Forward Forum
Confronting Discontinuity on Campus
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Birthright Israel is poised to take its 100,000th Jewish young adult to Israel for a 10-day educational experience. The program has reached massive numbers of college-age Jews, and already nearly 25,000 North American young adults have applied in recent weeks for the 10,000 or so slots available for this coming summer.

What, though, about the tens of thousands of students who do not get to participate in Birthright Israel? The fact that most Jewish students, including some who have been part of Israel experience programs, reside on a college campus does little to further their Jewish engagement. College is a decidedly secular institution devoted to empiricism and critical thought. By its very nature, it may be anathema to Jewish life.

To understand the possibilities for Jewish life on campus, our research team interviewed more than 700 students, faculty and administrators at 20 nonsectarian colleges and universities nationwide. We also surveyed more than 2,000 Jewish students on these campuses. Our findings suggest that only a minority of Jewish students experience their college years as a time in which the seeds of their Judaism take hold and blossom. For the majority of college students we studied, college is a time devoid of formal Jewish life and community.

The college setting itself is complicit in this outcome. Universities understand that they are instrumental in students' maturation into adulthood and they take seriously their responsibility not only for students' intellectual development, but also for their social, physical and civic maturation. They provide an array of academic opportunities, athletic facilities, health and counseling services, and well-funded student activities offices that foster the campus's social and political environment. But universities pay scant attention to religious and spiritual well-being, leaving these in the hands of the ministries, which are mostly outside agencies that exist on the margins of the campus.

The schools rely on Hillel and the other campus ministries to supplement student services — providing social activities, pastoral counseling, health and safety education, and the like. They value what these organizations do to help students adjust to college life and to find a place for themselves on campus. As one college dean told us, "young people find a portion of their identity in the group. For some students, it's their ethnic group, for some it's athletic, and for some it's a faith community." As far as these schools are concerned, athletics and religion are of equal worth in this regard. Colleges have little interest in religion as a matter of faith, belief or observance.

Given the disregard for religion that is common at most schools, it is not surprising that the college experience has little impact on the religious beliefs of Jewish students — either in a positive or negative
Students are more likely to grow and change with regard to their self-knowledge, choice of life partner, profession and politics than with regard to their religious beliefs. By the time they are ready to graduate from college, two-thirds of the Jewish students we studied say that the college experience has taught them about themselves but only 14% of our sample say that it has caused them to question their religious beliefs.

Although beliefs seem impervious to the college experience, religious observance is clearly affected by it: Two out of three Jewish college students change their level of Jewish observance during their college years. Notably, they are almost twice as likely to decrease their level of observance as they are to increase it.

A number of new initiatives sponsored by the Jewish community are attempting to reinvigorate Jewish life on the college campus. The positive impact of Birthright Israel is clearly present. Hillel has undergone a transformation and is in the midst of a strategic visioning process. And other groups, Chabad in particular, are working hard to establish a presence on campus.

For young adult Jews, university campuses are intellectual and social hothouses that critically shape their attitudes and identities. If we want young adult Jews to follow a trajectory of involvement with Judaism, campuses need a rich array of Jewishly-infused opportunities. Birthright Israel, which provides an intense encounter with Jewish heritage, is one avenue. The community surely needs to meet demand for the program, but it also must create new ways for students to engage with Judaism.

If efforts to engage young adult Jews are to be successful, they need to attend not only to students' social and intellectual interests, but also to students' spiritual and religious potential. Engaging college students with Judaism's profound religious tradition is, perhaps, swimming upstream against a strong current. But if we do not succeed when students are part of a defined campus community, it will be even more difficult to do so after they have entered the mainstream of American society.

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