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# sources

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH IDEAS

## Jewish *on* Campus

**CENTERING JEWISH IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

*Adena Kirstein*

**HOW AND HOW NOT TO HELP ON CAMPUS**

*Seth Goren*

**A MODEL FOR THE DAY AFTER**

*Benjamin Berger*

**CELEBRATING SIMULTANEOUS TRUTHS**

*Stephen Bartell*

**LEADERSHIP AND JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD**

*Claire E. Sufrin in conversation with  
Marc Baker & Lishi Baker*

**WAR 101**

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## Contents

### FROM THE EDITOR

4 Jewish on Campus  
Claire E. Sufrin

### JEWISH ON CAMPUS

8 Centering Jewish Identity Development  
(Even) When There Is Antisemitism on Campus  
Adena Kirstein

20 How and How Not to Help on Campus  
Seth Goren

32 Explorers on Campus: A Model for Education,  
Relationship, and Reconciliation on the Day After  
Benjamin Berger

44 STUDENT VOICE: Celebrating Simultaneous Truths  
Stephen Bartell

50 What Is Happening in the Humanities?  
Theory, Politics, and Protest  
Barry Scott Wimpfheimer

64 Leadership and Jewish Peoplehood:  
A Conversation with Marc Baker and Lishi Baker  
Claire E. Sufrin

76 American Jews and Our Universities: Back to Basics  
Josh Feigelson

86 STUDENT VOICE: War 101  
Issy Lyons

92 How a Multigenerational Community Can  
Transform College Students into Jewish Adults  
Lauren Cohen Fisher, David Freidenreich, and Rachel Isaacs

102 STUDENT VOICE: Building a Bayit: Holding the Particular  
and Personal with the Universal and Communal  
Lilah Peck

108 STUDENT VOICE: Challenging the Walls Around  
My Jewish Identity  
Chana Fisher

# How a Multigenerational Community Can Transform College Students Into Jewish Adults

Lauren Cohen Fisher, David Freidenreich, and Rachel Isaacs

*What does it mean* to be a Jewish adult? We believe that the answer to this question includes seeing yourself as part of the Jewish community, taking an active role as both a consumer and a producer of meaningful and vibrant Jewish life.

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Over the past decade-plus of work at Colby College, in roles that intentionally straddle the line that distinguishes Jewish student life from academic Jewish studies, we have helped our students become Jewish adults. Instead of merely listening while others recite prayers, for example, our students not only become able and eager to lead prayers themselves but also ensure that a *minyan* (quorum of ten adult Jews) is present; instead of always eating Shabbat meals prepared by others, they also create Shabbat meals for others. The principles of reciprocity and mutual support have long been foundational to small-town Jewish life in places like Colby's hometown of Waterville, Maine, and they remain our cornerstone.

In many ways, Colby's Jewish life programming resembles the kind of programming found on other college and university campuses. We focus primarily on providing opportunities for students to (re)discover their own relationships to Jewish peoplehood, engage in critically oriented Jewish education, and explore different approaches to Jewish rituals, traditions, and wisdom with peers of approximately the same age. In addition, however, we regard Colby students as part of the greater Waterville

Jewish community. For that reason, we create opportunities for students to benefit from and contribute to its vibrant, multigenerational Jewish life. Students and congregants work side by side in the Beth Israel kitchen frying latkes for a joint Hanukkah party and making food for community seders (one on campus, one at the synagogue; students often attend both). Students come to understand the importance of showing up to help make *minyan* when community members they care

about need to say *kaddish*. Congregants show up on campus to support students as well, for example, at our moving-on ceremony for graduating seniors. Students and congregants seek out opportunities to engage with one another across their many lines of difference because they share a deep sense that they belong to the Waterville Jewish community.

"Hillel said: Do not separate yourself from the community" (mAvot 2:4), and Rashi elaborated, "Rather, join with others in their distress so that you can eventually rejoice with them." Members of Colby's Hillel have experienced this wisdom firsthand, both on campus and in Waterville's broader Jewish community. In the process, they are learning to apply the interpretation of Hillel's teaching offered by Avigdor Shinan in *Pirkei Avot: A New Israeli Commentary*: "Even the most ardent individualist needs a supportive social structure, so that person needs to find a way to express their individuality within its structure rather than outside it."

