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An Ugly Day in the Neighborhood

Years of intolerance come to a head between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox residents of Hancock Park.

by Julie Gruenbaum Fax, Education Editor

Congregation Etz Chaim, at the corner of Third Street and Highland Avenue, is the center of a 10-year legal battle. Photo by

Kevin Scanlon.

Dr. Warren Lent is sure he knows why he was treated with such contempt and hostility that day last June. It was the kippah he wore on his head.

He had come to vote in neighborhood council elections at a jam-packed fire station in Hancock Park. Amid the tension and confusion, an angry poll worker repeatedly accused Lent, a soft-spoken surgeon, of trying to vote twice.

Things escalated to the point where the poll worker asked Lent if he was “man enough to step outside” to settle it, Lent said.

The poll worker eventually backed down, but Lent reported the incident to Michael Rosenberg, a candidate for the council who, along with a group of allies, was recording slights against Orthodox Jewish voters. From his spot the requisite 100 feet away from the polling place, and from his office desk, Rosenberg gathered reports on shouting matches, fraudulent ballots and tense stand-offs between Orthodox Jews and other voters, many of them non-Orthodox Jews.

More proof, to Rosenberg’s mind, that the upscale neighborhood of Hancock Park was out to get Orthodox Jews.

On the other side, non-Orthodox residents were just as disgusted by what they say they saw on Election Day — fake membership cards, line jumping and all manner of deception by Orthodox Jews trying to secure as many votes as they could. Yet more evidence that this group of Orthodox Jews is willing to bend — no, break — the rules to get what they want.

What both sides wanted was control of the local neighborhood council, a relatively new city institution meant to bring grass-roots voices into city policymaking, an ideal that hardly seems worth fighting over in other parts of town. But in Hancock Park, it came to symbolize a battle between those who believed the

Orthodox were trying to plant a shul and school on every corner, and the Orthodox who felt that established residents were trying to choke off their community.

Throughout that day and for months following, both sides wondered how the strife ever got this bad. How could it be, they asked themselves, that Jews in Los Angeles were at loggerheads, mosly with other Jews, in an embarrassing conflict that divided along religious lines?

To Rosenberg and his associates, the answer is simple: The neighborhood had been heading in that direction for years, and the election was the climax of years of intolerance.

Other residents challenge that interpretation. They tell a more complex tale, one that holds Rosenberg, an Orthodox Jew and real estate developer, personally responsible for ratcheting up the enmity and pulling the neighborhood into something like a civil war.

On that day in June, the vast majority of Orthodox Jews, as well as unsuspecting local residents who came out to vote, were caught in the middle, stunned. Yes, everyone knew there had been conflicts between the Orthodox and the rest of the neighborhood, mostly centered on land-use disputes. And even while tensions had escalated over several years, setting the whole neighborhood on edge, no one felt as if Hancock Park was roiling with ethnic prejudice, which is how things looked and felt to many on Election Day.

“I can’t say it was anti-Semitism, he didn’t call me ‘dirty Jew,’ or say, ‘you Jews,’ and I don’t want to falsely accuse anyone,” said Lent of the poll worker. “I don’t know what his true motivation was, but one thing was clear to me. He was ready to punch me, and he wasn’t going to give me a chance to explain.”

To moderate — and even extreme — voices on both sides, these elections were a wake-up call, setting in motion halting efforts at peacemaking.

Today, contentious issues and tough questions persist. Aside from continuing enmity over the election, residents are battling in court over the construction of a synagogue on a busy residential street. And an Orthodox school and its neighbors are testing just how far they can push each other.

But on both sides, there are people willing to face tough questions so they can begin to bridge the divide.

Do some Hancock Park residents harbor mistrust toward anyone who looks Orthodox? Is this a case of intolerance, or one of some Orthodox Jews behaving badly and now everyone paying the price? How much is just miscommunication? And is the community suffering because it let a few people, notably Michael Rosenberg, become the voice of the Orthodox community?

Conflicting Claims

In the first two years, starting in 1999, that civic activist John Gresham had been organizing the area’s first Neighborhood Council in the Midwilshire area, he hadn’t heard much from Orthodox Jews, even though he knew that Hancock Park, one of 15 neighborhoods in proposed council borders, was heavily Orthodox.

