

Rosh Hashanah – 2024/5785

Four years ago, I stood in this room, mostly alone, surrounded not by people but by special lights, cameras, microphones and tech specialists. As we live streamed our services that year, I shared some of my thoughts about time. How we measure time. How we wish time could stop going by so fast. How we judge ourselves, and each other, based on how we think we are using, or perhaps even wasting, time.

I shared some of the different ways I have experienced time throughout my life.

- Giving birth to my first child who went directly into the nicu instead of into my arms and for days, having no idea if it was 2 AM or 2 PM - this was hospital time.
- Losing a loved one and knowing that somehow the rest of the world had the audacity to keep moving forward when my world had stopped - the mail was still being delivered, a neighbor was walking her dog and talking on the phone, people were going to school or work - while I was getting dressed in black, preparing to go to a cemetery for a funeral - This was grief time.
- Undergoing treatment for breast cancer eight years ago and finding that sometimes I needed to sleep during the day or found myself fully awake at night, was to experience chemo time.

And then we all navigated Covid time, where the days blended together and we couldn't quite remember what day it was when we woke up each morning - was it Tuesday or Shabbat again?

Tonight, I have the overwhelming urge to go back in time, to a world that was pre-October 7th. Because on that day, almost one year ago, time stopped. And then time shifted.

The world in many ways now feels upside down and backwards. So many people have lost the ability to communicate with care. To hold another's point of view without judgment. To champion a social justice cause with actual knowledge of the entirety of the situation.

And it feels so very personal. This year, too many lives have been lost. Too many families torn apart. Too many hostages remain in captivity. Too many basic needs for food, water, and medical supplies, left unmet. Too many political decisions being made that we cannot agree with, let alone control.

And now, how I spend my time, as a Hillel Director, feels fundamentally different.

This past year, Hillel professionals all over the country were called upon to be present in spaces that did not necessarily address the core work we signed up to do. This may come as a surprise to you, but it is not actually in our Hillel mission statements to fight antisemitism on our campuses. But this was not a time where we had the luxury of this being someone else's responsibility. Our students, faculty and staff needed us to advocate for them with our University administrators. Our parents, community members, and donors needed to know we were doing everything we could to make sure our Jewish students felt safe and protected. Some days were better than others. Responding to protests, demonstrations, encampments, and endless graffiti became our day to day work. The Hillel International movement rapidly and impressively responded to the darkness of this moment with security grants, media training, and programmatic content we could repurpose, all the while reminding us that antisemitism has never been and never will be what defines Jewish communal campus life.

My wonderful colleague, Adena Kirstein, the Executive Director at George Washington Hillel in DC, wrote an extraordinary piece this past

spring that she titled “Centering Jewish Identity Development, Even When There is Antisemitism on Campus.” She shared, “What feels like an endless year is now coming to a close. Dorms have emptied out, summer internships have begun, and at long last there is something many of us Hillel professionals have been craving: silence. We are clearing our heads, taking a collective deep breath, and trying to make sense of the marathon we just ran and the horrible last mile we made it through. It is time to look back and reconsider everything that happened on campus during the months between October 7th and graduation. Did the statements and the angry emails and the Instagram posts we crafted in November and December ultimately do anything to protect us from encampments and antisemitism in April and May? Did we use our voices wisely? What can we do better next year?”

Jewish life on campus seems unrecognizable, she offers. Both Jewish students themselves and the world around them are radically different from what they once were. And yet, in other ways, their needs are the same as they have always been: to grow as Jews and to determine what it means to them to be Jewish.

Understanding today’s American Jewish college students, she explains, requires that we recognize the world in which they’ve grown up. Our students were born after 9/11, after Columbine, and shortly before Sandy Hook. While George W Bush was in the White House when they were born, their political identities have been shaped primarily by the Trump and Biden presidencies. They do not know a world without TSA pat-downs, without metal detectors at baseball stadiums, with security cameras tracking their every move. They have participated in active shooter drills from the time they started school. In their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff argue that the overall effect of all of these events on young adults in

America today has been to teach them that the world can - and should - be divided between the good guys and the bad guys.

