

Kol Nidre 2024 –

There is so much to say, and I feel like there are no more words.

This was apparently not a problem for me when I was seven. My second grade teacher actually wrote on my report card that while I was a good student, my parents “should encourage Ameer to do something other than talk when she finishes her work.” I wasn’t exactly a troublemaker - I think I just distracted others from finishing their work when I was done. The dynamics of managing a classroom seemed easier back then. The teacher spoke, you listened. That was the rule.

When I was student teaching for the first time years later, it never really occurred to me that you needed to actually know how to manage a classroom. I was the teacher. The students should listen to me. Ha. That was a funny idea. They did not. So I quickly learned how to offer fun incentives, both for individual students as well as for the whole class, so that my students wanted to listen, wanted to learn, and wanted to discover whatever useful wisdom it was that I was about to impart that day. It didn’t always work. But most of the time, if you are willing to have a little fun, children want to do the right thing. So I made star charts, filled jars with marbles, and gave out a lot of stickers. Stickers are magical to 7 year olds.

But now, I have no magical stickers to give out, no star charts to encourage good listening or appropriate behavior, no marbles for working together as a diverse group of individuals towards a common goal.

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So tonight, I’m going to go back to tradition. It is customary for someone to give a Kol Nidre appeal from the bimah, to share their story of why their community is important to them, how it has made a profound and meaningful difference in their life, and why they want others to join them in contributing to the success of the organization that has perhaps become like their extended family. And so, for my final time sharing some words with you during the High Holidays here at Hillel UW, I am going to humbly, and with conviction, invite you to ensure that this organization is here for our Jewish students, young adults, and community members for decades to come. For all the good times yet to become cherished

memories, for all the lifelong friendships yet to be made, for all the Jewish experiences and learning and food yet to be enjoyed. For all the mistakes yet to be made, for the endless cups of coffee yet to be consumed, for the nuanced, or intentional, and perhaps most importantly, the spontaneous conversations yet to be had, and for the professionals who will always be there to listen, guide, share and hold it all. For the future. Because there will be a future.

For just a moment, though, let's look back to see where this particular story begins. In 1923, the very first Hillel began with a noble mission and breathtaking vision: a handful of students in a rented room above a barbershop in Champaign, Illinois, embarked on their mission to share Jewish life with a new generation. And now, through the dedication of students, volunteer leadership, and professionals, Hillel has grown into a worldwide movement, serving more than 140,000 students each year across 850 campuses in 16 countries around the world.

Last year, 100 years after that first Hillel opened in Illinois, Hillel International was poised to celebrate their Centennial. As they reached this milestone as a movement, their goal was to collectively raise 100 million dollars across the field to support not only Hillel International's endowment, but to help individual Hillel's across the country start capital campaigns for much-needed buildings, or create an endowment when there was none, or to grow an already existing endowment.

It was an opportunity we were excited to be a part of. Our history here in Seattle began in 1940, when Hillel at the University of Washington hired its first rabbi, rented a house up the street from our current location, and hosted its first Passover lunches. I remember that red brick house very well. I remember going there for Passover lunch as a UW student, and I remember working there as a young adult back in the 1990's. I even remember the fundraising event with Edgar Bronfman when the dishwasher broke and the dirty dishes were piled up in the small kitchen and it took days to wash them all by hand. I remember hearing about the conversation that started as a result, that if we were going to have to replace the dishwasher, perhaps we should remodel the entire kitchen to make it a bit larger to meet the growing needs, that then morphed into the conversation

that perhaps we should think about a bigger, newer building for our Jewish students at UW.

In 2004, this building opened after a successful community-wide capital campaign, thanks to exceptional lay leaders like Michele Rosen, Karen Gamoran and others, along with the Rabbi and Executive Director at the time, Dan Bridge. A small endowment was started back then, that has grown to over 3 million dollars.

Our goal for joining in on this national Hillel campaign was clear. We wanted to raise an additional 5 million dollars to increase our current endowment so that the funds we draw from it each year would offer this Hillel additional stability. Our current endowment draw only covers 8% of our total annual budget, and the best practice for non-profits should be closer to 20%.

