Jewish Students in American Higher Education

Alex Katz
New York University

Introduction

Since the inception of university life in America, Jewish students have endured a complex relationship with the United States' higher education system. The group, whose identity lies at the intersection of ethnicity and religion, has experienced a long history of discrimination and prejudice from attempts to curb their collegiate participation. Despite the presence of these institutional and societal barriers, the Jewish population has persevered academically as a result of intrafaith collaboration methods. Although higher education practices and policies no longer disadvantage Jewish students, the overall response to hate crimes targeting this group is rarely met with the resounding support needed to ensure this population feels both safe and valued on campus. In order to survive a new wave of anti-Semitism infiltrating college campuses, Jewish students must no longer work alone to combat discrimination and require increased institutional support and inclusion in multiculturalism discussion.

History of Jewish Student Enrollment in American Higher Education

No systematic effort was made to collect Jewish student enrollment data until after World War I (Jospe, 1964). However, miscellaneous information has indicated higher education's clear refusal to include the population in its early stages. Modeled after England's prestigious and religiously affiliated universities, America's first institutions were designed to prepare students to join the Puritan ministry (Delbanco, 2012). As a result, Jewish individuals were not initially welcomed to join the pursuit of higher education (Kolko, 2003). While Hebrew texts like the Old Testament were considered foundational literature of the traditional curriculum, there is an insufficient record of Jewish involvement in academia throughout this time period (Kolko, 2003).

Even with the expansion of access brought on by legislation like the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, Jewish individuals did not successfully gain access to postsecondary education until the latter half of the nineteenth century (Jospe, 1964). Once they were finally allowed to enter, enrollment increased rapidly in regions with strong Jewish populations, particularly in the New York metropolitan area (Kolko, 2003). The population's wealthy and lower-class factions recognized the power of education in advancing social and economic mobility, thus putting great emphasis on pushing younger generations to enroll in college and succeed academically (Kolko, 2003). By 1916, 73 percent of enrollment at New York City College and 44 percent at Hunter College were made up of Jewish identifying students. This trend also materialized within the Ivy League system, with 20 percent of Harvard's class modeling this demographic uptick by 1920 (Takaki, 2008).

Although Jewish presence continued to persist on college campuses as a result of the group's commitment to educational attainment, students were often met with discrimination from their peers, faculty, and administrators (Jospe, 1964). Even though some had the ability to blend in with their white classmates, Jews were barred from participating in student organizations and social activities as well as targeted in varying forms of anti-Semitism (Kolko, 2003). Viewed as unwanted outsiders on campus, Jews were essentially alienated from all aspects of the college experience beyond academia (Kolko, 2003). As a result, these individuals kept a relatively low profile, focusing more on achieving academic excellence in their quest to ensure a better future for themselves and their families (Kolko, 2003).

Noticing a rise of Jewish enrollment despite the implementation of exclusionary campus

practices, United States colleges moved to restrict attendance through justification found within the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (Weschler, 1977). Fearful that Jews were going to "overrun" higher education, administrators imposed strict limitations on the number of Jewish individuals offered admission by universities around the country (Weschler, 1977). The ethno-religious community was unsurprisingly outraged by the new enrollment restrictions, expressing their disapproval through various complaints and lawsuits filings in addition to the development of intra-community social organizations and colleges (Kadushin, 2008). After World War II, the quota system was quietly dropped by most institutions nationwide (Jospe, 1964). Feeling pressure to follow through with the GI Bill's free tuition promises and uphold the country's status as a global leader in education, most institutions removed biased application questions that concerned nationality, race, and religion (Kadushin, 2008). Schools shifted admissions practices to focus on academic selectivity over identity—a move that has significantly contributed to the immense number of Jewish students entering higher education since the end of World War II (Perlman, 2013). Today, there are 12 times more Jewish than non-Jewish students in the United States attending Ivy League schools, a feat that suggests the group's impressive achievement in accessing higher education and the upward socioeconomic mobility this achievement represents (Kadushin, 2008).