Michael Rosenberg: "I told everybody else that we have a little problem — they don't like us Jews." Photo courtesy Sheryl Rosenberg

So he recalls being stunned when, in December 2001, Rosenberg, a businessman he knew only peripherally, filed a rival claim on the territory Gresham and a group of about 150 involved residents and business people had staked out as the future Midwilshire Neighborhood Council.

Claiming to represent homeowners, Orthodox interests and other underdog groups he had allied himself with, Rosenberg applied to the city for certification as the official neighborhood council in Midwilshire's borders, throwing two years of grassroots mobilization into tumult.

"It was essentially our map, but [Rosenberg] had changed the name at the top and said, 'We represent everyone there,'" Gresham said.

"So my initial reaction was: Why? And my second reaction was: What do we have to do to prevent this? And then my third reaction was: Wait a second, who is in his group? Who does he represent?" Gresham said.

To Rosenberg, the question of why is an easy one to answer. He felt that the existing organization was not doing enough to truly represent the will of the people

"They were certainly not considering us as part of them," he said. By us, Rosenberg meant Orthodox Jews, but not exclusively that group. He'd also recruited residents and business owners, including Asians, blacks and Latinos, outside Hancock Park proper.

Such a divisive confrontation was not what city planners had in mind when officials developed — and voters approved — the formation of neighborhood councils as part of the 1999 City Charter. The idea was to develop grassroots civic involvement, giving residents, businesses and neighborhood groups actual influence — but not outright voting power — on city matters that affect them. Today, there are 88 neighborhood councils, with influence over issues such as zoning, traffic patterns, utility rates, taxes and general decisions about the character of a neighborhood.

“The bottom line on a national and global level is that everything starts in someone’s neighborhood,” said Gresham, who lives within the neighborhood council’s borders, just south of Hancock Park, and who started mobilizing neighborhoods in the 1970s.

Gresham’s job as a vice president at M.L. Stern Investment Securities leaves him only late-night hours to dedicate to grassroots politics, but his earnest involvement has won him widespread admiration.

In fact, in 1999, when the city was first setting up the neighborhood council system, city representatives asked Gresham, who is also active at the Reform Temple Israel of Hollywood, to organize the Midwilshire area. This effort had been proceeding for two years when Rosenberg suddenly stepped in.

Gresham said he is dumbfounded by Rosenberg’s claim that important segments of the community were willfully excluded. Gresham had spent two years forming the Interim Midwilshire Neighborhood Council, made up of homeowners associations, business associations, and representatives for renters, students and nonprofits. The council area includes 50,000 people in 15 distinct neighborhoods within the area roughly from just west of Western Avenue to La Brea Avenue, from Olympic Boulevard to Melrose Avenue.

“We kept trying to get more people to the table so we would have a true cross-section — including Michael — and we are accused by him of not doing that? I just have no comprehension of what he is talking about. It’s foreign to me,” Gresham said at a late night meeting in his office, glasses perched atop gray hair and eyes squinty with fatigue.

Gresham had first met Rosenberg when he came to a meeting of the Midwilshire interim board, a few months before he filed his rival claim.

Rosenberg appears in the minutes of that November 2001 meeting as having volunteered to help iron out the group’s by-laws and participate in outreach. Gresham invited him to be on the board. But, after the meeting, Rosenberg had a run-in with a board member who recognized Rosenberg as an advocate for a synagogue involved in a vicious land-use dispute.

Rosenberg says he was told that the neighborhood council process had already begun, and that he wasn’t needed — or wanted.

“After the way they treated me I told everybody else that we have a little problem — they don’t like us Jews,” Rosenberg said. “We are outsiders.”

So Rosenberg gathered a few signatures from friends and business associates, including Orthodox activist and developer Stanley Treitel, and in December 2001 filed his own application with the city to become the Greater Hancock Park Neighborhood Council.

The city department that oversees neighborhood councils, which is committed to making these bodies truly representative, did not want to favor existing homeowners groups over ad hoc entities. In the spring of 2002 the city ordered Gresham and Rosenberg to negotiate a merger.

“We ended up giving in to them on every single point they wanted because they would not budge,” said Gresham, saying the negotiations over minutia occasionally became uncivil, to the point of table-pounding and screaming.

Rosenberg says the meetings were a ruse, since Gresham’s group continued meeting behind his back.

