



CONGREGATION ETZ CHAIM

BIDDEFORD, MAINE

# Congregation Etz Chaim

York County Jewish Community News

[www.etzchaimme.org](http://www.etzchaimme.org)

## Special Issue: Jewish College Students' Perspectives on the Israel-Hamas War

### Inside This Issue:

Page 1	Editor's Note
Page 2	Perspective of an MIT Student
Page 5	Silent Loneliness
Page 7	My Post-October 7th College Experience at WPI
Page 9	Being Jewish at Harvard
Page 13	A Perspective From Across the Pond
Page 14	Synagogue Contacts and About Etz Chaim
Page 15	About YCJC and Other Info



## Editor's Note

Since the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Hamas and Israel's response by waging war in Gaza, colleges and universities across the United States — and the world — have become hotbeds of political activity. Pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel student groups have clashed ideologically — and, unfortunately, at times, physically. With rises in both antisemitism and anti-Muslim/anti-Arab behavior and rhetoric, campuses are struggling with keeping the peace between the two opposing groups. Finding themselves now thrust under a media microscope, they are also grappling with public scrutiny over their handling of a myriad of complex issues: the appropriateness of public institutional statements about the war, the role of social activism on college campuses, free speech versus hate speech — pertaining to both students and faculty, the extent to which donor dollars should influence an administration's position on political matters, the role institutions of higher education should play in keeping students “safe,” and how “safety” should be defined.

Presidents of two highly selective universities, Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, recently stepped down from their positions following a scathing congressional hearing on their administrations' responses (as well as the response of the MIT administration) to antisemitism. Since then, the atmosphere at colleges and universities has grown even more tumultuous.

Congregation Etz Chaim recently checked in with our members who are currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs throughout the country as well as internationally. We asked them to share their personal experiences as Jewish college/university students in our post-October 7<sup>th</sup> world and compiled their responses into this special issue of the *York County Jewish Community Newsletter*. Authors were given the option of remaining anonymous.

The Board of Congregation Etz Chaim extends its gratitude to all the students who contributed to this issue. The diversity in the perspectives and experiences shared is demonstrative of the wide-ranging viewpoints of Jews in America, and in the world at large, on this multifaceted and often divisive topic. We commend our students for their time and thoughtfulness in crafting their articles, and we trust that their opinions and beliefs will be respected.

Jennie Aranovitch  
Editor-in-Chief

# Perspective of an MIT Student

Elyse Oliver

Fall semesters at MIT typically have their ups and downs: the highs of seeing friends again and learning from insightful lecturers; the lows of exams and project deadlines. While this past semester had all of these moments, the atmosphere in which I experienced them was much more somber. October 7 brought a new sense of dismay to my life, leaving me reeling, distracted, and dissociated when I should have been engaged in advancing my degree in city planning. The usual focus I put into my studies waned almost entirely. Suffice it to say, it has been a very challenging semester.

The weekend of October 7, I couldn't stop watching, reading, and listening to the news, feeding a pit in my stomach that continued to grow. Thinking I couldn't possibly be the only one feeling this way, I sought out my classmate group chat for community and support. I was shocked to see that nobody had acknowledged the attack.

On October 10, I broke the silence with the following message: "If anyone has family/friends in Israel, Gaza, Palestine, the Holy Land, etc. and needs support, please don't hesitate to reach out. It's tough right now. Lots of reasons (long standing) for our hearts to be heavy." Out of a chat of 76 typically well-informed and caring people, it received only nine reactions. Nine reactions of support, but still, why such little acknowledgement? A Jewish Israeli classmate reached out to me after I posted, thanking me for the message, also frustrated by the silence.

Other outreach occurred on campus in the first week after Hamas's attack, but these messages also missed the mark for me. MIT Hillel was quick to reach out to Jewish students, but as the Palestinian death toll grew, I found Hillel's messages more off-putting than comforting. Hillel did not critique Gallant's dehumanizing language toward Palestinians. Hillel did not condemn the State of Israel's corralling of Gazans to the south while their targeted bombing campaign expanded in that direction. Hillel did not denounce the State's seizure of Gazan humanitarian aid as already limited hospitals ran out of resources.

