

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yom Kippur

5768

Rabbis and congregants alike developed the expression "High Holy Days Jew" to refer to someone who is proud of being Jewish, but his active involvement in congregational life is restricted to three days during the year.

It is no secret that rabbis usually would like to see their congregants at shul more often. Rabbis invest a lot of time in preparing classes, developing programs, and bringing scholars, and there is a sense of understandable frustration when half a dozen couples turn up for an activity, for which they expected at least fifty or sixty people.

Since today is Yom Kippur, I must make a confession.

I was one of the countless rabbis, who, somehow, felt more admiration and empathy for those synagogue members who come to services every week, or who attend activities regularly, than for those who –in my own derogatory thoughts- "remember they are Jewish once a year." This confession comes together with thoughts of repentance and contrition: I used to feel this way, but not any more.

Today I look at my parents, my brother, my uncles and aunts, and some of my Jewish friends, all of them "High Holy Days Jews" with a new sense of respect. Today I look at you, and I look at myself before I became a rabbi, with a new sense of admiration.

I used to believe that a Jew who comes to shul on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur was paying lip services to a vestige of an old practice. I didn't understand what the secret of the High Holy Days was. What makes some of you, busy people during the year, removed from daily prayers and complex rituals, want to listen to a cantor chant old melodies, listen to the Torah reading, the rabbi's sermons, or the blowing of the shofar?

The answer to these questions lies not in the past year, or the past two years, or the past ten, twenty or fifty years of your lives. The answer to these questions is in the year ahead. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are more about our future connection than about our past experience.

All of us are here today, because we are all searchers. We are here because, knowingly or unknowingly, we want to extract some meaning from old melodies, from the Torah reading, and from the sound of the shofar.

Even those who attend services only for Yizkor, half an hour a year, are searching for a special connection. Maybe this year will be the year. Maybe seeing other Jews, seeing the Torah, or remembering my parents and grandparents will give a new meaning to my life.

Yizkor is not about repeating an old practice and it is not about paying our respect to those who preceded us in life either.

Yizkor is all about connection, It is about connecting with my parents and grandparents and it is about connecting with hundred of thousands or even millions of Jews throughout the world who, at least today, do as I do and feel as I feel. Yizkor is also about reconnecting with my Jewish experience, it is about trying to capture beautiful past moments before they fade away.

When I close my eyes I remember my first High Holy Days. My father took me to my zeide's shul. It was the only time in the year we went to shul. Other grandchildren were running around, in and out, while an old man chanted prayers I didn't understand. I remember that my zeide's friend, Mr. Groner, may his memory be for a blessing, gave me and my brother candy. I close my eyes even tighter and I can remember how the candies looked, how they tasted.

I remember my father's Machzor. It was all in Hebrew, with a silver cover. I close my eyes and see myself caressing the book and loving the words inside even before I understood them.

I remember bonding with my father during the High Holy Days. My father worked long hours, even during weekends and most of the time I was with

my mother. Being with my father alone, even for a few hours, was a special treat.

I close my eyes tight and I try to recover as many moments as possible. I do it not out of cheap romanticism, but because somehow deep in my soul I feel that the past can illuminate my future.

However, when my wife and I try to tell our children about our childhood emotional connections, we get, in the best of the scenarios, only their respectful attention.

My parents built a Jewish past for me, with their accomplishments and failures, with their achievements and limitations, and that was their most important gift to me. It is our responsibility to do the same for our children, our grandchildren and the future generations.

If I want my children to draw strength from the past, the only way I will be able to do it is if I help them create that past.

Yizkor is not about the past as much as it is about the future. It is about drawing strength from our loved ones who preceded us in life in order to empower the next generation.

In this regard, Yizkor is not more and not less than an exercise; an exercise that combines memory and determination, reminiscence and resolution.

Our loved ones whom we remember today blessed us with strong, vivid and meaningful Jewish memories. It is up to us to do the same for those who come after us. As your rabbi, I wish I could do the job for you, but I can't. I believe I can help you, but you need to do it alone

Here at Hillcrest Jewish Center we can help you reconnect with the beauty of Judaism, with the richness of our texts and with the complexity of our common history. Just choose one, or two, or three activities that are close to your heart within the array of possibilities that our shul has to offer:

The activities include weekly classes by the Rabbi, special lectures, Ahava meditations by Cantor Fuchs, religious school, youth groups, Israeli dances,

Sisterhood luncheons, Men's Club activities, Leisure Club, Junior Congregation, Ketanim, classes led by lay leaders of our shul, Hebrew classes, Torah and Haftarah trop classes, daily minyan mornings and evenings, Seudah Shelishit, a Jewish films series, thematic Shabbat luncheons, Tea and Schmooze, Shabbat dinners, a joyous spiritual trip to Israel led by Cantor Fuchs, and the list goes on.

The professionals and staff members of Hillcrest Jewish Center, together with a group of dedicated volunteers are putting all the above programs and activities together with the hope that some of them will resonate with your needs and expectations and that you, dear member of Hillcrest Jewish Center will enrich all of us with your presence throughout the year. Most of these activities are part of the benefits of membership, require a nominal fee or are free and open to the public.

All of us here today are searchers. We are here because, knowingly or unknowingly, we want to reconnect to our immediate and remote past and because we don't want our future generations to remain rootless.

We all are in the same boat, rabbi and congregants, "High Holy Days Jews" and those who spend more time here than at their own homes. My parents, my brother, my friends and I, we all are trying to grasp a piece of meaning; we are all trying to reconnect with our roots. It didn't happen last year, or the year before, or the year before, but we don't give up, we are here again, one more time, and we keep trying year after year, and for that all of you deserve my greatest respect and consideration.

Since The High Holy Days are about the future, and not about the past, we all have the same potential during this coming year.

May the memory of our loved ones move us to action and may God bless each of you and your families with a good, healthy, sweet, prosperous and meaningful year!