

Interview

Wayne Firestone

By Charley J. Levine

Wayne Firestone, president of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, firmly subscribes to the consensus that the future of American Jewry rests in the identities forged today on university campuses. Trained in law, international commerce and public affairs, Firestone, 43, has been on both sides of the Hillel coin, as a committed campus activist and now at the helm, in Washington, D.C., of the largest student organization working today on the frontlines of the Jewish identity campaign.



Q. Undoubtedly much has changed in Hillel's 30-year history. Can you tell us about the early days?

A. As a campus activist in the late 1970s and early 1980's, Hillel was a time of personal growth and activism. After a first-time trip to Israel with the Alexander Muss High School, Hillel was the only place I could turn to that really filled my interest in Zionism. My association with Hillel was based on a small core of activists who worked together for national and international concerns of the Jewish people. In those days, Hillel students were on the forefront of the Soviet Jewry movement and defending Israel against the U.N.'s notorious Zionism-equals-racism resolution. Hillel did not have the staff or the facilities to address the problems of contemporary college students.

Q. Can you describe Hillel's transformation?

A. With the support of visionary philanthropists like Edgar M. Bronfman, Lynn Schusterman and Michael Steinhart, volunteer leaders, the Jewish federations and the remarkable direction of presidents Richard M. Joel and Avraham Infeld, Hillel has been transformed from top to bottom. Our local Hillels have more staff, better facilities and more imaginative programs.... More than 513 campuses throughout the United States and Canada are served by 251 Hillel Foundations, program centers and affiliated Jewish student organizations. We have created Hillels where none existed before.... Five Hillels are located in Latin America. Five Hillels are located in Israel. Incredibly, 27 Hillels are located in the Former Soviet Union.

Q. What is the organization's main goal?

A. We have a strong infrastructure that enables Hillel professionals to focus on our essential work: engaging students in Jewish life. Every Jewish student on campus should be connected to the Jewish people in some way, even if not directly through Hillel. [We] seek to inspire every Jewish student to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life. We are thrilled to have been at the inception of the Taglit-birthright Israel program and to have brought more than 25,000 young people to Israel. This program has had a wonderful impact for the Jewish community that is still not fully appreciated. (See story, page 56.)

Q. Part of the "new Hillel" has to do with sending students off campus, right?

A. We have become increasingly involved in other forms of experiential education, such as alternative [midterm] breaks that emphasize *tzedek*, or social justice. Following Hurricane Katrina, Hillel had the largest Jewish volunteer force in that region, and we continue to send young people to affected areas. In 2006-2007, 1,150 students did relief work in northern Israel, 1,000 went to the Gulf of Mexico and 262 went to Latin America, many in cooperation with the American Jewish World Service.

Our new Campus Entrepreneurs Initiative employs students to engage their peers and help them connect to the Jewish community. In our first year, we have piloted the program on 11 campuses and engaged some 3,200 young people. [And] this is just the beginning....

COURTESY OF HILLEL: THE FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH CAMPUS LIFE

Q. Religion, culture, politics—which is Hillel’s priority?

A. Our priority is engaging students in Jewish life.... Jewish peoplehood has emerged as a powerful paradigm in the era of globalization. I personally wish there was greater attention and priority given to the study of Hebrew, which one day may prove to be our greatest common medium for the communication of thought, prayer and deed. We focus on interacting with individual students, helping guide them toward meaningful Jewish experiences that will shape their entire lives. For some students, that path may be *tzedek*; for others, it might be Jewish learning; for others, it may be an Israel-related group. The Jewish people has never responded well to one-size-fits-all formulas, and we avoid that approach.

Q. Scathing criticism of Israel is shriller than ever on college campuses. Where is it coming from?

A. I would say that only the most extreme fringes of campus debate call for violence against Israel or the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state. Nevertheless, on occasion these voices can commandeer the media and seize public attention. We are far more concerned with efforts

ners at AIPAC and many other organizations with whom we work closely. Israel is woven into the fabric of everything we do.

Q. How would you describe American Jewish student?

A. Think of today’s college student as computer users. They are used to having multiple screens open at one time: e-mail, word processing, Internet.... Just as they can have multiple screens open at one time, they can hold multiple identities. Today’s Jewish college student—there are approximately 400,000—think of themselves as Jews-and-something-else. They are Jews and environmentalists, Jews and athletes, Jews and artists. Consider that 47 percent of U.S. Jewish students have only one Jewish parent. We have to engage them in multiple ways. One of the greatest opportunities is to explore Jewish identity in history. The chance is not just to define myself as a Jew according to *halakha*...but rather by emphasizing that there are Jewish values that form the essence of my multiple actions and identities.

Jewish students are universally proud to be Jewish. They like it when Jews win Nobel Prizes, achieve athletic

Hillel isn’t just for the college campus, explains Firestone. Its goal is also to get students involved in Jewish life and social activism—whether in New Orleans or in Latin America.

on campus that prevent students from learning about Israel either in classrooms or through study abroad programs. That’s why the Israel on Campus Coalition, which is our partnership with the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, is working to ensure fairness in university policies and the elimination of prohibitions against studying in Israel.

Q. What part does Israel play for Hillel?

A. Israel is the heart of the Jewish people and, therefore, it is the heart of Hillel. Having lived in Israel for nine years, and with two sabra daughters, it’s close to my heart, too. We know that Israel programs have the potential to provide students with many meaningful Jewish experiences, whether they occur in Israel or on campus. Hillel programs are inconceivable without Israel. I cannot imagine a campus without a pro-Israel advocacy group, a Yom Ha’atzma’ut program, Taglit-birthright Israel trip opportunities or an Israeli *beit café* in one form or another. We now have Jewish Agency for Israel Fellows, young Israeli college graduates who do Israel-related programs, as well as Grinspoon Fellows, students who do similar work. None of this would be possible without our part-

ners at AIPAC and many other organizations with whom we work closely. Israel is woven into the fabric of everything we do.

Q. For parents who want their kids to stay Jewish and support Israel, what advice can you offer?

A. Creating a strong Jewish identity must begin long before a child comes to campus. Formal and experiential Jewish education, Jewish celebrations in the home, synagogue and organizational affiliation, Israel trips, youth movements like Young Judea and camp experiences all contribute to creating Jewish *menschen*. Hillel’s Web site, www.hillel.org, is used by parents, students and college advisers to find campuses on which young people can maintain and expand their Jewish identity. We get more than a million page views a year. We sometimes joke that the best thing that parents can do to ensure their children remain involved in the Jewish community on campus is to discourage them from participating in Hillel activities: They are way too much fun, the students are far too attractive and the approach is simply too enriching—which might distract them from their studies! **H**