Gresham said of course his group continued to meet, openly, to continue the work of getting certified — just as he expected Rosenberg’s group to keep meeting.

But whether Rosenberg had a group at all was a question Gresham never felt was adequately answered. Gresham said Rosenberg seemed to make decisions on his own, without consulting a board, and got angry with Gresham for always wanting to check back with the Midwilshire interim board.

Rosenberg says he had a group of about a dozen active volunteers and many more supporters, Jewish and non-Jewish, who empowered him to make decisions.

While he initially started with some close Orthodox friends, Rosenberg later pulled in some non-Jewish businessmen and disgruntled residents who felt they were not being represented by this nouveau establishment.

Among those was Morris Shaoulian, the lessee of the Scottish Rite Auditorium on Wilshire Boulevard and Lucerne Avenue in Hancock Park-adjacent Windsor Square, who is currently in litigation with the city over the use of the building.

After several months of negotiations, the newly named Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council was formed, with Rosenberg and Gresham as co-presidents, and an unwieldy 56 board members — 28 from each side.

At a hearing in December 2003, the city certified the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council. But before doing so, the city lopped off a section that jutted out of the Council's linear borders south of Olympic Boulevard, saying the small area, which Rosenberg had added, was not organically part of a territory that was already too big.

That severed appendage had included a large portion of Rosenberg's allies, including 14 of his 28 board members.

"In that area we had representation of people who were black, Hispanic, Koreans, some gays and lesbians — and they were so upset to be cut off from the neighborhood council," Rosenberg said. "And after that they said you guys stabbed us and they didn't want to meet anymore."

While the council was certified, it still needed to set up procedures to elect its board members, an election initially slated for March 2004.

But disgusted with what he saw as a biased and farcical process, Rosenberg dragged his feet and didn't bring his representative to any planning meetings. March came and went without elections.

Gresham and the city tried to schedule meetings with Rosenberg, but were continually put off.

Without Rosenberg and his people, the board had no quorum, and could not set up the election procedures, which meant voting could not commence.

Suddenly, in the early summer of 2004, a process that had been in the works for years, involving hundreds of people and thousands of hours of work, was at a dead halt.

Gresham was at his wits end. And he was beginning to wonder what was driving Michael Rosenberg.

Rabbi Daniel Korobkin, head of Kehillat Yavneh: "We have never tried to steamroll over the neighbors. We have never tried to hide what we're doing." Photo by Kevin Scanlon

'Red Flags All Over the Place'

Baby faced and jowly with a soothing Latin lilt to his speech, Rosenberg doesn't hide the fact that he is motivated by a large chip on his shoulder, despite his obvious success — he runs a thriving international real estate business, he and his family own thoroughbreds and he is the president of World Derby, Inc., which promotes horse racing events. He and his wife Sheryl have raised their four sons in a luxurious home at the eastern edge of Hancock Park, where they have lived for 21 years.

But Rosenberg's parents lost everything and everyone in the Holocaust, including three sons — Michael's brothers. The family found refuge after the war in Peru, where Michael was born and where he lived until the late 1970s.

As for his involvement in Hancock Park politics, Rosenberg is adamant that it's all a matter of principal. He scoffs at the speculation, put forth with no evidence by some who are critical of him, that his involvement in neighborhood politics has been motivated by potential financial gain for his real estate business, which he says is mostly out of state or out of the country.

Instead, Rosenberg said, he was initially motivated by ill-advised land-use policies that neighborhood establishments supported. But the matter became a personal cause after he encountered intolerance at neighborhood meetings, which he ascribed to his wearing a kippah and representing the Orthodox community.

During the rise of the Nazis, leading up to the Holocaust, "in Hungary, my parents had to endure rules of you can't go there and you can't shop here, and this was the beginning of the same things — red flags were going up all over the place," he says of restrictions being placed on land-use in Hancock Park and the accompanying intolerance he perceived. "That is the ultimate goal, to restrict use of the land and to rein in a group — and that is what they were trying to do with us at the end of the day."

Rosenberg is referring to the ongoing attempt by local preservationists to designate Hancock Park a Historical Preservation Overlay Zone (HPOZ), which, at its most stringent, would mean changes by homeowners to their residences would have to go through rigorous scrutiny by city boards.