This world that our students know is almost inseparable from the online world of social media. They don't share quick life updates on Facebook like I might do. Instead, if I get this right, they film a reel on Instagram, share a video on TikTok, update the world on their new job via LinkedIn, or perhaps put a quick slice-of-life moment on Snapchat. But where are the lines between real life and the virtual, social media world? Who draws them? Are they sharp or blurred? No longer can students consider the nuances of a Zionist identity in isolation, or over coffee with a friend or a Hillel staff member. Instead, their visions and viewpoints are clouded by the virtual world that spills over into their everyday lives. In these difficult and painful times for Israel and the Jewish people, this added layer of social media adds fuel to a fire that is ever on the precipice of raging.

Adena asks: What messages are we sending to our students when our greatest interest in their campus lives is directly tied to our own greatest fears?

When the well-intentioned community off campus only calls because of an antisemitic incident or only sends money in response to an anti-Zionist protest on campus, our students learn that our communal priority is not to thrive, but to survive. We need to do both, of course. Ultimately, we won't thrive if we don't survive. But one cannot come at the expense of the other. Adena calls on all of us to reject the notion that we must choose between defense of our people and celebration of Jewish possibility. When our students are nurtured and fortified in their identity development, all else becomes possible, she declares.

When students arrive on campus, as they have just last week here at UW, they seek out a place of belonging. Perhaps they will find it in a

sorority or fraternity, with a student organization, or right here, at Hillel. They are yearning for companionship, and for teachers. Some of these teachers may be actual educators they meet in the classroom, while some may be informal mentors in other areas of campus. But more likely, students will learn from their peers as they walk alongside one another on the same path towards identity development. When I was homesick as a new college student, I could write my parents a letter that was mailed, and took 4-5 days to reach them. Or I could talk with them on a corded telephone, once a week, on Sunday, when the rates were lowest. Now we have endless and immediate access to everyone, everywhere. Social media is here to stay. But that doesn't mean that today's college students shouldn't be afforded the same intentional spaces to develop meaningful and lasting relationships while discovering who they are and what is important to them as young adults.

So, is there a way of responding to antisemitism on campus that is actually focused not on fixing the problem of antisemitism, but on building our college students' Jewish identities? Focusing more deeply and intentionally on the joy, not the oy, of being Jewish, together, in community?

Our programming will include all of the things that make Jewish Joy come alive: weekly Shabbat dinners, song-leading circles, wellness activities, challah baking, bagel lunches, coffee conversations, game nights and all kinds of Jewish learning opportunities. We will empower our students to lean into their voices, center their energy and excitement, and call their friends to action, especially as many will be voting in their first presidential election in just a few weeks. We will travel, we will grow, we will learn. Together.

This past year, I sat in meeting after meeting with our University administrators, and will continue to do so. I am cautiously optimistic that our UW Provost, Tricia Serio, will be successful in the launch of her campus-wide project this Fall to promote learning environments that encourage curiosity, critical thinking, active listening, productive dialogue, and shared responsibility. As UW President Cauce wrote in the latest issue of the UW Magazine, “We have both an opportunity and an obligation to equip students for lives and careers in which they can lead with empathy and collaborate across difference to achieve positive impact in their communities and in the world. That preparation must include providing them with the tools to engage in meaningful dialogue with those who hold different perspectives, experiences and beliefs, which is a precondition for creating lasting change.” When she joined us for our Welcome Back BBQ last week, she reiterated to the energized crowd of over 100 new and returning students that the University of Washington wants our Jewish students, faculty, and staff to feel safe on our campus, to know they are wanted, and that they belong in our community.

These high holidays, as we pray for peace and understanding, I encourage each of us to seek out and find opportunities to connect, to learn, to volunteer, to actively take control of the things we do have the agency to change. We have both an opportunity and an obligation to help center Jewish identity development - even when there is antisemitism on our campus.

In this new year, may we remember that what we do with our time matters. And with that time, let us find, build, create and experience the many moments of joy awaiting us - however large or small they may be. And may those moments of joy provide us with the fortitude to bring about the change we so desperately need in our world.