

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center;

A few years ago, a congregant came to see me and asked if I could put together a vow renewal ceremony. Not being familiar with such a ceremony, I explored it a little more and learned that a marriage vow renewal ceremony, also known as a wedding vow reaffirmation ceremony, occurs when a married couple renews or reaffirms their original marriage vows as a way to celebrate and display their commitment to one another.

Vow renewal ceremonies are not necessarily part of the Jewish life cycle, but there is nothing in Jewish law that proscribes them, so resourcefully I put together a short but moving ceremony. However, before I conducted such a ceremony in the intimacy of my study, I wanted to know why, after being married for more than 30 years, they felt that such a ceremony was important.

"You see rabbi," the husband explained, "when we got married over 30 years ago I told my wife 'I love you,' but the truth is that we didn't know each other very well. I had entered into a relationship with the prospect of living an endless honeymoon with a beautiful, gorgeous woman. Now, 30 years later, I want my wife to know that even though the honeymoon is over, and she has more than a few wrinkles, I love her more than before and I wish to grow older together with her."

The renewal of a contract, especially a long term contract, between a rabbi and a congregation is like a vow renewal ceremony. The honeymoon is over, some of the original mutual expectations have been fulfilled and others not. The rabbi is not perfect and the congregation and congregants are not perfect. Each side knows the shortcomings of the other side, and yet, by signing an 11 year contract they declare to each other: I wish to grow older together with you.

A vow renewal ceremony is not a compromise with monotony and certainly it is far from the assertion "better the devil you know than the devil you don't." A vow renewal ceremony, not unlike the renewal of a long term contract, is a declaration of mutual love. It is a love product of mutual knowledge, maturity and experience.

I have been the rabbi of Hillcrest Jewish Center for the last 16 years, longer than in any of my previous congregations (God willing it will be 27 years at the end of this contract). I have also been the rabbi who served the longest after Rabbi Mowshowitz, of blessed memory.

Stability, constancy, and maturity are virtues our society does not always value. We are constantly in search of change, novelty, and glitter. However, stability, constancy, and maturity are more necessary as we get older, both as individuals and as congregations. As a matter of fact, organizational and personal wisdom is a function of shared experiences over a period of time.

On a personal, family, and professional level, I am extremely blessed to be the rabbi of Hillcrest Jewish Center. I feel I found my place in the Jewish community, and more importantly, I found a community at Hillcrest Jewish Center where I can live my Jewish life fully, growing spiritually in Torah and Mitzvot, without compromising my values and my beliefs.

In short, what I am trying to say, is that I am very happy to be your rabbi.

I wish to thank the leadership of Hillcrest Jewish Center, and those who diligently helped negotiate the contract on my behalf and on behalf of the shul. I am grateful to Silvia, Daniela, Ilan, and Abby, who understood long ago that being a congregational rabbi is a family proposition, and accepted it with love and enthusiasm.

Last but not least, I want to thank all of you, members, staff, and friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center, for the renewal of trust, for your constant support, and for your love.

May we gracefully grow older together.

Rabbi Manes Kogan