



Photo: Mike Derer/AP

THE POWER OF BREAKING BREAD

STRENGTHENING MUSLIM-JEWISH RELATIONSHIPS ON CAMPUS

Because of some conflict overseas, there's this preconceived notion in America that Jews and Muslims simply cannot get along. Our supposed animosity towards each other is so ingrained in our collective psyche that it has become trope for television. Of course, the Israel-Palestine conflict is highly controversial and distressing to many people. But most American-born Jews and Muslims have few stakes in that conflict. It has little to do with us at all. With antisemitism and Islamophobia rising amidst this divisive political climate, Muslims and Jews can be each other's most precious allies. So why are the Israel-Palestine tensions projected onto American Jewish and Muslim communities? And why are they preventing us from bridging the divide?

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM ?



Photo: Nuccio DiNuzzo/Chicago Tribune

Rallying with their fathers, a Muslim girl and a Jewish boy protest at a demonstration against President Trump's travel ban at Chicago's O'Hare National Airport.

The photo became a heartwarming Internet sensation overnight.

The families' stories continued together when they met for Shabbat dinner.

Creating imaginary conflict.

A recent rise in the appeal of identity politics encourages individuals to embrace their unique characteristics and backgrounds to inform and legitimize their political opinions. As a result, we tend to assume things about each other based on our non-political affiliations, such as race or religion.

Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker defines the trend towards identity as a "syndrome" in which people's political beliefs and interests are assumed to be determined based on their personal traits and group associations that have nothing to do with politics. This kind of thinking perpetuates certain misconceptions such as all Muslims are anti-Israel, and Jews pro-Israel -- and by extension, cannot coexist.

But everyone discriminates, usually without any malicious intent or even awareness that we are doing it. It's how the human mind makes decisions in the absence of information. Professor Thomas Sowell of Stanford University calls this "Discrimination 1B," in which we use group data to judge individuals we know nothing about.

For example, suppose Muslim college students are the most likely of among all other religions to be involved in the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement (BDS) that is considered by many Jews to be an antisemitic organization. In this case, Jewish students may feel victimized or less inclined to reach out to Muslim students. Neither side actually has any bad intentions, but in the absence of information about each other as individuals, we separate ourselves based on what we think we know about one another.

However, if we can get past these differences and get people to talk to one another, we can start to break down these barriers.



Separation on campus.

The existence of ethnic minority organizations on campus, such as Hillel or the Muslim Student Organization, has been proven to help connect students with others of similar backgrounds and enhance their own identities. This can be invaluable on a large campus such as Penn State, where it is easy to lose oneself.

However, students must be aware of the potential negative effects of these organizations. An empirical study from UCLA published by the American Psychological Association explores two opposing theories about the effects of joining ethnic organizations on campus. The **multicultural framework theory** argues that involvement in ethnically-oriented organizations gives minority students a support system that encourages and enables them to engage with the rest of the student body as a result of their solidified sense of self. By contrast, the **social identity theory** counters that these organizations unintentionally contribute to “ethnic segregation” on campus.

Unfortunately, the study suggested the latter held true. While there was ample evidence that ethnic-oriented orgs contribute to students’ sense of self, there was none to suggest that they encouraged more interaction with the campus community beyond those groups. In fact, there was proof of the exact opposite: membership perpetuated the perception that organizations were locked into “zero-sum competition” with each other (Sidanius et al.)

This is not an argument against the existence of ethnic organizations. They provide essential connections and resources for minority students who might otherwise feel alone or underrepresented on a predominately white, Christian campus. However, for the benefit of the university at large, it is imperative that we acknowledge their consequences in regard to the social identity theory and work to combat the potential for self-segregation.

"Membership perpetuated the perception that organizations were locked into 'zero-sum competition' with each other."

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Separation drives wedges between individuals that might not actually be there.

Therefore, there needs to be a more concentrated effort to encourage dialogue and connection between different minority organizations. This is particularly important for those groups who are infamously stereotyped for “not getting along” -- namely, Muslims and Jews.

