

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Thirty years ago I was sitting in front of a rabbinic Beit Din, a Jewish court composed of three rabbis, ready to be examined in order to receive my semikha, my rabbinic ordination. This was in Jerusalem. I remember the weather was pleasant, but I don't remember too much about the exam (only the question I didn't know). After 45 minutes the exam was over and I received the piece of paper that marked a before and after in my life.

I had the not very bright idea of hanging my rabbinic ordination paper by the window in my office. Without my realizing it, the sun faded away the entire text of the ordination and only the signatures of the three rabbis remained (next time you are in my office I will show it to you). Although I did make a photocopy of my rabbinic ordination before it faded away, the truth is I don't look at it very often.

At the beginning of my rabbinic vocation, I needed the paper as a reassurance of who I was or what I was doing. With the passing of time, I grew in confidence and maturity, and I learned that the only way to vouch for the fact that I was a rabbi was by being a rabbi, day after day.

As I told you, I don't remember too much about the day of my rabbinic ordination, but I do remember the days leading to it and especially the night before. I remember having cold feet and sharing with Silvia (we were not married yet) that I wasn't sure becoming a rabbi was a good idea. I felt scared by the prospect of living an observant life. At that time my Kashrut and Shabbat observances were laxer than they are today, and being 27 years old, I lacked the insight to know that I was going to change with time, not only in my religious observance, but in every aspect of my life.

Indeed, my rabbinate shaped my life, and, as expected, my life shaped my rabbinate.

After concluding my rabbinic studies and my Masters from Hebrew University, I returned to Argentina. Silvia and I got married, I got my first pulpit as a rabbi, and Daniela was born. Two years later, perhaps foreseeing difficult years ahead, we moved to the Dominican Republic, and two years later to the United States. This July will be 25 years since we arrived in the United States. We spent eight years in Roanoke, Virginia, Ilan and Abby were born there, and 17 years ago we moved to New York, to Hillcrest Jewish Center.

When I look back at the congregations I served as a rabbi, at the people along the way whose lives I shaped as well as they shaped mine, at Silvia, at our three children, each of them good human beings and proud Jews, when I think of my parents of blessed memory, and when I ponder what I have achieved in these last thirty years, I am filled with pride. The pride I feel doesn't stem from a feeling of superiority and is not the result of comparison with other colleagues. Simply put, when I look at the mirror of life, I like what I see. I like who I see.

Yes, there is always room for improvement. There are always things left undone. Our time on earth is limited and we are limited as well. Imperfection is in the DNA of all of us, and certainly in the DNA of a rabbi. All I can do is to try my best, to create a vessel for God's blessings, and to hope and pray that things in the future will turn out OK. I like to believe that if I were to be offered the rest of my life similar to how it has been so far, I would sign without thinking twice.

Last March 11th, Silvia and I decided to sponsor coffee and cake to celebrate my 30 years of rabbinic ordination. We could have celebrated on our own, but the truth is that all of you are an intrinsic part of who I am. I can only be a rabbi because of all of you. Just for that gift, I am extremely grateful to you.

I hope and pray Hashem will grant us many more years in good health, to celebrate together many more milestones, yours and mine.

In the meantime, let me wish all of you and your loved ones a happy, kosher, and meaningful Pesach.

From my heart,

Rabbi Manes Kogan