

This past summer, I interned with Open Hillel, an organization that strives to expand the range of discourse on Israel-Palestine among Jewish students in university settings. Open Hillel urges Hillel International, the most prominent organization for Jewish college students, to end its “Standards of Partnership for Israel Activities.” According to these bylaws, Hillel centers may not associate with any group or person with a critical perspective of Israeli politics. In other words, Hillel centers, the hub of Jewish life for students across the country, are forced to preach dogma rather than providing education.

This yearning for education makes Open Hillel’s vision coincide perfectly with that of the Justus and Karin Rosenberg Foundation. Both prioritize discourse over censorship; both believe in the right of free thought; and both guard the age-old Jewish tradition of machloket l’shem shamayim (“argument for the sake of heaven”). This cohesion of philosophy provided an ideal workspace for the duration of my internship.

My task for the summer was building a workshop for connecting those wishing to support students working for open discourse. This workshop served to create a network among people who wished to promote pluralism in the Jewish world, and who shared doubts about how Hillel’s Standards of Partnership impacted Jewish college students.

Initially however, there was nothing. The workshop was a concept without even a framework, and available materials for its construction were my own vision, and my colleagues’ thoughts and ideas. In order to better understand the needs of interested peoples, I conducted a series of interviews with activists involved in the movement for pluralism. Their input completely reshaped my own view of Jewish American life.

In developing a plan for the workshop, I also reached out to a number of former Hillel staff. Through talking to these older employees, I learned about Hillel's history of genuine pluralism and open discourse before the establishment of the Standards of Partnership in 2010. As late as 1999, six years after the initial signing of the Oslo Accords, Hillel programs included voices from a highly extended and enriched spectrum (even allowing students to consider presentations by representatives of the Palestinian Liberation Organization). Former Hillel staff described Hillel as a community with rising levels of political discussion and debate -- until Hillel International added the Standards of Partnership to its bylaws. Learning this history allowed me to confidently model the workshop -- and Open Hillel itself -- not as a rebellious novelty, but as a return to a pluralism historically present in Jewish-American discourse.

Next, I formed a committee of Open Hillel student leaders to build a workshop based on the input we had received. We chose topic outlines and developed full seminars, each aiming to engage workshop attendees in inventive and informative fashions. We also invited keynote speakers through our networks.

This internship introduced me to a breadth of experiences and outlooks I had previously never considered. For the first time, I played a leading role in coordinating logistics on a large scale; and for the first time, I distilled firsthand human experience into content and curriculum. In contrast to previous academic projects, which had always felt somewhat dry and removed, my hard work had refined into a nexus of unity and progress. Working with Open Hillel was by far one of the proudest experiences of my career. I am extremely grateful to the Justus and Karin Rosenberg Foundation for giving me the opportunity to not only engage passionately with my community, but to make a difference as well.