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Hillel students & professionals prepare to fight for Israel on campus

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By SUE FISHKOFF JTA



Students learning about Israel advocacy as part of their campus engagement work at the Hillel Institute at Washington University in St. Louis, which took place Aug. 11-15. JTA photo.

ST. LOUIS— Amanda Boris is nervous about what she'll face when classes resume at the University of Wisconsin.

"There's an uncomfortable amount of antisemitism on my campus," said the incoming senior.

Last year, her campus newspaper ran an ad from a notorious Holocaust denier for several weeks, despite protests from the Jewish community. More troubling, she said, were the anonymous posts that appeared under the ad, stating that the Jews "deserved it" and they "better watch themselves." And a professor who teaches an introductory course on the Middle East makes "openly false statements about Israel," she charged.

Boris told her story to a group of Jewish students who joined some 300 of their peers from Aug. 11 to 15 at Washington University in St. Louis at the Hillel Institute, a summer training session designed to help them prepare for Jewish engagement work on campus.

A big part of that work is learning how to respond effectively to anti-Israel activities on campus.

Such activity has been on the rise on North American campuses for several years, but pro-Israel activists say last year was different: The new campaigns are better organized, more prevalent and more vitriolic.

This summer, a number of national Jewish organizations, including Hillel, held training sessions to help their students and staff prepare for what is expected to be an even more targeted anti-Israel campaign this coming year.

"In the Jewish community there's a lot of fear and anxiety, and that lands on our campuses, on our students," said Hillel President Wayne Firestone at the gathering's plenary session.

"We have seen things on campus, last semester in particular, that are really ugly," he told the crowd. "We can imagine what we'll face when we return this fall."

Whereas past years might have involved handfuls of anti-Israel students passing out photocopied flyers, last year saw a high-tech traveling exhibit of Israel's separation barrier, complete with an embedded plasma TV showing anti-Israeli images.

And as part of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, efforts to bring resolutions calling for divestment from companies doing business with Israel were noted at more than half a dozen campuses— a new tactic in the anti-Israel movement that targets student governments.

Only one of those proposed resolutions passed, in a nonbinding student body vote at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash. But every time such a bill is put forward, Hillel activists say, the charged atmosphere it creates leaves lasting wounds.

When the student government at the University of California, San Diego voted on a divestment bill in April (See story on page 21), Hillel campus director Keri Copans noted some Jewish students standing on the other side of the room with the pro-divestment crowd, even as most Jewish students stood with her in opposing the bill.

As a professional charged with helping students develop all aspects of their Jewish identities, Copans said she found the physical divide painful.

"Divestment bills come and go, but these are Jewish students," she said. "I want them to have positive Jewish experiences, and that's not what they get by being glared at across the room."

Asking students to act as Israel advocates along with all the other things they do at college isn't easy, activists say.

"Our students are coming to school to learn, and now they're expected to defend," said Roz Rothstein, co-founder and CEO of StandWithUs, a Los Angeles-based international organization that describes itself as working to ensure that Israel's side of the story is being told on campuses and in other public spheres. "Israel is the target, but Jewish students who stand up for Israel also become the target."

In mid-August, StandWithUs flew 40 of its campus leaders to Oxnard, Calif., for a training session, and the organization will host another session in November for 150 students. J Street U, a self-described pro-Israel advocacy organization with a network of supporters on about 40 campuses, sponsored its first student leadership conference in late May outside Baltimore, where work to counter the anti-Israel sanctions campaign was addressed along with other concerns. And AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, offers such sessions throughout the year.

"We want to enable students to open up these difficult conversations on campus," said Daniel May, J Street U's national director.

"Everyone's concerned, and that's good," said Rothstein of StandWithUs. "Once the year begins, everyone's work on this will merge and hopefully strengthen the students."

AIPAC declined to speak about the issue on the record.

Israel advocacy is a nuanced issue, say Jewish campus professionals, and that can be divisive.

"For the average student, Israel is a problem—and they don't want more problems," said Michael Faber, longtime Hillel executive director at Ithaca College in Ithaca, N.Y. "It makes that leg of their Jewish identity wobbly."

Students with varying religious and political views are being asked to stand together for Israel's right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state, and that can bring them into conflict with other friends and other causes, activists say.

"College is emblematic of what's happening in the general society—Israel both unites and divides the Jewish people. That's what we're wrestling with," said Rabbi Adam Naftalin-Kelman, Hillel's executive director at the University of California, Berkeley, which also faced a protracted struggle over a divestment bill last spring. "For me, pro-Israel is someone who wants to develop a deep, meaningful, mature, loving relationship with Israel. How this is manifested may be different for different people."

But students active in Jewish affairs say it's something they face whether they want to or not.

"We were very affected by the divestment struggles at Berkeley and San Diego, and we're fully aware it is coming to our campus," said Raquel Saxe, who is beginning her sophomore year at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Firestone also weighed in on the issue.

"We want the students to be prepared, not paralyzed with fear," the Hillel executive said. "We are in the identity-building business, and the Israel issue is one we are standing up for."

During the Hillel Institute in St. Louis, some 80 Hillel professionals arrived early to take part in a 24-hour simulation exercise in which they played various roles on a mythical university campus faced with a divestment bill and a boycott of visiting Israeli professors.

The techniques used in the simulation are included in an Israel Advocacy Playbook that Hillel distributed at the conference and plans to give every Hillel campus professional.

"The group that went through this exercise together now has a common language," said Chicago educator Carl Schrag, who developed and ran the exercise on behalf of the Israel on Campus Coalition. "When BDS [the sanctions campaign] hits—and I presume it will—hopefully they'll remember they're not alone."

Coalition building is key to Israel advocacy work on campus, say those involved in leading such efforts. It shouldn't come down to Jewish students against the rest of the campus community, they add—and as interfaith efforts increase on more and more campuses, Jewish students should find themselves less isolated.

Allison Sheren, now Hillel program director at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, says that things were different five years ago as divestment efforts hit her campus when she was a student.

Now she points to a “MuJew” program—a Jewish-Muslim alternative spring break option on her campus that has brought Jewish and Muslim students together on social action projects for the past three years.

“There’s a real focus on dialogue, on partnerships,” Sheren said. “When Israel issues come up, even if there are disagreements, there is discussion.”