

"At its core, prayer was radical. It was revolutionary. It was an entirely new form of worship, and leaders of prayer communities continued to renew it daily with improvisation and personal petition." – Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

Every Jewish teen has to find their own relationship with Judaism, and NFTY empowers us to do that exploration. Whether you find it in social action, text study, song session, or meditation, I want to provide all the resources you need to create your own personal connection. **It is with *ruach* and joy that I, Owen Thomas, declare my candidacy for 5781-5782 NFTY Religious and Cultural Vice President.** As each NFTYite develops their own Jewish identity, they have brought that passion to NFTY, strengthening our *kehilah kedoshah*.

With all the challenges this year has presented, NFTY has helped us stay strong and stay connected. The next year will bring many unexpected hurdles for us to overcome together.

I have found innovative ways for NFTYites to explore their Jewish identity and practice, and I aspire to find more. Prayer will always be integral to Jewish practice, but the beauty of our religion is that for each Jew, there is a unique pathway to connect with Judaism. This deep and individual connection to Jewish practice is something I have worked hard to build this year as NFTY-NAR Religious and Cultural Vice President. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that praying does not just mean going to services but instead involves so much more. Judaism values asking questions and I will create open spaces for participants to ask hard questions and share with us what is important to them.

Using NFTYx as a resource, I will help Regional RCVPs and other NFTYites gain leadership experience while teaching others about all the different ways to engage with Judaism. This can also strengthen our alumni network, keeping former NFTYites connected in college and beyond. Music, which is a core part of NFTY services, is an amazing way to connect to Judaism. Having played the bass at my synagogue's Shabbat services all of last year, I love having an abundance of music at tefilah, and I will incorporate more instruments within NFTY services. I also anticipate opening up the RCVP Instagram to NFTYites who want to share their perspectives on the week's Torah portion and develop others' understanding of the text, which will deepen their Jewish identity and that of our whole community.

I will continue our commitment to social justice by providing a meaningful Jewish context for it. Social justice has been integral in my Jewish practice, and that of many NFTYites who have been fighting for environmental justice, gun violence prevention, racial justice, and more. Our rich Jewish texts offer so many passages and opportunities to connect with social justice. Having more social justice-based services will provide teens with the Jewish basis for their work and allow them to multiply their impact. I had the privilege of serving on the NAR social action committee and helping plan our Albany Advocacy Day, exploring the connection that Rabbi Heschel believed to be so important when he said he felt like he was praying with his feet and I want to bring that experience to the greater NFTY community.

I will create meaningful dialogue about Israel and give NFTYites the space to learn and develop their opinions. Discussing Israel can be a daunting task for many teens, especially when they have not been able to fully develop their opinions on the subject. Last summer I participated in a fellowship through the Shalom Hartman Institute, learning about Jewish peoplehood and American Jews' relationship with Israel. I want to give NFTYites the opportunity to learn more about these vital topics by building on the Israel Education and Engagement Task Force in partnership with ARZA, which I have been a part of this year, and work with Netzer Olami to foster relationships between NFTYites and Israelis.

Empowerment is important in Judaism and I aim to provide NFTYites with the tools to further develop their own connections. The things I value—text study, Israel, and social justice—may not be your passion, but I hope to create a collaborative space for NFTYites to have difficult conversations to explore our individual beliefs *b'yachad*, together.

B'ruach v'simcha (with spirit and joy),
Owen Thomas (he/him)