

Reimagining Hillcrest Jewish Center for a New Reality

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Last month, the leadership of Hillcrest Jewish Center called two virtual membership meetings to discuss plans for a possible sale of the Hillcrest Jewish Center building with arrangements that would allow for the shul to remain in its current location while providing its financial security for the next two decades.

Many Hillcrest Jewish Center members called me, assuming I had some insight they didn't have, and asked me: "Rabbi Kogan, what's going on?" The callers were mainly old-timers, members who have been associated with our shul for many years and remember, what many refer to as, the glorious years of Hillcrest Jewish Center. Indeed, our beloved shul was known across New York and the country not only as "the shul with a pool," the paradigm of the synagogue-community-center espoused by Mordechai Kaplan, but also as Governor Mario Cuomo's shul (Rabbi Mowshowitz was his personal rabbi). Hillcrest Jewish Center not only had thousands of members and Hebrew School students (the number kept growing year after year), but many of those members were judges, politicians, brilliant professionals, and accomplished businessmen. Not only was it difficult to get a High Holy Day seat at Hillcrest (alternative services took place to accommodate everybody who wanted to be part of the new phenomenon), but it wasn't easy to get a spot in the nursery school either. I myself arrived at Hillcrest Jewish Center after the golden years were over, but still witnessed the longing for the good old days. Paraphrasing Lamentations 5:21, the hope was for the "renovation of the days as of old."

Sixteen years later, it is self-evident that those "good old days" are most likely not coming back. Most of the old-timers who were part of Rabbi Mowshowitz's successful experiment are gone. Many of them passed away, and many moved to other communities, driven by more benign winters, the company of children and grandchildren, and more like-minded people.

Our neighborhoods (especially Jamaica Estates and Fresh Meadows) underwent such transformation in the last few years that in many ways makes them unrecognizable. Jamaica Estates and the first three blocks north of Union Turnpike absorbed hundreds, if not thousands, of Bukharian families, who brought to the neighborhood new synagogues, new stores, and new idiosyncrasies. This change in demographics is barely a Hillcrest phenomenon. Every single non-orthodox shul, and even non-Bukharian orthodox shuls in central and eastern Queens has been affected, from Forest Hills to Little Neck. To make my point, we only need to look at the Solomon Schechter School of Queens, where Abby graduated just five years ago. It has become an almost 100% Bukharian orthodox school, with an orthodox rabbi and

a mechitzah (prayer partition). While we have some young families at Hillcrest, mostly from Bayside and Bay Terrace, many of the children of our members and their families decided to buy homes in Port Washington, Plainview, Roslyn, and New Jersey. As the old French expression goes, *c'est la vie* - *that's* life.

And so, given the above facts (and many more that escape the scope of this article), it is imperative for us to ask ourselves – how should we look at Hillcrest Jewish Center and how should we understand our congregation in this new reality?

We can certainly continue to long for the good *old* days, but believe me, it won't help. It *is* time for Hillcrest Jewish Center and its members to embrace new, different strengths, striving to do what we do best, humbly accepting the limitations imposed on us by the changing demographics of eastern Queens.

And what is it that we do best at Hillcrest? What are our shul's strengths in this new reality? What can give us a new *raison d'être* that can sustain our current members and prospective members in the years to come?

I like to suggest three areas in which our shul is making a unique difference, areas in which Hillcrest Jewish Center can pride itself.

Serious Torah Learning. In past years, many of our members embraced, both through Hillcrest and by themselves, serious Torah learning, including participating in many shiurim, learning daf Yomi, listening to Torah podcasts, volunteering to teach others what they knew, preparing divrei Torah, and more. It is time to change “the shul with the pool” to the “shul with Torah.”

Serious Davening (praying experience). Hillcrest Jewish Center is one of the few non-Orthodox shuls in the country (perhaps in the world) that is sustaining a daily minyan in person, twice a day. Believe me, it is true. This is one of the strengths of our shul and we should continue to build on it. More and more of our members know how to lead services and the absence of a Cantor for the last three years, highlighted the current and potential richness of knowledge we have in our shul. We must continue to raise the bar, providing even more opportunities for those who wish to learn Hebrew and davening skills.

Meaningful Connections. Everybody knows that when you can't boost numbers, you must work on quality. The days of standing room only and huge dinner dances are over, but so is the time of anonymity, in which people came to shul to listen to a renowned speaker and nobody talked to them. Nowadays, people join shuls, including Hillcrest Jewish Center, because they want to feel that someone cares for them. They crave human company, and meaningful relationships. We are overall a welcoming shul. Now we must upgrade the quality of the conversation from “small talk” during Kiddush to genuine concern and friendship. Not everybody will be friends with

everybody, but everybody should have one or two people at Hillcrest Jewish Center they feel connected to. Everybody wishes to feel connected. If our members don't come to us, we need to find a way to connect where they are. Our new *Small Groups Initiative* will be working on this.

These are some reflections I wanted to share with you for a while, and what better opportunity than the upcoming High Holy Days in which we get to reflect on our past and plan for our future.

I take this opportunity to wish all of you and your loved ones a year of Torah, a year of spiritual awakening, and a year of meaningful connections; a sweet and good year.

Rabbi Manes Kogan