



September 1, 2026

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

This past July I celebrated 20 years at Hillcrest Jewish Center (I hope you celebrated as well).

20 years ago, on July 19, 2006, Silvia and I traveled to New York with Daniela (11), Ilan (7) and Abby (3) filled with many dreams and expectations, but also with uncertainties. Would we like the congregation? Would the congregation like us? How would the day-to-day work look? Would Silvia be able to find a job? Would the children like the school, make friends, and strengthen their Jewish identity, the main reason that made us move to New York?

After 20 years, many of these original questions have been answered, while new questions keep us awake at night: What will happen with us, Jews in New York, and America? Are these antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiments and actions we are experiencing something that will go away soon, or is this the new reality that arrived here to stay? And is moving to Israel the solution, now, when many Israelis themselves are emigrating?

While the questions we had 20 years ago and the ones we have now are different, what remained constant is the way I see my rabbinate.

Eight years ago, when I received the Rabbi Israel and Libby Mowshowitz Award, I had the opportunity to state my priorities as a rabbi, what I called then, the "Rabbi Manes Kogan Way."

What sustains my daily work? What are my priorities as the rabbi of Hillcrest Jewish Center? Where do I concentrate my efforts? How do I envision the shul of which I am the rabbi? What makes my approach to being a rabbi different, unique?

As I celebrate 20 years at Hillcrest Jewish Center, here is another opportunity to share the three pillars of my rabbinate and to invite you to embrace them.

“The world is sustained with kindness,” (Psalms 89:3)

God sustains the universe through His kindness. Similarly, congregations, communities and families can only be sustained through kindness. I see our shul as a laboratory where people, through their daily interactions, learn and experience how to act with kindness, how to become more compassionate, more sensitive human beings. If we make mistakes, we learn from them and move forward. Chesed should not be a project, or a committee, but the way we live our lives. There cannot be, there shouldn't be more important business at Hillcrest Jewish Center, than the way we treat each other. The rest is commentary.

When it comes to Torah, Mitzvot, and Israel, more is more, and less is less.

“Light” might be good for a salad dressing or for a soda, but it is not good for Judaism. In a time and place where Judaism is becoming diluted, thinner, and less fashionable, making it more diluted, and thinner, will make Judaism even less fashionable. People respect hard work, commitment, and effort – even though they might not be ready yet for hard work, commitment, and effort. Being a Jew of the 21st century shouldn't be the same as being a light Jew. We should raise the bar, challenge our congregants, and hope they will rise to the occasion. We should actively encourage more Jewish education, more observance, and a deeper connection with Israel.

Klai Kodesh don't own the monopoly on Torah teaching and leading prayers.

Torah learning skills and prayer skills must be democratized. At Hillcrest Jewish Center, our members are encouraged to study and to teach Torah, to deliver divrei Torah, to lead services, to read Torah, and to share their newly acquired knowledge with others. Cantor Rachel Black has been a wonderful partner in this effort. At Hillcrest, not only do we have lay leaders who teach classes and lead services, but we have even “exported” Torah readers to other shuls.

As I celebrate 20 years with you, I look forward to many more good, meaningful, and fruitful years together.

Last but not least, may Hashem bless you and all your loved ones with a sweet, healthy and good year.

Rabbi Manes Kogan