

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

I would like to share with you an adaptation of an email I sent to the President of Hillcrest Jewish Center, Ginger Schulman, the day I was presented with a new tallit and tefillin.

As many of you are aware, on Friday December 25th, a burglar entered our shul and took a laptop and my tallit and tefillin bag. In addition to the inner holiness of the tefillin and the real prospect of them being desecrated, the tallit and tefillin bag were given to me upon my ordination almost 28 years ago by my first congregation in the outskirts of Buenos Aires where I served as a rabbinical student.

When I came to daven the last Sunday of December and found out that my tallit and tefillin were gone, I felt very angry and sad.

While I am still upset, and the items taken from me were very dear to me, I was able to put things in perspective. As much as tallit and tefillin are special items, they are still "items." Baruch Hashem, nobody was hurt as a product of the burglary, and everyone in my family is healthy. These are the important things. After losing my two parents in less than six months, I know the difference.

My personal siddur was also inside my tallit and tefillin bag.

A few years into my rabbinate, when I started lending books and forgot to whom I had lent them, I developed the practice of writing my name inside the front cover of the book, as a gentle reminder to the borrower that the book was not his or hers, but mine. But was it really mine? Our Sages, quoting Psalms 24:1 remind us actually that "to Hashem belongs the world and its fullness." In other words, when I say "this is mine," I should have in mind that it was given to me as a temporary loan.

A few years ago, to slowly drill into my consciousness the fact that "ownership" in this world is relative and temporary in the best of scenarios, I ordered labels for my books that remind the borrowers that the books are not theirs, and reminds me that they are not completely mine either. The label, which was also in the siddur that was taken, reads:

*"To Hashem belongs the world and its fullness" (Psalms 24:1)*

*Ex Libris*

*Rabbi Manes Kogan*

In other words, before I get to call something "mine," I need to remind myself that it is not. I must say that this teaching, alas not completely internalized, also helped me diffuse my anger and sadness for the loss of my tallit and tefillin.

Four days after the tallit and tefillin were taken, the HJC community presented me with a new tallit and a new pair of tefillin.

I am deeply touched by the generosity of our shul and its leadership and by the thoughtfulness and kindness involved in getting me a tallit and tefillin replacement after mine were taken. Both the tallit and tefillin are top notch (believe it or not there is such a concept applied to tefillin and tallitot, as well), and the fact that everyone went out of their way to get them in record time, doesn't cease to amaze me.

I am very grateful to the many members of HJC who called or wrote to express their distress, and to everybody who contributed towards the gifts. I know money is scarce these days and that HJC has many important priorities to take care of. The fact that the leadership of our shul decided to replace my tallit and tefillin just a mere two days after it was taken, didn't go unnoticed by me. Moreover, I am grateful to all the people who were involved in that effort, to those who had the idea, made the call to the sofer, contributed towards the gifts, and came to shul to present the tallit and tefillin to me.

Which brings me to my last point, perhaps the most important.

I love HJC, I love its members and I love the people who work here. I cannot tell you how blessed I feel for being part of such a caring shul.

The experiences of loss I went through this year, including the passing of both my parents, the impossibility to be by their sides or to mourn them properly, almost a full year of COVID, and this episode that took place the last week in December, brought fully to center stage the love and care I feel emanating from the HJC family, from its members, from the leadership, and from my co-workers.

I feel truly loved, and I want all our members to know that. All of you make a difference in my life and I don't take it for granted.

May Hashem bless you, your loved ones and our big HJC family with only good news in this coming secular year.

Many blessings,  
*Rabbi Manes Kogan*