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VICTORY IN SANTA CLARA

A Yeshiva in Santa Clara, California, won a victory last week which few people expected. It is worth knowing how and why.

The city planning commission was considering the normal extension of a use permit for the Yeshiva, which was located in an essentially non-Jewish middle class residential district. A strong opposition movement had developed in the area, asking that the use permit be denied on grounds of health, safety and zoning code violations.

Violations did exist, but were remediable. Some said that developers were behind the opposition. Some said that anti-Jewish feeling was behind the opposition. Whatever the motivations, the opposition seemed strong. Yeshiva supporters asked urgently for a delay of the final planning commission hearing date. The commission vote went against them, a bad signal. The opponents felt strong enough to refuse mediation. Many supporters felt that in the overwhelmingly non-Jewish (and some felt, anti-Jewish) atmosphere they could not win.

But they did. The planning commission voted to extend the use permit. Several factors were at work. One factor was the active support of the organized Jewish community. The Rabbis were there; the Federation was there; the A.D.L. was there. And others.

A central role was taken by the A.D.L. That organization's regional director became the pivotal figure. She worked inexhaustibly and skilfully with both the Jewish and non-Jewish groups. The President of the Board of Rabbis of Northern California was the first public witness at the hearing.

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The point is that this matter was of importance to Jews everywhere. What would happen in Santa Clara would affect the Jews of San Francisco, Phoenix and Philadelphia.

However, the Jewish support of the Yeshiva was a necessary, but not yet a sufficient reason for the victory. If the Jewish community had not come forward with its active support, all other support would have faltered. But a noteworthy and decisive factor was strong support from the non-Jewish community.

The government officials were fair and not hostile. The staff of the planning commission itself virtually testified on behalf of the Yeshiva. Protestant and Catholic clergymen supported the Yeshiva, before and during the hearing, as did many other non-Jews. It is worth noting that some of these people had some fairly long history in working together with the Jewish community.

Two of them at the hearing had specifically been part of a recent trip to Israel which had been arranged for a Protestant group. Understanding does not come overnight, or in isolation.

A neighborhood group organized to support the Yeshiva. In a poll of the immediate blocks around the Yeshiva, they found only one person in one block, and one person in the other block were opposed to extending the use permit. The strong opposition came from further away in the neighborhood.

"It showed the importance of the common ethic," mused one Rabbi after the victory. Many non-Jews were appalled by the thought that some of the opposition might stem from anti-semitism. Many non-Jews were appalled by the possibility that the use permit might be terminated by unfair and unequal treatment of a group because of its religious identity.

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That is the "common American ethic" which still prevails among at least a critical number of Americans. And, with an important nudge from the A.D.L., it is the ethic which prevailed last week in Santa Clara.

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