Here's the situation: **Hillel** is Penn State's largest Jewish organization, and the **Muslim Student Association (MSA)** is a student-run committee that is a leading voice for the Muslim community on campus. Both of their headquarters are located within the same building, the **Pasquerilla Spiritual Center**. Yet, communication between these organizations is limited, if not completely nonexistent. Despite both Hillel and MSA holding several events and collaborating with other student organizations, they have never co-hosted an event with each other. Even within the Pasquerilla commons, the Jewish and Muslim students are as separate as high school cliques.

To provide a space for us to connect and celebrate our similarities, Hillel and MSA should jointly host a dinner social, complete with kosher and halal food and Jewish and Islamic music. Food would be free for students to encourage attendance. To acknowledge the physical proximity of our organizations, and for the sake of convenience, the event should be held in the Pasquerilla Center. All would be welcome to dinner, but energy would be focused on inviting Muslim and Jewish students. Rather than it being simply an “interfaith” event, it should focus on changing the dynamic between Penn State's Jewish and Muslim communities.

Photo: Gabriela Stevenson/Onward State

The Pasquerilla Spiritual Center is largest multi-faith center of its kind in the country. It is home to both Penn State Hillel and MSA.



The very existence of Jews and Muslims together is often politicized. The atmosphere of the dinner should not be one that demands any sort of deliberation about the Israel-Palestine conflict. Perhaps in the future we can plan an event specifically for that purpose. But Jews and Muslims can exist together outside of conflict and politics, and this dinner will prove it.

Ideally, one dinner social between Hillel and MSA will become a series of dinner socials. They could occur perhaps on a semesterly basis, or perhaps more often if demand calls for it. But the ultimate goal is to create a lasting relationship between Hillel and MSA, and Jewish and Muslim students. Certainly, we cannot force friendships. But it can be as simple as a Jewish student greeting a Muslim or vice-versa in the Pasquerilla commons as a result of this event. Even the smallest gesture would be worthwhile progress.

"Hillel & MSA should host a series of dinner socials."

Of course, this is certainly a campaign that must be approached carefully and mindfully. There should not be any implication that there was any kind of conflict or barrier between Penn State Jews and Muslims in the first place. Rather, the campaign would merely acknowledge a wider problem in the United States and how we, as individual, open-minded, and good-intentioned students, can lead by example. We can smash these stereotypes about our people and show the world that Jews and Muslims can very much be friends and allies.

Similarities are more powerful than differences.

Muslims and Jews have way more in common than we give ourselves credit for. Of course, coming together presents the invaluable opportunity to learn things about one another. But we can also concentrate our efforts on learning about things we have in common, rather than focusing on differences (as is the trend with identity politics).

Former white supremacist and neo-Nazi Christian Picciolini, and current co-founder of an organization called Life After Hate, works with extremists to counter racism. In an interview, Picciolini explains when trying to bridge a divide between groups, "If we start from the extremes and try to get to the middle, we'll never get there. We need to start in the middle. We must acknowledge what we have in common and work from there."

Imam Abdullah Antepli, an outspoken Muslim chaplain at Duke University, acknowledges that "interreligious sharing is wonderful, but Jews and Muslims share similarities, a common history, as well as similar theological and judicial foundations." Why not focus on that, for a change?

And one thing we certainly have in common is food. Jewish dietary laws, or kashrut, and Islamic dietary laws, or halal, have innumerable similarities on what we can eat and how our food should be prepared. In fall 2017, upon the successful opening of PURE, the new kitchen that meets kosher and halal requirements located in Penn State's East dining commons, Penn State President Eric Barron expressed that the university is "very excited to be creating new spaces for students to come together to share meals, customs and ideas." A joint MSA-Hillel event effort aligns perfectly with this sentiment.

WILL IT WORK?

"I introduce people to the people they think they hate ... nine-and-a-half times out of ten, they've never even met them."

This is Picciolini's secret weapon for combatting discrimination between groups. By breaking barriers and getting to know each other on an individual level, demonization is replaced with humanization.

