

All of us want to be the best. From a young age, many of us chase that #1 spot—whether in sports, music, academics, looks, or social media followers. Especially here at Boston University, success is constantly measured, ranked, and compared. I know this struggle intimately.

From the age of three to 22 I've been a classical cellist. My mom drove me two hours every week for Suzuki cello lessons with my teacher Carl, a Juilliard graduate. At first, playing music was pure joy. But then the competition started: Auditions, rankings, and trying to prove I could be better than the next player.

Over the years, I played in dozens of auditions, often not getting top chair. I kept thinking, "With all this training, I should be #1." But it felt out of reach. The pressure never eased. Six a.m. practices, endless sight-reading drills, relentless striving and driving. Sometimes I wondered, painfully and clearly: *Is this really fun anymore?*

While my peers explored friendships, dating, and the lightness of being teenagers, I was waking up before dawn, anxious and exhausted, chasing an ideal no one else fully understood. Add sports and academics to the mix, plus being a closeted gay teen, and success metrics constantly stared me down—even when I fell short.

I loved music—I still do—but I often felt like a rag doll pushed around by expectations bigger than me. By senior year, I finally earned principal chair in the Western Massachusetts All-District orchestra. And still, it wasn't enough. I wanted more—more solos, higher rankings, deeper recognition. That endless chase wore on me.

I was recommended for the All-State orchestra and considered majoring in music in college—but fear held me back. Fear I wouldn't get in, fear I wouldn't be the best, and honestly, I was just too tired. At UMass, I measured progress by teachers, orchestras, and rankings, still chasing dreams on paper.

Yet when I reflect on my years of cello playing, what I remember most from aren't the rankings—they are the friendships formed during rehearsals and concerts. The laughter. The camaraderie. Those moments grounded me, made music fun again. Later, in lonely Boston as a grad student, community orchestras were about belonging—not just playing.

This story isn't just about music—it's about all of us. We live in a culture obsessed with performance, ranking ourselves and others. But beneath the striving, what if the real joy lies in connection, shared experience, and simply loving what we do?

Now, let me tell you about Erin—a former BU student who holds a special place in my heart. At 24, as a young Director of Student Life at BU Hillel, I saw promise in her. I saw me in her. With coaching, I knew she could lead and become Student President for 4,000 Jewish undergraduates.

We strategized over coffee. She won the presidency as a sophomore and led powerful programming. She graduated, went to medical school, stayed connected to BU Hillel, and married her college boyfriend. When we reconnect, I'm reminded how much she impacted my life—and how much I impacted hers. Erin often tells me I gave her the first real sense of confidence and support. Now there was value in the election and rank, but there was also great value in the more emotional learning that took place. Rarely do I think of her as “top” Hillel student. Her growth and care matter more.

Today, life is measured everywhere. We just began the new school year and now the Jewish New Year. Grades, GPAs, job offers, social media likes—all are quantified. But what does chasing #1 really cost? Competition builds resilience, but what about when we don't land at the top? When we try hard but fall short? Do we lose ourselves?

I could have avoided much anxiety if I'd been taught to enjoy music instead of compete in it. My grandfather once advised me to slow down while eating—to savor the food. Get it? That metaphor holds: slowing down helps us notice more than ranks and scores. Erin might've found deeper happiness if she'd seen her presidency as a chance to learn and grow, not just as a contest.

Jim Collins' *Good to Great* taught me about the “Hedgehog Concept”: greatness lies where three things overlap—what you can be best in the world at, what you're passionate about, and what drives your economic engine. Remarkably, only about 30% of a happy career is about money; 30% is about passion. Two-thirds of fulfillment comes from beyond money. I wish I'd learned this sooner.

During the High Holidays, we face sacred themes of measurement, reflection, and *cheshbon hanefesh*—the accounting of the soul. Our tradition asks not only, “Are we #1?” but “How are we growing spiritually, ethically, and relationally?”

The Torah teaches in Deuteronomy 30:19, “I set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.” This ancient tension between counting and meaning frames this season. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, taught that true greatness is not external success alone but aligning your “hedgehog” with values like kindness, justice, humility, and belonging.

While the world demands we tally successes and failures, the High Holidays ask a bigger question: Is life just about accumulating good deeds or avoiding bad ones? Like chasing followers or perfect grades, what might matter more is the depth of reflection, prayer, relationships, and renewal. That's the judgment of *Yom Hadin*—not mere evaluation but invitation to transformation.

At BU, numbers shape our community: 45,000 members including 35,000 students, thousands of faculty and staff. Among them, 6,000 Jewish students. Our one Hillel space welcomes students 37,000 times a year. Much of my value here is tied to

numbers—fundraising, engagement, email open rates. But even top-performing metrics don't make a community. As Rabbi Sacks said, numbers don't define us as people or Jews.

Entering my 12th year at BU Hillel, I confess I've spent too much time chasing #1—in music, academics, work. Two years ago, we were named “best” Hillel because of growth and numbers. If you asked my colleagues, they might say numbers top our focus list. So we reached Sinai—we stood at the summit. Now, what?

At 35, I wish someone told me: Numbers take you only so far. Chasing the top seat in orchestra, the presidency of Hillel, or the title of “best” will only satisfy one part of the soul. Salaries rise, friendships accumulate, followers climb—but something vital is missing. Numbers can trap us in hollow pursuits.

This summer, as we welcomed staff and prepared for your return, I realized quantitative goals aren't enough. People and belonging matter most. I began working here to change students' lives through Judaism and connection to the Jewish people. My mom gave me a cello so I'd know the joy of learning and playing—not merely to win. I go home elated when a student has a powerful moment working with us.

I love Erin not because she was #1, but because of how she grew, explored, and connected. We open our doors to you not to track GPA but because we care. People matter and belonging matters. Relationships, highs and lows, learning, doing it together—that's what truly counts.

Yuval Noah Harari said, “Homo sapiens is a social animal. Without others, an individual cannot survive, let alone prosper.” You belong to many worlds—friends, family, university communities, identity groups. But as a leader of one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, I want you to know—You are part of another team: the Jewish people.

The hardest and most inspiring part of my work is seeing how students struggle to balance success and happiness—the external achievements weighed against sanity, serenity, and meaning. I see it every day. It fuels this work.

Our new tagline is “Find your people. Be part of something special.” Elie Wiesel, who taught at BU, said, “The bond of our people is not just our history, but the unbreakable thread of belonging that connects each of us.”

Whether you know it or not, you matter far beyond your resume. Joy and meaning come from human beings, not human doings. If you don't have all the answers, it's okay. If your grades aren't perfect, the world isn't over. If you want to prioritize joy, meaning, and love alongside achievement, I salute you.

This High Holiday season, I invite you not only to count your missteps but also the friends, mentors, and loved ones who make you feel alive. Spend time on finding your people, here or elsewhere. You may find a new friend, the love of your life, or a fellow Jew here. We are here for you.

Here is an invitation—reach out anytime: when you feel low, lonely, elated, or on top of the world. I want to hear from you. Send me a note—coffee's on me.

This year, may you let the numbers go. Let counting subside. Let chasing take a backseat. May God bless you with the beauty of living one day at a time. May you be renewed, rebuilt, and given space to find yourself—and your people.

Go in peace, love, and strength. May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

Shana Tova.