

Union for Reform Judaism Biennial - 71st General Assembly  
Friday, December 16, 2011 Plenary Speech  
By Wayne L. Firestone

It's a pleasure to be here today. Thank you to the URJ Leadership for inviting me and so many of my Hillel colleagues to be with you to strategize about our youth, young adults and the future of the Jewish people.

I want to tell you a story about the power of Hillel on campus today.

A couple of years ago at Northwestern Hillel, some students and our Hillel Rabbi created an initiative called "Ask Big Questions." Ask Big Questions has spread virally to scores of universities across the country including the University of Virginia, UCLA, and the University of Chicago. The Northwestern group was inspired by Hillel (the Sage) who over 2000 years ago helped to found Rabbinic Judaism, and modeled in his teaching and learning the importance of asking big questions. In college, all day long students ask HARD academic questions. But this ABQ initiative challenged them to ask BIG Life Questions, like: What Would I Sacrifice to Change the World? What Does it Mean to be Loyal to a Friend? What Do I Wish I Could Say to My Parents? Students are guided to probe these questions with Jewish texts and other rich sources.

A few weeks ago, the whole nation was jolted by the news out of another prestigious college campus, Penn State. The news media jumped on the emotional and legal issues. People everywhere reacted with pain and abhorrence, and many just vented. But a couple of Hillel leaders of the Ask Big Questions initiative said, we know something about how to deal with this. We have a framework for grappling with it. They had developed an Ask Big Questions curriculum on the question, "What Is My Responsibility As A Witness?" They called up our Hillel network at Penn State, and they said, here, use this curriculum to help frame, and channel, your students' rage and humiliation, and maybe it can help your campus deal with these issues, and begin to heal. And on campuses all over the country, not just Penn State, Hillel leaders began using this framework to engage students, faculty, and community members on the moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of witnessing evil, navigating the boundaries of loyalty, and advancing justice.

College campuses—as you know—are a microcosm of every political, emotional, and moral struggle that human beings encounter. It's challenging, and exciting, to be a college student. We at Hillel have the great privilege of working with some of the smartest, most entrepreneurial, most creative students on earth—students who are sought out after graduation by Teach for America, by the Peace Corps, and even Facebook. But wherever they are headed after graduation, we are empowering them to Ask Big Questions, about everything from witnessing to wondering, from davening to dreaming. And at Hillel we believe that, in small ways, through these big questions, we deepen understanding and pursue justice on campuses and throughout the world.

Our vision at Hillel is to inspire every Jewish student to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life, learning, and Israel. Yet, we cannot do this alone. We must continue to enrich our partnerships with the Reform Movement and others in our community who, like us, are preparing the next generation to

embrace the world with rigor, compassion and imagination. We must acknowledge that the strategies that helped Jews get here—near universal participation in higher education—may not be the same strategies that will help us build a future collaboratively with the next generation. This remarkable generation can help us build a borderless network that connects the global Jewish people, Israel and the world.

How can Reform movement and Hillel activists walk out of this room and advance this vision? As a full partner in the URJ Campaign for Youth Engagement, I want to share three approaches to help guide our renewed sense of partnership and possibility. I call them **Celebrate, Segue and Solicit**.

First, **Celebrate!** We must bring our communal success in higher education to the forefront of our strategy to engage the next generation. College is the one thing that happens to nearly every Jew, more so than any other religious or ethnic group. It is the one major milestone that happens to nearly every Jew between Bnai Mitzvah and chupa, and yet it has no specific communal marking, bracha, or celebration. We can change that tomorrow with the creativity and infrastructure of camps, synagogues and seminaries represented in this room. One example comes from Temple Emmanuel in Greensboro NC, which introduces all junior and senior high school students and their parents to the sometimes overwhelming process of college selection. As part of the initiative, students are introduced to the Hillel online search engine, and then when they're ready to do campus visits, they are connected directly to Hillel students around the Country.

Second, **Segue**. The transition from youth to young adulthood requires an intentional strategy. Developmental psychologists refer to the 18-30 year old age group as the Odyssey stage, because in this time frame, people journey forth and return home. But as we know, this Odyssey has no instruction book, no clear guidelines for how to begin it, conduct it, or end it. We need your educational resources--Rabbinic interns, Community rabbis, and Camp educators to partner in educational ventures on campus that will appeal to young adults in terms of content, relevancy and meaning.

Finally, **Solicit**. And no, I don't mean ask the students for money (they are still asking you for money, and current trends suggest that may go on for some time). But it is a mistake to think that today's young generation has only mastered gadgets and technology. What they are great at, with their gadgets, is building community – the very thing that the Jewish future needs! They know how to mobilize friends and allies. They know how to connect and commit and create. Don't miss out on their wisdom—Solicit it. Harness it. Invest in it.

Whether your children and grandchildren are Buckeyes or Wolverines, we honor their questions. Whether they are engaged by the anti-poverty group Challah for Hunger, alternative service breaks in the Gulf, a Birthright trip to Israel or Debbie Friedman's timeless a cappella arrangements, we embrace them as universally human and distinctively Jewish. And throughout our network of over 500 campuses, from Tufts to Tel Aviv, from Brooklyn College to Belarus, Hillel will be your partner in building a proud Jewish future.

Thank you.