

Uri Cohen Quoted in The New York Times on Oct. 7, 2024

Jewish students find solace and a place to mourn with campus Hillel groups.



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Students at the University of Maryland showed their support for Israel with what they were wearing. Pete Kiehart for The New York Times

Many Jewish students found refuge in Hillel houses a year ago, to process and understand the Hamas attack in Israel that killed more than 1,200 people. On the anniversary on Monday, many of those students flocked to commemorative events at Hillel once again, seeking solace and understanding.

Hillel is the main Jewish organization on many campuses, though it is open to everyone. The events hosted on most campuses on Monday focused less on the political statements and ideological disputes that have riven campuses — though in today’s fraught climate on campus even memorials became political — than on mourning the lives that were lost on that day and in the continuing war.

The year had been “incredibly hard” as Jewish students tried to navigate the crisis in the Middle East even as their own community was divided over how to respond, said Uri Cohen, executive director of Yale’s Slifka Center, which is affiliated with the university’s Hillel chapter, in an emailed statement to supporters.

Amid rising antisemitism, “Jews everywhere were reminded that we must look out for ourselves,” he wrote. At the same time, “tension between Jews forced us to get clear about who we are and what values we hold.”

Harvard Hillel was holding a public memorial on the steps of the university’s Widener Library. The Hillel rabbi and executive director, Jason Rubenstein, said he saw the public nature of the memorial as being in the Jewish tradition of mourning those close to you yet also supporting others in their grief during their time of loss.

“We hope our neighbors will attend and support us and comfort us, and at other times, other communities on campus will grieve their losses, and it’s our responsibility as their neighbors to show up and attend to them,” he said in an interview.

“There’s a real weightiness, a lot like 9/11,” Rabbi Rubenstein added. “It feels like we have to do this work together.”

At the University of Maryland, Hillel was offering “emotional support” and “stress relief” for any students unnerved by the protests going on, said Rabbi Ari Israel, executive director of the campus chapter.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Hillel called for a day of mourning for the lives lost on Oct. 7 and throughout the war. Events included a five-hour reading of the names of the 1,200 killed in the initial attack and the screening of a film, “Screams Before Silence,” depicting the events at the Nova music festival, where nearly 400 people were killed.

Dan Grushkevich, a second-year law student at the University of California, Berkeley, went to several events at the Berkeley Hillel commemoration on Monday.

“I was born in Israel and my family immigrated to the U.S., and so this was a hard day for me,” he said, “and I felt like I needed to channel my energy into something more positive than just sitting and being sad on my own and scrolling on the internet.”

One event was about fasting and memory in the Jewish tradition. Another event was about seven lessons of the last year. He was most struck by one about being an ally. For many American Jews, he said, “you don’t know who to trust and who holds beliefs or opinions that lack in empathy with the way you feel and the difficulties that you’re having.”

At the Harvard vigil, people held candles and listened to Harvard students sing “October Rain.” Peter Levin, a senior studying psychology at Harvard, said he felt the gathering was “a beacon of hope for Jewish people around campus.”

In some ways, Rabbi Rubenstein got his wish, Mr. Levin added. “There were people there who weren’t Jewish, people who I knew, people to support, which was impactful,” he said.