

Defending Israel on Campus

By Rahel Musleah

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Students at an Israeli Peace Week rally/Meir Pliskin

Stop! Checkpoint Ahead!” read the hand-lettered words on the pink sign. Students for Justice in Palestine dressed as Israeli soldiers and toting cardboard guns order the “Palestinians” to the ground, blindfold them, tie their hands and seal their mouths with duct tape.

Pro-Israel students counter with a banner that reads, “We’re ready to talk. Are you?” and “Checkpoints are an understandable and inconvenient truth.” Later in the day, arguments erupt between the groups.

This scene unfolds not in Gaza or the West Bank but on the campus of Columbia University in New York. It has repeated itself in various versions at colleges across the United States.

Jewish college students today not only confront the challenges of independence, uncooperative roommates, intense classes, but also threats to their identities and the measure of their support for Israel. The upswing in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, scheduling of Israeli Apartheid Week and anti-Israel lectures have caused Jewish organizations, local campus groups and individual students to devote time and resources to making Israel a priority. Delegitimizing Israel even reached the hummus market in 2010, as a controversy at Princeton and DePaul Universities broke out over the sale of American-based Sabra products in their dining halls.

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“You have to really care about Israel to put yourself on the line,” says Micah Toll, 21, a mechanical engineering major at the University of Pittsburgh. “It doesn’t fit into college schedules or lifestyle.” Until this year, Toll says, anti-Israel extremism was not much of a problem at Pittsburgh. Now, mock checkpoints, a play called I Heart Hamas funded by student activities fees and anti-Israel bias at the campus newspaper have caused him to become more involved. He is a fellow of CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, one of the groups that tackles the campus environment.

“I try not to be pushy,” says Toll. “If your heart is not in Israel advocacy you are not going to be able to do it. For me, it’s easy, because Israel advocates for itself through its civil rights record, its being the only democracy in the Middle East.”



Rutgers students protest recent on-campus speakers
Debra Rubin/The New Jersey Jewish News

Many active pro-Israel students have strong Jewish backgrounds and become sensitized to the need for advocacy on a trip to Israel or by anti-Israel campus activities. Tennessee-born Toll grew up in a Conservative family with the understanding that Judaism requires commitment. He lived two hours from the closest synagogue and, every week, would make the trip to Sunday school. However, he says, being Jewish was “more of a group and less of a lifestyle”—until he went on a Birthright Israel trip and then to Sderot with the Jewish National Fund. “I was always taught to support Israel but I didn’t know what it was like to have your boots on the ground. I realized that there was this place we can call our own and I want to actively support it.”

Paradoxically, anti-Israel sentiment is flourishing at a time when colleges are providing welcoming environments for Jews, notes Kenneth L. Marcus, director of The Anti-Semitism Initiative at the Institute for Jewish & Community Research and author of [Jewish Identity and Civil Rights in America](#) (Cambridge University Press). “For many,” he says, “this is now

something of a golden age with fewer forms of institutional bias.”

However, Marcus adds, the last 10 years have seen something of a reversal in progress. “The ‘growth industry’ in campus anti-Semitism has been in those forms of anti-Jewish animus related to Israel.” But, he notes, no statistics pinpoint the number of anti-Israel events on campuses.

Part of the problem, says Marcus, is that since Judaism has been classified as a religion, Jewish students have not been protected from ethnic- or race-based harassment under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Marcus, who headed the United States Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights in 2004, had issued a policy stating that students suffering bias based on “perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics” (which would include Jewish students) would be protected. That policy was disregarded by his successors but has just been restored under the Obama administration. Congressman Brad Sherman (D-California) has also introduced legislation that would prohibit religious discrimination in education.

Hotbed campuses tend to have significant Arab and Muslim student or local populations, left-wing students and faculty or a heightened sense of student political radicalism, notes Marcus. The University of California at Irvine serves as a prime example. The Muslim Student Union disrupted a speech by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, calling him a “killer.” The Zionist Organization of America filed a complaint with the OCR. Part of the case was dismissed and is now on appeal at the OCR, while part of the case was never ruled on.

Israel advocacy groups work together under the umbrella of the Israel on Campus Coalition, a network of 33 national organizations. (Until recently, ICC was an arm of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.) Some of the most active groups include Hillel, CAMERA, Hasbara, StandWithUs, The David Project and the ZOA. They disseminate materials, promote leadership initiatives and tackle legal matters. Scholars for Peace in the Middle East organizes faculty and coordinates petition drives opposing BDS. The network of Jewish federations recently launched the Israel Action Network to catalyze responses to delegitimization efforts in civil and social spheres. One of its primary areas of focus will be colleges, partnering with the ICC, according to its director, Martin Raffel. Its projected three-year budget is \$1.7 million.

