

Jewishness at Colby

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Colby has the reputation of accepting Jewish students, even when many other colleges, including Bates and Bowdoin, were limiting their Jewish populations beginning in the 1920s. There are stories emphasizing Colby's openness, such as president Roberts telling a local Jewish boy, "If you work hard, and you do well in school, Colby will make it possible for you to come" (qtd. in Freidenreich and Shayer). Something that is harder to determine is if Jewishness was truly accepted at Colby, or if it was merely overlooked.

Jewishness, as I will refer to it, is not racial in nature, nor is it exactly a matter of Judaism. Jewishness encompasses both religious and cultural facets of Jewish life, and can be expressed in many ways, from attending weekly services at a synagogue to eating bagels.

There are a few sources of information on this topic. The most extensive is the *Echo*, Colby's newspaper. Interviews with alumni and faculty provide more detailed information that is impossible to ascertain from newspaper articles. There are also a few assorted documents in the special collections area of Miller Library, mostly from the mid-'80s.

The *Echo* is unreliable, at best, when it comes to describing the activities of Jews on campus. Run by students, the *Echo* is subject to the shifting interests of its writers. However, like any newspaper, it can be expected that the *Echo* will "echo"—pardon the pun—the concerns and priorities of the students. Using the *Echo*, I hope to determine how Hillel and the general student body interacted. Interview data, then, can help expand on these findings and provide a deeper understanding of extent to which Jewishness was accepted at Colby.

1935–1945

In the years before World War II, Jewish presence on campus was felt in two areas: Tau Delta Phi, the Jewish fraternity, and “interfaith” affairs. Tau Delta Phi, though, falls slightly outside the range of my topic. This fraternity was created because Jewish students were excluded from other fraternities. Even though Tau Delt consisted solely of Jewish students until after World War II, the fraternity didn't engage in specifically Jewish activities and it was explicitly open to non-Jews (see Lee). There were no specifically Jewish organizations on campus until Hillel was created in 1944 or 1945 ("Hillel Society..."), but Jewish students sometimes participated in interfaith activities hosted by the Student Christian Association, the SCA.

In 1935, an "interfaith conference" took place, in which a Catholic priest, a Presbyterian minister, and a rabbi spoke with each other and students on various topics ("Interfaith Group..."). A second conference was held the next year in which Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish beliefs were discussed ("Second Interfaith..."). From 1937 until 1948, the Echo published about 7 articles each year mentioning the interfaith committee, an adjunct of the SCA and various interfaith teams. They emphasized "understanding and brotherhood between Jews, Catholics, and Protestants" ("Interfaith Team..."). One interfaith team consisted of "a Jew, a Catholic, a Negro Protestant [*sic*], and white Protestant" ("S.C.M. News"), suggesting that it also attempted to span race. One event hosted by the committee was a radio-broadcast discussion between a reverend, a priest, and Arthur Levine, a local Jewish attorney and Colby alumnus, on the topic of "National Unity" ("Colby Mike..."). Other events hosted by these interfaith groups included "Brotherhood services" and guest speakers to discuss interfaith issues such as "the social problems confronting the Jews and the Gentiles" ("Rabbi Shulman...").

While the specifics are hazy, it's not a stretch to conclude that there was a general acknowledgement of the Jewish religion on campus, even though these groups representing Jewish interests were hosted by a Christian organization. From a pragmatic point of view, the SCA was the group with the resources to host events, so this is only natural. On the other hand, it reinforced the idea that Judaism and Catholicism were guests on a Protestant campus. Colby was founded as a Baptist institution. The campus chaplain, until 1980, was always a Protestant, and "the Catholic priests, the nuns, the rabbis, anybody else on campus, were there, officially, as guests of the chaplain" (Longstaff).