The Hancock Park Homeowners Association, a 57-year-old body, supports the historic zone, as does the office of Councilman Tom LaBonge, who represents the area. In 2001 Rosenberg had attended a meeting of the association and told the members that a majority of Hancock Park residents did not support the historic designation. No one on either side of the issue, in fact, has done authoritative polling.

The challenge was not well received, and Rosenberg said he was treated rudely, as though he were an outsider with no business there.

Soon after, Rosenberg and Treitel, along with a handful of other Jewish and non-Jewish members, founded the rival Hancock Park Resident's Association. They sent out a mailing asking people to join them in opposing the historic zone. Rosenberg claims he received 1,100 letters in his support, which he filed with the city's planning department. A department representative confirmed that his office has received hundreds of letters both in support and against the historic designation.

Within the next month, the city's planning department will hold the first of many public hearings about the HPOZ, leading up to a likely decision this summer by the City Council.

While the Orthodox community — including everyone from Modern Orthodox to Chasidic — is hardly unified in supporting or opposing a historic zone, Rosenberg was certain he recognized yet another effort to choke off the growing Orthodox presence — many Orthodox families have remodeled old area homes to accommodate large families, adding bedrooms and modern kosher kitchens.

Rosenberg became increasingly convinced that longer established neighbors — many of them non-Orthodox Jews — were uncomfortable with the visibly distinct and insular Orthodox community, people who dressed in black hats and coats in the heat of the summer, who ate at different restaurants and sent their kids to different schools. The Orthodox, he believed, were a grudgingly tolerated "them," not regarded as part of the community fabric.

Rosenberg is not alone in reaching that conclusion.

"The other side will tell you it's nothing personal, it's only about zoning, and I wish I could believe that," said Alan Stern, an Orthodox businessman and philanthropist, whose wife Lisa won a seat as an alternate in the neighborhood council elections. "But it's just not true. When you dig deep enough and start talking, there is a lot more that I find worrying. Many of them don't like those black hats and coats walking in Hancock Park. It's not a kind of look they feel comfortable with."

Jane Ellison Usher, president of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission: "I think there need to be other Jewish voices." Photo by Kevin Scanlon

An Urban Oasis, Divided

Hancock Park is one of Los Angeles's most picture-perfect neighborhoods, where sloping lawns on winding streets are crowned with elegant Tudor, Spanish and Mediterranean mansions built mostly in the 1920s. It covers roughly a linear mile between Highland and Rossmore Avenues, from Melrose Avenue to Wilshire Boulevard.

Jews began to move into this urban oasis 40 years ago, when clauses in home deeds prohibiting sales to Jews or blacks were removed. As Jews shifted eastward from Fairfax, Orthodox institutions became centered on and around La Brea Avenue, a few blocks west of Hancock Park. The last decade has seen a surge in the number of schools, shuls and kosher establishments in the area.

There are about 20 shuls on La Brea, Beverly and surrounding streets, and about a dozen kosher establishments. At least four new schools have been established in the last 10 years, and enrollment at existing schools has surged. Yeshiva Rav Isacsohn Torath Emeth, for example, had about 700 kids in preschool through eighth grade 10 years ago, and today has more than 1,100.

With that growth has come increased tensions with established neighbors, including some residents who have been there for decades, and many more recent arrivals — a good number of them non-Orthodox Jews — who treasure the area's serenity and architectural beauty.

Some residents fear the character of the neighborhood, which is zoned for single-family homes only, is being threatened by haphazard remodeling projects and by institutions — notably a shul and a private religious school — moving into Hancock Park itself.

"Hancock Park is a beautiful suburb in the middle of a busy city, and if people keep chipping away at it, soon it won't be a beautiful, serene neighborhood anymore. It will be changed forever," said Jolene Snett, an activist who is involved in crafting a preservation plan, which would limit what homeowners could do with the parts of architecturally historic homes visible from the street.

Snett, a member of Temple Israel of Hollywood, was elected last June to the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council.

It was the arcane subject of zoning that led to the Neighborhood Council confrontations and became the focus of lawsuits and angry rhetoric over the last 10 years. In 1999, Yeshivat Yavneh, a 400-student Orthodox day school, moved from Beverly Boulevard west of La Brea Avenue into the Tudor estate that had housed Whittier law school on Third Street and Las Palmas Avenue. Neighbors saw to it that Yavneh's conditional-use permit was highly restrictive (see sidebar).

