Making Sense of Inequality

Through my research with Clark's Hillel community, I came to understand a subtle but persistent form of inequality: the emotional and cultural needs of Jewish students are often overlooked and misunderstood, both on campus and in broader social discourse. The erasure isn't always obvious, but its effects are deeply felt. Jewish students are not only navigating the typical stressors of young adulthood, but also navigating complex identities that are often politicized or flattened.

While some may see Hillel as "just a club," the students that I interviewed described it as a lifeline. It is a space where they can catch their breath, feel seen, and experience a consistent sense of emotional safety. In many ways, the club became a counter-space to the broader campus environment, which often failed to recognize the nuanced ways Jewish identity is lived and experienced. This reveals a larger structural inequality: institutions may include Jewish students in diversity statistics, but fail to create spaces where they feel fully comfortable and are able to be themselves. I don't place blame on individuals within the institution. Instead, I see this as a structural issue that is rooted in dominant culture norms that makes some identities feel invisible. However, acknowledging the systemic nature of the problem doesn't mean it's unchangeable. Yet even in the face of institutional neglect, students responded with an incredible sense of agency. Many took on leadership roles within Hillel, using their positions to shape a space rooted in mutual care and belonging. They planned events that emphasized connection over performative diversity, offered mentorship to newer students, and helped foster a culture where emotional authenticity was welcomed rather than hidden.

To better understand this inequality, I turned to Minority Stress Theory. This theory, originally developed to explain health disparities among LGBTQ+ individuals, helps explain how members

of marginalized groups experience chronic stress, not only from direct discrimination but from the ongoing demands of navigating invalidating environments. According to Meyer (2003), minority stress is unique and adds to the general stressors faced by all people, chronic because it is linked to enduring social and cultural structures, and socially based because it stems from institutions and systems rather than individual conditions (p. 676). For Jewish students, this includes emotional labor, anticipatory anxiety around microagressions, and the constant negotiation of when and how to disclose parts of their identity. In response to these challenges, students exercised a quiet form of resistance through meaning-making and relational care. For some, Hillel became a place to actively reimagine what being Jewish meant to them outside of rigid expectations or assumptions. This identity work, often shared with peers, reflected deep personal agency. Despite broad recognition of belonging as a key factor in student success, "comparatively little is known about differences that exist in terms of college students' sense of belonging, as well as social identities and campus environments that create a sense of belonging for such students" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.3). This underscores the need to center identity in conversations about inclusion and to intentionally cultivate spaces where all students feel seen and supported.

In this context, even small gestures like inviting someone to Shabbat dinner, checking in after a hard week, or simply showing up consistently become acts of care and resistance. These moments challenge the invisibility many students feel and affirm that belonging isn't just a box to check, but a feeling to be nurtured. In choosing to remain, lead, and connect, Hillel students showed that hope, like inequality, is built into the structure of campus life. Unlike inequality, hope is something they chose to grow. Their efforts reveal a deeper truth: when institutions fail to fully see their students, students will often do the work of seeing each other. This matters far

beyond any one campus. When people feel unseen, it quietly chips away at their sense of safety and belonging. A more just world, and a more just campus, begins with learning to recognize and support the full complexity of who students are.

Theory of Social Change

The kind of change I believe in doesn't begin with bold declarations, it starts with noticing, listening, and showing up. When I think about social change, I think about the friend who sends a check in text when they sense something is off. The professor who pauses after class to ask, "are you alright?" The campus space that doesn't just allow students to show up, but expects them to show up fully, without disclaimers or translations. These kinds of moments don't make headlines, but they change lives. They've certainly changed mine. I care most about the kinds of inequality that often slip under the surface, like when someone feels out of place but doesn't know how to name it, or when being in a space requires constant self-monitoring just to feel acceptable. My focus is emotional justice: creating conditions where people feel safe enough to exist as their full selves, especially in environments that have never made that feel simple or natural.

