

President's Column

By Jonathan D. Lubin

In June, a few weeks before the Installation Dinner, I accompanied Rabbi Schneur Scheiman on a road trip to four Illinois state prisons.

Every month, on behalf of the Hinda Institute started by his father, Rabbi Binyomin Scheiman, Rabbi Schneur spends three days on the road, meeting with prisoners in prisons across the northern part of Illinois. Other parts of the state are covered by other relatives, including his father, whom the Decalogue Society honored with the Hon. Gerald C. Bender Humanitarian Award back in 2013. The Rabbis Scheiman, when discussing the matter publicly, always credit the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as the inspiration for their work. The Rebbe created special programs in New York that prisoners seeking an exposure to Judaism could attend during furloughs. He taught that the best way to find the humanity in every person, inmates included, was to treat people like human beings. Rabbi Binyomin calls the people he meets with his "clients."

This was the first time—it won't be the last—that I had the opportunity to see what the Rebbe was talking about. It is easy to talk of treating human beings like human beings. Witnessing the conditions in which these human beings live makes it understandable why someone would want to dehumanize prison inmates; it probably makes it easier for them to sleep at night. But Rabbi Schneur greets everyone with a smile – and most of his clients greeted him with excitement. He had a silly joke for everyone—a ritual, evidently, as many of his clients asked what the joke was. It was rated PG. It made its audience laugh every time.

Some of his clients were given a "bar mitzvah," another ritual he performs with his clients each month: the mitzvah of donning tefillin through the bars of a cell. In some cases, the cells didn't have bars. When that was the case, they would put the tefillin on through the chuckhole, a small opening used to feed prisoners their meals so they don't have to be let out of their cages during mealtime.

Heroism sometimes comes in the forms of these little acts, things that are immediately consequential to one or two people, and societal pariahs at that.

It drove home to me, in the weeks before I assumed the leadership of this historic Society, what leadership is supposed to look like.

This year, the Decalogue Society hit the ground running, promising monthly social activities with different bar associations. Our July social was in tandem with the Black Women Lawyers' Association. It was, hands down, our largest monthly social ever. Our members had the opportunity to get to know folks whom they otherwise might not meet. We did it again in August, partnering with the Advocates Society, an association of Polish-American attorneys. As always, the Building Bridges event held at the end of August brings together attorneys from the Decalogue Society and the Arab American Bar Association of Illinois.

While rhetoric intended to rend apart the fabric of our American community becomes more prevalent, these bridges are the bonds that will keep us strong. As a Society founded on the values of the Jewish religion, we understand that all too well. We argued in our Amicus brief before the U.S. Supreme Court, on the subject of the President's Muslim Ban, "[a]t the time of Decalogue's founding, the United States and the world confronted unprecedented hatred and animosity directed towards minorities and specific groups, including Jews." We've been there. We know this dragon when we see it; and we are seeing it today. We know how important it is to build strong networks between our communities.

To that end, as our bar year gets underway, we dedicate ourselves to renewing our ties to our community, and building new ties.

We have a lot of work to do.

We begin the year strong. We will end it stronger.