Campus Anti-Semitism

Is anti-Semitism on the rise in universities?

BY DOV KATZENSTEIN

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A BIG PROBLEM?

Mr. Mathew Berger, a spokesman for Hillel International, the world’s largest Jewish campus organization, acknowledged the reality of anti-Zionist/anti-Semitic sentiment at many colleges, but said that most amount to “a lot of isolated incidents.”

“We have seen a growth of incidents, but we have also seen the continuance and growth of strong Jewish life on campuses,” Berger says. “Most importantly is what happens after these types of things occur. In a lot of cases, Hillel has been able to mobilize a strong response. We have initiated stronger law enforcement, in other cases dialogue between parties, and so on.”

Two years ago, Hillel launched a program to strengthen education and engagement efforts aimed at reversing the effects of this rising trend of anti-Semitism.

Professor Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, AMCHA’s co-founder and director, says the problem is far greater than many are willing to admit.

“People try to downplay it by saying out of 4,000 American colleges, only 2 percent have been affected, but only a few schools have a real Jewish presence. It’s easy not to have a problem with anti-Semitism where there aren’t any Jews,” she says.

She says that of the campuses with significant numbers of Jews, more than half have had BDS activity accompanied by destruction of property, painting of swastikas, bullying and “conduct that went beyond speech which we can all agree is unacceptable and discriminatory.” Professor Rossman-Benjamin pointed to frequent statements from pro-Palestinian activists denying the State of Israel’s right to exist, which she includes in her data as an example of anti-Semitism.

Rossman-Benjamin says that while in many instances Jewish campus organizations have responded strongly to anti-Semitism, too often Jewish students have been left feeling unsupported.

Following a lecture by an Israeli military official at Harvard, swastikas were found spray-painted on a table in a classroom.

“We have seen examples of [Jewish organizations] trying to downplay the issue; maybe they are afraid that if they come out too strongly, it will give them a bad relationship with the administration,” said Professor Rossman-Benjamin. “When that happens, Jewish students are left feeling even more vulnerable, and it makes the problem much worse.”

The difficulty of defining a clear line of demarcation between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism seems to be a key reason that statistics vary about this phenomenon. The definition a monitoring organization chooses has broad effects on reporting.

“It is important to also differentiate between criticism of Israel, anti-Israel rhetoric and anti-Semitism,” says Mr. Bernstein of the ADL. “For example, if there is a protest against a pro-Israel speaker on campus by groups hostile to Israel, this is generally not an expression of anti-Semitism.”

He adds that “administrators and other campus leaders are responsive and generally step up to the plate and confront anti-Semitism.”

PROBLEM SPOTS AND BRIGHT SPOTS

Unsurprisingly, campuses with active social justice movements in general tend to also foment sympathy for “the Palestinian cause,” and often for the BDS movement. A study released by AMCHA at the beginning of the summer tracked the correlation between anti-Israel activity and incidents of anti-Semitism against Jewish students. Analysts determined that, from a statistical perspective, the possibility that the two trends are not associated is 1-in-1,000.

With 4,000 Jewish students and a particularly active branch of SJP, Brooklyn College has been a noted hot spot. Mrs. Nadya Drukker, director of the campus Hillel, said that SJP has been the root cause of unrest at the school, using “hate speech … causing tension and hostility between students, and negatively affecting students’ college experi-
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"As the anti-Israeli sentiment intensifies and is affecting campuses worldwide, Brooklyn College is not an exception," she says. "We believe that an academic campus provides an appropriate venue for serious discussion of important issues. We also believe in the First Amendment's right of free speech. Yet SJP's behavior has little to do with those guiding principles."

Following the string of incidents at Brooklyn College, and similar occurrences at Hunter College and other New York City schools, pressure from advocates within the Jewish community and a bill from the State Senate that threatened to defund CUNY led New York's university system to initiate an investigation. The results are expected some time in the coming weeks.

A noted exception to CUNY's issues has been Queens College. Located in the city's most ethnically diverse borough, the campus boasts a large population of Muslims as well as Jews. Queens College is home to groups supporting Israel and Palestinian causes alike; these groups coexist in relative harmony.

Mr. Uri Cohen, executive director of Queens College's Hillel, says that pinpointing the basis of the school's success in maintaining amicable relationships between groups has been a subject of discussion for some time.

"The administration is a very important part of it; they really care a lot about it," he says. "Last December, I made an appointment with the president to talk about what had gone on at Hunter, and he already knew about it. He viewed what had happened negatively and was working to reinforce the situation to see that such animus shouldn't spread here. They're proactive."

