In the Jewish world, the college years are sometimes viewed as a potential engagement vacuum. Freed from educational outlets such as day schools or after-school programs and too young to fall in the crosshairs of young adult programming, college students are sometimes considered to be in a potential cul-de-sac on their Jewish journeys. College itself, in turn, is often painted as a vague, even somewhat dangerous place where Jewish identity is in jeopardy of attenuating.

In fact, the college years offer amazing opportunities for exploration of and experimentation with Jewish possibilities. Sometimes it happens through Hillel, sometimes through a Jewish studies course or a grassroots initiative, sometimes through peer networks and sometimes through a Birthright Israel trip and its aftermath. In an atmosphere in which multiple identities are embraced and ongoing questioning is encouraged, the key is to offer options that are not heavy-handed and that speak to students where they are.

With thousands of students returning each year from their Birthright Israel experiences, there are seemingly limitless opportunities for grassroots engagement among young adults and their peers whose interest in Jewish history, culture, life and experience has been freshly piqued.

Articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the potential of the college years from a variety of perspectives, whether through peer networks, Israel engagement, grassroots initiatives or various forms of study. They reflect a commitment to reaching students on their own level, through their own peers, and on their own terms. The unifying message is that if students are respected and given proper tools of exploration, they themselves will catalyze new and ongoing commitments to Jewish culture and life.
Here at Hillel, we have a mantra that we’re not interested in running “one-shot” programs. Hour-long, day-long or even week-long events are nice, but what impact do they really have? As our vision is to inspire students to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life, learning and Israel, our work focuses on connecting Jewish students with consistent and ongoing Jewish opportunities.

We’ve learned from important educational philosophers who assert that education is about building habits, or a set of routinized — almost intuitive — behaviors and thoughts. As Lee Shulman, President Emeritus of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, explains: to inculcate a person into a particular field of study or practice, the individual must learn the “habits of mind, habits of hand, and habits of heart” (“Signature Pedagogies in the Professions,” Daedalus, Summer 2005). That is, good education helps students to learn content (mind), skills (hand) and values (heart).

We in the Jewish educational world need to think along these lines: Any endeavor that is meant to engage and educate must create habits. It cannot merely be a moment or even ten days of inspiration. For every great time-limited program we run, there needs to be a before and an after. A day or week of service is important, and can be inspirational to its participants. But imagine if we were serious about getting people in the habit of doing service, for example of being kind to others. We likely wouldn’t design an experience in a far-away place where doing good would be relegated. Instead, we would design ongoing programs in which people could participate locally, every month or every week, and thus provide the opportunity for doing good to become a natural day-to-day habit.

This is just as true — if not more so — for a ten-day trip to Israel. As we know, the Taglit-Birthright Israel trip is an incredibly powerful experience for students, but it is only the beginning. We must work to ensure that the experiences of those ten days become habits of thought and action that continue long after the trip is over.

Abi Dauber Sterne is Vice President for Global Jewish Experience at Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.
educational tool. But it is just a tool, a spark. Without the right material and context, the spark doesn’t kindle into a fire. If we are serious about igniting students’ interest in and commitment to Israel and Jewish life more broadly, ten days is not enough. We need a before and after. We need to build habits. We need to provide trip participants with a clear sense of how their trip connects with their values and their day-to-day lives.

At Hillel, we are dedicated to doing just that. We are one of the only Taglit-Birthright Israel Trip Organizers that requires its staff to meet with each participant before and after the trip. We expect the bus leaders to actively build personal connections with students and to understand their interests, so that when students return to campus there are obvious and intuitive next steps. Most Hillels have individual debriefing meetings with at least 80 percent of Hillel trip participants, and they hold Birthright reunion events that reach a similar percentage of students. Furthermore, we strive to seek out students who went on Birthright with non-Hillel organizations, and we create opportunities for them to have ongoing, regular conversations with staff and with their peers.

In addition, Hillel has paired two of its most effective student engagement activities: Taglit-Birthright Israel and our engagement internships. Over the past five years, through Hillel’s peer-to-peer engagement strategy, 900 student interns have built vast networks. Through mostly one-on-one meetings, these interns have logged 35,000 relationships with uninvolved Jewish peers on more than 70 campuses, helping these students explore and connect to Jewish life on their own terms. Every year, about 30 percent of these student interns are Taglit-Birthright alumni, because Hillel actively seeks to involve these alumni in the next step of their Jewish journeys. We then hire and train them to engage other students Jewishly. We teach students the power of Jewish conversations, and are able both to reach more students and to sustain the power of the initial ten-day Taglit-Birthright Israel experience.

Also, with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, Hillel has placed experienced Jewish educators on ten campuses. Their roles are to build networks or communities of learning, to engage in conversations with students to inspire their Jewish growth, and to infuse Jewish content into the activities of campus Hillels beyond traditional religious services.

And we have seen tremendous growth and results. Through research, we have learned that multiple meetings between a Hillel educator and Birthright returnees multiply the “Birthright effect.” As a result, these alumni demonstrate increased levels of Jewish learning. The more meetings or conversations the students and educators have, the greater the effect. Our research shows that when an educator meets with a Birthright returnee one to five times, the student reports Jewish growth, while those who meet with an educator six or more times report their growth to be significantly higher. In other words, Jewish growth soars with more routine meetings.

