Judaism: For Blacksburg's Jews, life is 'Israel-ly good'

David Grant, editor-in-chief | Posted: Friday, April 10, 2009 12:00 am

When associate professor of Judaic Studies Ben Sax moved his wife and newborn child to Blacksburg from Chicago in the fall of 2008, he was a bit daunted about relocating from a thriving Jewish community to Southwest Virginia. And then he went to the DMV.

"The woman who was working with me was a very sweet person, and you could tell that she was genuinely trying to make conversation along the way in this bureaucratic process, and she asked me what I did," Sax said. "I told her I was an associate professor of Judaic studies."

"What's that?" the woman asked.

"The study of Judaism," Sax said.

"What's that?"

"Debatably a religion that Jews do or do not practice," Sax said.

"I think I've heard of Jews," she said.

"It was uncomfortable for both of us. She knew that her cultural prejudices were shining through to a person she did not know. I was uncomfortable because my small talk was a window into something complex and uncomfortable," Sax said.

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Jewish students from around campus gathered for an 'Israeli Shibbat' at the Blacksburg Jewish Community Center hosted by Israeil Fellow Larissa Rozenblit and Hillel. Students said traditional Shabbat prayers and tucked into food similar to that available at a Shabbat dinner in Israel.

Blacksburg's Jewish community - whatever the local understanding of one of the world's oldest religious traditions - is an eclectic mix of American Jewish students searching for a Jewish "niche" coupled with professors and community members that span the religious spectrum. In doing so, the Blacksburg Jewish community mirrors debates in Judaism both in Israel and in the Jewish community at large.

Finding their own way

Only five years ago, the Jewish student community at Tech was largely invisible, said Sue Kurtz, Hillel executive director, because of a lack of public programming targeted at the broader university community. By partnering with groups such as the LGBTA and the Black Student Union, Kurtz said Hillel, a Jewish student organization, was able to expand the visibility of Judaism on campus and encourage the 1.5 percent to 2 percent of each class that is Jewish to attend activities.

In step with this process, two-time Hillel president and senior ACIS major Rochelle Low has worked with both multicultural programs and services and the vice president of student affairs to attempt to form a Jewish Student Union to solidify the voice of the Jewish community within the upper echelons of student governance.

Low said that one student group's invitation of a comedian to speak on campus during Yom HaShoah, the day of Holocaust remembrance on April 21, would be something that could be more directly addressed through a formal Jewish Student Union.

Hillel students perform Friday night Shabbat services at the Blacksburg Jewish Cultural Center on East Roanoke Street and often serve as leaders of Sunday morning religious education programs at the center. While this ties the community together, many said, it also offers an insight into one of the local communities most controversial issues: the question of whether to attempt to secure a permanent Rabbi.

Students typically lead their own Friday night services, a process which Low said draws the students closer to one another.

"When students lead the services, they feel more of an ownership," over their faith, Low said.

While the absence of a Rabbi for college students may be assuaged by the presence of more learned adult members in the community, there are some who do miss Rabbinical guidance.

"Missing for me was a rabbi directly for the students who was young and would really work with the students to bring out spirituality and bring out the text of Judaism," said Arielle Kohr, a freshman human development major who grew up an observant Conservative Jew. "Now, while we have the cultural aspect of it, if we have any, if we want to do Torah study there really is no person to lead it who has been trained officially."

There are some in the roughly 40 families that pay the $700 annual dues to the BJCC that wonder what might be if the center were to attempt to secure a Rabbi, who, in the Reform and Conservative Jewish traditions serve less formal roles in typical Friday evening/Saturday morning, or Shabat, rituals than they do in community roles such as performing circumcisions and presiding over marriages.

Lili Lustig, a student at the Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine, said while she thinks that the services provided by lay members were excellent, community members who have been attending the BJCC for "20 or 30 years" are staunchly opposed to changing the center from its current format of alternating Reform and Conservative Jewish worship services from week to week, an opposition that while allowing maximum flexibility in worship may cause some Jewish families difficulty in raising their children.

"Though I am a physically older member, I have children who are 11 and 13, and I've had to look for alternate ways for teaching my children religious education, especially when my child was preparing for her Bat Mitzva (the Judaic right of passage into adulthood), and, luckily, there was an Israeli family here that taught her Hebrew. My husband's nephew is a Rabbi in Atlanta, and he came and conducted the service for us here. We flew to Atlanta several times so they could work together. We had to find our own way," Lustig said.

Sax agreed.

"On the one hand, it's inspiring that it's a community of lay people that has kept things up. On the other hand, it's not our comfort zone. We are going to have to teach our daughter and son Jewish tradition, not just family-wise but I am going to have to sit down and teach them Hebrew," Sax said. "That's not something I expected I would do."