Educational theorists Greg Mannion and Claire Adey emphasize the link between intergenerational and place-based education. Their empirical studies on community gardens in Scotland found "ample evidence of intergenerational education that was multi-directional and reciprocal in nature that had been brought about by concern with changing and enhancing a local place through material practice." Mannion and Adey go on to emphasize that place is "more than a container for the action": precisely because, in our case, people from more than one generation work together to foster a more vibrant Jewish community of and for all who call Waterville home, they become better able to understand and address one another's needs and aspirations.<sup>1</sup>

Waterville, Maine, is a postindustrial "city" with fewer than 16,000 residents. Like many communities outside of major metropolitan areas, ours is home to substantial socioeconomic and political diversity; in recent years, Waterville's mayors have ranged from progressive Democrats to Trump-style Republicans. Contrary to common perceptions, there are plenty of Jews in places like Waterville throughout the country: in 2020, over a million Jewish Americans—one out of every eight—lived in a county with fewer than 10,000 Jews.<sup>2</sup> Membership in Waterville's century-old Beth Israel Congregation, however, had dwindled to about twenty families by the time it hired Rachel Isaacs as its rabbi in 2011. Meanwhile, a mile away from the synagogue building, Colby College was home to well over a hundred Jewish students, but the vast majority were unengaged in Jewish life. As a Colby student at the time, Lauren Cohen Fisher remembers no more than three or four students lighting Shabbat candles together in the student union most weeks.

Today, both Beth Israel and Colby Hillel are thriving, even though the total number of Jews on campus and in the surrounding area has not changed substantially. What has changed is the sense that these individuals belong to a vibrant, multigenerational community founded upon reciprocal relationships and a shared sense of place.

Shabbat meals on campus played a key role in the revitalization of Colby Hillel. When student leaders expressed an interest in preparing Shabbat dinners for the Colby community, we made sure that they had ready access to all the necessary ingredients and kitchen equipment, but we also made clear that students themselves needed to cook the meals—and to do so consistently. We want our students to understand that they are not merely the *recipients* of Jewish life at Colby; they are its *co-creators*. This mindset fosters in students a commitment to one another and to the responsibilities of leadership: students need to prioritize Jewish life in order to see it thrive. This mindset also fosters the kinds of behaviors that characterize adult Jewish life. Our students learn what it takes, amidst other professional and social commitments, to ensure that there is a Shabbat meal on Friday night.

Food preparation also plays an important role in the culture of Beth Israel, where many members of the congregation are more practiced at cooking than at praying.

**The principles of reciprocity and mutual support have long been foundational to small-town Jewish life in places like Colby's hometown of Waterville, Maine.**

The kitchen became a classroom where Melanie Weiss, Beth Israel’s education director, taught congregants not only how to prepare traditional meals but also how to become the *creators* of Jewish holidays and rituals through food. Like our students, the congregants, too, were learning that a thriving Jewish life required their time, effort, and leadership to succeed.

It quickly became clear to everyone that these two adjacent Jewish communities, both trying to re-establish themselves, would benefit from collaboration and mutual support. In one of our first joint ventures, a group of five congregants and five students came together in the synagogue kitchen to prepare Rosh Hashanah dinner for fifty community members. The group included a Colby football captain, a day-school-educated rugby star, and a future Booz Allen consultant with a passion for cosmetics who once said about Jewish life, “I’m just in it for the brisket and Larry David.” They joined together with the ski-instructor synagogue president, a local nurse assistant with a home baking business, and a Brooklyn-raised speech pathologist who had lived in Waterville for decades. These collaborators cooked pounds and pounds of raw kosher chicken purchased wholesale from the local Maronite Christian butcher, and congregants taught students how to make potato kugel in bulk. They laughed for hours and built relationships that would last long after graduation. When the meal was presented, the cooks looked out of the kitchen into the adjacent social hall with pride as we sang blessings together. They had brought a joyous and once-robust tradition of communal holiday meals back to Waterville’s struggling community. This would be the first of many joint celebrations that would only grow in attendance and quality over the next decade.

The value of cooking for, and hosting, each other has expanded even beyond the physical spaces of Colby Hillel and Beth Israel Congregation. One of the most beloved new traditions in Waterville’s Jewish community is Home Hospitality Shabbat, when Beth Israel congregants each invite two or three Colby students to join them at their own homes for a Shabbat dinner. Students appreciate being invited into someone’s *home*—a place refreshingly different from the campus dorms. They enjoy getting to know community members, and they delight in the opportunity to have the week off from cooking for themselves. These students also bring something to the table, thanks to the familiarity with Shabbat dinner rituals that they developed while growing up or on campus. Congregants, many of whom are uncomfortable reciting Shabbat songs and blessings on their own because they do not feel sufficiently confident in their command of Hebrew, appreciate the fact that students come prepared to lead this portion of the meal. Most important, though, hosts and guests alike value the meaningful relationships they forge over dinner, relationships that deepen over time through additional meals, programs, and one-on-one engagement.

In recent years, students have taken the initiative to create “Reverse Home Hospitality Shabbat,” when they cook dinner and host congregants on campus. Last spring, Hillel’s student presidents stood in front of a group of fifty community members to introduce the meal that students had prepared. “As a reminder,” they said, “if you are at a table that does not reflect a mix of students and congregants, take two minutes now to reshuffle yourselves.” Though a small detail, this moment of leadership demonstrated our students’ commitment not only to reciprocal hospitality but also to establishing and deepening intergenerational relationships. Students have come to see themselves as equal partners in developing and sustaining their shared community.