To paraphrase a recent NYU graduate, “my weekly chevruta meetings with the rabbi motivated me to be involved in Jewish life.” I believe that this student’s motivation came not only from the content of what she studied with the rabbi, but also from its regularity. Ongoing motivation and engagement comes from habit — the habit of being in Jewish environments and participating in Jewish conversations weekly or even daily.

As part of Hillel’s new strategic plan, we will continue to cultivate the next generation of Jewish leaders and learners around the world. We will continue to design creative opportunities for students of all backgrounds to engage in Jewish values, ideas and actions daily and habitually. To paraphrase Maimonides, positive characteristics are not acquired by doing a one-time positive act, but rather through the repetition of numerous positive acts. He shares the example that it is better to give a thousand individual coins one thousand times, rather than giving all thousand coins at once. If we give one coin every day, we become accustomed to giving charity, whereas if it’s a once-a-year pinnacle moment, it’s just that — something that happens once a year. As Hillel develops methods, tools and programs for Jewish engagement, let’s inspire students to get into the habit of thinking, acting and feeling Jewish every day.
OUR STORY

Ask Big Questions started with a banner at Northwestern University. It was before the High Holidays, and Hillel needed to promote services. So the rabbi and students planned to hang a banner in the middle of campus that said, “Yom Kippur, Wednesday, Repent.” But then they realized a question on the banner might be more engaging. Wouldn’t it help begin the reflective process of the holidays?

So instead Hillel made a banner that said, “What will you do better this year? Experience the High Holidays.” Sure enough, students walked past the banner with their friends and began to talk about the question. They enjoyed the banner so much, they suggested that Hillel make more banners with more questions. Soon a regular banner campaign started. A student group formed and built a website around responses to the questions. Professors got involved and hosted discussions. Ask Big Questions took off.

In 2011, Ask Big Questions became a national initiative of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life to bring together diverse college students for reflective conversations to better understand others and themselves. We have trained more than 150 student fellows on 19 campuses around the country, and are poised to grow in the coming years. Ask Big Questions has been named to the 2012-13 Slingshot Guide and recognized by Craig Newmark’s craigslist.org as one of sixteen people or organizations changing the world.

Here is what we’ve learned along the way:

1. STUDENTS — AND MANY MORE PEOPLE — ARE HUNGRY FOR REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION, AND THEY NEED A WAY IN.

The banner example from Northwestern says it all: Students will answer when they’re asked questions that matter.

Students want reflective conversation. They want to understand their own stories. They want to know the people around them and have meaningful relationships with their peers. While most students find friends and community in college, many fail to find spaces where they can reflect on their lives with others. That’s the space we help them create.

Our model for Ask Big Questions is based on the Passover Seder. Like the Seder, conversations explore questions, share stories, use interpretive objects and include all participants at the table.

Our fellowship program is the first way in to these conversations. We train student fellows and campus professionals to hold reflective Ask Big Questions conversations for their diverse peers. We also offer one-day training courses for people who want to learn the basics of our work. And we post all our materials online at www.askbigquestions.org so any student, anywhere, can download our materials and begin.

2. TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS, WE MUST START BY ASKING BIG QUESTIONS.

Picture this: You’re on a first date with someone you’ve never met before. There is so much potential for a positive relationship. The person sits down next to you, says hello, and then asks, “So, how do you think we should solve the debt ceiling debate?”

There’s something divisive about starting here, yet this is what we so often do in communal conversation on campus: Gather diverse campus groups. Check. Put them in a room. Check. Ask something that is controversial and best left for experts, yet hope it helps them build positive relationships. Check.

Big Questions are different than hard questions. Both kinds of questions matter to everyone, but unlike hard questions, Big Questions are questions everyone can answer. They lead to stories and conversations, not statements and debates. They help us build the communal capacity to trust each other and ultimately work on the hard questions of decision-making.

Where do you feel at home? What are you thankful for? For whom are we responsible? These are Big Questions.

How are we going to solve poverty in the US? What is religion? What is the role of the Israeli government in global Jewish life? These are hard questions. We don’t recommend them to begin reflective conversation (and we don’t recommend them for first dates).

To build relationships across differences, we must start by helping the people in the room understand each other’s stories and experiences. By having conversations around Big Questions, we can create understanding among people on campus, in our communities and around the world.

3. WE NEED A LARGER VOCABULARY.

This past summer at the White House Interfaith Gathering, a Jewish student approached our table for some Ask Big Questions swag. As she picked up a booklet she said, “I get what you’re doing. Students like me need this. I’m Jewish,” she continued, “but not ready to say that I am Jewish. I want to have conversations with diverse people, but don’t want to represent the entire Jewish people when I do it. With Ask Big Questions, I can enter the conversation as myself and bring all my identities with me.”

But it’s not only unaffiliated students who benefit when we approach our conversations this way. Students from strong Jewish backgrounds also crave conversations where they can understand themselves and others without having to represent anything. “Religion is an answer to ultimate questions,” wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel. “The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of religious thinking is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer” (God In Search of Man, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

If we want students to understand others and themselves, we must change the way we ask them questions and we must allow the complexity of their identities to enter the space. These aren’t questions about this policy or that policy, this identity or that identity. These are questions that matter to everyone, that we come back to again and again throughout our lives.

