

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center.

My teacher once told me, "Time flies." I replied, "You can't, they're too fast."

Joke aside, time flies, indeed. As I write this message at the beginning of the month of August, I realize that I am beginning my 20th year at Hillcrest Jewish Center. In the last 19+ years since I began my tenure at Hillcrest, countless things happened in my personal life, in the life of my family, in the life of our congregation, in the life of the State of Israel and the Jewish people, and in the world.

In my personal life and family life, I saw my children go through elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. I saw my parents, of blessed memory, getting old and passing away in Israel. I also became a US citizen, and joined the US Army, perhaps the most challenging and unexpected move in my professional career. I took up golf, my game got a little better, and again, I realized there is always room for improvement. Last, but not least, my hair turned white and two of my children got engaged.

Israel (and all of us) suffered October 7th and are still dealing with its aftermath, including hundreds of Israeli soldiers killed in a war that doesn't have an end in sight, and many of our brothers and sisters still in the tunnels in Gaza.

We saw a rise in Antisemitism, the like we haven't experienced since the Shoah. America saw its first African American President and we saw President Trump winning an election, losing one, and coming back to the White House.

We experienced what looks (hopefully) like the demise of Hezbollah, the bombing by Israel and the US of Iran's nuclear facilities, the Abraham accords, the US embassy moved to Jerusalem, and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria.

Our world experienced a pandemic and exponential technological growth, including the proliferation of smart phones in every aspect of our lives. As I write these words, we can only anticipate the effect that artificial intelligence will have on our lives.

The Hillcrest Jewish Center of today looks different than the one in 2006, when Silvia, our three little children, and I arrived in New York. Many of our dearest members passed away in the last 19 years, including many past-presidents and our beloved Cantor Fuchs.

Our neighborhood, especially Jamaica Estates and Fresh Meadows, looks very different today than 19 years ago. The influx of Bukharian families in Eastern Queens brought new Kosher supermarkets and new Kosher restaurants. It also had a deep effect on non-orthodox congregations like ours, on our Hebrew schools, and on the old Solomon Schechter School of Queens.

Our congregation, while shrinking in numbers, experienced a growth in Torah, mitzvot, and a sense of community. Our minyan, while losing many minyanaires and gaining new ones, remained strong.

Perhaps our newest and most significant change is the refreshing new presence of Cantor Rachel Black, who not only is enhancing our services Shabbat after Shabbat, but is strengthening our shul, helping build a new core of young families and leadership through a series of robust engagement programs.

I am not sure how our shul will look in the next 20 years.

One thing I do know: it will depend mainly on its members. The religious and lay leadership will continue to work hard for the betterment of our shul. We have good ideas, innovative projects, a devoted staff and dedicated custodians (some of them have been at Hillcrest Jewish Center for more than 30 years).

However, a congregation is as strong as its members. We need your participation. We promise to “feed you” both spiritually, and with New York bagels, the best bagels in America. But we need your presence.

Read the daily emails (a big yishar koach to Melissa), the bulletin (a big yishar koach to Joan), and the website (a big yishar koach to Nadine), and be amazed at the quality and quantity of our programs and activities. And speaking of programs, save the date for Sunday, September 14, when Hillcrest Jewish Center will be hosting Rabbi Shai Held, founder of the Hadar Institute.

As I finished writing this article, I realized that the Tishrei holidays are around the corner, so let me wish you, and all your loved ones, a good, joyous, healthy, and sweet year.

Rabbi Manes Kogan