From the Rabbi...

Happy Passover!

It is my pleasure to reach out to our alumni, parents, and students in the first of our semiannual “Our Jewish Life” newsletters. This endeavor was born out of my desire to share some of the exciting and inspiring things we are doing here.

I am currently finishing up my fourth year as the Director of Jewish Life and Campus Rabbi at the University of Richmond. In that time, I am so proud of what our Jewish Life Program has become. We have weekly shabbatot, holiday celebrations, study & discussion sessions, social action projects, Israel travel opportunities, as well as tons of fun. What makes us special from Jewish Life programs in other schools (and from the past) is that we are integrated into the Office of the Chaplaincy which is fully integrated into the life of the school. Also, as a university employee I get to spend my time dealing with students instead of bureaucracy. In short, I find that students can come to the University of Richmond, get a top notch liberal arts education, be involved in many extracurricular clubs, and not have to leave their Jewish identity at home... and I get to help!

While I could fill every inch of this newsletter explaining about all of the amazing students at UR, our incredible alumni, and all the creative, dynamic programming we get to offer, I figured I would let you hear it from the source. In each issue, you will get to hear from some of our truly amazing community sharing how Jewish Life at the University of Richmond has augmented their time at the university and their careers since.

I hope you all have a meaningful holiday, and I hope that you enjoy learning about some of the remarkable occurrences here in the Office of the Chaplaincy!

Chag sameach!

“Students can come to the University of Richmond, get a top notch liberal arts education, be involved in many extracurricular clubs, and not have to leave their Jewish identity at home.”
I'm not religious. I consider myself a Jew culturally, but have never felt religious in regard to Judaism. So when a friend first mentioned Pilgrimage: Poland as something I should consider, I initially brushed it aside. A trip to explore my spirituality? I thought I was going to throw up. But as he began describing the program, I was intrigued.

Pilgrimage: Poland is a half unit course that takes an interfaith perspective on Judaism in Poland, Polish history over the last two millennium, and the relationship between Jews and Catholics leading up to, during and after the Holocaust. As a culmination of our learning experience, the class travels to Poland as a group during spring break.

My father’s side of my family survived the Holocaust, including my grandfather who fled Vilnius and became a Partisan fighter, and my great uncle who was liberated from the death camps.

Inspired by my own personal background and the promise of a multi-faith, diverse group, I applied to Pilgrimage: Poland. It was a life altering decision.

Pilgrimage: Poland made me more aware of my family and myself, which in turn makes me a better citizen of the world.

Writing this, I found it tempting to explain what I learned, but I think it is infinitely more helpful to share what questions I was inspired to ask. Pilgrimage Poland, above all, taught me to ask questions rather than answer them.

Our group asked about memory. Who are these people who died in the Holocaust? What were their lives like before the war? What from those cultures have we lost? Focusing on the lives of those murdered, rather than just their deaths, is critical in understanding the true scale of tragedy of the Shoah and ensuring those memories are never forgotten.

We asked about forgiveness. How do you forgive atrocity on this scale? Who is even capable of offering forgiveness, and do they deserve it?

We asked about empathy. Do we really take the time to walk in others’ shoes? What groups do we generalize? When talking about the Holocaust, it can be tempting to make things black and white, when in reality every decision is grey. We must accept that we can never truly understand what it was like to go through these tragedies.

Most importantly, we began asking ourselves questions. What am I doing in my own life to inflict change? Do I question my own surroundings enough? What can we do to inspire empathy in others?

None of these questions have answers you can tie in a neat bow, and many simply have loose ends. Despite this lack of closure, we must never stop seeking answers as if we could attain them. The moment that we stop asking questions about the Holocaust, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the same horrible ideologies that started it.
Draw Back the Curtain

After more than 70 years of closed borders, the former Soviet Union allowed more than one million Jews to immigrate to America and Israel in the late 1980s. American activism under Operation Exodus had a large part in this change in policy and the Richmond Jewish community in the resettlement of 800 refugees.

Twenty-five years later, Jewish Family Services and the University of Richmond Hillel are creating a permanent collection of the experiences and memories of the families who immigrated and the community volunteers who welcomed them.

“Draw Back the Curtain,” a feature-length documentary film, is the culmination of three years of student driven research and interviewing of immigrants and resettlement volunteers. The larger project includes multiple museum exhibitions, and an upcoming digital archive.

UPCOMING SCREENINGS:
Roving Eye International Film Festival
3pm, Sunday, April 19, 2015
Roger Williams Univ, Bristol, RI

Jewish American Heritage Month Film Screening and Exhibition
7-9pm, Thursday, May 21, 2015
Weinstein JCC, Richmond, VA

For more information and to view the trailer, please visit: www.DrawBacktheCurtain.com

From our Alumni...