Jewish Student Persistence in Higher Education

Despite enduring various institutional and societal barriers set up to discourage their participation, Jewish students have continually persevered and succeeded in their pursuit of American higher education. This "against all odds" outcome is the result of several collaborative measures taken within the group itself. As mentioned previously, the religious group quickly recognized the immense social and economic value of enrolling in higher education when first allowed entrance in the early 1900's (Kolko, 2003). Living as impoverished Eastern European immigrants in the slums of New York, Jewish parents put their children in public schools and saw the success of education in preparing them for a more prosperous future (Kolko, 2003). Since this initial contact period, the Jewish community has continually pushed each new generation to attend college and instilled in them the importance of enrollment and academic excellence in achieving upward mobility (Kolko, 2003). It is because of this group's values towards academia that they willingly sacrificed social well-being and endured discriminatory and prejudicial practices brought on by their peers, faculty, and university officials (Kolko, 2003). Despite being forcefully excluded from most of university life, Jews took hold of their chance to pursue higher education and utilized it to create a more successful future for their community.

The religious group has also achieved prosperity within higher education through the creation of their own social organizations. Barred from participating in any institutionally established student groups, Jews were given no space to practice their religion or participate in college social life beyond classroom activities (Kolko, 2003). While academic performance remained their top priority, Jewish students sought to develop opportunities that would support their spiritual welfare (Jospe, 1964). Zeta Beta Tau became the first official Jewish Greek social fraternity in higher education and was designed to inspire discussions of Jewish culture and history (Jospe, 1964). The Intercollegiate Menorah Association and various Zionist organizations popped up on college campuses soon after, providing spaces for first-generation Jewish students to comfortably explore and express their ethno-religious identity (Weissman Joselit, 1990). While at first these student-led groups helped improve the college experience for the community, they often struggled to survive without institutional and community support (Jospe, 1964). With the graduation of student volunteers and insufficient funding sources, organizations like the Intercollegiate Menorah Association eventually fizzled out of existence (Weissman Joselit, 1990). These societies did pave the way for more structured Jewish groups, however. The most popular group, the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, commonly referred to as Hillel, is currently active on over 550 college campuses internationally (Hillels Around the World, n.d.). Run by full-time professional staff, the

organization has offered Jewish students various programming activities and support services since its inception in 1923 (Hillels Around the World, n.d.). Although it now collaborates with the many institutions in which it functions, Hillel was created by and for the Jewish community during a time of severe institutional backlash. The existence of these groups ultimately helped Jewish students feel more at ease during their pursuit of higher education, providing them with the support necessary to successfully move forward in society.

Beyond the creation of student organizations, the Jewish community also established their own separate colleges. With the rise of anti-Semitism on campuses after 1920, several rabbis and students advocated for the establishment of Jewish-centric institutions that would continue to advance members' socioeconomic statuses (Eleff, 2011). Because of the religious and ethnic intersectionality of the Jewish identity, the group founded both religious and secular colleges. Yeshiva College, founded in 1928, fell under the more religiously oriented category. The institution offered a small liberal arts education specializing in training "a select group of Jewish young men seeking harmonious growth through the attainment of modern knowledge and Jewish culture" (Eleff, 2011, p. 239). The general curriculum stressed the humanities while also requiring courses in the subjects of Jewish history, ethics, and the Torah (Eleff, 2011). While Yeshiva College provided a beneficial learning space for the close-knit Orthodox community, many feared that its pure rabbinical approach was further hindering Jewish integration into American society (Eleff, 2011). As a result, several community leaders worked together to establish a secular institution that would embed overarching Jewish values into its foundation (Kolko, 2003). Serving a student body of both Jewish and non-Jewish students, this new school intended to assist a broader base of American Jews, allowing them to pursue higher education without having to worry about the admission quota and anti-Semitism issues running rampant on other college campuses (Kolko, 2003). With these more secular goals in mind, Brandeis University was established in 1948 in Waltham, Massachusetts (Kolko, 2003). Tasked with the challenge of balancing non-sectarianism with its Jewish underpinnings, the school has and continues to foster a positive campus climate for Jews to comfortably obtain an education without fear of discrimination or prejudice (Fox, 1993). More Jewish institutions have since been established for both its religious and more culturally focused factions, which have all contributed to the community's ability to prevail within the higher education system.

