

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Over the last month, I had the opportunity to travel to Rome and to Florida. Without giving it too much thought, I always wear my kippah visible (and most times my tzitzit as well).

Thank God, I never experienced any physical attack or verbal discrimination because of my Jewish identity. I know other people have been attacked, both in the U.S. and abroad, but I am just stating that, thank God, this was not my case.

What I did experience, and continue to experience increasingly, are positive remarks by less observant Jews, who are proud to share with me that they are Jewish as well, and by many non-Jews, who want to express to me their support for the Jewish people and the Jewish state. "Good for you, to wear your yarmulke on the street!" "May God bless Israel!" "We are sorry for October 7!" "Shalom!" are just a few of the reactions I encountered lately. Two people even asked me to bless them, which I did, by using the words of the priestly benediction and adding: "May the God of Israel, bless you!"

My recent experiences show me, in an unequivocal way, that when I wear my Jewish and Zionist identities on the outside, people respect me more. I believe the opposite is also true: if I were to hide or even underplay my Jewish and Zionist identities, people will respect me less.

We are living in extremely challenging times, and the times may not get easier.

Last November 19, more than 200 protesters outside Park East Synagogue in Manhattan chanted: "We need to make them scared!" The demonstration, which targeted an event hosted by Nefesh b'Nefesh, an organization that assists Jews with immigration to Israel (Aliyah), has been widely condemned as an act of antisemitism and targeted intimidation. And yet, intimidating acts of antisemitism and anti-Zionism are opportunities for all of us to become major players in the fighting back. Strengthening our Jewish and Zionist identities, increasing our Torah observance, traveling to Israel, displaying Israeli flags, wearing a kippah on the street (even if you don't call yourself a religious Jew), should be seen today, as true acts of resistance.

Indeed, we are living in challenging times, but we can transform them into historic times as well. We must do what the hour demands from us, so when our children and grandchildren, and the younger generations ask us: where were you when the antisemites chanted "We need to make them scared!"? we could answer with our heads high: I was standing tall, with my kippah and with my Israeli flag, on the other side of the street.

Rabbi Manes Kogan