While the school and neighbors agree that Yavneh has worked hard to be a good neighbor — carefully controlling noise and carpool chaos — tension has continued to build over when and what Yavneh can do with its building. Yavneh is now planning to bring to the zoning board a proposal for an 8-foot security fence, which neighbors oppose, and a plan to change the terms of who can pray in the school on Shabbat, an issue that neighbors say Yavneh has not been honest about.

"We have made every effort to be as conciliatory as possible with the neighborhood and have done our best to make sure we are in compliance with whatever conditional-use permits were granted to us by the city," said Rabbi Daniel Korobkin, head of Kehillat Yavneh, which holds Shabbat prayers at the school for the Yavneh parent body. "We have never tried to steamroll over the neighbors. We have never tried to hide what we're doing, and for some reason there are certain extremists in the neighborhood who are opposed to having any greater presence for Orthodox Jews convening for religious activity or prayer, regardless of the impact on the neighborhood."

At the same time, Korobkin is working with his own community to be more open, because he acknowledges that insularity may have contributed to the hostile environment and closed communication lines.

“Our guilt is that we have not sufficiently been good neighbors in the sense of reaching out and letting them know that we are part of the community, and we are here to work together with the rest of the community,” he said. “If an Orthodox Jew is having a Kiddush [party] at his home because his wife gave birth, and he invites 100 people from all around and his neighbors are not invited to the Kiddush — that type of thing creates ill-will,” he said.

Korobkin, and many others, believe that Yavneh is suffering the fallout of an earlier land-use dispute involving Congregation Etz Chaim, the synagogue to which Rosenberg and many of his neighborhood allies belong.

Etz Chaim is a small congregation that for 30 years met in the June Street home of Rabbi Chaim Rubin. In 1995 it purchased a 3,600-square-foot house on the corner of Highland Avenue and Third Street, enraging neighbors protective of the area’s single-family-home zoning status. The legal battle had already begun when in 2002 Etz Chaim razed the home and rebuilt an 8,200-square-foot structure with a main sanctuary and a mikvah (see sidebar).

Neighbors contend the shul violated local zoning laws and trampled due process, and the shul contends neighbors are attempting to infringe upon its religious freedom. The dispute is currently before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, but regardless of the outcome, residents are likely to remain angry about the bulldozer approach the congregation took.

“Third and Highland was this giant smack in the face to all of Hancock Park that said, ‘We are going to do whatever we want and no on is going to stop us,’” said Gary Gilbert, a writer and producer, who lives in Windsor Square.

While Orthodox residents who don’t belong to Etz Chaim were not vocal about the matter, many of them also were troubled by both the manner and the outcome of the construction.

“None of us like that shul either. I didn’t think what they did was right, and I certainly wouldn’t want that happening next door to me,” said Marty Gurfinkel, a Yavneh parent who is now participating in reconciliation meetings.

But the idea of Orthodox Jews speaking out against other shul-goers was anathema, and so, Gurfinkel says, the Etz Chaim dispute fermented a false sense, both among the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox, of us and them.

“It created a lot of negativity and came at a severe cost,” agreed Larry Eisenberg, a pediatrician who rues the fact that none of his Orthodox peers felt it appropriate to challenge Etz Chaim.

Eisenberg, a Hancock Park resident and past president of the West Coast board of the Orthodox Union, was elected to the neighborhood council on a platform of opposing traffic mitigation measures and the historic zone designation. He was not allied with Rosenberg, and had nothing to do with Rosenberg’s quest. But, he says, at the first few meetings of the neighborhood council over the past few months, he has felt that he is the object of suspicion and bias from other council members, just by virtue of being Orthodox.

Indeed, anti-Orthodoxy seemed at its height after last summer’s elections. Deeply troubled by the hostility and intolerance he saw, Gary Gilbert, an active member of Temple Israel, informally canvassed his neighbors in advance of launching reconciliation efforts.

“I went to my neighbors and I said, ‘Tell me about the Orthodox.’ And they said, ‘They think they are above the law, they will do whatever they want if it is good for them, and they don’t care about anyone else’s needs but their own,’” Gilbert recounted.

And while Rosenberg might offer that up as more proof that he was right — that the locals do hate the Orthodox — some argue that Rosenberg himself opened that door, back in 2004, when he and his

cohorts brought the neighborhood council process, which activists had been working on for five years, to a screeching halt.