1945–1950

Even though Judaism was represented on campus in the form of interfaith events, and Tau Delta Phi involved Jewish students, there was no organization on campus devoted to Jewishness. This changed with the arrival of Hillel at Colby. There was no announcement of this in the *Echo*, but on October 31, 1945, an article related the election of the president of Hillel. It states, "The Colby Hillel Society, started here last year, is an organization which has as its purpose the fostering of greater understanding and appreciation by students of the Jewish faith of their religious and cultural backgrounds." This statement of purpose reports the establishment of Hillel at Colby, and it reflects the purpose of the national organization of Hillel, to "inspire every Jewish student to make an enduring commitment to Jewish life" ("Hillel: Who"). Over the next five years, Hillel would host a couple of events each year that were reported in the *Echo*. These included outings, conferences with other Maine Hillel groups, and the occasional guest speaker.

In 1948, another shift occurred at Colby. The interfaith committee was established as an independent entity from the Student Christian Association and renamed the Interfaith

Association, the IFA. The IFA was headed by an executive committee of two Jewish representatives, two Catholic representatives, and two Protestant representatives ("Constitution Drawn..."). Interestingly, the Jewish population at the time was only about 7% of all students, but Jews were represented as one third of the IFA (Wagoner). This group sponsored activities like the Campus Chest (a charity drive), religious convocations, and freshman week religious activities. The group would also arrange programs at the chapel, which was now, in the words of Chaplain Walter Wagoner, "operated on the same policy as was common to Army-Navy chapels." That is to say, Wagoner hoped that the chapel would become a place of worship not only for Protestants, but for Catholics and Jews as well.

1950–1969

For Hillel, the '50s and most of the '60s were uneventful. For some of these years, the *Oracle*, Colby's yearbook, published club affiliations. Hillel grew from seven reported members to 44 between its creation and 1950. After a peak size of 46 people in 1951, Hillel settled around 36 members each year from 1952 until 1959. The *Oracle* data from the '60s is less coherent, but Hillel definitely shrank to less than half of its size from the '50s.

Hillel all but disappears from the *Echo* between 1950 and 1960. During this period, there are two articles about regional Hillel conventions and two about guest speakers, one a Jewish author and the other a civil rights worker ("Fairfax..."; "Hillel to Sponser..."). This lack of representation in the *Echo* shows how it is not a great model for measuring Jewish activities on campus. According to Judy Brody ('58), "Hillel was an active, functioning group and they did bagel breakfasts and they did a model Seder" (Brody). The fact that Hillel is mostly absent from the *Echo* suggests that Hillel was somewhat separated from the general campus: the *Echo* rarely

reported on Hillel, and Hillel rarely used the *Echo* to announce events.

For most of the '60s, Hillel continued to be invisible, and the *Oracle* suggests that membership dropped. In 1966 and 1968, there were only 4 and 5 Hillel members listed in the yearbook. Charlie Miller ('69) described Hillel events as "not that regular and... not that well attended." He did confirm that these events were "a social time for people who were Jewish to get together," though (Miller and Miller).

The IFA, meanwhile, would undergo several changes between 1950 and 1969. Three new organizations joined: the Episcopalian Canterbury Club, the Unitarian-Universalist Channing-Murray, and the Colby Christian Fellowship ("Chapel Holds Daily Services"). This meant that Jewish representation in the IFA was reduced from 33% to 16.5%, which more closely resembled Colby's Jewish population.

This drop in Jewish representation reduced their influence in the IFA. In the '50s, there was evidence of Jewish involvement with IFA: rabbis talking at religious convocations ("Rabbi Jacobson..."), for example. In the '60s, such involvement became less apparent. In 1962, the Hillel leadership wrote a letter to the *Echo* in regards to a review of a religious convocation. "Were we in a slanderous mood, we might suggest that Mr. Miller should have noted that it is a "Religious" not a "Christianity" Convocation [sic] that he was reviewing.... We have watched Religious Convocation come and go, and whether Christ or religion was present, Judaism was not" ("Hillel Association"). Colby was a Christian campus, and Jews continued to be guests.

