

COPING WITH THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS ON CAMPUS: THE ROLE OF HILLEL AND HILLEL PROFESSIONALS IN NORTH AMERICA, 2000–2002

JAY L. RUBIN

*Executive Vice President, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life,
Washington, DC*

The popular perception that American college campuses are on fire is largely untrue. Yet, a majority of Jewish students are unprepared, intellectually or emotionally, to counter any level of anti-Israel tension on campus. Through a variety of strategies, Hillel is fostering a community of proactive Israel advocacy on campus.

Hillel has been in the thick of the Middle East crisis on North American campuses since the beginning of the Second Intifada/Oslo War in September 2000. The popular perception in the Jewish community during this period has been one of college and university campuses “on fire” and Jewish students threatened, beleaguered, and cowered by anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic activities, including violence, vandalism, intimidation, and hate speech. Hillel professionals report regular expressions of concern from parents, alumni, and Jewish community leaders in face-to-face contacts, telephone conversations, and e-mails. A recent book review in *Hadassah Magazine* characterizes Jewish students as “outmanned and outmaneuvered by an outrageously successful Arab blitzkrieg.”

Fortunately, this perception is largely untrue and should not guide the strategic thinking of the Jewish community about the real challenges on campus. Only a relative handful of North American campuses are or were on fire. The most egregious incidents of vandalism, violence, intimidation, and hate speech are the exception, rather than the rule. Durban-inspired efforts to South Africanize the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by urging universities to divest from companies doing business with Israel have gone nowhere. For every signature on a pro-divestment petition, anti-divestment forces respond with multiple signatures. Not a single university president has endorsed the divestment campaign, and

more than a few have spoken out against it, most notably Lawrence Summers, President of Harvard University. To date, not a single university president has been presented with a formal divestment proposal. More than 300 university presidents signed recent newspaper advertisements sponsored by the American Jewish Committee decrying several highly publicized anti-Jewish incidents and pledging to maintain civil, tolerant, and intimidation-free campuses. In fact, the number of campuses engaged in serious Muslim-Jewish dialogue far exceeds the number involved in Muslim-Jewish conflict.

This article addresses two questions. What accounts for the strong disconnect between perception and reality? How have Hillel and Hillel professionals managed to deal strategically with both the reality and the popular perception?

Anti-Israel activities on campuses are hardly a new phenomenon. Jewish Baby Boomers who attended highly politicized colleges and universities during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s remember anti-Israel rallies and protest demonstrations linking Arab, left wing, and Third World student activists. Tenured radicals dominated the field of Middle East studies even then, as Martin Kramer has demonstrated in his excellent book, *Ivory Towers on Sand*. Such organizations as Hillel, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), American Professors for Peace in the Middle East, and Zionist youth groups conducted training workshops and

produced reams of mimeographed and printed materials in support of the pro-Israel cause.

Clearly, however, campus-based anti-Israel activity never generated the same level of attention as the anti-war and civil rights struggles during this period. Perhaps the relative absence of anti-Israel activities on campus during the Oslo/Camp David era of the 1990s, as well as the current absence of other highly charged campus issues, magnifies the perception of anti-Israel efforts on campuses today.

More than 8,000 institutions of higher learning operate in the United States and Canada. An estimated 200 colleges and universities enroll 500 or more Jewish students. Hillel has affiliates at nearly all of these universities, as well as on hundreds of other campuses with smaller Jewish student populations. A review of Jewish and general newspaper articles and Hillel-related files during the past two years reveals a total of three universities at the epicenter of the perceived crisis—the University of California-Berkeley, and San Francisco State University in the Bay Area, and Concordia University in Montreal.

Berkeley, San Francisco State, and Concordia have a long history of left-wing political activism.

- Berkeley experienced a series of disturbing incidents during the 2001–02 academic year. A brick shattered the glass front door of the Hillel building during winter break. Unidentified assailants attacked the son of a community rabbi near campus. An anti-Israel rally attempted to overshadow and politicize a recitation of the names of Holocaust victims during a Yom Hashoah Memorial. Police arrested 79 anti-Israel protesters following the storming and takeover of a university building.
- San Francisco State drew headlines last year as well with an anti-Semitic blood libel poster accusing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of killing Palestinian children according to Jewish ritual. In addition, anti-Israel counter-demonstrators

harassed, threatened, and hurled anti-Semitic invectives at a small group of Hillel students and professionals following a large and successful pro-Israel, anti-hate, pro-peace rally on campus. Campus police had to escort the Hillel group off campus.