Initially my off-campus schedule prevented me from participating in Hillel's immediate vigils, but the organization's one-sided messages kept me away. Their silence signaled that their mourning had bounds; I knew a request to acknowledge Palestinian lives lost would not be welcome at their services. It's true, I cannot accept the actions of Hamas on October 7 in murdering over a thousand and kidnapping some two hundred people. And. I cannot bear the continued destruction of Gazan homes and the collective punishment and deaths of over 20,000 Gazan civilians as collateral damage. In those first weeks after October 7, it felt like nobody speaking loudly could say these statements together. Why?

Thankfully, there were other students who were having these thoughts, and we were able to find each other and form a collective voice. We created a student group, MIT Jews for Ceasefire, to serve as an organizing space for Jewish students to advocate for an immediate ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas War. Much of our work requires standing in solidarity with — i.e., supporting the work of — Palestinian- and Israeli-led student groups or organizations led by those directly affected by this conflict.

However, because we've seen much more institutional support directed toward pro-Israel student groups — for example, accommodating vigils for murdered Israelis but shutting down pro-Palestinian teach- and sit-ins, swiftly responding to emails from Jewish students while emails from Muslim and Arab students go unanswered for days — we've focused our efforts on elevating the messages of pro-Palestinian student groups. As such, we've attended pro-Palestinian rallies that call attention to Palestinian lives lost before and since October 7. Pro-Palestinian student organizers, in turn, attended MIT Jews for Ceasefire's first public event. I see this as an incredibly compassionate approach to organizing. We are reciprocally responding to each other's grief, which we've both felt has been ignored in other spaces on campus.

In the midst of this organizing, I've reflected on the meaning of solidarity and the importance of self-awareness in times of grief. I have a renewed sense of what solidarity entails. It requires trusting relationships and an understanding that we show up for each other when we each face critical times of need. When pro-Israel counter protesters showed up at a peaceful, pro-Palestinian sit-in and hovered over us, stepped on us, pushed us, ripped signs from our hands, threw flyers of violent imagery onto us, verbally harassed us, yelled that we would be raped, told us G-d made a mistake by having us born a Jew, called us antisemitic, called us self-hating Jews, and called us Hamas, it was Muslim and Arab students who reached out to us to see if we were okay.

For the past 100+ days, national media has depicted a false polarization of Muslim/Arab students and Jewish/Israeli students on campus. I felt compelled to write this column because I want the Congregation Etz Chaim community to know that media coverage is simplifying campus dynamics, presenting a distorted view that weaponizes real trauma for views and engagement.

Regarding grief, I find myself extending a lot of grace to those mourning the loss of loved ones. I don't think it is possible to properly grieve when news of more death retraumatizes you every day. This is much of the reason that I've focused my time on advocating for a permanent ceasefire, so that community members directly affected can finally take a breath. It is important to have the self-awareness to care for our grief in healthy ways.

I like to think that the pro-Israel counter protesters mentioned above regret their aggressive actions. Anecdotally I've heard they do not, but we have still respected their space. There have been no student counterprotests at any pro-Israel events on campus. Israeli and Jewish students have a right to call attention to the continued danger that the Hamas hostages face and to grieve together.

That said, I do not recognize these same aggressive students' right to speak on behalf of all Jews on campus. Jewish students — as shown via Etz Chaim students' contributions to this newsletter — have incredibly diverse experiences. It is incorrect to state that MIT's campus is unsafe for Jews at this time. Campus may feel uncomfortable if, as a Jew, you've never thought critically about the actions of the Israeli government or the harm the world inflicted on Palestinians to right the wrongs of the Holocaust. But instead of calling for censure, I think Jewish students should appreciate that MIT is an environment that encourages dialogue, discussion, and debate. Personally, MIT is a place that allows me to engage with my Jewish identity and reflect on what it means to be Jewish.

In conclusion, I thank all the other contributors to this special issue for sharing your experiences unabashedly. I pray for a swift ceasefire and the opportunity to collectively grieve, envision the future, and work toward our aspirations for peace.



## About Elyse

Elyse is a second-year graduate student at MIT studying city planning. She previously graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a B.A. in international studies and sociology. She is a member of the Congregation Etz Chaim Board of Directors where she serves on the Finance Committee.

