

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

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The day after Election Day, I shared a message with you with my first reflections on "the day after." A couple of weeks ago, I also shared brief comments from the bimah on the election's results.

Having gotten a lot of feedback from family and friends, and to uphold the saying: "three is a charm," I decided to share with all of you, this time through the HJC newsletter, a revision to my reflections, which I hope you'll find meaningful.

In my previous message, after Election Day, I wrote:

A shul is an oasis; a place to be together with our friends and to connect with the Divine, with Hashem. It is imperative that we preserve this characteristic of our shul, and not allow heated or hurtful comments to enter our makom kadosh, our holy space. It is enough to trust that we all share similar hopes for our country and for our families, even if one on either side may struggle to fathom how another's path gets them to that similar desired destination. Our Sages share that one of the two reasons Hashem made certain that no two people look exactly alike is so we would have a physical reminder that no two people think alike either (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 58a). We all have cast our vote. Some of you went a step further and actively campaigned in favor of one candidate or another. Now that we have done what we needed to do, our Hishtadlut (our effort), is, for the time being, complete. Our Torah dictates that at a certain juncture we must also put our trust in Hashem and believe that things will work out for the best.

As I reread my words, I stand by them.

On the Shabbat after Election Day, I added that the best way to preserve a sense of harmony, friendship, and companionship, among people who have very strong and opposite opinions on divisive topics, is to avoid talking about them. I also highlighted – using the example of Abraham and Lot – that sometimes, and I believe this is one of these times, the best way to avoid a confrontation is to stay away from that space of confrontation. As I advised extended families who have a tradition of ending

Thanksgiving meals with a major fight: stay away from Thanksgiving meals with your extended family!

However – and here comes the revision of my previous statement – there is a possibility to hold conversations on difficult and divisive topics under some rules of engagement:

- 1) Those engaged in the conversation are ready and choose to be part of that conversation. In other words, a special space and time for that conversation is established, as opposed to throwing the topic on people who are not ready or willing to engage in it.
- 2) The goal of the conversation is to listen to others who think and feel differently, with respect, and to learn from them without trying to convince them that they are wrong.
- 3) Those engaged in the conversation do it knowing that the opinions of the people taking part in the conversation may touch on sensitive issues or expose thoughts and opinions for which they might not be ready.
- 4) The conversation needs to be facilitated by someone with experience in facilitating difficult conversations. That person will make sure everyone around the table feels validated and has a chance to speak and to share with others what they think and feel.

My personal experience, even with very close friends, is that most people are not ready for conversations on difficult and divisive topics, and hence it is better to stay away from them, if we ought to preserve the sacred spaces of our families and congregations.

Again, my experience is that most conversations that take place around difficult and divisive topics are among people who share the same opinion and who enjoy validating each other's points of view or calling names on those who differ with them.

However, I am glad to be proven wrong, and while personally I am not ready for it, I will be open to a space for a "conversation on difficult topics" at Hillcrest Jewish Center, under the above right conditions.

I also reiterate that if you feel especially anxious about the future of our country, Israel, the Jewish people, or any other issue, and feel I can help, please reach out to me, and let me try to make a difference. You can always reach me on my cell phone: 718-570-3032.

May Hashem bless this great country of the United States of America, and may its best days lie ahead.

With love, faith,
and optimism,

Rabbi Manes Kogan