Stanley Treitel, neighborhood activist: "We have to move on to some degree." Photo by Kevin Scanlon

The City Takes Over

With elections nowhere on the horizon, Gresham was relieved when, in July 2004, the city decided to take over setting up the elections. The city began the process by holding focus groups with area stakeholders to come up with election procedures.

Rosenberg came to some of those meetings with his supporters, and advocated for eliminating both the age limit and the need for proof of identity for voters, pushing for self-affirmation — actions eyed with suspicion by many.

The city, for its part, determined that people could vote in as many categories for which they qualified as stakeholders. That is, you got one vote if you owned property, another if you also rented property, still another if you worked in neighborhood — not to mention a vote for attending a local school or belonging to a local organization. Each category is represented by a board member. In the end, some people would vote as many as 19 times.

In March 2005, after the city decided that age limits and identification would be required, Rosenberg sued the city for violating the council's bylaws, a case that was quickly dismissed.

Increasingly alarmed at the free-for-all the city seemed to be setting up, Gresham worried that anyone, including non-residents, could become a stakeholder by setting up a bogus organization, and that underhanded scheming would be rampant.

In February 2005, Gresham summoned some active neighbors who decided to form Neighbors United for Fair Elections, a group whose initial mission was to see to it that election procedures were fair and logical.

"The real villain in this enterprise is the [city's] Department of Neighborhood Empowerment," said Jane Ellison Usher, a Jewish attorney who answered Gresham's call to action. "The way the department established procedures was to say to whatever group of people happened to show up at a meeting, 'How do you feel on these three or four points?' And whoever was sitting in the chairs would cast votes, and those were turned into formal recommendations for the board and the department."

Usher, a former president of the Windsor Square Homeowners Association, was recently appointed president of Los Angeles planning commission. She had been involved early on in the neighborhood council process and stepped out in dismay when the city forced Gresham into negotiations with Rosenberg.

Usher is known among friends and detractors for being resolute and blunt — as someone who, by her own admission, doesn't mince words. As elections neared, Usher began circulating aggressively worded e-mails to bring the masses to the polls.

"Don't let the bad guys outnumber us again," begins a Feb. 21, 2005 email, co-signed by Usher, Jolene Snett and Cindy Chvatal, who is now vice president of the Greater Wilshire Neighborhood Council. "Do you want a neighborhood controlled by the man who has leased the Scottish Rite or by the activists who have defied all zoning rules and built a temple at Third and Highland?"

Another e-mail, sent after the city delayed elections that had been set for May 2005, decries the city's "twisted thought process."

"Disabled by the notion that Michael Rosenberg might again sue, his forte, they [city organizations] have become the reliable enablers of the hijacking of this neighborhood by a handful of bogeymen," wrote Usher and Chvatal.

The same e-mail ended with the imperative to "Grab your white hat and enough votes to win."

Orthodox community members saw in that an allusion to their own black hats. But Usher, who grew up in a small town in Ohio, says the white hat reference is nothing more than a regional expression about good guys in white and bad guys in black.

And, she says, her references to "minions" was in no way meant to evoke minyans (a quorum of worshippers), and "bad guys" referred to the city organizations messing with the elections, not to the Orthodox community.

As Usher's e-mails circulated, rumors spread within the Orthodox community of nefarious, well-organized plots to stifle Jewish interests. For its part, the Orthodox community fielded nine candidates, many brought in by Rosenberg.

Some e-mails originating in the Orthodox camp compared what was happening in Hancock Park to Nazi-era restrictions, and rumors spread about plots to bus in Muslims on Election Day to defeat the Orthodox.

While some rabbis decried the more egregious rhetoric, the idea took hold that getting out the Orthodox vote was a matter of saving the community.

"On the slate are individuals who have proven hostile to the interests of our community. If they win, any new shul or school, any expansion of existing shuls or schools, any remodeling of any home, will require their approval," read a letter sent out by the Yavneh school. The letter urged all community members — even domestic help — to vote, and to enroll in newly formed organizations to qualify as stakeholders in more categories.

When Neighbors United got wind of the mobilization in the Orthodox community, fear began to spread that the Orthodox were trying to take over local politics so they could plant a shul and school on every corner in Hancock Park.

To both sides, elections had become a matter of saving the neighborhood.

