

Community Spotlight on

Zion Halili- The Man, The Myth, The Legend!

By Dev B. Viswanath

If you have lived in Hollis Hills for more than a month, then it would be a shock if you haven't heard the name: **Zion Halili!** This is a name that is basically synonymous with Hollis Hills! Zion is the past president of the Hollis Hills Civic Association, and currently serves as "Special Advisor" to the HHCA Board. He has dedicated almost 3 decades of his life to living, contributing, and helping to make Hollis Hills a wonderful place to live and work. But, despite his many years of service and contributions to Hollis Hills there is so much that we don't know about this great man!

Recently, I had the privilege of meeting with Zion and sitting down to interview him. Below are a few excerpts from our interview:

1) So, let's talk about your career and background.

I am a real estate entrepreneur doing business as ZH New York Investors since 1983; I started my real estate career in Israel back in 1972.

2) Okay, wow, that is a long time! Where were born and how did you end up here, in Hollis Hills?

I was born in Tehran, Iran. I left Iran in 1965 at the age of 17 as a young man; I immigrated to Israel and stayed there for 3 years. Later I decided to travel throughout Europe, via Istanbul, Turkey and eventually head to Canada. A few friends and I started our European adventure but quickly ran out of money. We decided to work a little here and there to make some money, so we could carry on with our trip.

The irony with regard to sticking around Europe a while longer ended up as a 15 year venture in Germany. In 1969, I opened the first designer denim jean boutique in Berlin; it was beautiful; up until that time people were buying denim clothes in uniform shops. My boutique changed this, we carried every brand and style, from Wrangler, Levi's, to beautiful corduroys. Believe it or not, after that, these types of boutiques were popping up all over Berlin. The name was Bonanza Jeans Boutique, named after the popular T.V. show "Bonanza", our logo was a Cow Head, I still have the business cards. It really was a very special kind of boutique; Til this day, whatever, I do, Dev, I have to make sure it's special, different from anything out there. At one time, I owned 5 clothing boutiques and was Importing/exporting Israeli shoes, solar signs, and art.

To top it all off, while in Germany, I tried my hand in acting; I took part in 7 T.V. movies.

Wow!!!!

I have to say, so far in my life whatever I set my mind to do, I achieve it!

3) Where do you think that comes from?

Oh, that comes from my childhood, growing up in Iran I had to fight for everything; during that time, it seemed as if we were living as our Ancestors did over 2000 years ago, there was no running water in our house; I remember being 6 or 7 years old when we got electricity and the pipes for water were installed; I am from the old days. We were Jews living in an Islamic country, Jews faced many hardships and did their very best to survive.

My parents were poor people; it is hard to imagine that a couple with 6 children having living space the size of a single room that would be a bit larger than my office. It was very tough, I remember, I had to do anything and everything...to survive! This is what molded me into the man I am today.

4) Let's talk about the U.S., when did you come to the U.S.?

I first came in to the US in 1982 from Germany; I was trying to decide between the U.S. and Israel, where would I settle down permanently? At first, I decided to conduct my business in the U.S. and live in Tel Aviv, Israel; I had a son from a previous marriage, and thought the life in Israel would offer him a better social and culture environment. I followed the plan for 3 years but learned a valuable lesson from the experience. You can't run a business remotely, it was too difficult and I was faced with financial problems in regard to my investment properties. I then decided to immigrate to the United States. I met my wife Dvora in Israel, and with my son from my previous marriage, we came to the United States, and married in 1986; that was same year we moved to Hollis Hills, NY.

Initially, we wanted to be close to Main Street. There was a vibrant Jewish community there and most of our Israeli acquaintances lived there. Coming from Israel, my wife knew no one here; it was quite an adjustment, so naturally I thought we should live close to a community and culture we identified with.

I told my wife, "You find a place that you like, show it to me and we'll see if it could work." She looked at properties in area and finally she found a home in the community of Hollis Hills, the very house that we live in today.

5) So was it love at first site with Hollis Hills?

At first, I said "Oh My God, it's too far From Queens Boulevard and Main Street, everything is there"; but after visiting the area, I liked it. There were many trees, and parks, the highway connections were right in our neighborhood. The homes were magnificent, so beautiful so I fell in love; Hollis Hills offered suburban like living in an urban locale. We bought the house, made

customized renovations, settled in and the rest is history. We have raised two children in Hollis Hills, it is a wonderful community and we love it!

6) So how long did it take you to get involved with the HHCA?

In 1983, I bought some property in Far Rockaway, NY, and established a Civic Association for the preservation of this striking area. During that time, I met an attorney by the name of Sal Diliberto who was handling a legal matter on my behalf; and soon discovered that he too lived in Hollis Hills.

One day, while having a discussion with Sal I asked him, “why don’t we start a Civic Association so we can help maintain our community?” Sal agreed and he knew another resident who he thought would be interested in helping as well, his name was Stephen Pivawer (who later became one of HHCA’s presidents), so the three of us got together for some brainstorming sessions to figure out how and what we were going to do to bring the idea to fruition. While researching, we discovered that a civic association was created many years earlier but was dormant. We contacted the last president of the association and explained that we were residents of Hollis Hills, and wanted to resurrect the Civic Association. He was thrilled and in order to assist us, he gathered all the documents he had pertaining to the civic association and handed them over to us. We were indeed successful in revitalizing the HHCA, we appointed an executive board and began holding monthly meetings and you know the rest. I have been personally involved since 1986 and must say that we have become a very powerful and influential association.

7) What were your early feelings about the civic association?

Unlike past Presidents who left after their tenure, I wanted to remain an active member, contributing in every way possible; therefore, I stayed on the Board until 2005 when I was elected president. To date, I am the longest running active member of the Board.

