

Report from the Non-/Anti-Zionist Field: The Inaugural Open Hillel Conference
Steven M. Cohen
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By way of background...

This past weekend I attended the Open Hillel (OH) conference at Harvard. I had the opportunity to speak twice – once on the opening panel and the other at a workshop on intermarriage. On the panel (with Shaul Magid, David Harris-Gershon, and Judith Butler) I delivered the message that the OH participants have little reason to focus on their felt marginalization in Jewish life – they're not that marginal in their views according to recent surveys and as graduates of very prestigious schools, they enjoy rather privileged social standing. Instead of dwelling on their real or imagined exclusion from Jewish life, I urged them to focus upon helping bring about a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. My intermarriage workshop (with Sarah Anne Minkin of Berkeley) contended with the demographic, cultural and policy implications of high intermarriage, delayed marriage, non-marriage, and low effective Jewish fertility.

And now, my thoughts about the conference and the participants...

I was deeply impressed by many features of the attendees: their number, obvious talents, social skills, Jewish background, and, of course, a genuine and, for me, quite admirable commitment to ending Israel's Occupation of the West Bank. For all these reasons, I came away appreciating both the people and their capacities. After all, this select group of young participants, and the much larger constituency they represent, has the potential to influence the discourse of American Jewry on Israel and the course of events related to the conflict. All that is to the good.

But, there's a big "however." However, at the same time, several features of the group in attendance will not only hinder its effectiveness, but for me as a progressive Zionist, are severely disappointing and deeply disturbing. Judging matters only by the panelists, the questions, the hallway conversations, and the snapping of fingers (a sign of approval, quieter than applause), I arrived at several inferences about MOST of the participants, with many exceptions and nuanced variations, of course:

The most fundamental issue (or, "flaw") was their absolute rejection of any sense of privileging their personal and group connection with fellow Jews, with the Jewish People, and with Israel. Never had I seen so much Jewish or Israel engagement in such a clearly Jewish space co-existing along so much seeming abjuring of the primacy of Jewish or Israel attachment. The few appearances of a special place to the Jewish group came in the form of criticizing American Jewish organizations for rejecting the participants and of Israelis for rejecting their positions. The other special recognition of the room's Jewish identity came in the form of citing the amorphous term, "Jewish values." To be sure, "Jewish values" were selectively accessed, with no affirming talk of Jewish solidarity, claims to the Land of Israel, special concern for Jewish life, and so forth (all worthy Jewish values, as worthy as decency, empathy, peace-loving, and so forth).

Epitomizing the total rejection of any privileging of Jewish connection by these Jews to other Jews was a curious linguistic custom: The word, "Israel," was hardly ever mentioned without "Palestine" immediately following. "Israel-Palestine" was uttered so often that I almost came to believe that the two-state confederation had already come into being. If I were attending a meeting of Open Palestine with Palestinian activists, I would not expect or demand of them that they speak exclusively of Israel-Palestine. In Israel, we of the Zionist left would conclude Peace Now rallies with the singing of Hatikvah

(perhaps preceded by Shir Hashalom). Doing so at Open Hillel would be seen as a heresy of its own sort.

It flows from this perspective that the conference and conversation was totally lacking in ANY serious discussion of Israeli security issues of fears. Where was the analyst describing the history of conflict, the military challenges, the terrorist threats -- even, if only, to de-bunk them, if that would be the preference of the conference organizers (not mine)? Somehow, talk of Israel's security interests seem the province of the un-represented Right. And not one speaker whom I heard made any reference to left-leaning Israeli military and security officials, reflecting the notion that security concerns ought not complicate a passionate commitment to ending the Occupation.

Then, I was taken aback by the lack of strategic thinking or aspirations. It seems like the whole point of the gathering was expressive to the point of ignoring the instrumental. No one seemed concerned about how exactly do we get from here to there, or even describe the "there." Which publics need to be influenced? Which messages need to be projected? Who are our allies, potential allies, swing votes, opponents? What are our strengths and vulnerabilities?

And last, I was surprised, to say the least, that the participants assume that the community that is shunning them has no moral right to do so, and I say that as someone who is critical of the shunning. Social activists everywhere expect the Established Order to resist them and for the Empire to strike back. Given the circumstances, I frankly am impressed with the relative tolerance and openness of influential figures in conventional Jewish life in the face of people whom they believe are misguided to the point of sometimes being aligned with the enemies of Israel. How much ostracism and retribution is taking place if... Hillel's own local rabbis participated in the event, and if I, prior to the event, underwent no pressure from Hillel (for whom I maintain a minor consultancy) to withdraw from the event? Protesters have the right to protest; but they (we) have no right to demand of others that they accede to our protests, let alone bless them -- and us.

Notwithstanding my critique above, I want to say how important and valuable is the Open Hillel movement. Most critically, it weighs in on the side of the forces pushing for a Palestinian state, something Israel desperately needs for its sustainability as a Jewish and democratic state. Second, the Open Hillel movement provides a place for Israel-engaged Jews to establish and participate in community with like-minded others, facilitating both Israel-attachment and strong Jewish social networks.

On balance, Open Hillel is an extremely positive development. If it continues, I have no doubt it will morph in different directions -- some will be to my liking, and others not, of course. In the ideal world, all of one's community arrives at the right conclusions for the right reasons. The world, though, is imperfect.