# Silent Loneliness

## Anonymous

After October 7 I have never been so absurdly grateful to be American. Like too many Jews, I grew up distinctly aware of the void in my family tree. My grandparents escaped the Iron Curtain with my dad in the early 1970s to Canada and later, the U.S. When we go back to visit the family still in Europe, it's a joyful reunion with my grandfather's siblings, nieces, and all their children, and a solemn visit to my grandmother's family, in rows of gravestones all bearing the same date.

There is no way to explain to someone the cruel irony of their social justice, who rightfully sees the killing of the innocent in Gaza as atrocious and the destructive razing of homes as tragic. In the past ten years, when 10,000 rockets fired from Gaza into Israel and landed to deafening silence, where was the justice then? Now, when Israel finally retaliates after nearly 80 years of struggling just to exist, those same voices shriek at the injustice of the chihuahua biting the wolf for the thousandth time, but now the wolf fights back.

While I grew up in the U.S., I have spent the past three years in Toronto, Canada, studying chemical engineering. Almost 45% of students in my program are non-Canadians, and due to the applications of chemical engineering, a large portion of them are from the Middle East. Some of my best friends are from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, and Lebanon. I have known them for years now, and none of them knows that I'm Jewish. Keeping that part of my identity guarded was a relic from my grandmother, and until October 7, seemed outdated and neurotic.

I heard about the Hamas attack when I was having lunch with my Saudi friend but just assumed it was one of the usual bombardments. I didn't realize the impact of the attack until my sister called me a few days later to see how I was holding up. A few hours after that conversation, all the emotions I didn't understand crashed over me, and I felt like an infant bawling my eyes out about something I had no control over.

I felt devastated for families in Israel, with whom all Jews share a bond, shame for the lesser sadness I felt towards the equal suffering of the Palestinian families, and fear towards anyone I could think of that knew/may have known I'm a Jew. However, what unified it all was my anger and mourning for the home I always had in Israel, lying bloody.

What followed was a silent loneliness. I never let any of my peers in Toronto see my mourning, and every time I looked at Instagram, I had to come to terms with the fact that people whom I love and treasure, publicly call for the death of my people. Maybe I could have changed their minds had I spoken up and revealed myself, but for thousands of years Jews have been targeted. Many stood out and many stood silent, and I learned I'm a descendant of those who were silent.

To people looking upon the Hamas-Israel conflict with a conscience, there is no way to explain the generational fear that targeted campaigns have left over thousands of years. How the word "Holocaust" is not a story or buzzword, but our most recent reminder of all the aunts, uncles, cousins, dinners, birthdays, and weddings that will never happen. How 2,000 years later, the Arch of Titus still depicts the "Spoils of Jerusalem" with a menorah held aloft by the Roman army.

The hate is not new. What is new is that for the first time, maybe ever, we have the means to actually fight back. I am gutted by the innocent Palestinians killed in the crossfire; they deserved better. But this is war. We did not start the war, but, if I can find any solace in it, it's that by the end no one will decree Israel's illegitimacy again.

# My Post-October 7th College Experience at WPI

Josiah Aranovitch

The ongoing war between Israel and Palestine has notably spawned conflicts halfway across the world in American universities. Some prestigious colleges, especially Harvard and Columbia, have had major tensions on campus that resulted in violence and student suspension. I am a Jewish student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), where the war has been a talking point among the student body. Fortunately, nothing violent has happened so far on campus.

The most prominent event that took place on campus occurred one day in early November. I was walking through the middle of campus to grab lunch when I, as well as many other students, were instructed to take a detour. It turned out the event interfering with my normal path was organized by the school's Muslim Students Association and consisted of many students pretending to lay dead in the middle of campus. Around the students were chalk-written messages voicing support for Palestine.

As a college student who is always online, I constantly see people post their support for Israel or Palestine on Instagram. I feel like this does more harm than good, however, since no one will have their opinion swayed by 19-year-old students posting on their Instagram stories. Posting on social media lets others see who supports which side, which leads to broken college friendships and avoidable arguments. I avoid posting my thoughts on this war online because I do not want to ruin any of my friendships. However, I am open about supporting Israel around my closest friends and my family.

