

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center;

A couple of weeks ago I met a Hillcrest Jewish Center congregant on the street, who, after exchanging greetings, proceeded to apologize for not coming to services. "I am sorry rabbi," he said, "but with COVID still around, I try to minimize my in-door activities."

I told the congregant that apologies were not necessary but his comment made me think of the different range of feelings, approaches, reactions, and behaviors that COVID-19 generated among us.

What I am going to write about in the following lines might be unnecessary, or obvious, or self-explanatory for many of you; and yet please indulge me.

Let me begin by stating the self-evident – although we are all human beings, we are different from each other. We differ in our genes, in our age, in our health, in our physical and mental capacity, in our beliefs, in our upbringing, in our fears and anxieties, in our faith, in the way we relate to others, in our ability to express ourselves, in our support system, in the way we deal with risks, in our political views, in the way we de-codify information, in our family configuration, in our socio-economic condition, in the way we trust or mistrust authority, the scientific community, or our political and religious leaders. The above list is a good one, but it is not exhaustive, and I am sure you can think of many more different variables in which we differ from each other.

When COVID-19 hit our world a year and half ago, each of us reacted to the new reality differently. To give you an example from my own family, Silvia, our three children and I, had, and continue to have different levels of concern regarding the pandemic, and this is just a sample in the same household.

To the above should be added that circumstances changed and continue to change regarding vaccination, new variants, CDC guidelines, etc. In other words, even the same person changed in his or her range of feelings, approaches, reactions, and behaviors throughout the last 18 months.

Schools, synagogues, and institutions may have the prerogative, or even the obligation at times, to establish COVID-19 related guidelines (on vaccination, masks, and social distancing, for example), based on the information available to them at a particular time and the best understanding of their leaders.

However, all of us, ~~including our leaders,~~ can benefit from an approach that incorporates open-mindedness, compassion, empathy, love, and kindness, to people in our society, who, for all the above listed factors and reasons, differ from us in their feelings, approaches, reactions, and behaviors related to COVID-19.

As someone who believes in the science behind the COVID-19 vaccine and cannot wait to get my booster, I want to understand those who believe differently. As someone who lives in a nice house with a backyard and has three older and independent children, I try to put myself in the shoes of a father and a mother who needed to stay inside their two-bedroom apartment with their children for months at a time without the ability to send them to school in person. As someone who is optimistic about the future and believes that things will get better soon, I feel for and understand those who don't see the light at the end of the tunnel and are getting frustrated and depressed.

People believe, feel, and act differently than I, the reasons for such differences being among the many I listed above. I know I can judge them, but I choose not to. There is enough divisiveness out there and there is no need for more.

Love, compassion, kindness, and empathy may not be enough to overcome COVID-19 but they will make the journey more tolerable.

Stay safe! From my heart,

Rabbi Manes Kogan