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Showing Up... on a sad day in Harrison

Several months ago, I was invited to serve as Chaplain of the Harrison Volunteer Fire Department. Apparently, the former (Christian) chaplain of the Department had retired from the position and they were looking to fill the post. Having served in and enjoyed this role with both the Mahopac and Mahopac Falls volunteer fire departments in the past, I happily accepted this invitation. Several members of the JCCH were present as I was introduced to the Department at their Installation of Officers ceremony back in January where I gave the introductory and closing prayers. Indeed, that is mostly what a Chaplain does – delivering invocations, benedictions and the like. Aside from these ceremonial functions, a Chaplain does not do much unless called upon. Fortunately, they do not need me to fight fires and save lives.

Last week, a terrible tragedy took place here in Harrison, the deaths of teenage sisters Alissa & Deanna Hochman. Both girls were well-known to younger members of our synagogue, students who studied alongside the sisters at the Windward School and Harrison High School. Alissa, the older sister, was also quite active in the wider community, specifically as a volunteer for both the Larchmont Volunteer Ambulance Corps and the Harrison Volunteer Fire Department. As Chaplain of the Department, I was invited to join the community and the Fire Department in mourning the tragic loss of these young girls.

Alissa's role in Fire Department meant that both girls would receive a traditional Firefighter funeral, with full Departmental honors. I was invited to participate fully in these honors – attending the Wake, riding in the caravan of ambulances and fire trucks to St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church, joining in the various salutes wearing my new Department dress uniform and returning to the fire station after the funeral for the Meal of Comfort (so similar, of course, to our shiva meals). I was especially moved by the presence of so many “Young Explorer” EMTs – high school students who serve the community on a volunteer basis in these vital life-saving roles. I was glad to speak with them and offer some measure of comfort that day. I have seen funerals such as these on television but, up-close, they are even more moving. What an honor it was for me to participate in this way.

Father Richard Guarnieri, Pastor of St. Gregory, afforded me an additional honor. The Pastor asked me to join him and the other priests – just us – in sitting on the altar in the church during the girls' funeral. While it was clear to Father Guarnieri that I did not know the girls – in fact, I told him that I felt like I was imposing myself in a private affair – he believed that my presence as one of our town's rabbis on the altar would speak to the communal nature of our loss. I sat beside him throughout the funeral, participating and observing as appropriate for a non-Catholic. All of us in attendance experienced a terribly sad and very moving service. What a sad honor and weighty responsibility it was for me to represent our synagogue that day.

The role of the rabbi is remarkable for the diverse nature of the position. The duties include teaching, preaching, counseling, managing a non-profit organization and more. But - sometimes - simply showing matters more than anything I do. A beautiful story to this point is told of about Rabbi Moshe Feinstein – Reb Moshe:

A woman who was sitting shiva was inconsolable. One evening, Reb Moshe showed up to be comfort the mourner. When he arrived, everyone stood up and cleared the room to give him privacy with the distraught woman. A number of minutes later, he exited the room, and all of the visitors returned to find the mourner's tears dried for the first time during her entire shiva. Everyone was in awe. Did the great sage know the magic words to comfort this woman in desperate need? After a few moments of relief, someone got the nerve to ask the woman what words of wisdom Reb Moshe had shared that brought her such meaningful comfort. The woman looked at the group and explained, "he sat down, didn't say a word, but tears welled up in his eyes. He continued to sit with me and silently felt my pain." She went on to explain that Reb Moshe was the first person who didn't attempt to make her feel better with trite sayings or focus more on his own discomfort than on hers. He then got up and left. Reb Moshe didn't say a single word to this woman. It was his ability to sit with her and be fully present with her in her pain that brought her the comfort she sought.

I learned this lesson last week. Sometimes, showing up is the most important thing that I, that all of us – can do.