In a few short years, Ask Big Questions has grown from a single banner on a single campus to a network of hundreds of students and professionals touching thousands of lives. More important than any of our programs is the mindset of Big Questions, which can be applied by educators and everyday people to approach our lives, our neighbors and our communities in new ways. Through this work, we are not only creating new pathways for Jewish students, but also offering a model for our universities to build richer communities for all students. Can we change the world through better conversation? We believe we can.
ON FINDING PURPOSE IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS

Students of the Millennial Generation generally feel very proud of being Jewish and positive about their experiences with Israel.

by RABBI MIKE URAM

For every generation of Jews, we need to find new ways to make Judaism and Israel come to life. We are well on the path to figuring out the next models for Jewish community, but when it comes to Israel on campus, many of us have relied on the old, tried-and-true models of Israel advocacy. Last year at the University of Pennsylvania, when it seemed like an anti-Israel crisis was looming, we tried something different. The move towards innovation did not happen all at once. It emerged in steps and stages.

In mid-December, 2011, we got word that what looked like the country’s largest gathering of BDS activists (advocating boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel) would be taking place at the University of Pennsylvania. We were stunned. The initial responses from professionals, students and donors ran the gamut of expected reactions: Let’s shut down the conference, let’s protest, let’s launch our own counter-conference.

But in the days and weeks that followed, as emotions calmed, it became clear that this conference, while offensive, did not present a credible threat to a campus culture that is highly positive towards Israel. The biggest mistake we could make would be to over-respond and in doing so, inadvertently give BDS more credibility and recognition than it deserved.

So rather than focusing on BDS and fueling a controversy that would only give a louder voice to their cause, we decided to focus on our mission of Jewish self-authorship and make use of Hillel’s expertise in working with college students. In order to do this, we would need more than a response to the BDS Conference.

The answer emerged from what we already knew about students of the Millennial Generation. Their relationships to Israel, to the institutions of the organized Jewish community and to perceived threats against Jews are fundamentally different from those of a generation ago. They have come of age at a time when Israel’s strength both militarily and economically is self-evident, and many of them have never experienced any form of anti-Semitism. Therefore, if Penn Hillel were simply to provide a series of speakers to defend Israel, we would, at best, reach only those students who are already most committed to Israel and, at worst, further alienate students who are already suspicious of Jewish institutions.

Since this generation strongly prefers smaller, more personal experiences, the standard response of inviting a series of “expert” speakers to lecture to large groups of students would do little to help students address the questions they really want to ask. Through online news, Facebook and Twitter, students have access to more information than they can possibly assimilate. What they do not have are safe communities and safe spaces to process that information and to think through their own intellectual and emotional responses to the controversies that often surround Israel. Even for Jews who are considered “uninvolved,” relating to Israel is much more than a cognitive process of dates, facts and talking-points; it is fundamentally about their identity as Jews and as citizens of the world.

Given the nuance of these campus trends and the circumstances as they presented themselves, students and professionals at Penn Hillel, Hillel of Greater Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Federation developed a multi-faceted approach that sought to maximize both the numbers of students reached as well as the educational impact. We decided the following: 1) Stay positive and focus on what Israel means to us Jews, as global citizens and as people of conscience; and 2) create something that will be owned by as many students as possible—because a greater variety of student leaders will deliver a higher level of diversity in content and will lower the barriers that prevent the uninvolved from taking part in the experience.

We realized these goals through two methods. First, we created a number of high-visibility initiatives designed to capture the attention and imagination of the University and the larger Jewish community. They included:

- A talk by Professor Alan Dershowitz attended by 887 students and community members.
- An “Invest in Israel Party” held at a bar near campus attended by over 300 students that raised $7,000 for an Israeli charity.
- A student leadership statement published in the student newspaper in support of Israel that was signed by 57 student leaders representing such groups as the Undergraduate Assembly, the Penn Democrats, the College Republicans and the Penn Basketball team.

Second, we accessed existing student leaders and their broad array of social networks to create smaller, more intimate discussions about Israel.

- More than 800 Jewish and non-Jewish students participated in “Israel Across Penn” Shabbat dinners at 48 different Shabbat meals.
- Thirty-five of the hosts were new student leaders and their work to create smaller, more intimate discussions about Israel.

Rabbi Mike Uram is the Director and Campus Rabbi for Hillel at the University of Pennsylvania. A major focus of his work is creating and experimenting with new models of Jewish community and Jewish education in order to meet the needs of the next generation of Jewish leaders.
leaders who had never been formally involved in campus-based Israel activities before.

- Each of the leaders was trained in facilitation techniques and provided with a specialized curriculum Penn Hillel created to help students provoke meaningful dialogues about Israel regardless of their Jewish backgrounds or levels of Israel experience.

While the numbers tell a good story, the real measures of success came in other ways. We heard from dozens of students that these programs provoked the most powerful, honest and meaningful conversations they had ever had about Israel. The positive Israel energy was palpable throughout campus that weekend and the rest of the semester. And, perhaps most important, there has been a dramatic increase in the weeks and months since the conference ended in the number and diversity of students interested in Israel engagement opportunities.