The process of co-creation that was so critical to the revitalization of Colby Hillel and Beth Israel has become fundamental to the thriving Jewish community that now encompasses both. Students and congregants work together on an ongoing basis to create vibrant programs and supportive relationships because they personally experience the value of multigenerational Jewish life. Researchers who study intergenerational programs emphasize the importance of fostering collaboration and mutual benefit.<sup>3</sup> This sort of reciprocity sets our approach to intergenerational programming apart from the dominant model of undergraduate civic engagement at Colby and elsewhere, in which students care for children or the elderly as volunteers. To be a Jewish adult, however, means seeing oneself as part of a community, not above it or at arm’s length from it.

Reciprocity and mutual support function at a personal as well as a communal level. For example, we were able to pair a Venezuelan Jewish student with a Venezuelan member of the Beth Israel board for Home Hospitality Shabbat. In addition to the challenges of juggling classes, clubs, and high-intensity friendships, this student carried the burden of knowing how deeply her family in Venezuela was suffering from that country’s economic and social dysfunction. The congregant also worried daily about how to attend to her own family’s welfare from afar, and the two bonded over a shared experience that those without an emotional connection to the people of Venezuela could not fully understand. The two came to regard one another as family, and when the student’s parents arrived to celebrate her graduation, the congregant joined them at our commencement weekend Shabbat dinner, bringing along a tray of homemade *arepas*.

When another student’s sister was hospitalized several hundred miles away, she too leaned heavily for emotional support on a Beth Israel congregant whom she had first

**Students have taken the initiative to create “Reverse Home Hospitality Shabbat,” when they cook dinner and host congregants on campus.**

met during Home Hospitality Shabbat. This long-time Waterville resident became the student's honorary "Bubbe," and the two forged a deep, mutually beneficial relationship that continued until Bubbe's death, several years after the student graduated. Bubbe's own biological grandchildren lived far away, but thanks to her relationship with her adopted granddaughter she could share her gifts as a teacher, storyteller, and source of support even as she became increasingly homebound. The student made a point of expressing her appreciation for her adopted Bubbe in the acknowledgements section of her honors thesis, adding that "The entire Beth Israel Congregation has helped me to feel like I have family here in Waterville." Not coincidentally, the thesis itself analyzed the familial nature of the congregation's approach to pastoral care.

The relationships that members of Waterville's Jewish community forge across generational lines also foster conversations across political and social divides. One of the deepest fault lines in our time, as in all eras, is the one between generations or, as the prophet Malachi put it, parents and children (3:24). Colby students, however, discover that they can sustain deep relationships with members of older generations—and, likewise, with one another—despite their disagreements. The ability to engage in *makhloket* (meaningful disagreement) is fundamental to Jewish learning, civic discourse, and, we believe, Jewish adulthood itself. Vibrant communities, by their very nature, include people with diverse perspectives and different ways of expressing their core values; to be a Jewish adult is to see yourself as a participant in the Jewish community's internal debates and to stay in relationship with fellow community members regardless of how deep a disagreement might run.

Several years ago, we ran a multigenerational *beit midrash* series whose sessions explored issues that generate significant intergenerational friction within the Jewish community: Zionism, interfaith marriage, and antisemitism. Participants in the session on Zionism, for example, spent two hours wrestling not only with texts by Vladimir Jabotinsky and Edward Said, but also with one another's very different perspectives. Because this conversation happened within the context of authentic, reciprocal relationships that extended over many years, it was interpersonally rich and respectful and also intellectually intense. It was a rare and precious sight to see a 55-year-old committed Zionist exchange a look of consternation with 20-year-olds sympathetic to the Palestinian cause in one minute, and then to see them laugh together over pad Thai the next. This series did not generate agreement, but it did sharpen and complicate the views of students and congregants alike, leading to deeper connections across their generational, ideological, and socioeconomic differences. Perhaps because respect for diversity and *makhloket* is part of the culture within Waterville's Jewish community, Colby Hillel itself has also become resilient enough to hold space internally for students with sharply divergent views about Israel.

