

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

When New York City decided to close all non-essential businesses on Sunday, March 22nd, many people rushed to cancel their gym memberships. Even before people knew how long the outbreak was going to last, they made a quick decision which could be paraphrased as, "I don't use it, I don't pay for it!"

And indeed, the decision was a logical one. A smart one. Gyms are providers of services for which people pay as long as they use them, and therefore it doesn't make any sense to keep paying if you don't go.

Not only do the customers understand that gyms are providers of services, but the owners of the gyms knew this as well, and rushed to inform their clientele (a fine word for customers) that they were not planning to process their automatic payments. Thank you so much.

Although people can occasionally make friends at a gym, nobody defines a gym, or a bank, or a beauty parlor, as a community. My barber, a nice man whom I have known for the last 14 years, may wonder when will I come back to cut my hair, but he will never call me to check on me or to ask how I am doing. As a matter of fact, he doesn't have my phone number, and he never asked for it.

Synagogues are different. At least our shul is.

Although many say "we need to think of synagogues as businesses," what they actually mean is that synagogues must run efficiently, be fiscally responsible, and make financial and strategic decisions that, in the long term, will benefit its members, will help it thrive, and most importantly, will help it carry out its mission, the one for which it was founded.

The mission statement of Hillcrest Jewish Center reminds us that our shul "...seeks to foster love of Judaism and of the Jewish People through study of Torah, the performance of mitzvot, meaningful prayer, the performance of acts of Chesed (loving kindness)."

Through these difficult and challenging times, Hillcrest remains even more vital than before, with people studying and praying through Zoom. However, the unique characteristic of our synagogue, the one that screams out loud that we are not a provider of services, is that we care for each other. None of our members resigned his or her membership since the COVID-19 outbreak began over two months ago because they see our shul as a family. Hillcrest was there for them, and they are here now, for Hillcrest. Employees kept their jobs at Hillcrest Jewish Center, because it is the right thing to do and because this pandemic will be over, hopefully, sooner rather than later.

The kindness and care we exercise now under difficult circumstances will make us stronger and will carry us for many years to come.

Not every synagogue is as special as ours. Synagogues who defined themselves as providers of services are struggling. Once the product is gone, why would someone continue to pay?

While I take pride in Hillcrest's many programs, nothing makes me prouder than my shul's members, who live kindness and compassion in their daily lives, helping others and caring for their fellow congregants, and who, while struggling under these difficult circumstances, look for a brighter future, for the day in which this too shall pass.

With blessings and love,

*Rabbi Manes Kogan*