

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

On August 26th we recognized the Shlichei Tzibbur (prayer leaders) Sam Bahn, Paul Cohen, Ilan Kogan, Iris Schachter, Mark Solkoff, Esther Tokarz and Beth Ritter, who did the majority of leading Friday night and Shabbat morning services since the retirement of Cantor Fuchs z"l in 2019, until Cantor Rachel joined Hillcrest Jewish Center a few months ago.

On that occasion, Beth Ritter shared inspiring words, which I am including below, with the hope that it will inspire all of you as well, to begin or to continue your Jewish learning journey.

We appreciate all our leaders and volunteers who make Hillcrest Jewish Center the special place that it is.

From my heart,

Rabbi Manes Kogan

*Imagine being a Hebrew know-nothing, suddenly propelled into a need-to-know-something—having no idea how that was to happen. "It's time for the next project," Rabbi Kogan informed me, shortly after I read my haftarah for my 2020 bat mitzvah. "Project?" I looked at him stupidly. Wasn't I done? Nope. The rabbi had other plans, and recruited Iris—the reason I know anything Hebrew—to teach me the Torah Service. Terrified, I somehow got up there, and did it. But, unlike my getting up here and pretending I have something profound to say, there's no "fake it to make it" in davening; you either know it, or you don't. Make no mistake; none of it has come easily to me. I've worked very hard to do whatever I've done, often frustrated by my coming so late to learning Hebrew, to davening; often feeling that it takes reading a service 500 times to feel like I'm ready. (No, I don't have a realistic number; I don't really want to know!)*

*But, as the proverbial "new kid on the block" every single one of the davening veterans has been encouraging and helpful. Every single one of them who is here, and Sam, who is not here today. And, our beloved Cantor Fuchs. I still have part of his message on my machine, which I will never erase. I wish I had not picked up the phone that day, and let him leave the rest of his message. But, during that call, I mentioned Iris, and how much she has taught me. "It's a calling," he noted.*

*For reasons I did not understand, Rabbi Kogan— and Iris—believed I could do this, despite my doubting their sanity. (Those of you who know me, are familiar with my, let's say, trepidations.) So, I did the Torah service. Do you think the rabbi was finished? We know better than that! He has systematically bestowed upon me subsequent services to learn—patiently explaining them—then trying to be patient until I could do them already!; checking on my progress month by month, as I reluctantly shook my head. But, as he now knows, I really can only go as fast as I can go. Sorry, Rabbi. Speaking of sorry, I don't mutter it as often when I make a mistake up there (although I did, last week, losing my place while davening Shacharit ). More often, it's a small (unintentional) laugh, perhaps borne of "Oh, well;" perhaps inspired by the rabbi's reminder not to take myself so seriously? But, isn't davening serious? Sure, but I've learned that, more than the attempted perfection of the delivery, it's the recovery from a mistake—not to stop, to go on—that has helped me.*

*It is a great privilege to stand up here and daven; that fact has never been lost on me. It's hard to describe the feeling, scary as it is. I'm so grateful to have had this opportunity; grateful to Grandma, the reason I've ever gotten up here; so grateful to Iris — my teacher and friend, to my fellow daveners, and Jeffrey, for their inspiration and encouragement, so grateful to the congregants, whose generosity of spirit—whose*

*kindness—those who tell me they appreciate my davening—have kept this old girl continuing to learn. They, and Rabbi Kogan, who won't, it seems, have it any other way. Many blessings to all of you. Thank you so much.*