Bernard Jortner, two-time president of the BJCC and a faculty member at Tech's veterinary college since 1980, said that the community had largely decided against a Rabbi for two reasons. First, "we have an eclectic group. It's hard to select one person to lead people of varying approaches," Jortner said. Second, the cost of a Rabbi for a small community is prohibitive, and Roanoke, with both a Reform and Conservative Rabbi, could handle some of the more pressing needs.

The Chabad House

In the aftermath of the April 16 shootings, the worlds of the professional community and the student community collided with the death of Liviu Librescu, an Israeli-American aerospace engineering professor. In the aftermath of the shootings, Jewish life in Blacksburg was bolstered by two new additions to the community: the creation of a Chabad House and the appointment by the Israeli government of an Israeli Fellow to the campus.

Librescu's widow, who since emigrated to Israel, helped secure the purchase of a former bed and breakfast on Wall Street to house families of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Judaism, a group of roughly 200,000 Orthodox Jews who, among other pursuits, staff centers the world over providing for Jewish education and fellowship. The group is identified with an Orthodox brand of Judaism rare in the United States outside of neighborhoods of major urban areas and is very conservative in its social teachings. While the first occupants of the house relocated to Charlotte because of medical problems stemming from a difficult pregnancy, the house has been recently restaffed with Zvi and Chanie Zwiebel and their daughter Rifka.

At a Shabat dinner held on a rainy Friday in March, Zvi, a Londoner by birth, and Chanie, a New Yorker, made themselves known to the roughly two-dozen Jewish students in attendance not by their presence but by the rain of Facebook friend invitations to those with Jewish-sounding last names Zvi let loose from his PC earlier in the day.

"Some Orthodox Jews come from the opinion that technology and Judaism are conflicting. Whether Internet or TV. Well, the Chabad Rebbe (the spiritual leader of the religious group), said if God created it in this world, use it. It's there for us to use. The Internet can be terrible if you use it the wrong way, but you can take a tool like Facebook and use it for the good. That's what it's all about. These are tools that God gave us to spread Judaism," Zvi said.

While only arriving in Blacksburg during the last week in March and still continuing a previous obligation to teach online courses in Jewish religion and culture to children all over the world from 9-to-5 each day, Zvi already has plans to help boost the amount of kosher food available in the area.

While saying he could get Kosher food flown in from Baltimore and Atlanta if need be, Zvi said he would be visiting local supermarkets to press them to obtain more ritually prepared foodstuffs. Currently, kosher

turkey is the sole meat available in Blacksburg.

Although the Zwiebel's maintain their task is to "help every Jew," and Zvi's Rabbinic training could allow him to fulfill many religious duties within the community, there are those who do not hew to Orthodox Jewish teaching and who are uncomfortable with allowing the Chabad into intimate religious experiences because of wariness regarding some of the group's theological positions.

"We're having a son, and I wouldn't have to think about, for example, circumcision if I was still living in Chicago. I would make a call to someone who would make a call, and the process would be taken care of. Here, whom do you ask? I am very wary of Orthodox or Chabad having to participate in an important part of my son's life," Sax said.

"Israel-ly good"

Zvi was adamant that he was not interested in channeling American Jews to Israel.

"Our goal is not to make people do aliyah (literally, "to go up" or emigrate to Israel) or change their feeling. Our goal here is to help every Jew," Zvi said.

At that juncture, he and Israeli Fellow Larissa Rozenblit stood at slightly cross-purposes. Where Zvi is concerned with spiritual development, Rozenblit sees her job in Blacksburg as not necessarily involved in convincing Jews to emigrate, but rather to increase awareness of and connection to Israel amongst them.

Initially, there was some rough going.

"It was hard for my students at the beginning - I was from Israel so they assumed I was supposed to be religious but I'm not. I do religious things but for me it's more cultural. It was weird for me at the beginning to go to services but now I like it a lot because its time to bond with my students," Rozenblit, 24, who came to Israel from Moldova after the fall of the Soviet Union, said.

Rozenblit's disconnect was not uncommon for Israelis for whom being Jewish is a fact of walking the streets of Tel Aviv or approaching the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Nahum Arav, an Israeli-American professor of astrophysics who came to Tech in January 2008 from Boulder, Colo., said that his American Jewish friends in Blacksburg are typically more observant than his Israeli friends.

"The age-old, known fact is when you live in Israel you don't have to be anything special to be Jewish. You live and breath an interesting mix of Judaism and Zionism and all the concoction that goes with that. In the other countries, where Jews are a minority, these things are becoming more important," Arav said.

Between the American Jewish experience of holding onto ritual and religious observance and the Israeli experience is the bridge of Tagleet, or Birthright, a trip funded by the Israeli government and several private groups to bring teenage and young adult Jews to Israel to increase their connection to the country.

