

‘You have a great Jewish community on every campus’

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“Yes, you’re going to be faced with anti-Semitic people. Yes, you’re going to be faced with people who are going to make claims about Israel that are going to make you feel uncomfortable. But be comforted by the fact that: one, it’s not every day; and two, you have the resources available and a great Jewish community on every campus.”

Even on a highly multicultural campus, like Toronto’s York University, it’s important to remember that the vast majority of students and faculty are not anti-Israel, however the minority who harbour these views can generate an outsized amount of attention, said Carl Ehrlich, director of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies.

Students also need to learn that not every battle needs to be fought, if it gives the offenders free publicity, he said.

“If it’s a case of people just expressing themselves peacefully in an inoffensive manner, but a position you disagree with, let them do it, because the minute you turn this into a confrontation, things can escalate very quickly and draw attention to what’s going on,” said Ehrlich.

That approach obviously does not apply to offensive or discriminatory statements or acts, he added.

And students need to be aware that anti-Semitism may sometimes be dis-



Tamar Lyons

guised as social justice. A case in point is a motion that has been circulating at York University, which calls for the university to divest itself from arms’ manufacturers. However, the motion is being promoted by BDS supporters and specifically targets the Israeli defence industry, Ehrlich said.

Rabbi Philip Bregman, executive director of Hillel BC, which is on seven British Columbia campuses, says the prerequisite for membership in groups on campus, especially liberal ones, seems to be a hatred of Israel.

“If you try to separate that out, you will be politely, and sometimes not so politely, asked to leave the island,” he said.

As in Ontario, Hillel BC is working hard to develop strong relationships with other re-

ligious groups on campus, Rabbi Bregman said. “So when this BDS crap comes, the other side begins to see maybe this is not simply about Israel that has no connection to us in the university, it actually has a connection to these Jews that I know,” he said.

Even if students aren’t worried about confronting blatant anti-Israel protests in the quad, they can still face it in the place where they have the least amount of influence – the classroom.

Ehrlich says he doesn’t think professors often make anti-Israel or anti-Semitic comments, but it certainly occurs.

“I have no doubt that there are certain instructors who view the classroom as a bully pulpit,” he said. “Faculty should not be using the classroom as a place to indoctrinate a specific political position.”

The advice is unanimous about the wrong way to handle the situation: students shouldn’t go it alone and challenge the professor directly.

“I would never say to a student it is your job to stand there in the middle of a class and put your neck out going after the professor to defend Israel, or to defend Jews on campus,” Orzy said. “It is their job to do well in school and it is our job (at Hillel) to support them as much as possible and part of that support is going to bat for them and making sure the issue gets dealt with without their grades being affected.”

At the beginning of every school year,

Rabbi Bregman sends out a letter asking students to report if they encounter anti-Israel statements in the classroom. Very few students do report and those who do often decline to make a formal complaint, usually bowing to their parents’ wishes not to make waves, he said.

“I can’t tell you how disgusted and sad I am about this. There’s an educational process that has to go on, not just with students, but with families,” said Rabbi Bregman.

But despite reports of anti-Semitic professors and new, insidious strategies being launched by student governments, the reality is that even the Canadian campuses that have been home to some of the most egregious incidents are a comfortable place for Jewish students, those familiar with university culture say.

Last year at McGill, a member of the student government tweeted that students should “punch a Zionist” and a campus newspaper admitted that it refused to publish any pro-Zionist commentary. But despite these highly publicized events, Noah Lew advises first-year students to come to Montreal and not to worry.

“The majority of McGill students are not anti-Semitic and are often allies, and are attending McGill for the same reasons all students want to go – to get an education, have a good time, maybe get involved with school and learn.” ■

Shoresh gears up for second year of its outdoor school

ARI BLAFF
CJN INTERN

Shoresh, a grassroots Jewish environmental organization based in Southern Ontario, is gearing up to welcome a new cohort of participants. After the successful launch of the Shoresh Outdoor School last year, the organization has received funding for the upcoming season.

The Shoresh Outdoor School is an extracurricular program for students and families between grades 1 and 8. According to the organization’s 2016 *Year in Review*, participants explore Jewish holidays, mitzvot and rituals through a blend of garden and nature-based activities.

The inspiration for this initiative came from a desire to “bridge Jewish learning with ecological awareness and environmental sustainability.” The eight-week program is based at Kavanah Garden, which is on the Lebovic Campus, beside the Schwartz/Reisman Centre in Vaughan, Ont., just north of Toronto. In a blog post, Juliana Isaac, Shoresh’s garden co-ordina-



Shoresh is set to restart on Sept. 12

tor, said that the first year of the program “helped us learn about the mitzvah of *Bal-Taschit*: do not destroy that which can be used again.”

Shoresh was established in 2002 as Torat HaTeva by Alexandra Kuperman and Tuvia Aronson. The organization views environmental ethics as a core element of Jewish identity and runs educational programs to encourage such thinking.

Linking Jewish texts with the experiences of the natural world, Shoresh seeks to “invest in the next generation of Jewish environmental leaders.”

Operating throughout the Greater Toronto Area, Shoresh has two primary campuses – Kavanah Garden and Bela Farm in Hillsburgh, Ont. Many of the activities that take place at the farm are designed to promote natural honey production and

the expansion of its existing bee sanctuary.

The organization’s efforts are situated within a broader context of growing fears over environmental degradation. According to Shoresh’s website, its programming is tailored to respond to three “key challenges facing” the community: environmental crisis, continued concerns over poverty and hunger and broader Jewish disengagement. Incorporating Jewish concepts such as *dayeinu* (gratitude), *tzedek tirdof* (justice for all) and *kehillah* (community), among others, the organization seeks to pair Jewish learning with contemporary environmental issues.

The Shoresh Outdoor School is set to restart on Sept. 12 and continues into October. There is much excitement within the organization and high expectations amongst its staff.

The enthusiasm is shared by the student who take part in the program, as well. As one of last year’s participants said, “I liked learning things about Judaism like that every blade of grass has an angel beside it that says, ‘grow, grow, grow.’” ■