I am also a member of the Hillel chapter at WPI. Although I am not one of the most active members, I go to events occasionally. I have been to two of their bagel brunches in the campus center after the war broke out. Here, free bagels are offered to students who walk through the campus center. They have been popular, and no one seems to care that a Jewish group is drawing a crowd in this busy part of campus. Partially due to this, I feel safe as a Jewish student at WPI during the Israel-Hamas war.

Overall, I feel like WPI is a safe school compared to other colleges in America. Nothing violent has happened on campus, and people are respectful to both Jews and Muslims. Finally, I would like to mention that the war has given me an increased sense of pride in Judaism. I hope for the war to end soon — not only to stop the bloodshed abroad but in hopes that the fighting among Americans may diminish too.





## About Josiah:

Josiah is a sophomore at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he is a data science major. He is from Biddeford, Maine, and graduated from Biddeford High School in 2022.

# Being Jewish at Harvard

Ariel Bernstein

Studying in the famous reading room of Widener Library, as I worked to keep myself from dozing off while studying biostats the night before my final exam, I had a moment of “Is this real? Am I really here?” There are moments when it really hits me that I am a student at Harvard. The summer after I was out of the Israeli army, while on a six-month trip in the U.S., I made a visit to Boston. It was unexpectedly cold and rainy, and so I bought a sweatshirt to keep warm. Of course, it said “Harvard” on it. I never thought I would be here. I was a good student in high school, and worked very hard in college, but I still thought the Ivy league was out of reach.

In the fall of 2022, I applied to grad schools for a master’s in public health degree. I applied to Harvard as my dream “reach” school. As a midwife for the last eight years in Maine, I wanted to pivot from private practice to working on maternity care issues on a more global scale and wanted to study at an institution that would have the kind of global reach I dreamed of connecting to. On a Thursday morning in late February of last year, shortly after coming home from the hardest birth experience of my career to that point, I received an email that I had been accepted to the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. I cried so hard. I couldn’t believe I had made it to Harvard. The next six months were a blur of preparing to move to Boston, closing my practice, and getting my kids ready to enter public school.

On my first day of classes I took a picture holding a sign that said, “First day of 19<sup>th</sup> grade. When I grow up I want to solve the maternity care crisis.” It was one of the proudest moments of my life. The first few weeks were incredibly hard. The pace of school was more intense than I could have imagined. The adjustment for our family to city living and a very different life was harder than we thought it would be too.

I awoke on the 7<sup>th</sup> to a text message: “There was an attack on Israel. Wake up. Read the news.” Like every other Israeli, I still can’t put into words the feeling I felt when I started reading what was happening. The next day, I was on my couch at home crying uncontrollably, listening to Netanyahu address the nation live on the radio, and all I could think, over and over, was where was the army? How could we have failed that horribly? How? I was a soldier in the IDF during the second Lebanon war. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing when Gilad Shalit was kidnapped. That was one person. How could we fail like this? How did we fail the country, the Jewish people? It was, and still is, an unbearable anguish.

The impact of October 7<sup>th</sup> on life at Harvard was immediate. On the night of the 8<sup>th</sup>, I sat in the Hillel dining hall as Israeli students recounted stories of their dead friends and relatives. Claudine Gay, the embattled, now-former president of the university, sat in the room with us but said nothing and spoke to no one.

Moments before the gathering began, the room was abuzz with anger, rage, and shock as news quickly spread of the letter signed by 30-plus student organizations blaming Israel for the attack on its citizens. This letter has now come to be the ignition point of Harvard's place in the international news cycle on the war in Gaza. I sat there with so much hurt and outrage that fellow students could be so swift to seize our moment of grief to attack us. We were never allowed to mourn at Harvard. We were demonized. We were blamed for "playing the victim." We were told it's all our fault. The rhetoric of the "anti-Israel" camp at Harvard has been a downward spiral, which now seeks to hold all Jews who do not denounce Israel as accountable for the ills of the Palestinian people. We are now "Zionists." We are "violent colonizers." We are "white supremacists." We are evil Jews.

What began as a letter has become a movement. When Jewish students had peaceful vigils to mourn our dead and pray for the hostages, the other side had protests calling for "globalize the intifada." I was a 16-year-old high school student in boarding school in Israel during the intifada. It's not a call for protest; it is a call for our deaths.