An Election Debacle

The hype and propaganda worked, bringing out a record 1,200 voters on Wednesday, June 15, 2005, who cast a combined 29,000 ballots, higher than any other council elections since the city founded the Neighborhood Council system, which generally does allow for multiple ballots per person.

But rather than being a triumph of grass-roots activism, the turnout signaled the extent to which fear and suspicion had taken over.

By all accounts, the fire station on Wilshire Boulevard and Van Ness Avenue — the single polling place for the day — was a madhouse, with poll workers overwhelmed by the turnout, and voters and volunteers equally befuddled by the Department of Neighborhood Empowerment's impenetrable election procedures.

According to the city's exorbitantly inclusive rules, voters were allowed to define themselves as stakeholders in up to 19 categories.

That meant that on Election Day, voters — many of whom did not live or work in the area — stood on line with fistfuls of ballots, a startling site in this one man, one vote culture. (One of the first actions of the newly elected council would be to revise election rules, allowing a maximum of two votes per person.)

And things got very, very ugly.

Neighbors United, the non-Orthodox group, created an Election Day staging area at the nearby Wilshire Ebell Theater, offering a free shuttle service to the polling place, where parking was difficult.

At the Ebell, Neighbors United registered voters and enrolled them in organizations to qualify for more ballots. Slates of candidates were endorsed. In some categories where the two or three highest vote-getters would win seats, Neighbors United provided an alphabetical breakdown for voters to follow to optimize the number of its winning candidates (i.e., if your last name begins with A-F, vote for this candidate; G-M for that candidate).

Orthodox community members say they saw Neighbors United people — including volunteer poll workers — at the polling place trying to intimidate Orthodox voters and handing out membership cards, some of them for organizations founded for just for the purpose of boosting vote totals.

The Orthodox community was not nearly as well organized, but its members were busy, too. Neighbors United members allege that they saw candidates campaigning outside the polling place, in violation of election rules, and people handing out "your name here" membership cards for organizations. Some of these had changed addresses to be within council boundaries; others hadn't existed the week before.

One member of Neighbors United said that while she was looking for parking, two Orthodox men sitting in a car in front of the fire station indicated they weren't leaving. Seconds later, she saw them relinquish the space to another Orthodox Jew.

Orthodox voters speak of harassment: If you looked Orthodox you were treated with greater scrutiny and greater contempt by poll volunteers, who came mostly from the ranks of Neighbors United (they were, after all, better organized).

And throughout the day, e-mails and phone calls continued to circulate, urging more people to come out and vote.

In the end, five Orthodox men, including Rosenberg, were elected to the Neighborhood Council, out of 31 seats. Gresham, ironically, only won as an alternate (when a board member can't make the meeting, he takes her place). Gilbert and Treitel are alternates; Usher, Snett and Chvatal all won seats.

Nine people, including Rosenberg and Alan Stern, filed challenges against the election results, but the city dismissed all of them.

"There was considerable fraud on both sides, and a number of rabbis were not comfortable with that," said Irving Lebovics, West Coast president of the Orthodox umbrella organization Agudath Israel. "But the bigger issue to me was that in this election there was a tremendous amount of anti-Semitism. We had people who showed up to vote like any good citizen, and they were harassed and screamed at from vans on the street. It was unacceptable."

Charges of anti-Semitism became a sore point after the election. After all, a significant number of the Neighbors United activists are Jewish.

“To evoke the Holocaust for political gain in a neighborhood zoning dispute, and for one group of people to allege anti-Semitism against another group that they don’t see eye-to-eye with politically, especially when many in the group are Jewish, is a problem,” Jolene Snett said. “These are serious claims, and to use them in a political manner, so readily and so quickly, and often to fellow Jews, I find very troubling.”

For her part, Usher says she feels compelled, as a Jew, to offer an alternative voice when she sees Jews behaving badly, as she believes some leaders at Etz Chaim and Yavneh did.

“I think there need to be other Jewish voices,” she said. “Frankly, it is repulsive to me that I am connected or associated in any way with the people perpetrating these deceptions, so I intend to speak out.”

“I am a Jew, I am a practicing Jew, and I feel that deception is shameful,” Usher said in an interview at a Beverly Boulevard pastry shop not long after the election. “Did I ever think I would see the day I would feel the need to stand up and say I am Jewish and I have a bone to pick with other Jews? Did I even anticipate that day? No.”