Over winter break of 2008, Rozenblit organized the first all-Virginia Tech Birthright trip in history of Hillel at Virginia Tech, with 36 students packing an entire bus for a ten-day, all-expenses paid journey around Israel.

For many of the students who participated, the trip was nothing short of magical.

"We always learned about Israel in Hebrew school, and I thought it was important because of the historical background of Judaism. Now that I've been there and met people and have friends there and my friends' families there, it's a completely different connection - it's the culture of Judaism rather than the religion," said Amanda Herring, a freshman interdisciplinary studies major. "I want to go back and study abroad there - we had always talked about how it was our homeland, but I never really understood it until then."

The program does have its critics, however.

"My perception of the program is that they're run ... to get American Jews interested in Israel if not in actually moving to Israel, which is the ultimate goal, but interested in being supporters of Israel in taking part in what they call the Hasbara, pro-Israeli propaganda," said Israeli-American science and technology studies associate professor Daniel Breslau, who taught at Tel Aviv University from 1993 until 2000. "They should come back to the U.S. and be spokespeople for the public image of Israel. I know a lot of kids go on them to have a good time, but they have to realize it has a particular political purpose."

Political allegiance is never far from discussions of the state of Israel, whether in compelling students to visit or to join political clubs upon their return.

"Before I went on birthright, Israel was a very distant thing for me and, yeah, I supported Israel but I didn't know why. And that was completely different. As I grew up and went to Hebrew school and was bat mitzvahed and you learn a lot about Israel but it's so different going there," said Kori Brown, a sophomore international studies major and president of Friends of Israel. "You're standing there at this place and thousands of years ago people were fighting so you could be here."

Kohr, whose father is the president of the vaunted pro-Israel lobbying group the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said she was slightly "surprised" by American Jews who did not possess a strong connection to Israel.

"Jews have been persecuted for forever and without the state of Israel and before the United States there was really not refuge for them. If they would have been born another time I feel like they would be grateful to have a place to find refuge and practice Judaism. Living in the United States sometimes in the back of their mind they may not realize that in other places and at other times they might not have been able to practice because they're being persecuted," Kohr said.

Breslau said that living in Israel was akin to "living in history."

One gets the sense "that there is a historical turning point every few weeks or so and the greater possibility of making a difference there. Socially, it's a very intense place and you make very close relationships. There isn't this separation between work life and personal life that there is in the U.S. If you work with people, you live with them, so to speak," Breslau said.

In addition to the connection to Israel, the trip tied the participants tightly together back in Blacksburg.

"We all have cute little sayings - 'Israel-ly good,'" Herring said. "And we run into each other around campus, and we get really excited to see one another."

Aaron Fine, a junior business management major and treasurer for Hillel, said that he had seen a number of people who went on the trip get involved in many more Jewish-themed events back in Blacksburg.

"It's building the Jewish community inside the school, and now they are more comfortable saying, 'Yes, we are Jewish,'" Rozenblit said.

But what announcing one's Jewish-ness truly signifies opens another difficult package of ideas.

"People are not really noticing the fact that the mainstream in Judaism right now is a secular Judaism. It is mainstream and it is becoming quietly larger and larger and I think it's about time for the Jewish people to acknowledge that and forge a cultural and spiritual path given the fact that the majority of the Jewish people in the world are becoming less and less religious," Arav said.

While many agreed that Judaism was indeed trending toward a more secular approach to Judaism, Breslau points to a difference in the Israeli and American religious milieus that contains many of the differences.

Arav's statement is, "something that makes sense from an Israeli perspective because there is a secular-religious rift in Israel that really wouldn't occur to people in the U.S. Jews in the U.S. who don't practice don't feel like they're in some kind of competition with the religious. They don't feel like anyone is telling them that there is something not authentic about their Jewish identity. I think that's sort of reading a mostly internal Israeli discussion, maybe universalizing it when it's really confined, I think, to issues of Judaism in Israel," Breslau said. "Being Jewish in the U.S. is not insisting that you practice the religion in an Orthodox way. The stakes are so much higher in Israel. Because of the power of the organized faith in Israel, there aren't the kinds of options for practicing Judaism. In the U.S., it's pretty easy to tailor the faith to how flexible you want to be. In Israel, they don't have those options. It's very much all or nothing."

The first Reform synagogue to receive state funding on par with Orthodox synagogues opened in May of 2008. Israel has roughly two-dozen operating Reform congregations.

Yet for all of the debates about the position of Blacksburg's Jews vis--vis a Rabbinical presence or their place in world Judaism, the need to consider one's identity and address

one's own position is perhaps never clearer and never more important than when considered in a geographically and culturally remote clime, Sax said.

"I don't have a right to be ambivalent ... I think more about my identity here than I have in my entire life ... Now someone who has a Ph.D. in the history of Judaism now has a spot."