

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

To say that the month of June was a difficult one is an understatement.

On top of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the heartless killing of George Floyd on May 31st in Minneapolis, the protests, riots and curfew that followed and paralyzed our country for an entire week, made the month of June, a very trying one, to say the least.

The killing of George Floyd brought back to the surface the following questions. Is there systemic racism in the police force and in many of the American institutions? Is the United States of America overall a just country with room for improvement and evolution, or is it a rotten one to the core that must undergo a long overdue revolution? Should Jews in general and Jewish institutions in particular defend the status quo, or should they be at the vanguard of a fight for radical change?

I am afraid that the answer to these questions is not an easy one for many of us. Not only is our country divided over these questions, but congregations, and even families are divided as well.

Personally I believe change is necessary, but I believe that change begins by talking to people, instead of talking about people. For me the people I need to talk to are not the ones I agree with, but the ones I disagree with; not the ones I know about, but the ones I don't. I made a personal point to learn more about the African American culture, not from a history book, but by meeting with Black leaders in my community. After all, I know very little about African Americans and they live (almost) literally in my backyard. Moreover, while talking to people is very important, listening to people is even more important.

Sadly, our society lately became a battlefield of ideologies, where violence and snappy remarks took the place of dialogue, kindness, and compassion.

Religious leaders and religious organizations have the unique possibility – and I would add – the obligation, to bring out a message of kindness and compassion, dialogue and love, without renouncing our particular views, beliefs, and values.

Our families and our congregations must be social labs, in which we practice listening skills, respectful exchanges, patience, kindness, tolerance, and compassion. If we can do so, when the dust settles, the new reality will find us stronger and wiser.

With love and blessings,

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Endemic