Jewish Students in American Higher Education Today

The significant enrollment of Jewish students in higher education today may suggest the group's successful integration and continued commitment to academia. Only 6 percent of these individuals currently entering college identify as first-generation college students—a statistic that clearly shows the group's "above average investment in human capital" (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015, p. 2). With discriminatory barriers like admission quotas and social exclusion policies no longer practiced, the community should have less fear of blatant prejudice occurring at the institutional level (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015). Formerly separate Jewish student organizations like Hillel have been adopted within student activities centers, and Jewish colleges continue to serve the community's religious and cultural sects (Hillel Around the World, n.d.).

With all of these practices in place, higher education is theoretically set up to include Jews, allowing them to safely and peacefully advance through their college experience. Despite this progress, Jewish students still encounter incidents of anti-Semitism in college. According to the National Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students in 2014, 54 percent of Jewish students claimed that they had been targeted or witnessed anti-Semitism on their campus (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015). Examples of these incidents typically included name calling, swastika drawings, vandalism, and other forms of harassment and assault (Kosmin & Keysar, 2015). Although more current data from this specific survey is unknown, other outlets have revealed an alarming increase in anti-Semitic university incidents since 2016. The Anti-Defamation League, a leading national civil rights and human relations

nonprofit group, reported an 89 percent increase in Jewish-related hate crimes on college campuses from 2016 to 2017 (Bauer-Wolf, 2018). The findings show the largest increase in university anti-Semitism seen in one year since the organization began tracking these episodes in 1979 (Astor, 2018).

The dramatic rise in targeted Jewish hate incidents in recent years can be attributed to a variety of societal, political, and institutional factors. This 2016 increase follows the far right movement's mainstream rise during the divisive American presidential election held in that same year (Astor, 2018). The victory of Donald Trump, whose campaign often spurred messages of hate and prejudice towards minority populations, is believed to have validated the intolerant beliefs of this group and created an environment in which acts of bigotry can now prosper without fear of condemnation (Astor, 2018). With recent reports of a surge in campus anti-Semitism found after the tragic Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh, the belief that a connection exists between university Jewish life and the current political landscape does not seem far-fetched (Bauer-Wolf, 2018).

Jewish students have also expressed experiencing anti-Semitism regarding the controversial Israel divestment movement that has gained momentum on campuses nationwide (Hoover, 2002). The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which has garnered support from various student groups, faculty and administrators, calls for universities to boycott Israeli companies in response to the belief that the country continues to commit human rights violations against the Palestinian people (Hoover, 2002). With Israel's strong identification as a Jewish state, the line between anti-Zionist statements and anti-Semitism is difficult to define (Hoover, 2002). This issue continues to prove contentious and complex on many college campuses, significantly impacting Jews' comfort in expressing their ethno-religious identity (Hoover, 2002). When navigating this controversial topic as a Jewish student myself, there was often fear of communicating this ethno-religious identity on campus out of concern that sharing such beliefs would be conflated with a Pro-Israel stance. Further research is necessary to determine the extent to which the rise of the BDS movement has affected campus attitudes towards this community and in turn how this has affected the group's comfortability in expressing their identity. Nevertheless, these trends reveal that despite positive institutional policy changes, Jews are still facing societal antagonism within the institutional sphere.

