

# The Scarsdale Inquirer

Founded in 1901

VOLUME 93, NUMBER 4

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 2015

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION

# Bias on campus challenges Jewish students

By **VALERIE ABRAHAMS**

Campus die-ins, boycotts, mock eviction notices and other actions perceived as anti-Semitic have caught some Jewish college students off guard or made them feel unsafe. Subtler incidents, such as professors who express biases about Middle East politics, are equally unsettling, especially for students coming from Westchester where there are so many Jewish people.

Dozens of college students home on break and their parents convened at the JCC of Mid-Westchester earlier this month to address concerns about anti-Israel incidents on campuses and to network with representatives from Jewish National Fund and StandWithUs, an international organization dedicated to combating anti-Semitism and supporting pro-Israel groups.

Five local parents — Shoshana Bederman, Tamar Ben-Simon, Bonnie Katzenstein, Sharon Freudenstein and Ziva Zaff, founders of Students & Parents Against Campus Anti-Semitism — organized the event with panelists who led breakout conversation groups to focus on the issues of the day.

"We wanted students, parents and grandparents to come together and realize that we all need to do our part to stand up to anti-Semitism and intimidation on campus," Bederman said.

A brief video presentation depicted recent anti-Israel, pro-Palestine activism on campuses, which raised concerns among audience members, but also delivered a positive message: "Learn more so you can teach more on your campus ...



ONLY BENUN PHOTO

Aviva Malveira, third from left, a campus coordinator for StandWithUs, at a SPACAS event earlier this month led one of several discussion groups to counsel local Jewish college students on ways to respond to anti-Israel activism on campus.

If you are vocal and you are proud, you will be surprised how many people will come to you and be part of a movement to support the state of Israel,” setting the tone for the discussions that followed.

Students for Justice in Palestine, an anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian organization that stages demonstrations asserting, for example, that Israel is an apartheid regime that violates the rights of Palestinians; and the

they work with a very scripted and targeted message that they are good at amplifying,” Adkins said. “The public as a whole does not feel this way toward Jews, Jewish students or the state of Israel. However, college, while being a great place for liberalism in the sense of fostering dialogue and discourse, is also a place of ideological exploration for a lot of people.”

For the past decade both groups have spread a net across campuses, from Harvard, NYU, Columbia, Cornell and Wesleyan, to University of Michigan, Tufts University and many others. At Northeastern University last March a controversy arose when SJP was temporarily suspended from the campus for distributing mock eviction notices to raise awareness about Israel's

*“We all need to do our part to stand up to anti-Semitism and intimidation on campus.”*

— SHOSHANA BEDERMAN, CO-FOUNDER  
STUDENTS & PARENTS AGAINST CAMPUS ANTI-SEMITISM

Lead panelist Laura Adkins, an editor for the Jewish Insider online news source and president of NYU's pro-Israel advocacy group, said incidents on campuses are orchestrated primarily by two activist groups:

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which asserts the notion that Israel is unfairly targeting the Arab minority and calls for economic sanctions against Israel in retaliation.

"These groups are small and

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destruction of Palestinian homes. Similar flyers have shown up at a dozen schools, including NYU and Harvard, according to JNS.org news service.

BDS activists seek to put economic and political pressure on Israel by pressing university boards of directors to divest from pro-Israeli companies. They petition college dining services to stop using products from Israeli companies such as Sabra hummus or SodaStream, an Israel-based beverage machine maker that until recently had a factory in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank.

The issue is not that these groups take a stand for social justice or promote awareness of Palestinian issues. The problem arises when the activists intimidate or shout anti-Semitic insults or create a hostile environment for Jewish students.

Some of the local student participants had firsthand experience with bias on campus. A Harvard student took action to overturn a pro-Palestinian group effort to boycott SodaStream at Harvard, and he's planning to start a journal on Israeli politics. A freshman at Cornell said there have been pro-Palestinian demonstrations, but little to no pro-Israel response. A student treasurer for Hillel at Hamilton College, sensing "an unsettling situation" on campus, founded Hamilton Israel Public Affairs Committee to promote informed dialogue.

