

*From "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues" by Jack Wertheimer in the American Jewish Year Book, 1999 (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1999), David Singer, ed.*

## **Campus Programs**

The remarkable revival of Jewish campus programs in the 1990s stands as a dramatic counterpoint to the relatively anemic condition of contemporary Jewish youth movements. After nearly sliding into oblivion during the 1970s and 1980s, campus programs have received a significant infusion of new energy and capital. Impressive new Jewish centers have been rising on campuses across the country; and, even more important, a new generation of professional and lay leaders is transforming the entire field.

Jewish campus life has long been dominated by the Hillel network, which began with an organization founded at the University of Illinois in 1923 and then spread to many more colleges and universities. For much of its history, the B'nai B'rith Hillel system offered programs of disparate quality. On some campuses, Jewish student life was well organized, with a highly visible central address; in other instances, college campuses were in close proximity to strong Jewish communities where students could find services. But large numbers of Jewish students were situated on campuses where they could benefit from neither.<sup>328</sup> As a result, the campus was often seen by Jewish leaders as a place where Jewish identity would attenuate rather than gain strength.

As admission barriers to Jews dropped in the postwar decades, the sheer scope of the challenge to serve Jews on campus grew beyond the capacity of B'nai B'rith, the parent organization of the Hillel network. It has been estimated that 80 percent of all Jewish college students are located at 109 universities with Jewish student populations greater than 1,000;<sup>329</sup> yet hundreds more campuses attract smaller Jewish student bodies. Even at its apogee of strength, B'nai B'rith could not reach all these students. And then, in the 1980s, the parent organization went into a decline and was forced to cut its allocations to Hillel by 50 percent. It is therefore all the more remarkable that during the 1990s Hillel severed its ties to B'nai B'rith - renaming itself Hillel - The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life - and not only rebounded but gained unprecedented vigor. By the late 1990s, it encompassed 120 Hillel foundations and affiliates at an additional 400 campuses.<sup>330</sup>

Under the energetic leadership of Richard Joel, Hillel has won support from major Jewish family foundations and local federations of Jewish philanthropy, both to build impressive new facilities and to underwrite new ventures. In recent years, spanking-new Jewish centers have risen on campuses such as Harvard, Columbia, New York University, the University of Maryland, and in Houston, one for students at Rice and the University of Houston. Its "Campaign for a Jewish Renaissance" raised \$37.5 million in 1998 alone.<sup>331</sup> And new programs funded by large Jewish family foundations are expanding the scope of Hillel's work, which includes professional development courses for Hillel staff members, sponsored by the Schusterman Foundation; study trips to Israel for staff members, sponsored by the Gruss Life Monument Funds; the Steinhardt Jewish Campus Service Corps, a program to nurture Jewish student leaders on campuses; the National Jewish Student Service Campaign, funded by the Cummings Foundation for the purpose of encouraging Jewish students to design social action programs on campuses; and the Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning, which aims to establish batei midrash, traditional Torah study centers, albeit for men and women equally, and for the entire range of Jewish students on campuses.<sup>332</sup>

All of these programs are designed to create opportunities for Jewish learning that will complement formal courses of study offered by Jewish studies programs on campus. The distinctive experience Hillel aspires to offer is a form of traditional Jewish learning explicitly aimed at nurturing Jewish identification, an aspiration few Jewish academics would set for their courses and probably could not accomplish in any event. As the director of Princeton's Hillel observed: "There is no substitute for the kind of curricular critical analysis that Jewish Studies provides. Rabbis and the Jewish community do not 'own' the study of Jewish tradition and institutions. In

the total economy of Jewish life on campus both Jewish Studies and Jewish Learning are requisite; both have their place and their role." Whether these two models of Jewish study will coexist remains to be seen. But Hillel surely is intensifying its capacity to deliver informal Jewish education and has been set for itself a goal of nothing less than "a Jewish Renaissance."<sup>333</sup>

That task, as Hillel leaders would readily concede, is enormous. A survey conducted in 1990 found that only 15 percent of the 400,000 Jewish students on college campuses were affiliated; another 25 percent were thoroughly alienated and probably unreachable.<sup>334</sup> By 1998 matters had not improved : a survey found that almost three-quarters of Jewish students rated their Jewish campus activity as minimal, and fully one-third did not participate at all; still, 8 percent claimed to be fully satisfied with their Jewish campus life, and another 32 percent said their Jewish campus organization sponsored many interesting activities.<sup>335</sup>

With its renewed energy and important new funding, Hillel is laboring to reverse these trends by reaching the inactive population while continuing to work with its core of affiliated members. Its leaders fervently embrace a mission to overcome the "Jewish illiteracy" of vast numbers of otherwise bright and well-educated young people who never had the chance to acquire a solid Jewish education prior to arriving on college campuses.<sup>336</sup>

---

<sup>328</sup> See the survey *Campus and Community: Strengthening the Identity of Jewish College Students* (Ukeles Associates, New York, n.d.), p.7.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>330</sup> From a promotional booklet, "Hillel: The Campaign for Jewish Renaissance," n.d., ca. 1998.

<sup>331</sup> *Communities: 1998 Hillel Annual Report*, p.10.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6. *A Week in the Life of Hillel: 1997 Annual Report*, p. 9. And "Hillel Takes Torah to College," *Forward*, Nov. 21, 1997, p. 5, on the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning.

<sup>333</sup> James Diamond, "Creating a Culture of Jewish Learning on Campus," from a draft of "Toward an Educational Philosophy: Informing Hillel's Joseph Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Learning," Dec. 1997, pp. 24-25.

<sup>334</sup> Sales, *Jewish Youth Databook*, p. 31. We may note in this connection that Hillel often works in conjunction with campus organizations sponsored by the three major Jewish religious movements. But the Hillel foundations and their affiliates carry the major responsibility of reaching Jewish students on campuses.

<sup>335</sup> "It's Greek to Us," *Jewish Week* (New York), Feb. 12, 1999, p. 3. This study confirms that only a narrow band of young Jews participate in campus life, and of those who do, an overwhelming 75 percent had either attended a Jewish summer camp or youth group; some 29 percent also had attended a day school.

<sup>336</sup> Alvin Mars, "A Plurality of Learners," in "Toward an Educational Philosophy," p. 10.