





A young man with dark, wavy hair is smiling slightly. He is wearing a black top hat, a gold chain necklace, and a black strap around his neck. He is holding a white rectangular sign in front of his chest with both hands. The sign has the text "#TefillinforYitzi" printed on it in a bold, black, sans-serif font. He is also wearing a black ring on his left hand. The background is an indoor setting with a white archway and a doorway.

#TefillinforYitzi

Rabbi Sholom Bogomilsky, spiritual leader of the Maplewood Jewish Center, deserves kavod, according to longtime congregant Jeffrey Kingsley. Kingsley, diagnosed with a slowly progressing ALS six years ago this month, just became the owner of a van enabled with assistive technology for those with disabilities. Over a six-week to two-month period, Bogomilsky quietly went about raising the funds to get Kingsley into a van equipped with an electronic ramp.

Rabbi Bogomilsky saw firsthand the struggle Kingsley, who uses a wheelchair, was having transferring in and out of his family vehicle. The rabbi was at the forefront of leading the campaign to get Kingsley the wheels he needed to come to minyan and move about town. Kingsley, who said he had begun to find it easier to stay home, admitted that it was primarily because he worried about his helpers hurting themselves by lifting him.

Throughout his illness, Kingsley has had overwhelming family and community support, he said. He and his wife, Karen, sold their Maplewood house in January and moved to an apartment in nearby South Orange. Members of the Maplewood Jewish Center since 2005, they and their three children, 18-year-old Emma, and 16-year-old twins Sarah and Harry, have made huge efforts to adjust to their new normal. While keeping their endearing smiles, the children balance school, work and their new family dynamics, with the support of their many friends at MJC.

Karen took over her husband's real estate practice, which he developed after many years in finance. Kingsley revealed that "after living out here for a few years, having had young children, I wanted a more flexible schedule to spend time with them." He added, "I had to stop working three years ago. As my ability to walk deteriorated, I could no longer work effectively. Karen picked up the torch and got her real estate license. As I was leaving, she was coming in. We were both licensed for a short period to help the transition."

Just before the High Holidays, when the cement was newly poured for a kosher foundation to ready the construction of the very first mikvah at MJC in the Essex County city of Maplewood, someone in the congregation mentioned to Kingsley that the rabbi had approached him about Kingsley's difficulty in getting to services and other synagogue functions. Kingsley responded by telling his fellow congregant that it was getting more difficult to get into and out of their family vehicle.

It was Rabbi Bogomilsky himself who then approached Kingsley and suggested that he start researching available vans. Kingsley, overwhelmed by such concern and generosity, uttered the proverb, “It takes a village... played out in our small shul.” After researching appropriate vans, Kingsley turned it back over to Bogomilsky to speak with the Bergen County dealership and order a van to be delivered to Kingsley.

Bogomilsky said they started by buying a compact, modernized Hoyer lift. To make him more mobile around town, however, the rabbi went about finding a motivated donor to help purchase the 2010 grey Honda Odyssey. “I’m very, very happy we were able to help Jeff,” Bogomilsky added, and “now, with the new [MJC] building, which is totally wheelchair accessible, there is nowhere Jeff can’t go.”

Kingsley, a stalwart from the start at MJC, and past vice president, was instrumental in getting the Maplewood erev approved in 2007. Now, he sees that it works both ways, with Bogomilsky, a Chabad rabbi, doing what he could to accommodate Kingsley, so that he could continue to be an important member of the MJC community.

Kingsley, who encouragingly noted that there are promising treatments on the horizon for ALS, is humbled that the community has rallied behind him to help keep him going to see that day.

Asked how he enjoyed his first outing in his van, Kingsley, who hails from Cedarhurst, Long Island, explained that it was “completely converted for wheelchair accessibility,” and, “it was a pleasure just going up the ramp into the van.” His first outing on a cold fall day was warmed by the company of three supportive friends from MJC.

By Sharon Mark Cohen