

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center:

Each time I go back to Buenos Aires, I ask my brother to drive me by the two apartment buildings we lived in when we grew up in Argentina. Of course new people live in those apartments and due to the increasing lack of security in Argentina, the idea of seeing how they look inside is just a dream, at least for the time being. My brother and I also fantasize about buying back my grandparents' house without a real plan about what to do with it once we buy it. I guess we like to be able to recover the beautiful memories of our childhood and we believe that seeing the place where we grew up will bring back those memories.

Places and things are not the most important aspects of our existence. We all know that. And yet, I know I am not the only one who feels a special attraction to particular places or items, especially if those places or items are related to our childhood.

We have a congregant who sits every day when he comes to shul in the same seat where his family used to sit when they joined Hillcrest Jewish Center over 70 years ago. Many others, including myself, feel a special connection with our parents' memorial plaques, pictures and documents. People who know that their parents' essence is not buried in the ground, still find solace in visiting the cemetery, and although God can be found everywhere, houses of worship are still the favorite place where people seek the encounter with the Divine.

When two or more synagogues talk about, or even entertain the possibility of a merger, the topic of the building, the physical location of the future joint synagogue is usually at the center of the discussion and disagreements. Yes, "my rabbi," "your rabbi," "my cantor," "your cantor," are important topics. Finances too. And yet, location, location, location, seems to be, usually, the bone of contention.

I confess that I used to minimize or even negate completely the importance of a physical place. After all, families and communities are made from people, not from buildings.

Lately, however, especially since my parents passed away, I recovered a new appreciation for places and things, not for their intrinsic value, but because they hold the key to precious memories. This new appreciation helped me understand people for whom it is difficult to let go of stuff. In their heads they know they have to downsize, to throw out papers, to donate clothes, to travel lighter through life. Yet, each piece of paper, each item, each room, brings memories, precious memories we try to keep alive at any price.

I know I am a romantic. I admit it. Hoarding is not good, attaching ourselves to places and things can hold us down. In addition, we won't be able to take anything with us, and the same is true about those who come after us.

And yet it is important that we don't underestimate the importance buildings and stuff have for many people, not to convince them of our point of view or let them convince us, but to keep building a community of love, empathy, compassion, and understanding. At the end of the day, building such a sacred community is the most important thing.

With love and blessings,

Rabbi Manes Kogan