- Although Berkeley and San Francisco State have been relatively quiet through the first half of the 2002–03 academic year, Concordia University, a commuter campus in downtown Montreal, has been in a constant state of turmoil. Rioters prevented former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from delivering a speech on campus. The university administration responded by banning both pro- and anti-Israel activities on campus for several months. A Jewish student claimed to have been assaulted on campus by Palestinian sympathizers. Concordia's student government banned Hillel from campus and cut off funding to protest a flyer on a Hillel table recruiting Israel Defense Force volunteers. Montreal Hillel has filed a lawsuit seeking full reinstatement and damages.

During the past two years, perhaps a half-dozen or so other campuses experienced less volatile incidents of one sort or another, including blockades designed to simulate Israeli security checkpoints, the destruction of Israeli flags, and anti-Israel graffiti and chalkings.

As egregious as these incidents were, they were neither pervasive nor unprecedented. In each of these cases, local Hillel professionals and student leaders, in consultation with the Hillel's Schusterman International Center and in partnership with local community relations professionals, worked diligently and heroically to address their unique situations.

What led so many in the Jewish community to conclude otherwise? The widespread use of the Internet certainly played a role. Each incident received significant play in e-mails, attachments, weblogs, and web sites. An impassioned e-mail from the Jewish Studies chair at San Francisco State who

mischaracterized the post-rally incident as a "pogrom" zoomed around the Jewish world at warp speed. Coverage in the general news media, especially the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the cable news channels, also magnified the incidents. *U.S. News and World Report* and the *Jerusalem Post* actually published an erroneous report that a pig's head had been left at the front door of Indiana University Hillel in Bloomington. A few Jewish organizations with limited campus involvement jumped on the bandwagon to proclaim a major communal crisis.

The Anti-Defamation League, the premiere Jewish organization monitoring and combating global anti-Semitism, was not among them. ADL showed characteristic integrity in not exploiting these "well-publicized anti-Jewish confrontations at a handful of particularly volatile universities." A June 2002 ADL survey declared that "anti-Semitism on college campuses is virtually non-existent" with 3 percent of college undergraduates and 5 percent of faculty identifying most strongly with anti-Jewish attitudes compared to 17 percent in the general population. Despite periodic outbursts from anti-Israel professors and unwelcome invitations to offensive speakers "tolerance is more prevalent on college campuses than elsewhere in America," the report declared.

Nevertheless, there remained a near-universal perception on the part of the organized Jewish community that the campuses were on fire and that more had to be done. Perception had become reality.

The protagonists on campuses where Palestinian-Israeli tensions boiled over have been principally Muslim and Jewish students. The majority of Christian students, outside of the extreme left and right, have been generally (if not vocally) supportive of Israel as an ally of the United States and a fellow victim of terrorist violence following September 11th and the Hebrew University cafeteria bombing. The problem is that North American Jewish students, by and large, are less knowledgeable and less visibly passion-

ate about Middle East issues than their Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim counterparts. Jewish students are primarily second- and third-generation Americans and Canadians, unlike Muslim students who are often immigrants or the children of immigrants. Unlike most Jewish students, many Palestinian students have direct links to the violence in the region, with close family members living in such hot spots as Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Gaza. Less than 20 percent of Jewish college students have visited Israel. Most Jewish day schools and synagogue religious schools provide a very low level of education about modern Israeli history, politics, and society. In addition, Jewish college students typically hail from communities where they face little exposure to pro-Palestinian activism, unlike many university campuses where Jews and Muslims attend the same classes and live in the same residence halls. A majority of Jewish students entering colleges and universities in North America are unprepared intellectually or emotionally to encounter any level of anti-Israel tension on campus.

HOW TO RESPOND: A NUANCED STRATEGY

Hillel has long-standing and deep Israeli and Zionist roots. From launching a Hillel at Hebrew University in 1950 to serving as the largest birthright Israel trip organizer, Hillel has viewed Israel and Zionism as a central pillar and touchstone of Jewish life. Under the leadership of Richard Joel, Hillel underwent a major organizational transformation during the 1990s. Elements of the transformation included an engagement methodology "to meet Jewish students where they are" through a variety of entry points, and a commitment to Jewish religious, political and ethnic pluralism. In short, Hillel operated as the proverbial "big tent" where "one size does not fit all." Reconciling both of these core values with a major increase in pro-Israel engagement, education and advocacy required a nuanced strategy.

Hillel developed a *Statement of Principles on Israel* designed to reflect the core values

of the organization. "Hillel is committed to Israel's right to exist and flourish as a Jewish State within secure and recognized boundaries," the statement began. "Hillel staff should assist all Jewish students in promoting an array of Israel activities and opinions, consistent with the above policy. Hillel must be welcoming to all Jewish students," regardless of their individual attitudes about Israel. As the infrastructure for the organized Jewish community on campus, "Hillel serves as partners with [Jewish] Federations and a wide variety of other communal organizations consistent with the above policy."