In retrospect, we learned three seminal lessons about Israel engagement on campus: 1) Students are more inspired by a values-based purpose than by a crisis; 2) students thirst for safe spaces and intimate communities where they can explore their own relationships with Israel and the Jewish people; and 3) by dramatically increasing the number of students who feel ownership of a project, campus professionals can increase both the breadth and depth of impact. Students of the Millennial Generation generally feel very proud of being Jewish and positive about their experiences with Israel. We can build on that positivity towards transformational results even when faced with troubling and confrontational events such as an anti-Israel conference.
Growing up in Milwaukee, I had a fairly well-rounded Jewish life. My family was actively involved in our Reform synagogue, I attended a Jewish camp for 13 years, and in high school I joined BBYO, the B’nai B’rith Youth Organization. I felt very connected to the Jewish community I lived in, I loved Jewish people and I think I loved being Jewish. But I’m not quite sure I really knew what that meant.

During the Fall of freshman year, I was mindlessly ambling around Brown University’s campus. I stumbled onto our Main Green, the center of campus that is constantly abuzz with games of Frisbee, charity bake sales, conversations about heteronormativity, and occasionally a student or two working on homework. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a man decked out in a suit and a kippah standing behind a table with a banner that read “MEOR.” He invited me to grab tea with him and talk a little about Simchat Torah, which was coming up soon. Though I had never done so before, my freshman self liked the idea of drinking tea because it seemed like something a real college student would do. I wanted to be a real college student. So I went.

As it turns out, that man was a rabbi at an organization that engages college students in Jewish learning, both through one-on-one meetings and group discussions — also known as my gateway drug into the addiction known as Torah. Sitting in a hip little tea shop with him, I discussed a hodgepodge of Jewish topics, from medical ethics to deeper understandings of Chanukah. Soon I walked into our Hillel rabbi’s office and decided to start going through the Torah. I met with him and talk a little about my take on Judaism. Each one of these hevrutot (Jewish study partnerships) have helped me to see the world in new and interesting ways, and they have truly enriched my life with new levels of meaning.

At the same time, though, I was introduced to a type of learning that differs fundamentally from Torah study. This learning involved a lot less tea and far more footnotes. It involved a great deal of reading, midterm exams and final papers. It was called Judaic Studies, and when I made it my undergraduate concentration, my life was complicated in a whole slew of ways.

Some might argue that Judaic Studies and Torah learning do not mix well. Judaic Studies, an academic endeavor, does not exist for spiritual enrichment, and Torah learning does not comport to the standards of academic honesty and integrity expected at universities. Many would say that putting aside one’s Jewish biases in a classroom setting is not attainable, and, at the same time, that looking at holy text through academic eyes would feel completely hollow.

At first, I agreed. I did not really know how to navigate my seemingly contradictory situation. I signed up for a class called The Bible as Literature, and I was forced to think of the Bible not as a holy document imbued with lessons and meaning, but as...well...a book. Certainly, we discussed the incredible and enduring impact of the book, but it ultimately was just another book, deserving of the same criticisms we might offer a work by William Shakespeare, Mark Twain or J.K. Rowling. Its narrative consisted of plot developments and linguistic choices that students could either praise or criticize. All my life I had been taught that the Torah is, on some level, special. Now, as I examined it as mere literature, I felt as if I was slapping it across the face.

I also struggled in my Jewish learning outside the classroom. Discussing the characteristics of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob over tea, I had to wrestle with the fact that according to just about every modern scholar in the field of Biblical history, they never really existed. I read the book of Kings and had to deal with some scholars’ assertion that David murdered Saul’s entire family in order to solidify his own claim to the throne. Could I maintain any level of respect for Judaism when it denied historical reality by elevating non-existent figures into patriarchs and considered an avatar of holiness a man who may have been a complete and utter criminal? At first, I really was not so sure.

But my situation changed, and soon I was able to rest easier. I woke up one day and realized that my class on The Bible as Literature gave me more than just academic skills. I read through much of the Pentateuch and the books of the Prophets, books I had only skimmed in the past. Now, when rabbis mentioned the gut-wrenching story of Bathsheba and Uriah, I knew what they were talking about. When my professor discussed Orthodox understandings of the Talmud, I already had a ton of background knowledge through my weekly conversations with people he might call primary sources. Both types of learning, while starkly different in a number of ways, served a great purpose. They made me more Jewishly literate, and doing so made me a higher-functioning member of my Jewish communities.

Unfortunately, though, people involved in each type of Jewish literacy seem to know very little about the other, and sometimes they even view each other as enemies. Students of Judaic Studies often see no value in traditional Jewish learning, and I have even heard some of those students call Torah learning ineffective, immoral or destructive. In more traditional circles, I’ve heard people say that scholars of Judaic Studies, despite their intense research and academic credentials, are simply making things up to satisfy their ruthlessly atheistic agendas. Both sides succeed at demonizing the other, and the resulting system is one in which students taking a Judaic Studies class called The Talmud and those discussing it as a holy text a block away feel like they have very little in common.

I have seen dozens of people at my school discover their love for Jewish learning, Judaic Studies or both, and I know that the same is true at colleges around the world. People naturally gravitate towards this immense body of knowledge that has so much potential to elevate our lives intellectually and spiritually.

We must recognize the value in both of these ventures, and we shouldn’t discriminate depending on what person or organization is providing the newfound knowledge. The stereotypes I mentioned above are incredibly harmful to the Jewish world. They serve as a destructive rather than a unifying force. They are not the only stereotypes out there. I have heard people from more traditional Jewish circles talk about how Hillel “dumbs down” Judaism. I have heard supporters of Hillel discuss how Jewish fraternities “lack Jewish substance.” And to complete the circle, I have heard members of Jewish fraternities describe how “dangerous” those more traditional Jews are.