University Support of Jewish Students

The current American higher education system is often seen as a champion for the historically marginalized, praised for providing a space where individuals can feel included and their culture celebrated. Despite its courage in promoting a progressive vision of inclusivity for communities of all identities, the system still struggles in its efforts to support religious-practicing individuals. With the Jewish population in particular, university outreach has overall proven misinformed and lackluster in execution. Many students report feelings of discouragement regarding faculty and administrators not understanding their identity and the problems they face as Jewish individuals (Blumenfeld & Klein, 2009). Jews often struggle with comprehending their ethno-religious identity, as they benefit from white privilege yet know historically their community has been treated as "racialized others" (Blumenfeld & Klein, 2009, p.33). Despite higher education's reputation for supporting self-exploration, little attention is given to support this group in understanding the complex ethnic, racial, and religious intersections of their Jewish identity (Blumenfeld & Klein, 2009). The community's plight cannot directly be compared to other historically marginalized students as a result of the privileges they are afforded as an invisible minority group. However, Jewish students still deserve institutional recognition when it comes to accessing spaces for identity reflection and dialogue.

Higher education's response to the rise in targeted Jewish hate crimes has also proven generally weak and haphazard. University statements regarding recent attacks have included tendencies to skirt around explicitly condemning anti-Semitism and/or universalize tragedies without mentioning their Jewish significance (Huangpu, 2018). Even more alarming is when institutions neglect to respond

altogether, as seen with Cornell University in a recent case involving Swastika drawings found in its dorm buildings (Kakutani & Ghazi, 2018). Institutions' Hillel foundations often take the lead in appropriately addressing these incidents by default and are considered the sole support system for Jews to process such blatant attacks on their identity (Kakutani & Ghazi, 2018). The student organization is also one of the only campus entities to call out anti-Zionist rhetoric when it begins crossing into anti-Semitic territory (Hoover, 2002). While it is important that Hillel continues to support Jewish students, it is vital that the rest of higher education become involved in uplifting this community. A clearly outlined definition of anti-Semitism must be adopted in order to establish what actions and speech ultimately cross the line (Kosmin & Keysar, 2014). Anti-Semitic incidents require the same quick, decisive, and clear condemnation from university officials that targeted hate crimes towards other groups like LGBTQ individuals and students of color receive (Kosmin & Keysar, 2014).

Beyond employing these combative strategies towards intolerant attacks, higher education must put more emphasis on including Jewish students in conversations regarding social justice and multiculturalism. Research has found that non-Jewish students' appreciative attitudes towards the ethno-religious population are connected with the following three positive climate factors:

> 1) informal engagement with diverse peers (e.g., socializing with someone of a different worldview), 2) a space for support and spiritual expression (e.g., agreeing that the campus is a safe place to express one's worldview), and
> 3) provocative experiences with worldview diversity (e.g., feeling challenged to rethink one's assumptions about another worldview) (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Selznick, & Riggers-Piehl, 2015).

It is evident from these results the strong impact intentional institutional support can have in fostering a more positive reception of Jewish students. If more universities actively facilitate interfaith exchange and multicultural conversations that include Judaism, the general campus will have a better understanding of this community and thus allow Jews to more comfortably advance through their college experience (Mayhew et al., 2015). Jewish students must no longer rely solely on their own networks to navigate higher education and require institutional assistance in tangibly changing campus attitudes towards the group.

Conclusion

The Jewish student population has experienced an erratic history with its involvement in American higher education. From admission quotas to enforced exclusion from social activities, several discriminatory policies were previously enforced to hinder their participation in university life. Despite these obstacles, Jews have managed to excel in academia as a result of the community's academic-centric value system and creation of Jewish organizations and institutions. When looking at this population today, it is assumed that the disbandment of prejudicial practices has solved all of the group's problems regarding their successful navigation of higher education. With the recent rise in campus anti-Semitism however, it is crucial that universities pay attention to Jewish students, provide them with the necessary support services, and incorporate Judaism into its social justice framework. Only through institutional implementation of intentional advocacy efforts will this group feel truly welcomed, understood, and secure throughout their experience pursuing higher education.

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