The IFA lost steam in the late '60s. This isn't very surprising. The '60s saw the Civil Rights Movement, the Beatles, Hippies, LSD, and Vietnam protests. Religion became less important as counter-culture increased in popularity, and this hit the Interfaith Association particularly hard. In November 1969, a plea is submitted to the *Echo*:

Dear Colby,

Help

There exists on this campus a floundering institution called I.F.A. (interfaith association) Beneath the stigma of this title, there is indeed a living and barely breathing organization... If you are interested in Re-sussating or forming your own study Group or series of lectures on any relevant topic of today, please contact,

Bob Gordon

207 Leonard

Ext 561

P.S. We also need a Vice President and Treasurer and Secretary. (Gordon)

The rise and fall of the IFA reflects the attitudes of the '40s, '50s, and '60s. In the wake of World War II, Jews became more accepted in American society. Though part of this can be attributed to Jews and Gentiles serving together in the war, it was also a response to the atrocities committed in the Holocaust. In either case, the United States as a whole began to see itself as a Judeo-Christian nation, rather than a Protestant nation. This continued into the '50s, which is regarded as a fairly conservative period. In the '60s, however, the rise of drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll reduced the role of religion in American life. The IFA, by definition a religious group, didn't survive this, and Hillel, a group devoted to Jewish religious and cultural, became the symbol of Jewishness at Colby.

1969–1980

Even as the IFA was failing, Hillel started growing again. Starting in 1968, Hillel reappears in the *Echo*: an interfaith discussion on Vietnam, Hillel's presence at a club fair, a

speaker at Given Auditorium, a bagel breakfast. In November 1969, as the IFA is calling for help, Hillel uses the *Echo* to advertise "Hillel Shabbation: A Two-day Quest into Judaism. ... Are you willing to learn about Judaism and yourself? Open to the entire student body" ("Hillel Shabbation..."). Although Hillel was not a large group, it did not fall apart, as the IFA did, because Hillel is not only a religious group, but a cultural one.

Hillel appears to have grown through the '70s. In 1972, a student government representative sent a letter to the *Echo* encouraging students to stand up against inequities in student government spending. As an example of this, he says that Hillel received \$250, while the Colby Christian Fellowship and the Newman Club (a Catholic group) only received about \$150 (McNamara). In defense, the president of Hillel sent a letter saying that "While it is true that Hillel's membership is only 150... our activities are open to the whole Colby Community" (Baer). He argues that these events, including a concert, movie screenings, and breakfasts, are worth the larger budget. Through the rest of the '70s, Hillel was fairly active (or at least visible). There are numerous bagel breakfasts, a few speakers, and holiday events. Yearly activity fluctuated, most likely because of changing student leadership.

These examples indicate that something had changed about the public presence of Jewishness at Colby. Maybe it was the growth of Hillel that spurred its newfound visibility, including the first mention of a Passover Seder on campus that Spring—with over 80 people attending (Stone)—and the first advertisement of High Holiday services in the *Echo* the next fall ("Hillel Announcements"). It's also possible that Jewish students at Colby felt more comfortable with their Jewishness: in 1967, Israel defended itself against invading Arab armies in the Six-Day War, spurring an increase in Jewish pride (Sarna, 315). Perhaps, as religion became less important, Colby seemed less like a Christian community and therefore more receptive to non-

Christian cultures. In any case, Jewishness at Colby shifted from a small, fairly isolated group to an open community, inviting the entire campus to take part in their Jewishness.

1980–1995

Jewishness was first officially expressed at Colby through interfaith groups. Hillel provided a more suitable venue for Jewishness, as it dedicated itself to both Jewish culture and religion. When the IFA was removed, however, there was no longer an institutional conduit for Judaism, and visiting rabbis and priests were still guests of the Protestant chaplain. This was corrected in the early '80s when the chaplaincy was split three ways: a Protestant, a Catholic, and a Jewish chaplain replaced the single Protestant chaplain.

The Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Raymond Krinsky, provided a more permanent support for Jewish students. Whereas Hillel's activity fluctuated with student leadership, Rabbi Krinsky was a continual presence. He had an office on campus and was the rabbi of the Waterville synagogue, Beth Israel. According to Linda Cotter, he taught Hebrew to interested students and attended Hillel meetings. He was also available for students in need of rabbinical counseling (Cotter). One of the most important consequences of Rabbi Krinsky's installation at Colby, though, was that Judaism was no longer a guest on a Protestant campus.

Hillel at this time continued to evolve. In the '80s and '90s, it was advised by Linda Cotter, wife of President William Cotter. Hillel continued to express Jewish religion by hosting Passover Seders, for example, but held them publicly, "so that students would bring their non-Jewish friends" (Cotter). This openness and eagerness to incorporate the general student body continued. In 1983, for example, the president of Hillel, Craig Cohen, said "all that is asked of a member is that he acknowledge and appreciate the fact that the Jewish religion exists and is

practiced by some students here at Colby. The only other prerequisite for membership is that you enjoy having fun" (Laurie).

This isn't to say that there were no tensions between the mostly Christian campus and Jewish Hillel. In 1988, a charity drive, named Project Hero, was involved in a bit of a scandal. It was organized by the Newman Club, the Colby Christian Fellowship, and the Protestant Chapel Steering Committee. A Jewish student, Meredith Post, tried to get involved with the project at the directing level, but she was turned away, supposedly because she was Jewish (Kuller). This caused a significant amount of concern among students and faculty because it was a case of blatant discrimination. It signaled to Jewish students that they were not accepted by their Christian neighbors. The interfaith council was reestablished less than a month after the incident was reported (Hardman), but, as Longstaff stated, "soon the differences between the religious groups... were sufficient that it never really functioned particularly well."

The "cross controversy " was another significant event highlighting the tensions between Jewish students and the rest of Colby. In 1993, some students, Stephanie Pulver in particular, felt that the cross on top of Lorimer Chapel should be removed (Pulver). The cross represented the chapel as a Christian building, even though Hillel meetings and secular events were also held there (Longstaff).

In the words of Howard Katz, Co-President of Hillel, in his letter to the editor on the issue, "The proposition to remove the cross on the Chapel surprised me, however. In one bold move, I learned that the College was truly willing to make a stand for all of Colby's diverse religious backgrounds. Regardless of the outcome, I felt honored and respected. Ironically, the defensive backlash made me feel less welcome than before... Only one generation ago my parents would not have even dreamed of directing so much attention to their Jewish beliefs in a

Christian world... There was too much fear of being singled out as 'the Jew' and laden with a host of ingrained labels" (Katz).

Even though the board of trustees decided not to remove the cross, this event marks a milestone in Jewishness on campus (Longstaff). The cross had been on top of Lorimer Chapel since 1936, but only in 1993 does a non-Christian feel comfortable enough at Colby to challenge it. Less than two years later, construction began on the Pugh Center (Bornstein and Giacobbe). This new area would house Hillel, as well as several religious and racial diversity groups, such as SOBHU (Students United for Black and Hispanic Unity), Muslim Students, the Asian-American Student Association, and the Bridge. While the 1993 movement to remove the cross from the chapel did not succeed, it helped to raise awareness of the need for a truly open area on campus for these kinds of groups.

Howard Katz described the very reason why Hillel of the '50s and '60s was so invisible. Even though Colby seems a very secular college today, Colby was established as Baptist. The chaplain, until 1980, was a Protestant. Any other religious leaders that came to campus were his guests. Katz also said in his letter "every time I enter Lorimer Chapel, I feel that same sense of invitation, but shouldn't I feel... that I can belong?" The Jewish students on the interfaith committee, when it was still part of the Student Christian Association, were guests of the SCA. When the IFA became its own entity, perhaps some Jewish students felt that belonging, but they were probably still afraid of being singled out on a Protestant campus. As Jewish students felt less like guests on campus, their Jewishness was allowed to expand, first by creating Hillel and having a Jewish "home away from home" on campus, then by hosting events and inviting other students to be their guests, and finally by attempting to change something about Colby itself.

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