It’s not time to stop debating the most effective methods of Jewish education and engagement. My friends Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammey would be offended at the suggestion that we would ever cease that discussion. But our discussion, like theirs, must be l’shem shemayim, for the sake of heaven. The second we lose that, we cease existence as am yisrael (the Jewish people) and we become amei yisrael (the Jewish peoples). I do not believe we’ve gotten to that point yet, but we must not get there anytime soon.

Lex Rofes is a senior at Brown University concentrating in Judaic Studies. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and works as the Opinions Editor of New Voices Magazine.
Every year, thousands of college students return from Taglit-Birthright Israel, their interest in Israel sparked, their appetite to learn more whetted. Increasingly, these alumni — and many other young adults like them — are finding meaningful avenues to tap their newfound excitement and to deepen their connection to and knowledge of contemporary Israel. Hungry to understand the country “behind the headlines” and to explore its vibrant economic and cultural landscape, students are engaging with Israel through a growing array of effective but unheralded programs that are enabling them to learn and talk about Israel in more sophisticated ways.

The reverberations are being felt on campuses across the United States. Indeed, college students are voting with their feet by creating and availing themselves of opportunities to engage deeply with modern Israel on their own terms and in ways that unite rather than divide, energize and inspire rather than demoralize. Three areas that have proven particularly valuable for young people to forge meaningful ties to Israel are business and entrepreneurship, academia and the arts.

1. BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: At the University of Michigan, students looking to involve their peers with Israel’s innovative, cutting-edge side created the Tamid Israel Investment Group, which was incubated at Hillel and which offers year-round Israel business projects culminating in a summer fellowship with an Israeli company. By connecting business-minded students with Israeli start-ups and providing unique opportunities, such as managing a Tel Aviv-based investment fund and consulting for a start-up in Herzliya, Tamid offers hands-on experiences that respond directly to students’ interests and career goals while connecting them to Israel as a dynamic and successful “Start Up Nation.” College students across the country are excited about replicating this model, and Tamid is now expanding to campuses throughout the U.S. with the help of the Israel on Campus Coalition.

Similar models are sparking growing student attention and participation, including Birthright Excel, which places outstanding Birthright alumni in summer internships with Israeli companies, and Israel and Co., which organizes trips for MBA students to Israel and includes Israeli entrepreneurship and high-tech as part of the MBA curricula. These programs are creating more — and more accessible — entry points for engaging with Israel and Jewish life. And they are helping to foster a new generation of business leaders who are knowledgeable and passionate about Israeli innovation and ingenuity.

2. ACADEMIA: Beyond business, students from every discipline are broadening their understanding of the realities of contemporary Israel through the blossoming academic field of Israel studies. Boosted in part by thousands of Birthright alumni looking for ways to stay connected with Israel, these courses are enabling university students to delve more deeply and to engage with diverse aspects of Israeli society in a familiar academic environment. Previously unengaged students are availing themselves of course offerings that allow them to connect through Israeli history, film, politics and sociology. And those students already involved can deepen their learning through the classroom, in a framework disconnected from advocacy. The rise of independent Israel studies programs and multi-disciplinary courses is ensuring that a growing number of college students have the chance to develop both their knowledge of Israel as a multifaceted country and their relationships and mentorships with top-notch Israeli academics. Indeed, Israel studies have exploded in recent years, with a 69 percent increase in the number of Israel-related courses on U.S. campuses over the past decade.

And demand is reflected not just in the numbers. As the field has matured, courses have become broader as well as deeper, with classes on numerous topics beyond the conflict. Last semester, for example, Yale offered a class called “Dynamics of Israeli Culture,” while Princeton is now offering a course on “Israeli Humor and its Roots.” The feedback has been encouraging: a recent study found that students enrolled in courses taught by visiting Israeli professors were nearly unanimous — 97 percent — in saying that the classes had expanded their knowledge of Israel, given them richer backgrounds and broadened their views. An overwhelming majority of students reported that the discourse in their classrooms was respectful and open, and that the courses significantly increased their interest in learning more about and spending time in Israel.

3. THE ARTS: Israel’s fertile arts and culture scene has been another exciting avenue through which college students are engaging with contemporary Israel. From film and fine arts to dance and music, Israeli artists are introducing young people to the country’s rich, sophisticated culture. The Schusterman Visiting Artists Program, for example, is bringing well-regarded Israeli filmmakers, choreographers, musicians and writers to campuses including the University of Florida, Harvard, Michigan State and Berkeley. The artists serve as teachers and mentors, providing a window into a country that many only hear about through the narrow lens of political conflict. A recent independent study examined the impact of Israeli art and artists on young people and found that, after being exposed to visiting artists, college students previously unfamiliar with the country gained a more nuanced perspective on Israelis and a new picture of Israel as a lively, modern, multicultural nation. Participants who had previous experience with Israel, meanwhile, found that engaging with Israeli art evoked positive memories and reinforced a sense of solidarity with Israel. Many students surveyed expressed their desires to visit or study in Israel as a result of their interactions with Israeli artists.

From business and entrepreneurship to academia and the arts, new programs are engaging students with Israel in organic and creative ways. Moreover, they are reaching students who likely never would have become involved through traditional routes and, in the process, introducing students to a more holistic view of Israel as an intellectual, cultural, scientific and technological hub. These initiatives are exciting because of their innovative aspects, but even more so because they are working. On campuses across the United States, students are exploring the diversity and vibrancy of Israel, forging connections across political and religious differences, and creating new avenues to define their relationships with Israel now and for the future.

