

Hillel on Campus: Israel Engagement, Education and Advocacy

by Ilan Wagner

Hillel is focusing on building relationships and on engaging college students with Israel and, by doing so, creating a solid reservoir of connections and care that can weather even difficult political storms.

Over the last two years, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Life on Campus has articulated a vision for Israel engagement, education, and advocacy on campus. At the centerpiece of this vision is the enhancement of the personal relationship of the North American Jewish student with the Land, People and Culture of Israel. Hillel faces three significant challenges in advancing this vision.

First, Hillel faces an overall challenge of engaging Jewish young adults in meaningful Jewish experiences on campus. A seemingly endless array of options, fluid and often fleeting patterns of Jewish identity, and the fact that nearly one-half of Jewish students on campus today come from households with only one Jewish parent frame the contemporary campus environment within which campus Jewish educators work. Jewish programming has to be compelling, diverse, vibrant, and engaging to break through these natural barriers.

Second, Israel is often seen as overly political, connected to strife and discord, and linked to hard core Jewish concerns and passions. Particularly for students who have not chosen full involvement in Jewish life on campus, Israel can be initially seen as intimidating and foreign.

Finally, the local realities of Hillel on campus vary greatly, and are contingent on campus size, geography, type of campus, and campus demography. The development of national strategies and resources must take into account these differences and find a way to encourage local initiative and ownership within the framework of advancing the organization's vision.

With these challenges in mind, Hillel has developed an extensive set of resources for Israel education, engagement and advocacy on the campus. Several principles have governed the development and allocation of these resources to the campuses:

- ♦ Maximize the ability of local campuses to build their own programs and initiatives.
- ♦ Emphasize student involvement and empowerment.
- ♦ Create opportunities for direct relationships with Israelis and Israel.
- ♦ Emphasize immersion opportunities in Israel.
- ♦ Encourage on-going and sustained models of education and engagement.
- ♦ Facilitate a plurality of views and a safe space for a diversity of opinion about Israel.

Hillel: Working with National Grants and Partnerships

Avi Chai and MASA

The administration of national grant programs allows campuses to generate local priorities and strategies while maintaining national mechanisms of review, quality control, and monitoring. At the national level, they are examples of partnerships with leading organizations in the Jewish world. Leading examples of such national grant programs are the Avi Chai grants (made possible through the generosity of the Avi Chai Foundation) to change the campus Israel climate, and MASA campus grants (through the MASA initiative of the Government of Israel and The Jewish Agency for Israel) to promote and market long-term programs in Israel. Both of these grant programs set clear national criteria and benchmarks, but maximize local autonomy in choosing strategies.

Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC)

In addition to its direct work, Hillel is one of the founding partners of the Israel on Campus Coalition, a group of thirty organizations devoted to strengthening the pro-Israel movement on campus. The ICC has been particularly active in response to the situation in Israel's North this past summer. It has raised considerable dollars to facilitate a campus grant program, regional student training, a speaker series, and a series of conference calls connecting students directly to dynamic personalities on both sides of the ocean. In addition, the ICC is spearheading a petition drive to reinforce congressional support for Israel at this important moment in US-Israel relations.

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Grinspoon Israel Advocacy Intern Program

The Grinspoon Israel Advocacy Intern Program provides funding for campuses to hire leading student Israel activists on a part-time basis, each focusing on a well-defined area of Israel engagement, education, and advocacy. The strategic directions of this program are set nationally, this year focusing on cultural diversity and dialogue, deepening Israel education, and Israel travel. Each participating campus chooses one strategic direction and then recruits a student leader best equipped to carry out the agenda on campus. The interns are trained and supervised nationally. Their voices provide constant input in the development of new national initiatives and directions as well.

Israel Fellows Program

The Israel Fellows Program is perhaps Hillel's most ambitious attempt to change the campus Israel culture. In a full and dynamic partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel, Hillel each year brings more than twenty young Israelis, each with at least a year of university experience in Israel, to serve as Israel Program Coordinators on campuses across the continent. This year, 22 Israel Fellows serve more than 40 campuses. These Fellows focus on Israel program recruitment, bringing Israel content to campus, providing resources and guidance for student advocates, and directly engaging students with Israel. The strength of this program is that the medium is the message. By interacting with them, whether it be organizing a program, or participating in a program, or simply by having coffee, North American young Jews have the opportunity to create a lasting and sustainable relationship with an Israeli peer. Through these connections, students develop a greater desire to visit Israel and arrive on such trips with the orientation and preparation that the Israel Fellow can provide.

Facilitating Student Travel to Israel

It has become a well-established principle in the field of Israel education that there is no substitute for actually visiting Israel and directly experiencing the nuances, complexity, and dynamism of Jewish sovereignty in action. Hillel facilitates student travel to Israel through a variety of opportunities and resources. First and foremost is the partnership with Taglit: birthright israel (bri). Hillel is the largest single organizer of bri in the United States, offering the unique advantage of campus-based trips, including preparation, orientation, and follow through. Beyond bri, Hillel is increasingly prioritizing the value of MASA long-term immersion programs in Israel, especially as a natural vehicle for bri returnees searching for an additional vehicle to return to Israel. MASA offers one-stop shopping for program options, scholarships, and campus grants for marketing and recruitment. Finally, this year in

particular, Hillel offered students a variety of venues to get to Israel over winter break. Through a partnership with the Schusterman Family Foundation, and with the help of individual donors, Hillel sent eight busloads of students on three different winter Israel experiences, including volunteering opportunities in the North and new programs focusing on environmental issues and Global Jewish Peoplehood. Though invaluable in terms of connecting students to Israel, these programs are expensive, and new funds need to be raised constantly to sustain them.

BINA Program: Delving Deeper

The BINA initiative is an exciting new opportunity for campuses to deepen Israel education on campus. This specially-crafted curriculum gives students the opportunity over 10 weeks to delve into the deeper issues of their relationship with Israel, to ask the difficult questions, and to develop nuanced levels of understanding. BINA models exist for students alone, and for students and faculty together. A base curriculum including supplementary materials is provided to the campus, which is then encouraged to diversify the curriculum to align it with local priorities and needs. This year, the BINA curriculum was revised to allow for students to relate in an educational setting to the war in Lebanon. In addition, a special curriculum, entitled *From Processing to Action*, was written with the intent of allowing students to process, reflect upon, and understand the summer's events before choosing the courses of action most appropriate for them. In all of these educational activities, Hillel makes great efforts to promote an atmosphere of pluralism and diverse opinions, signaling to students that critique of Israel and dissent from current policy is perfectly legitimate within the confines of supporting Israel's existence as a Jewish and Democratic State.

Creating a Solid Reservoir of Connections

The climate about Israel on campus is prone to changes and shifts. While there is a general sense that the North American campus is more favorable to Israel than its counterparts in Europe, quickly changing political and military events in the Middle East can directly impact the campus atmosphere in North America. Hillel's approach is to focus on building relationships and on engaging students with Israel and by doing so, create a solid reservoir of connections and care that can weather even difficult political storms. As part of its overall strategic goal of doubling the number of students involved in Jewish life and increasing the number of students having meaningful Jewish experiences, Hillel has renewed its commitment to Israel education, engagement, and advocacy on the campus. 