Jewish students at the college feared for their safety after numerous Israeli students had their identities doxed. Students were followed and taunted for being Jewish, they were harassed in their dorms by university employees. A Jewish student was physically assaulted for filming an anti-Israel protest on campus. On my campus, Jewish students were harassed for not participating in walkouts and disruptive events that violated university policies that went unenforced. My school decided to suddenly enforce "unwritten" rules about flyers and allowed self-proclaimed anti-Israel students to tear down flyers about the hostages from the campus.

There were serious actions that took place, including a situation where I was personally bullied and threatened with punitive action by school administrators to back down from trying to report harassment that I was the target of in online forums.

I had a verbal altercation with a professor after I walked out of his class following inappropriate and completely insane comments he made about Hamas taking hostages. I screamed at him in the hallway when he refused to leave me alone as I sat in the hallway sobbing, surrounded by people who were trying to protect me. I got a lower grade on my final assignment than my co-authors did, and I am sure that it was retaliation. I had to attend a lot of meetings following that incident. He faced no disciplinary action. There were days I didn't want to step foot in the classroom. An administrator encouraged me to drop out when I asked for help. I had panic attacks regularly on the way to school. I didn't want to talk to anyone for fear of harassment. I felt alienated and ostracized.

On October 9<sup>th</sup> I became the president of the Jewish Student's Association at the school of public health. I spent more time in meetings with the school the first few weeks after 10/7 than I did in class. It was overwhelming. There were always news trucks on campus. There were doxxing trucks. Trucks with billboards harassing students, staff, the president, and everyone else. It was like living in a fishbowl. Harvard was on the front page of the *New York Times* almost daily alongside Israel and Gaza.

Then the Congressional hearing happened. There was a plane that flew over my house (I live close to Harvard Yard) for days with a banner that read "Harvard Hates Jews." My children saw it from their playground at school. Claudine Gay resigned as president in the week after the fall semester ended, and immediately the claims that the "Zionists" got rid of her filled the online spaces at Harvard.

I spent my winter break trying to come down from the mental health spiral the semester had caused. I traveled to Uganda to train midwives in simulation training for emergency skills, my thesis project, as the recipient of a complete fellowship from Harvard. I tried to spend my time halfway around the world focused on things that actually matter: saving the lives of mothers and babies, making birth safer. I tried to ground myself every morning on my ride on the back of a motorcycle to the hospital, looking up into the African sky and praying that we wouldn't lose any mothers or babies that day.

On my last morning, I left the hospital after a busy morning of deliveries, staring up into the rain from the back of the "boda boda." A baby had died that night. It was as if the heavens were crying with me. It was a life-changing trip — a reminder of how precious life is and how truly big the world is. How can my school be so obsessed with one small country and a nation of people they hate so much when the world is so big, diverse, and beautiful?

Tomorrow I return to classes. I have much anxiety about what the climate will be there now, following Gay's departure and an announcement of a lawsuit by Jewish students against the school. I just wanted to enjoy this time. I wanted to be a grad student. I wanted to be proud that I had made it to such a prestigious place. Now I am not sure what the Harvard name will mean on my diploma when I graduate in May. I want to walk at my graduation with my head held high because, despite all of this chaos, I am proud to be Jewish, Israeli, a veteran, and most of all a mother who wants her kids to watch her graduate from Harvard and be proud of her.



## About Ariel:

Ariel Bernstein is a Master of Public Health candidate at the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. She is a dual U.S.-Israeli citizen and served as a Commander Non-Officer of Education in the Israeli Air Force. She graduated from the University of Haifa with a bachelor's in linguistics and moved to the U.S. 12 years ago to become a midwife, settling in Maine, where she has practiced for seven years. Prior to moving to Boston with her husband, Hagai, who has catered multiple events at Congregation Etz Chaim, and her two children, she lived in Saco, Maine.