Unlike Toll, the majority of Jewish students affirm their support for Israel but want to focus on their studies and social life, says Marcus. “They see rancor and hostility over Israel...but avoid controversy. Sometimes that means they become less involved in Jewish life. They may decide not to wear a Star of David necklace or a T-shirt with ‘Israel’ or a Hebrew word on it. They may stop going to lectures and discussions related to the

Middle East.... Some stop going to Shabbat dinners and communal events. This can have a deleterious effect on Jewish community building and identity during formative college years.”

Judith Leibowitz, 21, a journalism and psychology major at Brooklyn College, decided to do just the opposite. “I wear a Magen David all the time,” she says. “I am not scared of the Palestinians on campus. They are not afraid to wear their hijabs and burkas. [Jews] who are afraid to openly express their religious affiliation are giving up the fight for Israel.”

Despite the location of the campus—in the heart of Jewish Flatbush — Leibowitz notes that the Palestinian Club, founded in 2009, is more active than the “largely apathetic” Jewish student population, which makes up about a quarter of the 16,000 daytime students. The college administration has not been responsive to complaints that the newspaper withholds pro-Israel articles, she says. “I feel like I’m alone and getting nowhere.”

Leibowitz was raised in a modern Orthodox home but, she says, her school did not educate her politically. Her grandfather is buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. “He had never been to Israel but wanted to spend the rest of eternity there,” she says. Leibowitz was studying in Jerusalem during the 2008 terrorist attack on Merkaz Harav Yeshiva. “I realized there was nothing being said on campus when I returned,” she says, adding that she organizes pro-Israel events through a CAMERA fellowship. She is also a member of Hillel’s culturally oriented Israel Club.

The intensifying anti-Israel atmosphere has provoked debates over how best to fight back. For instance, Leibowitz was incensed when the Palestinian Club brought in pro-Palestinian Jewish speaker Norman Finkelstein. “We should have protested his coming,” she says. “My tuition money brought him here.”

The strategy for many Israel advocates, however, is not to answer back with extremism, but to step up educating students. “Fighting fire with fire doesn’t make sense,” says Toll. “We are fighting fire with water. We are increasing our pro-Israel campaigns about culture, day-to-day life, civil and humanitarian rights. When [pro-Palestinians] get more and more negative, we get more and more positive.” For example, some students promote an Israel Peace Week in reaction to Israel Apartheid Week.

“Our most effective advocacy may be...at small meetings...that focus on issues like women’s rights in Israel,” says David Bernstein, executive director of The David Project. “At large events, speakers are vulnerable to disruption by outside groups and do not necessarily reach the target audience.”

“We target our activism by creating a pro-Israel atmosphere,” agrees Nathan Sigal, 24, a nuclear medicine major at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and a Hillel president. “The students know nothing about Israel, good or bad. That’s our biggest challenge—and strength.” Pro-Israel groups at UNLV have built coalitions with the Sierra Student Coalition; they sponsored a solar-powered concert that highlighted Israel’s environmental contributions and that featured Nevada, JNF and local Jewish federation officials. With the Student Peace Initiative, they linked flags of different countries to facts about how much aid Israel has provided to that country.

A 2008 Birthright Israel participant and Aish HaTorah Jerusalem fellow, Sigal has taken part in AIPAC leadership seminars in Washington, and in Israel Amplified, Grinspoon-MZ Foundation’s Israel Advocacy Conference, which brings together fraternity and sorority students to build a base of leaders and promote activities on campus.

As a member of the Jewish Identity and Israel Advocacy Task Force of Alpha Epsilon Pi, the Jewish college fraternity, Sigal networks with the organization’s 140-plus chapters to enact pro-Israel agendas by publicizing advocacy opportunities, arranging conference calls with Israeli officials as well as brainstorming to create new initiatives and offering grant money for events. In addition to Israel Amplified, AEPi is planning its second Hineini Jewish Identity Enrichment Conference this summer, which will include advocacy initiatives.

At Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, a “relentless” series of anti-Israel speakers and events last fall served as a platform for pro-Palestinian groups, says Hillel director Andrew Getraer. Except for some letters to the editor, the programming went unchallenged by the pro-Israel community. “We didn’t want to call more attention to the events, and the Jewish community wasn’t prepared to respond in an organized way,” he explains. A program in January, however, propelled the community into high gear: Never Again for Anyone featured Holocaust survivor Hajo Meyer, who claimed Israel’s “ethnic cleansing” of Palestinians is comparable to the Nazi treatment of Jews. “It was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” says Getraer.

In tandem with Jewish community organizations, Hillel planned a peaceful protest at the event, drawing 400 students and supporters. When the organizers began charging for what was billed as a free event, anger erupted.

“The organizers went through the admission line, picking anti-Israel supporters to go in, and pro-Israel supporters to be left out. It was chillingly like a selection line,” says Getraer. “No Israel supporter wanted

to pay the fee that would endorse that organization. We stayed in the lobby and sang Israeli songs and danced in circles for two hours. It was a powerful and empowering moment.”

