

# Members of Jewish Student Group Test Permissible Discussion on Israel

Swarthmore's Hillel group decided not to abide by guidelines prohibiting collaboration with speakers or groups deemed unsupportive of Israel.

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At Harvard, the Jewish student group Hillel was barred from co-sponsoring a discussion with a Palestinian student group. At Binghamton University, a Hillel student leader was forced to resign his position after showing a film about Palestinians and inviting the filmmaker's brother to speak. And on many other campuses, Hillel chapters have been instructed to reject collaboration with left-leaning Jewish groups.

At American colleges, few values are as sacred as open debate and few issues as contested as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But Hillel, whose core mission is to keep the next generation of Jews in the fold, says that under its auspices one thing is not open to debate: Those who reject or repudiate Israel have no place.

This month, the students at the Swarthmore Hillel rebelled, declaring themselves the first "Open Hillel" in the nation. They will not abide by Hillel guidelines that prohibit chapters from collaborating with speakers or groups that "delegitimize" or "apply a double standard" to Israel.

The Hillel dispute has amplified an increasingly bitter intra-Jewish debate over what is permissible discussion and activism about Israel on college campuses.

In a major step affecting that dispute, professors in the 5,000-member American Studies Association [voted this month](#) to boycott Israeli academic institutions over Israel's treatment of the Palestinians.

Hillel's defenders say that in an atmosphere so hostile to Israel, Jewish campus organizations must draw parameters and that this is why Hillel established new guidelines in 2010.

Alan M. Dershowitz, a professor at Harvard Law School who was once a faculty adviser for the Harvard Hillel, said in an interview: "I don't think this is a free-speech issue. The people who want divestment and boycotts have plenty of opportunity to speak on campus. The question is a branding one. You can see why Hillel does not want its brand to be diluted."

In interviews, some students said that college should be a place for no-holds-barred discussions about Israel and that Hillel should host those discussions, since Hillel emphasizes inclusion and takes its name from a rabbinical sage who welcomed intellectual challenge.

“Hillel does a fantastic job of bringing together Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, secular students, and respecting everyone’s different religious practice,” said Rachel Sandalow-Ash, a student active in the Hillel at Harvard. “But in the political realm, that sort of pluralism just doesn’t exist, and students who have more dissident views on Israel are excluded in many ways.”

Joshua Wolfsun, a student on the Swarthmore Hillel board, said, “There are a lot of really smart people across the political spectrum on Israel that we want to talk to, and we feel that Hillel should not have a political litmus test on who is allowed and who is not.”

In a manifesto, the Swarthmore Hillel students proclaimed: “All are welcome to walk through our doors and speak with our name and under our roof, be they Zionist, anti-Zionist, post-Zionist, or non-Zionist.”

But the president and chief executive of Hillel, Eric D. Fingerhut, responded to them in a letter saying that “ ‘anti-Zionists’ will not be permitted to speak using the Hillel name or under the Hillel roof, under any circumstances.”

The organization’s guidelines specify that it will not host or work with speakers or groups that deny the right of Israel to exist; “delegitimize, demonize or apply a double standard to Israel”; support boycotts, divestment or sanctions against Israel; or “foster an atmosphere of incivility.”

A nationwide online petition in support of the Swarthmore Hillel’s rejection of those guidelines has gathered 1,200 signatures.

In an interview, Mr. Fingerhut said, “If we’re an organization that is committed to building Jewish identity and lifelong connections to the Jewish world and to Israel, then we certainly have to draw lines.”

But some students active in Hillel say the lines are either muddy or wrong. Hillel’s adult staff members on more than a dozen campuses have refused to allow J Street U, an affiliate of the liberal group J Street, to co-sponsor events. The explanation was that donors to Hillel do not support J Street, which supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but is critical of Israeli settlement building and the occupation of the West Bank.

J Street is challenging the dominance of the more conservative establishment Israel lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Leaders of Hillel and Aipac recently published an essay in *The New York Jewish Week* hailing their partnership

on campuses.

David Eden, a spokesman at Hillel, said that each of the 550 campus Hillel branches worldwide was independently funded. “But as far as Hillel international is concerned,” he said, “J Street and J Street U and other groups are more than welcome.”

In contrast, the leaders of Jewish Voice for Peace, a group that supports the boycott and divestment movement, say their organization has been unable to affiliate or work with any campus Hillel in the United States.

Hillel chapters have also shunned collaborations with Palestinian student groups, which tend to support boycott and divestment.

That is what happened at Harvard. Hillel held a dinner with about 15 students for Avraham Burg, a leftist former speaker of the Israeli Parliament. The students then walked over to the Quincy House dormitory for Mr. Burg’s speech — Hillel refused to host the speech because it was co-sponsored by the Palestine Solidarity Committee.

Showing documentary films about the Palestinian experience has also caused friction on many campuses. In one case, Benjamin Sheridan, a senior at Binghamton University, part of the State University of New York, said he arranged a showing last year of the Academy Award-nominated film “5 Broken Cameras” and a talk by the filmmaker’s brother, a Palestinian angry about the occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The event was sponsored by Dorm Room Diplomacy, a student group that holds video conferences between American and foreign students.

Mr. Sheridan said he was forced to resign from the board of Bearcats for Israel, a Hillel affiliate, and from a paid internship promoting study abroad programs in Israel. He said the Hillel director told him he could no longer hold these positions because he had broken the guidelines and put donations to Hillel at risk. (Mr. Eden, the spokesman for Hillel, disputed this, saying fellow students forced Mr. Sheridan out.)

Mr. Sheridan, 21, wears a wristband that says “Israel Is Strong” in Hebrew. He spent his gap year in Israel, has an Israeli flag in his dorm room and did an internship at the American Jewish Committee.

“The second I question Israel — Israeli policies, not its existence — all of a sudden I’m a pariah?” he asked. “If Hillel is going to be the group that represents all Jews, how can it say, ‘On Israel we have one policy only?’”