level. I don't want to be somebody's Rabbi simply because they pay dues to the synagogue. I want it to be based upon a personal relationship. I look forward in the near future to contacting each and every member of the synagogue and getting to know them. I know the transition committee has talked about putting together small informal meetings in the fall. I look forward to that opportunity and I look forward to hearing people's satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We are human beings, and, by definition, every human being, including me, is flawed. We all have our strengths and our weaknesses. As an organization of human beings we are naturally going to have our strengths and our weaknesses. Our challenge is to capitalize on strengths and compensate for our weaknesses. If somebody is upset, I want to understand that too. I want to understand what it is that the congregation itself feels it is important to preserve, and how the congregation itself envisions moving forward as well.

E: Very good. Let's just finish on a fun note. You have a history in the food industry, and I'd just like you to tell us a little bit about that part of your life.

Rabbi: I had mentioned to you that I have been blessed with good chaverim- good friends. I have a friend by the name of Lenny Posnock. Lenny had been the owner of Shofar Kosher Foods. Shofar was purchased by Best Kosher Foods, a subsidiary of the Sara Lee Corporation. Lenny was hired by Sara Lee to run the Shofar division. Lenny reached out to me when Shofar embarked on developing a Glatt Kosher Hot Dog. He requested that I serve as a consultant in the area of Glatt Kosher marketing.

Lenny felt that a kosher concession at Yankee stadium was the perfect venue to launch Shofar's Glatt Kosher product. With a captive audience that included a large Jewish population the new product was guaranteed instant brand recognition. Lenny and I met with the VP of Volume Services at Yankee Stadium. Together we explored the parameters of establishing and maintaining a kosher concession. Volume Services decided that this was a specialty that would be better served by an outside vendor. I was asked if I knew an outside vendor interested in operating a kosher concession at Yankee stadium. Have you ever heard the expression "seize the moment"? I immediately began negotiations with Volume Services to become the kosher food provider at Yankee Stadium. With the Yankee Stadium agreement in hand I approached Harry M Stevens Sports & Entertainment the food service company at Shea Stadium. On May 19, 1998 we opened the kosher concession at Shea and June 2, 1998 at Yankee Stadium.

E: Now the all-important question. Are you a Met or Yankee fan?

Rabbi: Rabbi Solomon Schechter is quoted as saying "In order to be a success in the American rabbinate, you must be able to talk baseball." Fortunately my wife is an avid Yankee fan and speaks baseball on my behalf. Though I grew up surrounded by baseball fans, I did not follow the Great American Pastime until I opened the stadium concession stands.

E: Thank you for your time today, Rabbi, and speaking for the congregation at Manetto Hill Jewish Center, I'd like to welcome your family to ours.