

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

This September 2nd will be the first anniversary yahrzeit of the passing of my beloved mother, Ida Kogan, may her memory be for a blessing.

To say that this past year and a half was a difficult one, is an understatement. On March 29th, exactly two weeks after the world, including our shul, was locked up due to COVID, my father, Jose Kogan, of blessed memory, passed away, followed by my mother, less than six months later.

The pain associated with the loss of my parents was magnified by the impossibility to attend their funerals in Israel, or to say kaddish for my father for two and a half months.

Then on, Sunday, June 14th, after the severity of COVID cases and the restrictions imposed by the CDC eased a little, the leadership of our shul decided to open the shul for Shabbat and weekday minyanim.

Being extra cautious and keeping up with the CDC regulations and recommendations, our shul started experiencing a glimpse of normality. While virtual services were (and are still) available, those HJC members who wished were able to attend services in person, wearing masks, keeping social distancing, and having their temperatures checked.

For me, June 14, 2020 in the evening, was the first time I said kaddish for my father in shul. Even though it was well after his passing, the possibility to say the words of the kaddish, accompanied by 10+ people at Hillcrest and by a similar number from home, started giving me a sense of closure.

As I write these lines, since June 14, 2020 we have had an uninterrupted minyan at Hillcrest Jewish Center for over 60 weeks. Morning and evening, twice a day, every day, rain or shine or snow, we kept going, between 10 and 15 people during the week, Friday evening and Shabbat afternoons, and over 40 attendees on Shabbat morning, and we had in-person services for all the holidays throughout the last year. Moreover, we were here to support our fellow congregants who were mourning their loved ones, and who joined us for minyan either in person or virtually, and we were here to celebrate milestone birthdays, retirements, births, marriages and graduations.

You all know already about Hillcrest's wonderful virtual programs during the last year and a half. You should also know that our shul was at the vanguard of reopening, being the first – and one of the few – non-orthodox synagogues to reopen its doors in New York City.

On August 3rd, I finished the 11 month-period of saying kaddish for my mother. When I started saying kaddish for her on September 15, 2020, I was already saying kaddish at Hillcrest for my father for three months, since Hillcrest reopened its doors. Altogether I said Kaddish for over 14 months. Throughout these 14 months I got to say kaddish in almost every shul in the neighborhood, including five orthodox shuls and three Conservative ones. I also said kaddish in Boro Park, Long Branch, New Jersey, Hartford, Israel and Italy. I said kaddish at the airport, and on the plane on the way to Israel. I said kaddish in backyards, offices, and shtiebel. I said kaddish in Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Italian, and Hassidic shuls. In every place I said kaddish for my parents in the last year and a half, I felt welcome.

However, in no place did I feel at home like in my own Hillcrest Jewish Center, where day after day, twice a day, fifteen times a week, over 800 times altogether, my own congregation was there for me. I was comforted by the presence of my fellow congregants and was able to experience first-hand the feeling of being embraced by a community at a time of loss. My shul was there for me, as I have been and continue to be there for others.

As I finish the twelve-month period mourning for my mother, as I slowly move forward with my life, I wish to pause to express my deepest appreciation to everyone at Hillcrest Jewish Center who was there for me throughout the last year and a half, and especially to everybody who went out of his or her way, to help make the minyan, day after day, week after week, month after month, who joined once, twice, or more times a week, both in person and virtually, to remind me that I wasn't alone, that my beloved congregation had my back. To all of you, *todah rabbah*, thank you so much.

May the new year about to begin bring each of you and your loved ones, health, joy, and peace. May we all be inscribed for a blessed, good and sweet year.

Rabbi Manes Kogan