8) What made you decide to finally want to become the president?

About 5 years ago, I decided I wanted to semi-retire, enjoy life more and gradually slow down with my work, and at that point in my life I was elected President of HHCA; I accepted the nomination from the Board, and was voted in as President. I truly believe that I have made a tremendous contribution to furthering the causes of the community at large since becoming president.

9) What is one thing that you could point out as part of the reason why you were so successful as president and were able to accomplish so much?

One thing is clear to me, with all due respect to those who served as president before me, is that my level of commitment to my work as president was unsurpassed. That is me!

Organization and leadership are part of my persona. I believe that with my positive, go-getter attitude, I was able to successfully plan and implement projects for the benefit of the entire community.

10) What are two things in the Community that you are most proud of that occurred while you were president?

Two major issues I believe I took a very aggressive approach on were:

NO Landscaping or Construction in Hollis Hills on weekends and holidays; the people of our community work hard to purchase and beautify their homes. The weekends are often the only time we have to enjoy some peace and quiet with our friends and family. I can remember at one point in time, we could not enjoy the beautiful surroundings of our community on the Holidays and weekends, due to the noise and debris from the landscaping and construction that was ongoing. This was a nuisance and I am very happy that we were able to resolve it. From time to time, I do hear some ongoing landscaping or construction so I ask the party involved to adhere to the rules of the community, to respect their neighbors and the community so we can all enjoy it.

Beautification is another issue close to my heart. I started the tradition of the Street Fair in our community which continued to be a great success year after year. We also held a picnic in the park, and a fundraiser bicycle-thon for PS 188 where we raised \$2000 for the school to purchase new computers. Additionally, we revitalized the Hollis Hills Herald, our community Newsletter! It is an extensive, time consuming undertaking but I am convinced it is a must; this is our only direct way of getting a large amount of information and messages out to the community. When I became President, I invested time and effort in perfecting the Newsletter.

11) What else have you been involved with in our community?

About 11 years ago, I decided to join Community Planning Board 11, a local body responsible for making impacting decisions concerning several Queens communities with Hollis Hills being one of them; at the time, City Councilman Member Sheldon S. Leffler appointed me as a board member of CB11; in addition, I have served on numerous community boards such as Zoning and Consumer Affairs, Community Housing, Senior Citizens and Youth board committees.

Over the past 11 years, I have served on this board protecting the interest of our community, and one of the major issues I have been fighting for in the past 6 years is the capital budget approval to cover the replacement of the curbs on the median at Union Turnpike, between Hollis Hills Terrace and Springfield blvd., which are in dreadful condition.

Every year, the community board prioritizes the expense budget, and years ago the issue of the median was number 24 on this list; every year I had to argue and fight to get this item categorized at a higher priority. Finally last year, I was able to convince the board to escalate the median issue from number 24 to number 2 on the priority list, and I will continue to

adamantly pursue this issue until it is number one. Hopefully, next year it will reach number one on CB11's priority list. I am wondering if it will require 10 more years of follow-ups on this issue until it is complete.

Last year, I received from Borough President Helen Marshall, an award for 10 years of outstanding service to the community; I will remain on CB11's board in order to continue to protect the interests of our community.

12) Through all your experiences, as president, what would you say the hardest parts were?

For me the most difficult parts were the following: 1) the Newsletter, and 2) The Street Fair. I am very meticulous in all that I do, and these two projects are extensive and time consuming, requiring attention to detail and most of all patience.

13) Okay and what were the most enjoyable parts for you?

The favorite part of my presidency was looking back at all the things that were accomplished and will benefit the community for years to come. I did have a few more ideas, but to be honest, I just don't have the energy.

14) You know that we are so happy and grateful to you for staying on as a special advisor, but, I want to ask you how do you feel about this change?

My heart is with this community, and I declined the presidency for many years because I didn't want to stop contributing once my tenure was over; but the Executive Board has asked me to stay on in this special capacity as an Advisor, I feel like it's the best of both worlds. I can still advise, and bring my ideas to the Board, while passing the torch on for the new generation. It's a win-win situation for everybody. I can still participate and the Board can still utilize my ideas, if they choose.

15) As a Torch Holder, if we can see this in some ways as you passing it on to me, what advice would you give me?

More than anything else, you must have the courage to stand up and take responsibility for making decisions in the best interest of the community, despite the fact that not all will agree with what you are proposing or doing. As a leader, you must be willing to take risk, to go the distance for those who depend on you for your wisdom and support. You have an entire community that will look to you for answers to questions, problems that may arise with them as individuals or collectively as a community; but you must be strong and focused! Adamantly stand your ground, be strong and true to your word, diligently pursue answers and resolutions for your community, and the sky is the limit to what you will accomplish for your community.

I will conclude in appealing to all the residents of this beautiful community; kindly support the Civic Association by paying your dues, and allowing the board to continue to protect and

beautify our community; believe me when I tell you, without the Civic Association this community would not be as desirable and prized as it is today.

The civic association is the channel you utilize to make certain the city and other government agencies to provide services as needed in a timely manner. Many NYC communities do not share this privilege, because they do not have an influential organization such as the civic association to voice their concerns and fight for their needs.

I don't intend on leaving the community, but rather I will continue to protect the best interest of the community from the sideline, and I'm confident that the board, with our new President Dev Viswanath leading, will diligently resolve any and all issues you as residents may encounter; Dev is very enthusiastic and willing to contribute his time and energy in continuing to make Hollis Hills truly a place to call home.

I want to take a moment and thank all of the Board members who have assisted me throughout my years as President of HHCA, without your help and dedication nothing would have been possible; Also, I would like to thank the residents of Hollis Hills for all your support throughout the years.

Thank you all, and mostly thank you Hollis Hills!