Collaboration between Hillel and MSA has seen varying levels of great success on college campuses across the United States. As early as 2006, in the wake of political conflict between Jewish and Muslim groups at University of California Irvine, the Hillel and MSA of Orange Coast College responded by breaking bread together. "Years ago, Muslim speakers against Israel came to OCC's campus showing the same disrespect toward Jewish students as is seen on UCI's campus ... Now, as delicate as the situation is, members of the two clubs are trying to change the stereotypical conflict," reports Ashley Eliot of the Coast Report. After their joint dinner event, many events between Hillel and MSA followed, including a "Fast-A-Thon."



Photo: Hillel of Colorado

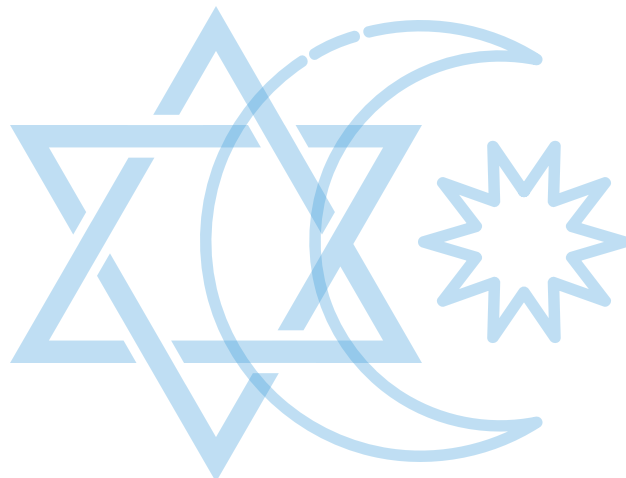
MSA and Hillel of Colorado State University host an Avi Schaefer-themed Shabbat.

In 2015, Stockton University's Hillel and MSA hosted a "Kosher/Halal" night, the kosher menu consisting of kosher chicken, latkes, tzimis, challah, matzah ball soup, and Jewish apple cake, and the halal menu of chicken biryani, chicken tikka, chicken shish kebab and naan. The event was labeled a tremendous success with the attendance of over 60 people, including professors.

Harvard went even further and created their own Muslim-Jewish alliance. It began with Muslims and Jews breaking bread and discussing their faiths and traditions under a sukkah. Since then, members of Harvard Hillel and the Harvard Islamic Society have been attending each other's events in support and solidarity. Sahar Omar of the Islamic Society reminisced on Jewish students attending Jummah. "There was a whole lot of warmth and unexpected support [from the Jewish community] ... Having a Jewish contingency at Jummah prayer [after the election] meant a lot to us, and it came from this group that people would not have expected." Since then, students of the two groups forged their powerful alliance.

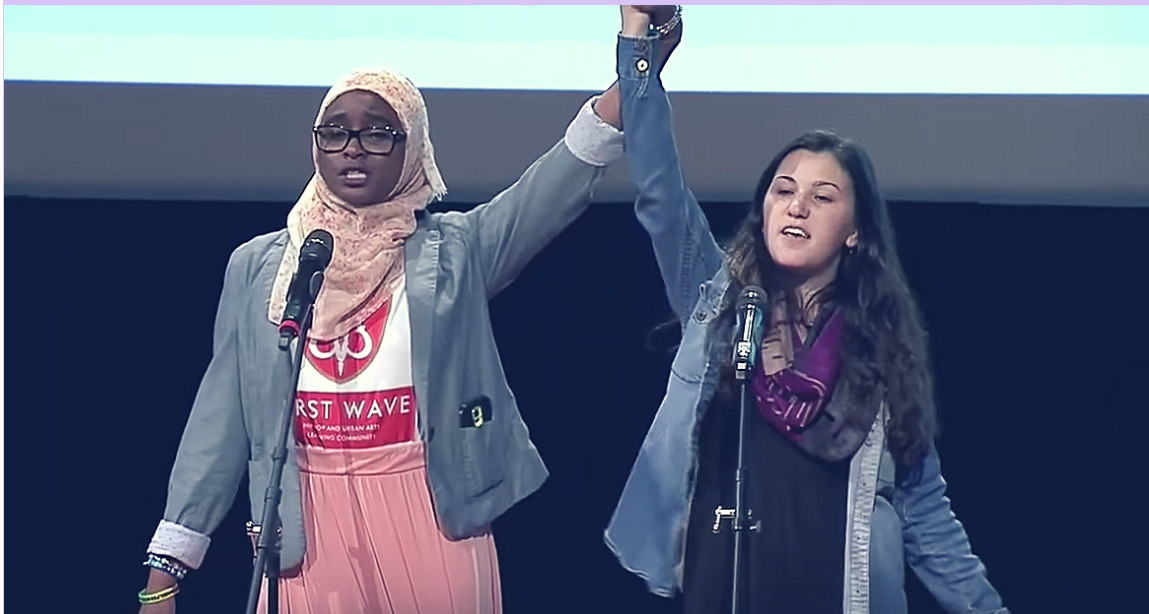
Similar collaborations between Hillel and MSA have triumphed on the campuses of The University of Pennsylvania, Colorado State University, Franklin & Marshall College, Middlebury College, and counting.