# A Perspective From Across the Pond

Elaina Hammond

What I have discovered from going to university in England is that most people have barely met someone who is Jewish. When it gets mentioned, or I talk about an upcoming holiday, I am met with confused faces and blank stares. I go to student comedy nights and am bombarded with Nazi salutes. I enter class discussions with ignorant teachers and enter bars with Holocaust jokes. When I try to say something, I then get told I can't take a joke about the human slaughter of my people. To say the least, my experience has not been the greatest at university being Jewish.

This year when everything started to happen in Gaza, I was faced with Instagram story after Instagram story pulling Jewish people into the fault of the Israeli government. Scrolling through, I see antisemitic posts from my own classmates — people posting without thinking, not educating themselves on a complicated subject I have spent years learning about in Hebrew school, high school, and my own research. It wasn't the posts I was upset about, but the lack of effort my peers seemed to take in doing their own research.

I do stand with Palestine, but the posts and stories that use this situation to be antisemitic is a scary thing. My city has had protests as a way to do something about this situation, but this isn't the thing that scares me. It is the ignorance, the lack of research, the blind following that makes me afraid at my own university.



## About Elaina:

Elaina is in her second year of study at The Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts in Liverpool, England. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in the Acting Honours program. She is from Kennebunk, Maine, and graduated from Kennebunk High School in 2022.

## Synagogue Contacts

**Lifecycle Events and Pastoral Counseling:** Cantor Beth Strassler, [cantor@etzchaimme.org](mailto:cantor@etzchaimme.org)

**Community Outreach:** Denise Hammond, [communityoutreach@etzchaimme.org](mailto:communityoutreach@etzchaimme.org)

**YCJC Newsletter:** Jennie Aranovitch, [newsletter@etzchaimme.org](mailto:newsletter@etzchaimme.org)

**Yahrzeit Reminders:** Jennie Aranovitch, [yahrzeit@etzchaimme.org](mailto:yahrzeit@etzchaimme.org)

**Memorial Plaques:** David Strassler, [president@etzchaimme.org](mailto:president@etzchaimme.org)

**Hebrew School and Religious Services:** Beth and David Strassler, [mail@etzchaimme.org](mailto:mail@etzchaimme.org)

**Prayer Books:** [president@etzchaimme.org](mailto:president@etzchaimme.org)

**Library:** Maureen King, [library@etzchaimme.org](mailto:library@etzchaimme.org)

**Family Education:** Anthony and Jessica Allen, [familyed@etzchaimme.org](mailto:familyed@etzchaimme.org)

**Communications and Press/Media:** Jennie Aranovitch, [communications@etzchaimme.org](mailto:communications@etzchaimme.org)

## About Congregation Etz Chaim

Congregation Etz Chaim, founded in 1906, is a full-service synagogue located in Biddeford that serves the York County community. A non-denominational congregation, it promotes Jewish cultural, social, educational, and religious activities in an exceptionally welcoming and inclusive environment, making available a range of activities that facilitate the expression of what each individual finds valuable in the Jewish experience. We embrace people along the entire spectrum of Jewish practice and theology and welcome all who are interested in our congregation, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, or formal religious affiliation.

For more information, visit [www.etzchaimme.org](http://www.etzchaimme.org)

# York County Jewish Community News Special Issue: Jewish College Students' Perspectives on Israel-Hamas War

## About YCJC News

The York County Jewish Community Newsletter is published twice yearly by the Congregation Etz Chaim Communications Committee. All issues -- current and past -- may be accessed at [www.etzchaimme.org/newsletter/](http://www.etzchaimme.org/newsletter/). Congregation Etz Chaim reserves the right to edit articles for length, clarity, grammar, and style.

### YCJC Newsletter Team:

Jennie Aranovitch, Editor-in-Chief  
Eva Aranovitch, Design Editor

### CEC Communications Committee Members:

Jennie Aranovitch, Chair  
Maureen King  
Adrienne Levy  
Leah Macomber

Beth Strassler  
David Strassler  
Joe Strassler

**Congregation Etz Chaim**  
**PO Box 1473**  
**Biddeford, ME 04005**

## Save Our Trees: Go Green!

You can help to save our natural resources and to reduce our costs by receiving your newsletter — and all CEC community announcements — electronically. Just email us at [mail@etzchaimme.org](mailto:mail@etzchaimme.org) or write to us at PO Box 1473 Biddeford, Maine 04005 and ask to "Go Green."