Mr. Cohen also attributes the prevailing harmony to students coming from a context of diversity, as well as efforts at dialogue and mutual understanding.

"One thing campus organizations can teach is that the world is big and there are a lot of perspectives. We don't have to say that they are all valid or true, but we should be promoting valuing the people who hold those opinions."

THE SILENT VICTIMS

Those coming to college with a strong Jewish identity and values, part of which may include a deep attachment to Israel, are likely to maintain their positions and lifestyle even in the face of animus and confrontation. Some with a fighting spirit might even become strengthened from the experience of having to defend beliefs that they long took for granted. Nevertheless, some that Hamodia spoke to say that the negativity conjured up by anti-Israel groups takes its greatest toll on Jews who could otherwise be candidates for learning more about their Jewishness.

"There is a population that would like to be more outwardly Jewish, but they're afraid," says Mr. Ori Herschmann, a recent graduate from University of California at Berkeley, home to a powerful SJP chapter. "There's a stigma that if you identify as Jewish, you must be a right-wing Zionist nut. Jews have an inherent connection to Israel, but it doesn't mean that everybody who is interested in being part of Jewish life has to be part of the pro-Israel debate. It's very sad. People have a fear instilled in them and they're afraid to be Jewish."

As is the case with the vast majority of American Jews, a relatively small percentage of Jews at colleges have received a day-school education or have come from communities that make Jewishness a central part of their identity. As such, if prognostications regarding the "collateral damage" of BDS and other such movements are correct, the effects could be significant.

"Many come without a strong background, and what they see is that all being Jewish will get them is anxiety. The result is that they get turned off to Judaism," says Prof. Rossman-Benjamin.

She added that leaders of "social justice" causes on campuses, such as "Black Lives Matter," are often part of the pro-Palestinian camp; therefore, Jewish students seeking involvement in progressive movements are further discouraged from embracing their Jewishness.

"People get the feeling that if they are too Jewish or too Zionist, they won't be able to be involved in social justice groups, so they get a feeling..."
of ‘what do I need this for?’ and they turn off,” says Professor Rossman-Benjamin.
“College is a time when a lot of these kids are opening up to their Judaism, but most are falling into this trap. It’s a problem that’s only getting worse. It’s very sad.”

Rabbi Dovid Gurevitch, Director of Chabad of UCLA, a campus with a particularly active BDS movement, hypothesizes that the effect of anti-Israel groups on Jewish students’ comfort with their Jewish identity cuts both ways.

“It has a polarizing effect,” he says. “Some look at the negativity and say, OK, I don’t want to have anything to do with this and it chases them away from their Jewishness. For others it makes them confront issues about their Jewish identity that they may have not thought too much about before. Some start to investigate and want to know more about what it means.”

Rabbi Zev Tennenbaum, Director of the Chabad at the University of California at Irvine, said that while it is difficult to determine what effects anti-Israel sentiment on campus has on attracting students to Jewish events, he too is inclined to say it has been a double-edged sword.

“It’s hard to say, because I don’t get to have a lot of contact with those who get scared away from their Jewishness, but I do believe it is a major factor,” he says. Rabbi Tennenbaum finds that the opposite effect, however, is evident.

“[Anti-Israel activity] brings the community together to an extent. If there is a Shabbos dinner after a major anti-Israel event, there is more attendance.”

FIGHTING BACK

Jewish groups, as well as grassroots efforts of Jewish students, are working to combat the trend. In her first year at UCLA, Miss Arielle Mokhtarzadeh went to get a coffee from a campus café, when she saw the words “Hitler did nothing wrong” scrawled across a wall. Over the course of the year, a number of other equally unnerving experiences moved her and a group of like-minded individuals in the California state system to draft a resolution asking the university to clearly define and condemn anti-Semitism.

After wide lobbying efforts from national Jewish organizations, the statement was passed and accepted at many campuses in the state.

“A law is only as strong as its enforcement, for which the administration has to take responsibility, but it definitely sends a powerful message. It labels targeting Jews for what it is and says that it won’t be tolerated,” says Miss Mokhtarzadeh. “Some of this [anti-Israel/anti-Jewish animus] comes from ill will, but a lot of it comes from ignorance or hearing one side of the story. People hear time and time again that Jews are aggressors and the cause of all evil in the world; they come to believe it. We have to be engaged and do what we can to educate and make it clear that what is going on now is just an echo of centuries of anti-Semitism.”

Mr. Herschmann was another key partner in drafting the UCLA resolution. He says that the very nature of the resistance the statement met on its way to passage reveals a great deal about the problem at hand.

