

Rabbi Hirsch's Speech at Mekor's 4th Annual Gala January 27, 2019

Thank you, Bruce. I apologize for my voice – I got a case of laryngitis with very bad timing. Thank you to everyone for coming tonight. Miriam and I are deeply touched by this enthusiastic turnout, and by the warm and supportive messages in the Gala Tribute e-Book.

Jon Gradman mentioned in my sermon yesterday 😊 that we chose this weekend for the gala because it's the week, when the football season is idle. The conference championship games took place last week, and next week is the Superbowl, which we didn't want to conflict with, especially since our loyal Eagles fans predicted the Eagles would compete in the Superbowl again. Alas, it wasn't meant to be. What we didn't point out is that today is also Holocaust Remembrance Day, which may at first seem incongruous with this celebration. However, Mekor has an incredibly inspiring Holocaust survivor in our midst, Hersh Waisbord, who loves coming to shul partly because of the large contingent of young, committed Jews at shul. He knows, as we all do, that this would make Hitler turn over in his grave, and so I think that makes this a particularly fitting day to celebrate our shul, Mekor Habracha.

"Philadelphia ... is a perpetual underdog." So said the Washington Post in an article several years ago. When you think about it, that characterization makes sense -- we're the city where underdogs **triumph** – Philly is the birthplace of America, the city of Rocky, the Iggles, and now I think we can add another underdog to the list. Almost 13 years ago, a very small group of city residents embarked on the journey that led us to this milestone occasion tonight. When we began, **everyone** counted us out. We were told that Center City life would be unfriendly to the kind of community we sought to build. And we were reminded, **rightfully so**, that many other organizations, with much greater resources than ours, had already tried and failed.

But what the naysayers didn't understand was that Mekor would become a **reflection** of this underdog city. This is the city of "St. Nick Foles" and the "Philly Special", where we do the unexpected, and we shock the world. And so, I think it's fitting to add Mekor to the list of remarkable Philadelphia underdogs.

Mekor after a decade has really made an imprint on the Philadelphia Jewish community and beyond. We even have terminology that has been coined just for us. There is **Mekor Time**, which refers to our custom of starting services or events late **most** of the time but also, inexplicably, starting on time on the **one day** you arrive late. Mekor time also refers to the fact that we don't see **any contradiction** in starting Mincha Gedola too early, regular Mincha 20 minutes after sunset, and Ma'ariv before it gets dark outside.

And then there is the **Mekor minyan**, a phenomenon which causes people to doubt their own ability to count heads; you think, "We said kaddish, but I could have sworn there were only 9 people there..."

We have **mekorkids**, a term coined by Yoella Epstein for our children's programming, where parents with no teaching experience magically turn into master educators. And of course, you all know about our 11 **Mekor couples**, who first met at the shul, one of the reasons we have so many high quality, eligible singles attend Mekor. That's what I call effective PR!

There's ***Pesach Without the Pain***, based on my Pesach classes, which became a best-selling e-book on Amazon, partly because among other food items, it allows ice cream, candy, & yogurt without kosher for Passover supervision!

Which leads us to the infamous **Mekor Hechsher**, also known as IKC's Center City branch, which has increased the number of local kosher establishments in Center City from 3 to over 30. So many people in Philadelphia enjoy the delicious fare, though half of them deny they ever set foot in any of these places!

There's the **Mekor house band**, started and led by our own very talented Jeremy Kriger and Jon Gradman, otherwise known as **Moments of Wrong**, because they have many, many, many moments of wrong (plenty of them created by me, by the way). The band has become well-known for its Purim and Lag B'Omer performances as well as opening for the Moshav Band, which has become the "**official Mekor band**". It has to be our official band, because it's led by our esteemed president's son in law, Yehuda Solomon.

And there is the classic response about everything we do: "What do you expect? **This is Mekor!**"

Whatever your take is on the way we do things at Mekor Habracha, there is simply no question that our impact is memorable. And what could be a better example than our "Mekor Gala", which once again is an amazing event. I would like to thank the Gala chairs, Rhona Gerber for starting us off, and Ellen Geller and Rena Asher for all their hard work in finishing off all the details and making this celebration happen.

Thank you to Julia Rafsky for all your help with the gala (and basically everything else that happens at shul!)

Thank you to the organizing committee and volunteers: Rebecca and Ben Falk, Jill Freeman, Tamar Levine, Bracha Rosenstein, Lisa Rothstein, Aliza Jaffe Sass, Erik Schneiman, Deborah Schuman and Elyse Weiss, and to Ben Sass for the l'dor vador program.

I would also like to thank the "Mekor board": David Morley, Yoella Epstein, Claire Raab, Rena Asher, our incredibly dedicated treasurer Ellen Geller and our esteemed president, Bruce Taubman, for all their help with everything that happens in the background at shul. Being on the Mekor board is a thankless job which costs a lot of time and money, and for once on behalf of the shul, I say thank you so much for all that you do for us.

I would like to thank our parents, my Mom, my dad and Hanna, and Mommy Ort for being the most wonderful, most supportive parents anyone could have asked for. Our parents live by the dictum that my mom heard directly from Rebbetzin Yungreiss: a good parent is one who keeps their wallet open and their mouth shut!

Thank you to our siblings and their significant others, and to our nieces and nephews: Miriam and I love every one of you, and the truly amazing thing is that we actually like every one of you as well and consider each of you to be our close friend!

And acharon, acharon chaviv, last but not least, I must mention my amazing, beautiful wife Miriam, who hates the spotlight, and will not be happy with me if I go on too long about her. So, all I will say is what the Gemara tells us in Mesechet Nedarim 50a – what Rabbi Akiva told his students about **his** wife: “Sheli v’shelachem shela hi.” “All that I have and all that you have - we owe to her.” Without Miriam Ort, there is no Rabbi Hirsch and there is no Mekor Habracha. Mir, you are the best and I love you.

Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that we’d be so blessed as to have nearly 200 remarkable people gathered in a room as we do this evening, and that we could call every one of you our friend. And never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that we’d have over 200 people attend our shul on a routine Shabbat morning, that we’d have 11 Mekor couples (and counting) who met for the first time at Mekor, that we’d have over 30 kosher restaurants and more in the wings. That we’d have a consistent morning minyan (well, on most days!)

That Mekor would become such a diverse and cohesive community, made up of people who love Judaism and love Israel, a community of people who care for each other, and yes, sometimes fight with one other, like family. A model for the Jewish world.

I feel blessed to be here this evening, to celebrate what we have all accomplished together. And I thank all of you – you’re the most committed and dedicated community one could ever hope for. B’ezrat Hashem let’s continue to make our mark on Philly and the entire Jewish world. Thank you so much!