Campus life is a platform of multifaceted opportunities for students to explore and strengthen their identities in ways that speak to their varied needs and interests. Learning about and engaging with Israel should be no exception, and we should celebrate, support and expand on innovative efforts that are proving the rule.
In the pursuit of identifying effective models for educating and engaging young Jewish adults, leveraging social networks has demonstrated impressive results. Since 2008, Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life has utilized this strategy on college campuses across the country. This model has helped Hillel expand its engagement efforts among students from a broad range of Jewish backgrounds in meaningful Jewish learning experiences. Our ability to learn about, refine and ultimately scale this model is central to our goal of inspiring more Jewish students to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life.

The Senior Jewish Educators/Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative (SJE/CEI), a five-year pilot program funded by the Jim Joseph Foundation, was the centerpiece of this new peer-based education strategy. The initiative placed Jewish educators on ten campuses to work in tandem with student engagement interns in order to help reach Hillel's goal of doubling the number of Jewish students who are involved in Jewish life and who have meaningful Jewish experiences.

For this to be achieved, the student interns tap into their personal social networks — whether they are with fraternities or sororities, business majors, foodies, artists or graduating seniors — to connect friends and friends of friends to each other, launching student-run Jewish initiatives on campus. To broaden Hillel's reach, the student interns initiate ongoing conversations about Judaism with their peers, and they co-create Jewish experiences and offerings that foster connections to broader definitions of Jewish life, learning and connections with Israel — outside the walls of a Hillel building on campus.

A case study on the program conducted by the Monitor Institute showed that training these interns to cultivate relationships effectively with previously unengaged campus networks was a catalyst for broader and deeper student engagement in Jewish life. The interns were the critical social connectors who engaged students from diverse networks on campus. The Senior Jewish Educators then provided depth to the program by building personal relationships with interns and their peers and engaging them in conversations about what matters most to them as college students, framed through Jewish topics.

The data from the pilot period is compelling — the ten campuses each had on average 12 student interns who engaged an average of 50 contacts per campus. Combined with the educators’ unique contacts, each campus
averaged 746 contacts per campus for a total of 22,380 new contacts over five years.

Beyond these campuses, Hillels throughout the country have begun embracing a network approach to Jewish life. More than 60 North American campus Hillels and nine Hillels internationally are participating in peer-to-peer engagement projects and at least another ten are experimenting with full- or part-time Jewish educators to support student networks. Local Hillels employing this methodology increased their penetration into Jewish student populations and reached many more students, including those with weaker Jewish backgrounds. Since Hillel began expanding this strategy, student involvement across the nation has increased from 35 to 48 percent.

Evaluation also demonstrates that the one-on-one relationships with educators and interns, as well as participation in smaller engagement activities, led to measurable Jewish growth for both interns and their peers.

Recognizing this success, we now look to scale the program to other campuses in the coming years. The greatest challenge in scaling this model undoubtedly is the cost. As a result, we worked with the Monitor Institute to develop a core program model for between 60 to 70 campuses that are prepared to adopt the methodology. In addition, Hillel’s Schusterman International Center plans to also offer “open source” resources to other campuses in order to help them adopt the same strategy for their specific campuses.

During this planning process, the Monitor Institute identified important lessons from the pilot period that will inform the scaling of the program:

**OPTIMIZE FOR BOTH BREADTH (REACH) AND DEPTH (GROWTH).** While interns are successful at reaching their peers, the Jewish educator promotes real Jewish growth and provides depth to the program. Students who have contact with an educator experience Jewish growth in several dimensions. The scaled program will seek to combine the goals of breadth and depth, leveraging both interns and educators on campuses.

**CREATE A LESS COSTLY JEWISH EDUCATOR ROLE AND BUILD A TALENT PIPELINE.** Full-time Jewish educators were the main cost driver in the pilot program, and they were also a key driver of the program’s positive impact. In order to make scaling financially feasible, several modifications to the full-time educator model were proposed — including part-time educators — and will be piloted and evaluated. Creating a national talent pipeline would help to cultivate and place more Jewish educators in these positions.

**INCLUDE STUDENT LEADERS AND TARGET DIVERSE CAMPUS NETWORKS.** While the pilot program targeted only uninvolved students, the scaled program will target “diverse networks of students” and will define and clarify the leadership development component. Throughout the pilot program, we learned that some students were involved in Hillel but less advanced in their Jewish growth, while other students were uninvolved but had stronger levels of Jewish identity. In all cases, the program advanced each student’s personal Jewish journey.

**EXPAND FROM A TIGHT PROGRAM MODEL TO A LOOSER ENGAGEMENT METHODOLOGY OVER TIME.** On pilot campuses, the program’s engagement practices became embedded in the campus Hillel after a few years. However, we learned that it would be easier for new campuses to begin to implement a defined program before innovating this approach in other areas over time.

**CONTINUE TO SUPPORT AND ENABLE PEER LEARNING.** Hillel’s summer institute trains engagement interns and supervisors and convenes peer-based communities to prepare these individuals to implement this program. It also enables them to create their own professional networks and capture, organize and share their learning more effectively. To ensure accessibility to the greatest number of campuses, Hillel will experiment with the timing and location of the engagement program training.