Inspired by the impact of this series, David Freidenreich now offers a credit-bearing *beit midrash* course at Colby whose sessions are open to the entire community. As their capstone experience within the Jewish Studies department, seniors learn how to design and facilitate respectful conversations, grounded in texts from within and beyond the Jewish canon, about questions that matter to students and fellow community members. The culture of dialogue, respect for diversity, and mutual support that we cultivate in our classrooms and within Waterville's Jewish community also informs other types of Jewish engagement on campus. Students from Hillel and the Colby Muslim Society have forged deep relationships over many years that helped them weather the tensions that tore apart so many college campuses in the aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attacks. They remained respectful and sensitive to one another's feelings, checking in with each other about how to pursue activism that was true to their values without causing unnecessary pain or offense to those who hold different points of view. After a difficult spring semester, many Jewish students planned a Yom Haatzmaut gathering; congregants who had learned with these students all semester showed up in the middle of a workday to support them as they took a social risk by publicly identifying as Zionists on campus.

We have found that making intergenerational reciprocity a critical element of "raising Jewish adults" generates profound benefits for Colby Hillel and its individual students as well as for Beth Israel and its congregants. Our students graduate with a diverse set of Jewish role models, including interfaith families, Jews by choice, Jews of various levels of traditional observance, and Jews who are sustaining vibrant Jewish practice in a rural environment. Our students experience the profound satisfaction of coming through for community members who need and value what they have to offer, whether they make a *minyan* or make a meal, chant Torah or hold a hand. Our students discover the value of participating in a Jewish community that is intentionally diverse—not only generationally but also in terms of class, ethnic background, ideology, and politics—and they carry that value with them when they graduate into the world of Jewish adulthood.

Of course, bringing together students from a well-resourced residential college with members of the surrounding less-resourced local community is not without its challenges. Waterville is a town with very high levels of poverty, with most families

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reliant on Medicaid, and many people struggling to pay rent and bills for basic utilities. Congregants often count upon the synagogue to provide for them during moments of financial crisis. Many Colby students, in contrast, grew up in Jewish communities where the combined annual cost of synagogue dues, high holiday tickets, Hebrew school tuition, and the like can be a five-figure investment.

In one painful but ultimately fruitful moment, we needed to explain to a Hebrew school aide from one of America's wealthiest zip codes why pulling up in a luxury SUV to tutor a child on government assistance could cause tension with the family she was serving. When she showed up late or left in a rush to get to other events back on campus, the family perceived her lack of attention and time as a humiliating slight, rather than as the normal behavior of a college student learning how to manage her time. Discussions with this student helped her become mindful of the ways in which class differences can create perceptions of uneven power dynamics. This student also discovered that her totalizing assumptions about American Jewish power, privilege, and wealth were not only false but also profoundly harmful. Tensions of this nature between Colby students and Waterville residents are not uncommon, and they require us to be thoughtful about how we design intergenerational programming that keeps reciprocity at its center.

Another challenge intrinsic to fostering a multigenerational community inclusive of college students is that students cycle through while most Beth Israel congregants have no desire or plan to move out of the Waterville area. Congregants who invest deeply in relationships with students risk burning out when those students graduate and, for that reason, are sometimes reluctant to forge similarly close ties again. One way that we try to address this challenge is by encouraging alumni to demonstrate their continued commitment to Waterville's Jewish community. More than sixty young alumni contributed a total of \$70,000 toward the synagogue's recent capital campaign, enough to name the family room in Beth Israel's newly renovated building in honor of Colby Hillel. What many community members most appreciated, however, is that a dozen of those students showed up in person at the campaign launch celebration.

Many college Jewish experiences are designed to help students cultivate their own identities as emerging Jewish adults. This is not surprising: research in the field of psychosocial development demonstrates that identity formation—including self-definition around family, ethnicity, ideology, and religious beliefs—primarily occurs between the ages of 18 and 22.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, that period often coincides with relatively minimal intergenerational relationships as college students experience life within a campus bubble. Geographers who study such relationships, however, emphasize that “identities of children and others are produced *through* interactions with other age/generational groups.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason, our efforts to cultivate a deep and

enduring sense of Jewish identity among students at Colby College benefit greatly from a deliberate combination of age-specific programming on campus and the integration of students within Waterville's broader Jewish community. By fostering opportunities for students to benefit from and contribute to a thriving, multigenerational community, we help them not only to learn how to become Jewish adults but also to discover why doing so matters.



## Notes

- 1 Greg Mannion and Claire Adey, “Place-Based Education is an Intergenerational Practice,” *Children, Youth, and Environments* 21, no. 1 (2011), pp. 47, 50.
- 2 Leonard Saxe, et al., “American Jewish Population Estimates 2020: Summary and Highlights,” Brandeis University, Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2021, [www.brandeis.edu/cmjs](http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs), p. 11.
- 3 Mariano Sanchez, et al., *Intergenerational Programmes: Towards a Society for All Ages* (Barcelona: “La Caixa” Foundation, 2007), pp. 35-36.
- 4 Li-fang Zhang, “Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, vol. 7, p. 943.
- 5 Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain, “Geographies of Age: Thinking Relationally,” *Area* 39, no. 3 (2007), p. 289. Emphasis original.