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# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HEBREW INSTITUTE OF WHITE PLAINS AND WHAT WE AIM TO BE

By Rabbi Chaim Marder

## A COMMUNITY OF WELCOME

Welcome to the Hebrew Institute! There is nothing that we would like more than to share our special congregation with you.

We pride ourselves on the diversity of our community: diversity among the young and old, men and women, those who with a rich Jewish background, and those new to observance. We welcome the perspective and wealth of experience that such diversity brings to our shul. And through all this, we endeavor always to deepen our lives through tefillah (prayer), limud (Torah study) and (shmirat hamitzvot) observance; through music, and through communal life and social action both within and beyond our community.

And - We take being welcoming seriously. We're the synagogue where congregants warmly greet a visitor at their side in shul or at Kiddush.

So: Whether you're a young couple from the West Side or Riverdale, Queens or Teaneck, a downsizing empty nester from Queens or Rockland, a searching Jew from upper Westchester – *shalom* and *bruchim habaim* – welcome!

## OUR MISSION

**To be the inspiring center of White Plains communal Jewish life for those who seek a warm, supportive, refreshingly open, people-loving, G-d-serving, *menshlech*, Modern Orthodox community –and one which helps its members be that way too.**

Let's expand that a bit. As a *kehillah* ("community," more than "institution") the Hebrew Institute strives to create an environment and shape an experience for those who enter our doors.

We are continuously working to be a synagogue community that:

- ☼ Embraces in friendship
- ☼ Enlivens *avodat Hashem* (serving G-d) with spirited and spiritual *tefillah* (prayer)
- ☼ Provokes introspection and action through Torah study and conversation
- ☼ Prefers *heimishe* to "having", values to volume, saneness to stridency

- ✿ Understands who you are
- ✿ Builds relationships between its members (*chevrah*)
- ✿ Appreciates the gift of its multi-generational membership
- ✿ Supports women's religious quest
- ✿ Works passionately for Israel and world Jewry
- ✿ Links itself to the entire Jewish community, and the general community
- ✿ Trains its youth (and the rest of us too) to provide compassionate care for those in need
- ✿ Invites and supports the uninitiated and novice
- ✿ Programs creatively
- ✿ Explores the relevance and richness of Torah observance
- ✿ Engages contemporary issues
- ✿ Encourages everyone to go deeper in religious living
- ✿ Enjoys a great kiddush together each week!

This emerges from a perspective on what a synagogue community is, and what Jewish living, through an open and modern Orthodox lens, is all about. People are part of our community for many reasons, primary among them is that they appreciate and hopefully share that vision too.

## **VISION - OUR GOALS/ WHAT WE'RE ABOUT**

*We at the Hebrew Institute have a vision of what a synagogue and Jewish life can be.*

Our synagogue has been serving the White Plains Jewish community since 1915. From the very first gathering at the back of Isaac Leven's furniture store, the Hebrew Institute has been an "intentional community." In simple terms that means people coming together to be part of something with a shared sense of what's important to them. Today, under the guiding hand of our rabbi, Chaim Marder, our shul community is more "intentional" than ever. With increasing frequency, the people that walk through our doors and join our ranks do so because they want to be part of a synagogue that stands for a certain view of community, of modern Orthodoxy, of people, of life.

The Hebrew Institute of today is a place of both **purpose** and **connection**. All that we do is shaped around these essential elements.

## **A COMMUNITY OF PURPOSE**

*A SHUL IS A PLACE WHERE LEARNING AND OBSERVING, PRAYER AND CONTEMPLATION, JOY AND CHESED SHOULD TAKE CENTER STAGE.*

- **Encounter**- A synagogue experience is not just about getting the davening done so people can get home (although we are opposed to a tefillah that drags!). Rather, our synagogue is the place for a Jew to have a meaningful encounter with G-d - through prayer, Torah study and mitzvot - and with the world - through the prism of an open and modern Orthodox perspective.
- **Keeping it real and for everyone**- That perspective must be rich in ideas and deep in experiences that are personal and relevant to everyone – people of all ages, men and women, the novice and the well-versed. And those ideas and experiences must provoke the mind, stir the heart, and lift the soul, and do so in a way which just seems real.
- **Beyond ourselves**- Along with that personal and collective experience, our shul is a place in which we are reminded through our words and through our deeds not to focus merely on ourselves, but our connection and service to the larger world of Jews and non-Jews alike.