**CENTRALIZE SOME CAPABILITIES AND SERVICES AT THE HUB (HILLEL’S SCHUSTERNAN INTERNATIONAL CENTER).** While program implementation happens locally, other capabilities can best be delivered “at scale.” In addition to training, Hillel’s hub in Washington, D.C. will provide network-wide evaluation, knowledge management and sharing, overall communication and some fundraising.

As funder and grantee, it is in both of our interests to recognize that this network-based approach magnifies social impact. In this specific case, more students connect with Judaism on their terms with their peers. We understand how important personal connection is for this demographic. With this learning, along with the strategy of leveraging students’ social networks, we believe that the program’s scaling will help reach an even broader range of students and engage them in meaningful, relevant Jewish learning experiences.
For as long as I can remember, “outreach” to college students on campus and “engaging the next generation” have been national buzzwords and phrases. How can we reach more students beyond the core? How can we grab their interest? How can we get them in the door? What kind of mechanisms do we need? What kind of branding? What would the programs look like? And on and on.

Just over 13 years ago, Michael Steinhardt and Charles Bronfman decided to launch what most people in the Jewish world believed to be a crazy idea: a ten-day trip to Israel for first-timers that would be free for all participants aged 18-26. At the time, Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (the Jewish Federation of Boston) had its own program partnered with JFNA (the Jewish Federations of North America). Our trip for first-timers was highly subsidized and had strings attached. Each participant had to commit in advance to a minimum of one year of service to a specific area of Jewish life consistent with their interests. They also did service in our partnership community in Haifa during the trip. Boston has a significant share of the available college students in our area, and we were excited about the notion of growing from our initial cohort of 100 participants.

When we learned of Michael Steinhardt’s and Charles Bronfman’s plans to launch Taglit-Birthright Israel, I remember the conversations I had with Myra Kraft, z”l, Chair of the Board of CJP. We agreed that it sounded crazy. “What? Free?” we both said. “Why? No strings attached? Who’s going to sign up for something like that?”

When overnight, we saw a few hundred participants sign up for the Steinhart/Bronfman program instead of the total of one hundred students who had signed up for ours, the “crazy” idea now known as Taglit-Birthright Israel became wildly exciting. I had the privilege of envisioning how we could maximize the opportunity and create change in our own community. When I looked at the market share of students who were going on the trips from Boston and what the potential could be, I realized we’d been handed a miraculous opportunity for young adults and for every Jewish community in North America and in the Jewish world.

When Birthright Israel’s numbers reached 100,000, Barry Shrage, President of CJP, challenged me with creating a vision and strategy to execute a comprehensive plan for our campuses to reach a critical mass of Jewish college students that would leverage the gift of Birthright Israel.

The first step was to engage the best talent we knew to make the project creative, high quality and results-driven. We wanted outcomes — not just process and ideas. We hired Upstart Ideas based in Jerusalem, a start-up entrepreneurial company co-founded by two business-savvy former campus activists with strong community organizing skills, the ability to train and razor sharp creative flare. Their job was to help us build a critical mass of Birthright participants at each campus and engage these students in Jewish life after the trip. We were aiming at underclassmen — those who would return to campus and infuse it with new energy and untapped networks.

Cheryl Aronson is the Associate Vice President of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP). She is the founder of key CJP initiatives including Ikkarim, an adult learning initiative for parents of young children; the Jewish Overnight Camping Initiative; the Israel Campus Roundtable, IACT; and the Follow Me to Israel Institute. Cheryl also serves on several national committees including Taglit-Birthright Israel’s International Education Committee.
So here’s what we did: We partnered with three different Hillels — Tufts, UMASS/Amherst and Brandeis — and invested in specific assets at each campus, including a full-time professional who would recruit and engage students in an enhanced pre-trip, trip and post-trip model. We decided to name our program IACT (Inspired Active Committed Transformed), the aspirational journey of the Birthright student. We believed from the outset that student empowerment towards engagement in Jewish life is based on a Jewish mission. Therefore, our frames of engagement were grounded in Jewish values and focused on Israel engagement, Jewish learning and community service. We chose three campuses with strong Hillel leaderships and a desire for experimentation and learning. These Hillels would be open to self-reflection among their full campus team and an additional new professional, the IACT Coordinator. The Coordinator was expected to be the inside/outside person — an employee of Hillel, but one who would spend his/her time with underclassmen in fraternities, sororities, campus centers and places where students who are not active in Hillel hang out. We provided programming resources for recruitment, pre-program activities, trip enhancement and post-program engagement. We trained IACT Coordinators intensively for several days each semester and provided ongoing mentoring and coaching every week. Finally, we helped support campus-based trips so students would return with the same community on campus.

The results: our Taglit-Birthright participant numbers immediately more than doubled at each campus. Students had a built-in community, participating with fellow students and with the IACT Coordinator, and an average of 80 percent of all returnees at each campus became engaged in ongoing Jewish educational opportunities.

The next year, we added Boston University and Northeastern University, and we now have 12 campus partners. At each of these campuses, the numbers of participants increased several-fold until a critical mass was achieved. Contrast this to a time before IACT, when staff had little time or resources to recruit and to follow up with students who were not already part of Hillel’s core programming.