Peace Talks

Today, with the elections well in the past, Usher’s stridency has mellowed.

At the neighborhood council meetings — there have been four since the elections — Usher sits just one seat away from Stanley Treitel, a colleague of Rosenberg’s whose passion and vociferousness were off-putting to some during the thick of the strife.

At the January meeting, Treitel handed Usher his card and asked her to call. Usher and Treitel met for breakfast at La Brea Bagel a few weeks ago, where the two, who had formerly demonized each other, talked about issues in the neighborhood, and vowed to keep an open dialogue.

“I’m very optimistic. I don’t see or feel any hardliners drawing lines in the sand,” Usher said.

“We have to move on to some degree,” agreed Treitel, noting that Usher is now the head of the city’s planning commission, an organization that holds the key to approval of community projects.

While Usher’s and Treitel’s new connection is off to a good start, things are not going as well for a larger-scale reconciliation effort.

In November, a group of Orthodox, liberal Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors met to plan a blood drive and neighborhood safety fair for January. But three weeks after the initial planning meeting the event was off.

Yavneh had offered to host the event, but since Yavneh is in the middle of troublesome negotiations over its city operating permit, residents who live nearby wondered if Yavneh’s hospitality was motivated mainly by a desire to build support for dealings with the city.

And, ironically, holding a large event like the blood drive would have violated Yavneh’s permit.

It wasn’t the outcome Gary Gilbert and his wife Judy hoped for when they convened about 20 people in their Windsor Square living room last summer, following the election, to save the neighborhood from itself.

“One of the reasons I got involved is because I heard the phrase ‘the Orthodox’ 50 times, and then I heard the term ‘Jew’ in a way I never heard before in Hancock Park,” said Gilbert, a producer and writer of comedies, including the “Seinfeld” pilot.

The Gilberts joined forces with Rabbi Korobkin of Yavneh, who independently had set out to begin the healing process, contacting local clergy and L.A. Voice, an organization that works with faith-based organizations to build community.

At the first, smaller meeting about a month after the election, about 20 people from varying backgrounds sat in the Gilberts home and introduced themselves, putting names and faces to the impersonal "other side."

"I'm not a professional mediator or conflict resolution person. I'm just a Jewish guy from the neighborhood who is really upset," Gilbert recalled telling those at the first gathering in August. "I'm here to say let's figure out what to do. I have no plan, no agenda — my agenda is why can't we all get along. So let's give it a try."

A second meeting took place in November at the home of Marty and Candice Gurfinkel — a new home that blends impeccably into its surroundings and stands in regal rebuttal to the charge that the Orthodox have no aesthetic sense. It was there that the plan for the blood drive was devised, and after the meeting, a dozen neighbors stood around the dessert table schmoozing.

But despite the thaw, some were uncomfortable, feeling like they were skirting the real issues, moving ahead with joint activities to foster relationships when old wounds had yet to be healed, or even acknowledged.

"We perceive that the other neighbors look at us with such a sense of suspicion and distrust, that they feel anything we are trying to do is completely self-serving and disingenuous and we are not concerned with being good neighbors," Korobkin said recently. "If you start with that premise, it is hard to win people's support to work toward common goals. It's hard to move things forward."

But Korobkin persists in his efforts toward reconciliation, understanding that not only Yavneh's future, but the entire neighborhood's rests on everyone's ability to work together.

As for Rosenberg, he has spent much of the last six months in Peru tending to family matters. He's missed most of the Neighborhood Council meetings, but the one he did attend, he voted against all of the proposed measures, which passed anyway.

One of those measures reduced the number of future board members on the Neighborhood Council from 31 to 21 for the next elections in March 2007. Members who supported the motion said the board was too unwieldy with 31 members.

Treitel, who voted against the change, noted in an interview that Orthodox Jews had a good chance of filling the seats that were cut, in categories such as education, religion and nonprofits. He worries that the interests of the Orthodox community are now further jeopardized.

Rosenberg plans to do whatever it takes to accomplish what he says was his initial goal: to ensure that everyone in the neighborhood is represented, and that no one, especially not the Orthodox community, gets left out of the process.

"I feel bad that people have a perception of me as being a bad person," Rosenberg said. "I'm not a bad person. I have given a lot of my time and money to make people aware of what I believe to be very important things."