

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Hopefully you read your emails and by now are aware that I am back from South Carolina, from Chaplain School.

As a quick update, let me share with you that I am back at Hillcrest, that the New York State National Guard told me that they still need me and my clergy skills, and that while I reevaluate my future involvement as a military chaplain, I continue to serve with my unit in Troy, NY.

While I won't reiterate what I wrote in my email, I would like to share with you some thoughts on the responses I received to that email from members of Hillcrest Jewish Center. The responses were private, only addressed to me, and I must say that the overwhelming outpouring of love, support and empathy I received from everybody, truly comforted me and warmed my heart.

Some of the emails and phone calls were focused on my health: "*Rabbi Kogan, try to rest and get your strength back!*" Other emails highlighted the "good news" that I was back: "*Welcome home! The Army's loss is Hillcrest's gain.*" Yet, other emails focused on the fact that I gave it a try, and reminded me how much I mean in their lives: "*Yascher Koach on giving it your best shot!*"

One congregant wrote: "*Despite returning home under circumstances unforeseen, you are to be commended for your effort and courage. Hold your head high, you have nothing to feel low about. I think of the famous quote, by Tennyson, 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.'* To fall short of goals or expectations is not a weakness, it is a strength. Because, although you may have fallen short at this particular moment, the success you will have in future endeavors, will be that much more rewarding. You will always have my respect and appreciation, not just as Rabbi, but as a man, a father, a son, a mentor to many, and to me, a dear friend. Looking forward to seeing you soon."

What all the emails and phone calls I received have in common is your love, kindness, compassion, and empathy.

As your rabbi, not only do I feel comforted by your words, but I feel very proud of you as well. Love, kindness, compassion, and empathy are wonderful character traits we shouldn't take for granted.

The same email I sent to you could have encountered harsh judgment, criticism, or indifference. The fact that it didn't, may speak a little about me and my being your rabbi for 17 years, but it speaks volumes about you.

Many times in the past, I shared with you that the first obnoxious question a rabbi is being asked when meeting other rabbis is "how big is your congregation." The unspoken intention of the person who asks that question is to assert that "mine is bigger than yours," hence, I am better than you. Most rabbis are not interested in how much Torah, prayer, kindness and meaningful connections are created in a particular shul. Perhaps it is not easy to quantify friendship, love and compassion.

For whatever my opinion is worth, I know better.

While Hillcrest Jewish Center and non-Orthodox Judaism in New York are facing demographic challenges, our shul continues to thrive and grow in what really matters. We should all remember that living lives of love, kindness, compassion, and meaning, is the most important treasure we can leave to those who come after us, more than a building, or an endowment fund (and I don't underestimate the connection that

people have to a physical place and the importance of the shul's financial sustainability).

This email started about me, but it is actually about all of you, about all of us. I wanted to tell you how proud I am of you, and how blessed I feel to be your rabbi.

May Hashem bless you with all the best. From my heart,

Rabbi Manes Kogan