

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Twenty years ago, when I became the rabbi of Hillcrest Jewish Center, I was told that among my rabbinical responsibilities was leading a Community Passover Seder together with Cantor Fuchs, of blessed memory.

I confess I didn't like the idea. Growing up, the Passover seder was at the center of my Jewish experience, always linked to fond family memories. For me, a seder was synonymous with family—just family. Hence, the idea of sharing a seder with strangers was, pun intended, strange to me.

However, being new in my position, I didn't have a choice, and I "dragged" my family to our first community seder, which traditionally took place on the second night.

The Community Passover Seder was indeed a community seder—open to the public, with few or no Hillcrest Jewish Center members in attendance. I was told that it was a seder for those who "didn't have a place to go," as everyone in the leadership of the shul, and the families with children our kids age, had a place to go—usually their own home.

With the passing of the years, three interesting things happened.

First, Silvia and I started enjoying and appreciating the Community Passover Seder. Since I was leading it and needed to be there with my family anyway, I tried to make it more engaging and fun. Cantor Fuchs and I worked together to make the seder the way "we" liked it, and our enthusiasm slowly rubbed off on the participants.

Second, I realized that many of the participants didn't have anywhere to go for their first seder either, so I encouraged the leadership to move the Community Passover Seder to the first night.

Third, an increasing number of Hillcrest Jewish Center members, including families with children our children's age, have started attending. The seder remains a community event open to the wider public, but we are seeing more and more familiar faces. This includes members of the Hillcrest Jewish leadership and friends who either didn't have a place to go or, even more interestingly, decided to bring their entire family to the Hillcrest Jewish Center Community Passover Seder.

This past Pesach, my 20th at Hillcrest Jewish Center, was the first one we spent with Ilan and Abby's spouses. We explained to them that while we planned an intimate seder for the second night, we had 86 guests for the first. The guest list included a couple of their friends, a few regular minyannaires, past presidents of the shul, young families, and several members of the larger community—including members of neighboring shuls—for whom we are the only family they have, and who look forward to this seder every year.

So, how was the seder?

It was wonderful, but if you don't believe me, just ask those who attended! The food, the organization, and the camaraderie were excellent. Everything worked out perfectly thanks to

our chairperson, Hariette Wittenberg Saturn; Nadine Kochavi, our executive director; the Hillcrest Jewish Center staff (Juana, Brona, and Melissa); and the custodians (including Manny, Orlando, and Wilson) who helped us on the seder night. Cantor Rachel and I led the seder in a very relaxed atmosphere, and we all had a great time.

And if you missed it, don't worry. You can join us next year—in Jerusalem, or right here at Hillcrest Jewish Center.

With blessings,

Rabbi Manes Kogan