Let's add Penn State to that list.



“On college campuses, Jews and Muslims have the room to exemplify a fruitful Jewish-Muslim engagement for the rest of the U.S., world Jewry, and the Ummah, the Muslim world,”

- Antepi, Muslim chaplain at Duke University



**REPORT BY
MORGAN SEIFF**

Amina Iro and Hannah Halpern perform their slam poem about bridging divides between the Jewish and Muslim communities in the United States at the Common Ground Awards in 2014.

Photo: Poetry for Peace

Works Cited

- Abouzaglo, Amitai, and Bushra Hamid. "A Muslim-Jewish Alliance: Interfaith in Trying Times." *Harvard Political Review*, 13 Sept. 2017, harvardpolitics.com/harvard/a-muslim-jewish-alliance-interfaith-in-trying-times/.
- Antepli, Imam Abdullah. "The Future of Jewish-Muslim Relations on College Campuses: Hope or Hopeless?" *The Huffington Post*, 13 May 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/imam-abdullah-antepli/the-future-of-jewishmusli_b_4949540.html.
- Eliot, Ashley. "Hillel and MSA Are Building a Bridge of Peace." *Coast Report Online*, 18 Oct. 2006, www.coastreportonline.com/features/article_c652dad7-b5c4-5f53-ae2b-d7d9b7f54782.html.
- Harris, Sam, and Christian Picciolini. "#121 - White Power." *Waking Up with Sam Harris*, 2018, samharris.org/podcasts/121-white-power/.
- Hazan, Sadye. "A Successful Avi Schaefer Shabbat." *Hillel of Colorado*, 22 Feb. 2017, www.hillelcolorado.org/2017/02/22/successful-avi-schaefer-shabbat/.
- "Hillel Celebrates with the MSA." *Franklin & Marshall College*, 10 Nov. 2016, www.fandm.edu/hillel/getconnected/hillel-stories/2016/11/10/hillel-celebrates-with-msa.
- Jashinsky, Emily. "Defining 'Identity Politics'." *Washington Examiner*, 16 Feb. 2018, www.washingtonexaminer.com/defining-identity-politics.
- Knopp, Jordan. "The Argo: The Independent Student Newspaper of Stockton University." 10 Oct. 2015.
- "Penn State to Open Its First Kosher and Allergy-Friendly Kitchen." *Penn State News*, 1 May 2018, news.psu.edu/story/465987/2017/05/01/campus-life/penn-state-open-its-first-kosher-and-allergen-free-kitchen.
- Sidanius, Jim, et al. "Ethnic Enclaves and the Dynamics of Social Identity on the College Campus: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 87, no. 1, 2004, pp. 96–110., doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.1.96.
- Sowell, Thomas. *Discrimination and Disparities*. Basic Books, 2018.