The transformation at each IACT site is profound. Jewish life changes when underclassmen unlikely to be engaged are successfully recruited and become personally involved — and bring with them their previously untapped networks. For example, since IACT started six years ago at Tufts, the number of Jewish students involved in sustainable Jewish educational programs there has doubled. These are not one-off programs.

These programs include ongoing pro-Israel campaigns, immersion in Jewish-learning courses and intensive community-service programs. This past semester, 85 percent of Birthright alumni were actively engaged in at least three educational programs. We have never had a better opportunity to engage students. It’s not just about how they feel when they are on the trip or after the trip. It’s about what they do. IACT will help students engage in the meaning and beauty of learning and doing Jewishly long after the trip is over.

Taglit-Birthright Israel gave us the chance. We opened our eyes and saw the possibilities. We hope other communities grab this moment. Our young adults deserve it. Our future depends on it.
Though the group is young and small, with dedication and perseverance, education and community, JFem can enhance Jewish and feminist identities, provide a safe and accepting community, and be a force of social change.

Creating a new campus space

by REBECCA SILVERMAN

A couple of weeks ago, a Jewish friend and recent graduate of the University of Maryland (UMD) asked me what new things were going on at Hillel. The question was particularly appropriate for me, having co-founded a Jewish feminist group called JFem just this past November. When I explained the group to him, he replied, “There is such a thing as a Jewish feminist?”

Unfortunately, his response was not the first of its kind. While speaking with a fellow Jewish student, Rebecca Krevat, earlier this fall, we agreed that there was a lack of space at Hillel for Jews who identify themselves as feminists. While the Women’s Social Empowerment Initiative, spearheaded by Naomi Kohl, Maryland Hillel’s Campus Torah Educator, focuses on connecting Jewish women socially, there was no group dedicated to exploring feminism in a Jewish context. It was as if topics that are relevant to feminism, including gender equality, reproductive rights and the wage gap, had no significance in the Jewish world. There was a mentality that feminism and Judaism are mutually exclusive.

Rebecca and I yearned for a place to explore what it means to be both a feminist and a Jew. We wondered about others who, whether openly or privately, are also curious about feminism in a Jewish context. We wondered how the two identities could intersect to create positive change in our immediate and surrounding communities. So Rebecca and I, no longer willing to ignore the hole we felt in Hillel, teamed up with another UMD student, Elizabeth Savopoulos, to create JFem, a political, social justice and Jewish learning group. JFem is dedicated to providing an open, safe and engaging space for people — men and women — to explore their feminist Jewish identities.

At our first event, JFem hosted Rabbi Elizabeth Richman, Program Director and Rabbi in Residence of Jews United for Justice, to tell her Jewish feminist story and to facilitate a discussion about what it means to be a Jewish feminist today. At the end of her presentation, Rabbi Richman commented, “I wish something like JFem had been around when I was in college.” Her words reaffirmed for everyone in the room that the need for a group like JFem is long overdue. People left the event excited about JFem’s potential to provide new meaning in Judaism as well as to create positive social change.

JFem already has a number of events on the calendar for the spring semester. These include, but are not limited to:

- A training session through the Washington Area Clinic Defense Task Force to teach volunteers to escort women safely to abortion clinics.
- An advocacy training session about the Paid Sick Days Act, which, if passed, would allow more than 50 percent of restaurant workers in Washington, D.C. to take leave while ill or to care for family members.
- A co-sponsored series with Hamsa, UMD Hillel’s LGBTQA group, about how to address gender norms in the Bible.
- A cell phone drive for the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse.
- A reproductive rights panel of prominent political figures and Jewish leaders.

The short time frame in which JFem was created and launched can in large part be attributed to the strong support and assistance from the UMD Hillel staff. As a Campus Engagement Intern (CEI) this year, I am responsible for drawing in uninvolved Jewish students on campus and simultaneously creating an initiative that reflects my skills and passions and assesses the needs of my “engages.” When I decided that JFem would be my initiative, my mentors, Rabbi Jessica Schimberg, Associate Director for Jewish Life and Learning, and Maiya Chard-Yaron, Director of Educational Engagement, supported me wholeheartedly. I understood that Jessica and Maiya were helping not only because their jobs require them to, but because they respect the desire and initiative of Jewish students to enhance the Hillel community.

JFem is a perfect example of the balance between Hillel-directed initiatives and grassroots, student-led programs. The Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative is a Hillel-sponsored fellowship in which the interns, with the help and support of staff, are responsible for creating their own projects based on the needs of the Jewish community. The Hillel-directed and student-led programs are deeply interwoven: Hillel-directed initiatives would be greatly lacking without students’ ideas and student-led programs would not be fully possible without the frameworks already set up by Hillel.

When Rebecca, Elizabeth and I created the official JFem Facebook group, we joked that we had collectively born a child, and we were ecstatic and somewhat nervous about how the group would turn out. Jokes aside, the baby metaphor is applicable. Though the group is young and small, with dedication and perseverance, education and community, JFem can enhance Jewish and feminist identities, provide a safe and accepting community, and be a force of social change. What a privilege to be a part of JFem and to be part of a Hillel that supports a Jewish feminist group. Though it is only the beginning, JFem is off to a good start.
Students want reflective conversation. They want to understand their own stories. They want to know the people around them and have meaningful relationships with their peers. While most students find friends and community in college, many fail to find spaces where they can reflect on their lives with others. That’s the space we help them create.

— SHEILA KATZ AND RABBI JOSH FEIGELSON