Others, like a boy who attends the University of Hartford, feel comfortable among a large Jewish population, but want to learn what to do if they encounter incidents of bias.

The presenters at the JCC de-

finied the problem using human rights activist Natan Sharan-sky's "3Ds" Test for Anti-Semitism — when someone or something seeks to delegitimize, demonize, or hold Israel to a double standard.

To combat those messages, the presenters told students to use the "3Es"—education, experience and engagement.

**Education:** Students should build their knowledge and arm themselves with facts. "Being an informed citizen is really important. You don't have to read 10 books a week on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but keep a general knowledge and use your resources to the fullest extent to educate yourself about the issues. That can really go a long way in keeping these incidents from escalating," Adkins said. For example, when confronted with "Israel is an apartheid state," she said a good response might be to acknowledge that the Arab population in Israel is a minority population, but they participate in higher education, entertainment, politics, the military, employment and recreation; they are also members of the Knesset, serve on the supreme courts, and by and large their civil rights are upheld.

**Experience:** Citing a number of programs that offer a variety of travel options for students, Anna Richlin, a student leader with JNF said, "There is no better way to build confidence in advocating for Israel than to spend time in Israel." Being familiar with Israeli culture and environment can help students address negative statements and reframe the issue with a positive message about Israel.

**Engagement:** Students should get involved on campus and

reach out to pro-Israel organizations, such as AIPAC, StandWithUs and the David Project, for resources and advice. Each of the presenters encouraged students to seek support by contacting campus security and school administrators if they feel intimidated or experience bias. "There is a whole community behind you that is willing to rally and support you," Yoni Kaplan, tri-state coordinator for StandWithUs told the students, adding that campus Hillels and Chabad chapters are good places to start. "When we are surrounded by people we are comfortable with, who don't engage in anti-Semitism, we can start conversations" about these issues.

Aviva Malveira, a campus coordinator for StandWithUs, said her organization works to bring pro-Israel speakers and programming to colleges and helps to support pro-Israel student groups on campuses.

## Parent discussions

A separate discussion group for parents was led by Dr. Eric Mandel, founder of Middle Eastern Political Information Network, a forum for members of Congress and the Knesset. He also is regional co-chairman of StandWithUs, writes for The Jerusalem Post and often gives pro-Israel speeches on campuses.

Mandel cited several cases of intimidation in classes and at pro-Israel assemblies as well as unbalanced coverage in the media. Jews shy away from demonstrations if there's a perceived threat of violence, Mandel said, and supporters of Palestine understand that and use it to their advantage.

Mandel encouraged parents to speak with school leadership to discuss ways to establish safe dialogue between people of differing opinions on campus.

"College is supposed to be a marketplace of ideas, but [supporters of Israel] are being shouted down and not allowed to have a voice," Mandel told the Inquirer. "The kids are getting sound bites thrown at them about apartheid and racism and colonialism. Israel has been painted as a colonialist enterprise that is like South Africa was, and that the Palestinians and Muslims are the people being oppressed. Whoever is in power is the victimizer, the oppressor. And whoever is the victim is in the right."

"Our kids are shocked and ill prepared, that's why it's up to adults to give them the abilities to have a voice."

Mandel summed up a common purpose for everyone in the room:

"You want to remain Jewish. You want to be involved with Israel; you want to be involved in defending Israel. You want to find some continuity, and you want to feel safe and protected wherever you are to express your points of view. ... Don't give up. This is hard stuff. You have an incredible legacy as Jewish kids. Literally thousands of years of sacrifices made for you to remain Jewish and be in this room today. Step back and think of how you got here ... And now be your own person and get involved in defending Israel with facts and context. Israel's right to exist is a given. ... It has problems, but you can deal with that if you learn how to arm yourselves with facts."