“When we first wrote the bill, people came to me and, in all seriousness, said, ‘Why do we need to protect Jews? Jews aren’t a minority.’ The whole context of Jews as victims of persecution is something that needs to be explained to them,” he says.

Mrs. Drukker says that in the wake of the incidents at Brooklyn College, Hillel pushed CUNY to take similar steps. “The university must have clear guidelines and direct consequences for those who do not follow the rules,” she insists.

Brooklyn College Hillel, together with the Natan Foundation and the Jewish Agency for Israel, initiated a series of in-depth educational workshops labeled “DA Israel,” aimed at educating the campus community about the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

An organization known as StandWithUs is taking its own approach. Its goal is to train Jewish students to act as effective pro-Israel advocates on campuses as well as to be a resource for fighting anti-Semitic
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incidents when they occur.

“We want students to be engaged in educating their peers. We saw that even those with deep Jewish roots didn’t have the information necessary to answer questions being asked,” says Mrs. Roz Rothstein, CEO of StandWithUs. The organization also runs a high-school program and has packets they send to parents to help educate their children on the basics of pro-Israel advocacy before they reach college. Additionally, StandWithUs attempts to put pressure on colleges after anti-Semitic incidents occur and maintains a pro bono team of lawyers to litigate extreme cases.

“Not so long ago, nobody was taking these things seriously and students were frustrated. Now that our name is out there, we get a lot of calls,” says Mrs. Rothstein.

JEWISH LIFE, AND THE LIVES OF JEWS

Notwithstanding the rising number of reported incidents against Jewish students and the border between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism becoming ever more blurry, even voices from campuses with the most active anti-Israel organizations maintain that the effect on the daily lives of Jewish students has been minimal.

“It’s mostly a perception that the media creates,” says Rabbi Gurevitch in regard to the situation at UCLA. “The perception is created by a reality of what the anti-Israel movement does to push their agenda, but [Jewish students] don’t experience animus on a day-to-day basis. Even pro-Israel activists who are in the middle of things, I don’t think they are targeted or really feel unsafe.”

Mr. Daniel Agress, who is pursuing a Ph.D. in mathematics at University of California at Irvine, said that while SJP and the campus’ Muslim Student Union often bring a great deal of disruption and tension to public events related to Israel, that the negativity is not pervasive.

“The only time I feel hostility is if I go to a pro-Israel event, but I certainly don’t feel threatened being on campus,” he says. “I have been in many classes with Muslims that are very much on the other side of the Israel debate, but everybody was very cordial.”

Even at the most aggressive confrontations between pro and anti-Israel groups on campus, Mr. Agress says that he has never heard anything said that was “against Jews.” However, he does say that groups such as SJP regularly deny the right of the State of Israel to exist, something that the U.S. State Department considers an expression of anti-Semitism. The resolution adopted by many California colleges uses this definition as well.

New York City’s Columbia University has been another hotbed of anti-Israel activity that some say has crossed the line of acceptable political debate and demonstration.

The accusations are not new. In 2004, the David Project, an organization dedicated to promoting pro-Israel sentiment on campuses, produced a film highlighting several instances where Columbia students were harassed by professors from the school’s Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures for defending Israel in the classroom. Recent activities by pro-Palestinian groups at the University such as “Israel Apartheid Week” have drawn criticism from pro-Israel voices focused on campuses.

Yet, Mr. Brian Cohen, Executive Director of the Hillel of Columbia and its sister school, Barnard, says that students’ Jewish life continues “without a problem,” and that even the organization’s Israel-related activities “take place without any major disruption.”

“Like many schools around the country, some Columbia students choose to criticize Israel — individually or through student groups,” he said. “A silent protest took place when we brought Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat to speak last year, but it did not interrupt his talk.”

Rabbi Tennenbaum of Chabad at Irvine says that pro-Israel events at the campus are frequently disrupted and “can become intimidating.”

“It’s aimed at the event, not individuals, but it can still feel threatening, and definitely discourages pro-Israel activity from being planned,” he says.

Nevertheless, he too says that students can fully participate in Jewish life on campus, while steering clear of anti-Israel sentiment, if they choose.

“I tell parents who are considering sending their children here that if a student wants to stay clear of these things, there is a way to avoid it. If someone just can’t deal with the negativity that these confrontations entail, they don’t have to get involved in pro-Israel events and they will never hear about it,” he says. “There certainly is an anti-Israel climate on campus. It’s not motivated by anti-Semitism, but it can result in it. I wouldn’t say students face any of this on an individual basis, but the challenges are there.”