So last summer, Terri Green, who had been our Director of Advancement for the past nine years, worked closely with me and the Hillel International Team to craft a beautiful and heartfelt campaign that we called “***The Promise of a New Generation***”. It outlines three everlasting areas of impact that we were excited to invite our donors to invest in: 1 - Jewish Life and Learning, 2 - Wellness and Counseling, and 3 - Immersive Experiences to Israel and Beyond. Each of these areas of impact includes an opportunity to name and endow another position, such as our Senior Jewish Educator, our counselor, or our Israel Fellow.

We even spoke to a few key donors, and began planning parlor meetings to share our excitement. And then October 7th happened. And our time and our energy understandably went to the immediate and ongoing work of caring for our students and our campus community in completely unexpected and unimaginable ways.

If it hadn't been clear before, this past year highlighted the vital importance of Hillel and what we uniquely offer: Jewish Life and Impact. Wellness and Counseling. And Israel.

Our Shabbat dinner numbers increased dramatically last year. Students who had never come to Hillel before were now seeking out spaces to be with like-minded individuals, to have moments of respite from the onslaught of misinformation and noise on campus, or to have real conversations about what was going on with people who would listen, hold, and help educate them. Our Jewish learning

cohorts ranged in content from Understanding Antisemitism to Jewish Song Leading and Sephardic Cooking classes. There was something for everyone - All Kinds of Jewish. While our strategies for bringing Jewish learning to campus may shift from generation to generation, our commitment to sharing Torah and its relevance to daily life with our students remains unwavering. Holiday celebrations for Hanukkah, Purim and Passover will always offer deep and meaningful moments of connection. This is Jewish life and impact.

Our counselor works closely with our team to offer opportunities for art therapy, stress-reduction tips and techniques, and provides 1:1 sessions for hundreds of students. Last year was no exception. Our current counselor, Orliyah, continues the ground-breaking effort that began more than 25 years ago, when Hillel UW was the first Hillel in the world to offer a Licensed Mental Health Professional in partnership with Jewish Family Service. In the past five years, we have purposefully expanded our Wellness programming to address the growing physical and mental health needs of our students who are now living in not only a post-Covid but now a post-October 7th world. How is it possible that this essential position has not yet been endowed? My father would have said that it is because no one has asked yet. So tonight, I am asking. Ensuring that Jewish students and young adults in our community will always have this kind of immediate and necessary access to essential mental health counseling services cannot be taken for granted. This generation has enough to think about and contend with. Let's make sure that a future board of this Hillel never has to consider defunding the counselor line item on the budget because the money wasn't there.

Two years ago, Hillel International strongly encouraged us to participate in their Israel Fellow program, and hire a Israeli to join our staff full-time to help navigate and address issues that were arising - someone who along with providing robust Israel education, leadership and engagement, would also be trained with the necessary tools to support students when they encountered anti-Israel sentiment on campus. If there was ever a time we are grateful to have an Israel Fellow on our team, it is now. And as soon as our immersive trips to Israel continue, it will be in their portfolio to help recruit and staff those life-changing opportunities. Immersive trips to Israel and beyond include all of our alternative spring break trips, and our JDC Entwine trips to visit the Jewish communities in countries like

India, Poland, Georgia and Greece that expand their view as global Jewish citizens. These are the critical stepping stones to leadership and learning.

Today, the college experience for students continues to evolve from the impact of the pandemic, the rise of antisemitism, and societal changes at large. Jewish young adults need the wisdom of tradition and the support of their community to help them meet life's complex challenges.

Annual donations are essential to the health and well-being of this organization, but if you are in position to give a bit more, an investment in our ***Promise of a New Generation*** endowment campaign will guarantee that Hillel UW continues to boldly transform the lives of Jewish young adults now and into the future. Even in this past year of challenge, we raised over \$800,000 towards our total goal of \$5 million dollars.

I am asking you tonight to help us meet this moment and ensure that Hillel UW is here to provide a home for Jewish students and young adults for generations to come. If you want to know more about how you can make your gift, I invite you to come to talk to me.

I know that I am fresh out of star charts, marbles, and stickers. And there are just no more words to describe all the things that I am trying to hold right now.

But I do know, with my deepest conviction, that this is the legacy that I want to leave. I have dedicated my entire career to this, and I can think of no greater investment we could ever make together than in the future of the Jewish people.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.