Hillel also adopted a catch phrase designed to capture the Statement of Principles in a few words, "Wherever We Stand, We Stand With Israel." Thousands of Hillel students carried banners and buttons reflecting the new mantra at the large national Israel solidarity rally in Washington, D.C. on April 15, 2002 sponsored by United Jewish Communities and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. The statement and slogan acknowledged that political differences over such issues as settlements, borders, and separation of synagogue and state would not stand in the way of familial solidarity and principled support of Israel.

Another key strategy involved strengthening Hillel's partnership with Jewish organizations across the ideological spectrum. The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) and Hillel entered into an agreement to house a full-time shaliach (representative) in its Washington, D.C. headquarters to coordinate the delivery of Israel educational resources to Jewish college students. Hillel and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation created and co-convened the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC) in 2002. Designed to promote a more unified, strategic, and proactive approach to supporting Israel on campus, the ICC brought together 30 national Jewish organizations, including AIPAC, the Jewish Council on Public Affairs, the Zionist Organization of America, and Americans for Peace Now.

Hillel, with the support of the Schusterman Family Foundation, developed an in-house Center for Israel Affairs with a team of skilled professionals to assist students, staff, and campuses with strategic Israel program planning, advocacy training, grants, printed materials, and crisis management. Working with other organizations, foundations and philanthropists, Hillel sent hundreds of student activists to Israel for advocacy training, created a Speakers' Bureau, recruited a network of Israel student interns, and sponsored the Caravan for Democracy, Israel at Heart and other exceptional programs on campuses from coast to coast.

Hillel maintains a strong commitment to birthright Israel and to finding additional opportunities for other students to make return visits to Israel. During the past three years, nearly 11,000 birthright Israel participants have shared a safe and celebratory first-time Israel experience under Hillel's auspices.

Finally, Hillel sought to communicate the full range of campus Israel activities and services to as broad a constituency as possible. A newly created Israel web site links college students to top-notch experts, organizations, and strategists. Featuring flyers, articles, photographs, campus updates, advocacy manuals, chat rooms, and interactive web forums, the site is designed to foster a community of successful, proactive Israel advocates on campuses worldwide. In addition, a periodic Israel Update e-mail is sent to a broad cross-section of influentials throughout the Jewish world.

WHAT NOW?

Most U.S. campuses—including Berkeley and San Francisco State—have been both quieter and better prepared this past semester. For example, Hillel student leaders and professionals prepared effectively for the Fall, 2001 Second Annual National Student Solidarity with Palestine Conference at the University of Michigan, a reprise of a conference held at Berkeley last year. Here is an excerpt from a report on the conference by

Michael Brooks, the Michigan Hillel executive director:

The goal of the conference was to train student delegates from around the country to lobby their universities to divest from companies doing business in Israel. The new President of the University of Michigan pre-emptively announced that she did not support divestment and had no intention of bringing the issue before the Board of Regents. She also informed the student organizers of the conference that all sessions would have to be open to anyone registered (which was not the case at Berkeley where Jewish attendees were harassed and asked to leave.) The campus Israel activists were energetic and well organized. They sought and found welcome and responsible partnership with Hillel International, ADL, the Detroit and Ann Arbor Jewish Federations, and the Detroit Jewish Community Council. On the advice of several national organizations, as well as Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz, the student activists decided not to conduct protests on the days of the conference, but rather to mount a campaign before and after the conference. The campaign featured speakers, posters, newspaper ads, flyers, and an on-line anti-divestment petition to

present to the University attacking the idea of divesting from the only democracy in the Middle East and refuting some of the other disreputable positions of the conference. More than 1,000 students and university supporters attended a pro-Israel campus rally the Thursday before the conference. Other groups—including many from out of town—decided to confront the divestment conference directly (on Sunday), garnering the conference far more media coverage than it might have enjoyed otherwise.

Unfortunately, the new strategies have not been in place long enough to change the perception of North American campuses as Middle East battle zones. Hillel professionals are still spending too much time putting out fires started by well-meaning Israel advocates unfamiliar with the campus eco-system. Recently a senior AIPAC professional predicted the possibility of a major crisis with “the perfect storm” of a protracted Middle East war and a burgeoning campus anti-war movement. Regardless of whether this scenario plays out, enhanced, strategic, and proactive Israel advocacy efforts on campus will have proven to be an extremely prescient investment for the Jewish community.