

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Listening to new voices: GVSU Jewish student speaks

Allie Egrin *Hillel president and senior, GVSU*

Editor's note: This is the first in a series of insights from area college students based on talks they gave at this year's Abrahamic Dinner. Allie Egrin is a senior at Grand Valley State University studying marketing and dance, with a minor in French, and served as the president of Hillel, a Jewish campus organization. Her involvement in student-led organizations has sparked her passion for the nonprofit world and interfaith dialogue. After graduation, Allison plans to develop further her skills as a professional in the Jewish nonprofit world.

Growing up in metro Detroit kept me sheltered from the reality of being a minority and, quite frankly, allowed me to take my Jewish religion and culture for granted. "You don't know what you have until it's gone" is how I would describe my relationship with Judaism. When I decided to attend Grand Valley State University, my mom alluded to the culture shock I would experience when I moved here. She would just look at me and say, "It's ... different. It's definitely going to be different from here." As a naive 17-year-old eager to start college and experience freedom and change, I would just nod and reply innocently, "Yep, college will be different from home!"

It wasn't until campus life night, which is when students can walk around for a couple of hours learning about all of the student organizations and clubs available on campus, that I finally realized what she was referring to. I remember so vividly passing tables labeled "campus ministry," "ice cream social for Christians," "a Christian soccer club," and the list goes on. My new close-knit friend-group was composed of all Christians and then me, the new "token Jew."

This was a new concept for me. I grew up in a very diverse area, with a very large Jewish community. There are numerous Jewish delis and bakeries, a plethora of synagogues, and in seventh grade every weekend someone was having a bar or bat mitzvah, which the entire grade attended, Jew and non-Jew alike. Half of the school would be missing on Jewish holidays, and teachers would avoid assigning homework to acknowledge the Jewish students and our holidays. Everyone knew at least a little bit about Judaism, and it was a rarity to be somewhere in public and be the only Jew.

SOMETHING WAS MISSING

Back to freshman year, however: My new friends had some different place or event to go to just about every day of the week. Sundays, they had church in the morning, a gathering at night, a pro-life group Monday nights, a Bible study Tuesdays, etc. They all knew so many people on campus because of their involvement with Campus Minis-



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try, which has about 1,000 active students. During that first semester, I really felt like something was missing for me.

I joined Hillel, although it was incredibly small at the time — I think maybe six students, including the board members. The sense of community all of my Christian friends had, that I didn't, made me feel incomplete, and a little isolated. At the time, I couldn't see how obvious it was that what I was lacking and craving was a strong Jewish community on campus. Since I had previously taken it for granted and not fully embraced this aspect of my identity, I didn't automatically assume what I was missing was my faith and people who shared similar beliefs as me. It wasn't until the semester break in December, when I traveled to Israel on my birthright trip, that it hit me — I was longing for my Jewish community.

At the end of my freshman year, I was eager to join the Hillel board, and help work towards my goal of not only building a Jewish community for myself, but also for the other silent Jewish students who were feeling the same way. At the beginning of my sophomore year, I served as Hillel's vice president and there already was a drastic increase in Hillel members. My few Jewish friends and I were so excited for this growth and our potential. After a year of yearning and questioning whether to even stay at Grand Valley, there suddenly was a glimmer of hope. I had made so many new Jewish friends, there was an increase in Hillel events, I was connecting more with Judaism, and I was suddenly in a leadership position, gaining new skills. I was becoming this person I would have never expected of myself — "a leader."

Truthfully, I was starting to find my purpose. I was beginning to fill all of my free time with "Jewish" things, spending time with my new Jewish friends, and talking about Judaism. I attended several conferences that year across the country, gaining even more leadership skills, meeting other students from all over North America, and was honing in even more on this newfound passion.

I began focusing on connecting Hillel with some of the other faith-based student organizations, especially Campus Ministry. A friend from freshman year was starting a Bible study which they were calling "wine and the word." I half-jokingly said, "If you study the Old Testament, I'm in!" Surprisingly enough, they said yes, and I was now part of a Bible study! I had no idea what to



A finished hamantaschen, with strawberry filling, made at Lucy's Sweet Surrender bakery in Shaker Heights, Ohio. The hamantaschen is a traditional pastry made for the Jewish holiday of Purim. *Advance Local files*

expect, but it turned out to be such a fulfilling and meaningful part of my week. Being able to gather with some of my closest friends once a week to openly discuss our struggles, our needs, our G-d, and pray for one another was incredibly genuine and uplifting. They would ask me about my perspective and opinions on different stories and passages, as well as sharing theirs.

This space to learn from one another, support each other and gain a better understanding of our respective faiths not only strengthened our friendships, but also strengthened my Jewish faith. I realized that this is the type of work I want to do for the rest of my life. Nothing fulfilled me more than working for and with the Jewish community. As I was growing in my Jewish identity, Hillel had grown from six members to a solid 50.

WE CAN ALL BE OUR OWN ESTHER

This year, I have the privilege of teaching third and fourth grade at the United Jewish School at Temple Emanuel, in Grand Rapids. Being able to share my knowledge and passion with those young children is not only challenging, but also unbelievably rewarding and inspiring.

We recently started talking about the upcoming Jewish holiday, Purim, which is told through the Book of Esther. As we were discussing the mitzvahs, good deeds or commandments, of Purim in the fourth grade class, I asked them if they could think of a time that they were "Esther" in their own lives. For those of you unfamiliar with the story, I was asking them for an example of them standing up for themselves or their beliefs. Eventually, one student said one of her peers had written something mean about Jews on the whiteboard, and she immediately told her teacher that she was Jewish and felt uncomfortable. The class-

room conversation then shifted to how they felt being a minority at school and times that they had to explain Judaism to their peers.

Another student compared herself to Esther "wearing a mask" when she hides her Judaism in order to avoid the questions. Hearing about Jews, or anyone for that matter, hiding their identity always saddens and worries me. I told them while it may be easier to hide our Jewish identity, it is vital that we are proud of who we are.

I can relate to my fourth grade students. Being bombarded with questions all the time about Judaism can become overwhelming and exhausting. I often have a hard time answering, as I am not a rabbi. However, I always try to answer people's questions, because I realize the importance of sharing my culture and religion with others. I told my students that while it may be easier to avoid these constant questions, they are in fact changing the world every time they take a minute or two to explain why they don't celebrate Christmas, or why they go to synagogue rather than church.

I continued saying, "Think of the hate and violence in the world." One girl interrupted me, "because of religion!" I said, "Exactly. People are filled with hate because they don't understand. They don't know things that are different from them and what they are used to. So taking the time to explain something as small as why you don't have a Christmas tree in your house, they now know a little bit more than they would have if you hadn't explained it to them. Educating your friends now while you are still young will help them be more open-minded and accepting when they're older." Another girl interrupted me energetically, "I get it now!"

I challenged them to invite their friends over for a Shabbat dinner, to a night of Hanukkah, to their future bar and bat mitzvahs, to continue answering their questions. I challenged them to embrace their inner Esther and change the world one question at a time. We can all be our own Esther within our own faith, culture, race or gender.

I believe that education is our greatest tool in reducing bias and hate. It is imperative that we share our beliefs with other people so as a society we can be more understanding, open-minded and accepting. I challenge you to invite your friends to celebrate your holidays with you, bring your traditional foods to work to share and continue answering all questions, no matter how redundant they may seem to you.

Keep asking others questions. Stay curious and open-minded. Continue changing the world one question at a time.

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