University officials deny charges of discrimination since the event was endorsed by BAKA: Students United for Middle Eastern Justice but was actually sponsored by two noncampus groups, the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network and American Muslims for Palestine. The New Jersey State Association of Jewish Federations pledged \$10,000 for a series of pro-Israel events in the spring and Getraer is discussing the need for a “permanent pro-Israel infrastructure on campus,” including staff members.

Amanda Cove, 21, a Young Judaeon, Hadassah life member and part of Hillel’s Israel Committee at Rutgers, points to the primacy of social networking tools. Students on both sides advertise events on Facebook, text, Twitter and post videos on YouTube, spreading word of unfolding events with unprecedented immediacy. Jacob Binstein, a Rutgers freshman, set up a blog the morning after the Never Again program with videos of the event and links to every article written about it (<http://jakebinstein.com/baka-lies>). Freshly updated Web sites like www.israelcampusbeat.org (sponsored by ICC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations) provide information for students and professionals.

Peer mentors play a vital role in influencing individual commitment on a deeper scale. Eric Schorr, 22, is vice president of LionPAC, Columbia’s pro-Israel public affairs committee. An SWU Emerson fellow, he is also Hasbara’s New York campus coordinator and a Hagshama campus intern for the World Zionist Organization. “Better we fight them here than on the streets of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem,” he notes.

Schorr, who is majoring in Middle East, South Asian, African and modern Jewish studies at List College, the undergraduate arm of the Jewish Theological Seminary, spent his post-high school year in Israel. It was not until he went to a campus rally and saw the anti-Zionist activity that he determined to “defend Israel in the court of public opinion,” he says.

“Who will step up for Israel on campus?” asks Schorr, a dual citizen of the United States and Israel (his mother is Israeli) and the grandson of Holocaust survivors. “I have to be a model, a guide, an example.”

Peer influence is also the driving force behind Hillel’s Israel Fellowship, sponsored in partnership with the Jewish Agency. Now in its ninth year, the program places young Israelis who have graduated from college and completed their Army service on 34 campuses (almost double the

number from 2009). “They are authentically able to relate to questions, stereotypes and misunderstandings on a personal level,” says Hillel President Wayne Firestone. “They become part of campus culture.”

Gila Hashkes, 26, an Israel Fellow on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley, spends her time with Jewish students, “closing the gap between how Israel was drawn in school for them and their ability to deal with harsh accusations while maintaining a strong connection to Israel.

“We encourage dialogue,” she says. “We say, ‘Come sit with us. Listen to the challenges Israel is facing.’” Student-run workshops like Explore Israel For Us By Us allows students to engage with Israel in their own way. For example, three Jewish students—Persian, Iraqi and Russian, whose families immigrated to Israel before coming to the United States—embodied the value of Israel as a homeland. “By education we avoid propaganda,” says Hashkes. “And it is more palatable when the information comes from other students.”

Students within Hillel freely talk about Israel, but fears can surface on campus and in classrooms. Some are nervous about their physical welfare. At the University of Pittsburgh, says Toll, anti-Israel students have followed members of the pro-Israel club. Internet forums have turned into personal attacks. Following Toll’s presentation at a Middle East conference at the university, students assaulted his integrity. “When Israel supporters are attacked for who we are,” he says, “it’s not anti-Israel, it’s anti-Semitism.” Still, he cautions, “if you play the anti-Semitism card publicly, it nullifies our arguments. Anti-Israel students can accuse us of saying we are victims.”

Academic challenges stemming from anti-Israel professors in departments from anthropology to writing are harder to combat. Leah Yadegar, now a graduate of the University of California at Santa Barbara, contacted SWU when two of her friends dropped a class given by William Robinson, a Jewish sociology professor who equated Jews with Nazis in discussing Israel’s battle against Hamas in Gaza. Following an SWU complaint that Robinson violated the faculty code of conduct, the university administration launched a five-month investigation. The charges were dismissed, but “a message was sent to professors that someone is watching their actions,” according to Roz Rothstein, SWU cofounder and CEO.

Not all confrontations end in rancor or disappointment. At Loyola University in Chicago, Nissim Bejar and fellow Hillel board members presented a workshop, Israel: Facts Not Myths. Thirty SJP members attended. During the question-and-answer period, Bejar defused their

arguments, and a conversation resulted.

“I feel very successful because they did start seeing it from a different perspective. They could relate their experience of exile to ours,” says Bejar, 21, who is Orthodox, a political science major and an SWU Emerson fellow. “I wasn’t embracing their perspective but I tried to show we are for coexistence and open to their perspective. They requested a follow-up dialogue.” Bejar notes that Chicago is home to a large Palestinian community but he does not feel any discomfort or danger on campus, which is “usually peaceful.”

As proponents of delegitimization muster their forces on campus, pro-Israel students are rallying to Israel’s aid. Even if they number just a few, their willingness to defend Israel mirrors its place in their hearts. “What we’re seeing coming to the fore is no longer the issue of settlements or checkpoints, but rather that Israel has no right to exist,” says Schorr, “and that is not acceptable.”

Rahel Musleah’s Web site is www.rahelsjewishindia.com.

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