Shir Bodner ’12

My first year in Hillel, 2008, a Jewish cooking night with seven of us around a table was my favorite among many other small events that year. Quite frankly, I never imagined my Jewish community in Richmond amounting to much more, but the kugel and company were great and what I thought I wanted.

Fast forward three years and I was once more at a Jewish cooking event, but this time there were about seven of us on the Hillel board on a retreat at Rabbi Goodman’s home. The attention, relationships, and planning formed by the Rabbi now had grown our events to sometimes over 100 students. That retreat specifically began a unique partnership in the Richmond community with Jewish Family Services (JFS) for a Hillel member to serve as a student on the nonprofit’s Board of Directors. For me, it was additionally an opportunity to get Robins School credit for a marketing internship, explore a new field, apply my studies to support a local organization, and most importantly network with professionals and fellow Jews in Richmond.

University of Richmond was a fantastic place to grow. Doing research directly with professors, learning in small classroom environments, and involvement in diverse clubs were all positive experiences, but if you had asked me in my third year if I was going to stay in Richmond, there wasn’t a chance. It was the opportunity to have an integral role in the Draw Back the Curtain collaboration between JFS and the UR Hillel that changed that for me. As a preface, throughout the 1990’s and after 70 years of closed borders the Former Soviet Union allowed (specifically) Jews to leave. Draw Back the Curtain documents the resettlement in Richmond and the efforts of the local Jewish community from political campaigns to picking refugees up at the airport. Beyond the beautiful stories that we gathered, the responsibilities of creativity and outreach were an opportunity to form bonds with a wonderful Jewish community and my heritage. Who knew that an internship for academic credit would lead me to walking on stage of Modlin as Director?! Today, I continue to be involved with the film project, among other things, as a business analyst for JFS. I am constantly learning and am given the opportunity to impact the agency in its mission to serve our Richmond community. I enjoy getting to interact with the board both in and out of work, and always look forward to the next year’s student representative from UR Hillel.

We are interested in hearing from other alumni and we want to hear from you! Please be in touch with Rabbi Goodman if you would like to contribute a story, experience, or reflection on your time at the University of Richmond or to share how your time at UR has shaped who you are or what you are doing now.
Hillel Leadership

Matt Wyman '14

Ever since I decided to join Hillel Leadership my Junior year, I have been in a position to help shape Hillel into an organization that is identifiable to anyone who wants to join. The main reason I decided to get involved in the first place was because of the openness of it. Hillel wasn’t just for religious Jews, it was for anybody who simply wanted learn about what it means to be Jewish in college and anybody else who wanted to get involved. More than anything, Hillel is a community that is open to anybody. It is more about friendship and camaraderie than it is about the practice of religion. I have always been a firm believer in the philosophy that is always nice to know another Jew. The openness of an organization like Hillel allows for students from a wide variety of Jewish backgrounds to connect simply by virtue of being Jewish or by merely having interest in Jewish life.

As a leader of Hillel, it is my job to perpetuate this image. Initially, I was the Publicity Manager of Hillel. It was my job to make sure that people heard about Hillel’s events and try to get people to be involved. I made sure that I advertised events in a way that was suitable to the Jewish community and the secular community by creating Spiderbytes, e-mails, and Digital Flyers. It was my vision to be as inclusive as possible to people from a variety of backgrounds, no matter who they are or what they believe. Later on in the first semester I was given the opportunity to become an Oversight Coordinator, along with Cory Labov, to take a more official role in Hillel where I led meetings and held the rest of leadership accountable for their roles. Cory and I made a great team because we shared the same vision for Hillel of inclusiveness. We wanted to have fun, but also provide necessary religious support for those interested.

As my involvement as a leader comes to an end in the coming weeks, I know the upcoming leadership is more than prepared to continue to perpetuate this philosophy. Hillel is a place for Jewish students to connect with one another, as well as a place that is open to anybody interested in Jewish life on campus.

We Couldn’t Do it Without You

If you have any ideas for stories, know of Jewish alumni who are not on our list, or know of something great one of our alumni is doing, please give us a call or drop us an email.

Also, we would love to see photographs from your time celebrating the holidays or marking your Judaism at the University of Richmond.

Also, all of our Hillel and Jewish Life events are provided free of cost for students, faculty, and staff members on campus. The programming is made possible through the hard work of the Office of the Chaplaincy and our wonderful on-campus partners. If you feel inclined to make a contribution to help us with our dynamic programming, please do so through the University’s secure website. Please select “Other” under the designation and specify Jewish Life.

Thank you.