*ENVIRONMENT*

**A supportive space**- A religious collective should set as its aim to enable one another to reach our potentials as people and as Jews. The approach is respectful of the independent decisions and life course that adults take. We choose to expose not impose, to educate not dictate, to encourage and support without pressure and stridency. We attempt to create an environment and to provide direction and partners, providing all Jews access and the opportunity to play a role in our communal religious endeavors – women along with men, young along with the older members of our community, the Jewishly educated along with the novice.

All of this is an effort to focus on furthering the values of an open, modern Orthodox life, exploring and living it.

*THE LIFE OF AN ENGAGED MODERN ORTHODOX JEW*

- **Making it personal** - For us, this means to be seriously engaged in both the letter and the spirit of the Torah - learning and observing, as we value the importance of Torah study and mitzvah observance. That is why we offer classes on all levels. And that is why we try to make the learning *personal*. That impacts on everything, from the choice of what we teach and learn, to the setting (many of our learning opportunities are in people's homes) to the way in which we study (with concern for the ways in which the topic of study and the people engaged in the study connect). We bring in some of the best minds and souls in the observant community to share their skills and wisdom with us.
- **Soulful Jewish Living** - At the same time, the life of an engaged Jew is about *kedushah*- leading a life that is noble and ennobling (as the president of Yeshiva University put it so well), living a life rich in good values. This involves the soul – what we might call “Soulful Jewish Living”, something we take seriously both for the individual and the community, through contemplation, and prayer and music (something our Chazzan, Yitzy Spinner, is helping us achieve).

- **Open, moderate, earnest-** To us, part of being a modern Jew is to always have an open outlook. That doesn't mean that anything goes, or that all ideas have validity. But it does call on a person to fully explore Judaism's perspective on life, on self, on G-d, on the contemporary issues of the world; and at the same time, the ways in which worldly wisdom enhances our appreciation of these as well. It also means resisting the tendency to see stringency as a Jewish value, a mindset that seems to have become a strong force within the certain circles. Instead, it calls on us to reach for Torah truth, and the Golden Mean as a value that lives alongside so many of the human and communal factors that go into decisions and policy making.

Our shul takes this seriously. It drives the way in which our rabbi makes rabbinic decisions. And it informs the way in which we explore issues. We work to create an atmosphere in which we discuss the issues of the day in an honest and full way, in a way which presumes the best of all involved.

### *WOMEN IN THE ORTHODOX SHUL COMMUNITY*

Our shul has placed a high priority on the role of women in congregational life. We want to model a synagogue's role in ensuring that women are more fully integrated into Orthodox synagogue life (to the extent that halachah permits), and deeply experience both the religious and leadership components. We do so in many ways:

- ❖ A leadership position of Women's focus officer, whose role is to ensure that the various efforts by and on behalf of women in the congregation are coordinated and assisted.
- ❖ We sponsor a women's tefillah in our synagogue.
- ❖ The Torah is carried by women in the ezrat nashim each Shabbat so that no one be kept from having access to it.
- ❖ We engage budding female scholars to serve as a Congregational interns.
- ❖ And we have many special programs under the rubric of our "Isha l'ishah" effort.

### *WHAT WE DO AS A COMMUNITY OF PURPOSE*

- Uplifting Shabbat Tefillah
- Regular minyanim
- Our "Life Long Learning" Program, both at the shul and in homes
- Chavurot and onegs
- Special guest weekends throughout the year
- Relation and service to the larger Jewish community, Israel, and the world:

- ★ from Israel action efforts to
- ★ Project Embrace's aid for the cold and hungry or
- ★ the annual yachad shabbaton for the handicapped and
- ★ our inter-synagogue programs to our blood drive with WP Hospital or
- ★ our outreach to unaffiliated Jews to
- ★ our efforts to green our shul and our homes...

## **CHEVRAH: CLOSE CONNECTION**

We believe a *Beit Knesset* is about *chevrah* (circles of friends) and *mishpachah* (family), the place where people come to develop and nurture close relationships with one another.

It's both a home (*bayit*) and a place of gathering (*knesset*) and we actively seek to nurture that sense of closeness. This isn't just about social events; it's a philosophy that impacts on the experience of Shabbat services, the contexts of study, programs and events - everything.

We gear programs to various groups in the shul. At times we seek to mingle ages, backgrounds, interests, and at other times, we seek to provide "niche programs." The goal though is to bring people together, to help people feel the support and embrace and warmth of friendship.

[more information on this...]