My theory of social change is rooted in the small relational moments that build emotional safety and belonging. I believe meaningful transformation starts close, in our conversations, our communities, our silences. Not the policies that we write on paper, but in the way that we choose to show up for one another when it would be easier not to. Over time, these moments become a blueprint for broader change. They signal what is and isn't welcome and shape who feels safe enough to speak, to stay, to grow.

I've always been the kind of person who others turn to for emotional support. Sometimes this is because I offer it freely, and other times it's because my instincts are telling me someone needs something. I know what it means to hold space for others while quietly suppressing my own needs. I also know how amazing it can feel when someone makes you feel safe enough to be messy, confused, or unsure. That rare space where someone gives you the permission to not have to perform in a space, has taught me just how transformative care can be. As a white Jewish woman who has often been the emotional anchor in both personal and professional settings, I've learned how to read a room before I enter it. I know what it feels like to belong in some spaces but feel invisible in others. That mix of privilege and invisibility has shaped the kind of open and grounded presence I strive to offer others.

My research with Jewish students reminded me how deeply people crave spaces where they don't have to shrink or translate themselves. I have seen this in other parts of my life as well: in friendships where someone says, "you don't have to explain" or in workplace settings where I've quieted certain parts of myself to avoid being misunderstood. These moments taught me that belonging isn't just about being allowed in, but about feeling like you were meant to be there all along.

I've also realized that emotional labor isn't just something that we do in our friendships, it is also a structural issue. In environments that aren't built for you it takes constant energy to exist, to assess, to soften your truth so that others can handle it. That is why emotional safety matters so much. When someone doesn't have to use all of their energy just to exist, they can actually participate, learn, and lead.

Change for me is not only about what we do but about how we do it. It can be felt in the small ways people show care, like the way someone adjusts their body language to show they are fully

listening, or how they offer you room to speak without rushing in with their own insights. It's the difference between merely being accepted and being truly welcomed. These small distinctions shape everything.

I also believe that change is most sustainable when it is built through relationships. We do not grow in isolation. It is through witnessing someone else's vulnerability that we are often brave enough to name our own. I've seen this in my friendships, in scholarly spaces, and even in passing moments with strangers. Even something simple as a nod, a shared glance, or a "me too" can break the silence. These moments are the root of solidarity, even more than agreement alone, is what fuels change.

That said, I'm not naive about the limitations of small-scale change, and I know that larger systems, legislations, policies, and institutional accountability matter. However, people are the ones that carry these systems. If we do not attend to the people, and know how to properly care for one another, we will replicate the same harms no matter what policies we rewrite. Culture shapes policy just as much as policy shapes culture. If we want real change, we have to start with how people feel when they walk into a room.

I'm not aiming to fix everything overnight, but I am trying to create spaces, conversations, friendships, shared moments, where people feel safe and seen. In the short term, that might look like continuing to be a steady presence in my relationships, bringing this lens into community work, or simply noticing who hasn't spoken yet in a room. In the long term I hope to carry this framework into fields like education and social work. When people feel that way they begin to imagine futures, they invest, they speak, they lead. Over time those small shifts begin to shape a culture from the inside, through everyday actions and choices that quietly but powerfully redefine what is possible. Not with perfection, not with power, but with presence.

Positionality

I was raised Jewish, but for much of my early life it felt like something we did, not something that I fully belonged to. My family rotated through several synagogues when I was a kid, desperately searching for a compassionate and understanding Jewish community. My brother, Eli, is on the autism spectrum, and as a child, he struggled to regulate himself physically and verbally in organized spaces. His religious school teachers had a hard time grasping what he needed and weren't able to support him in ways that actually worked. When I think back on those years, I picture uncomfortable glances, quiet stares, and an overall feeling of judgment that followed our family in those spaces. We were never explicitly asked to leave, but we were never truly welcomed either.

By the time I reached the age for my Bat Mitzvah, we still hadn't found a temple that felt like the right fit for us. I studied with a private rabbi instead of continuing in religious school, and had a smaller ceremony with just family and friends. The day felt significant as I had worked hard to reach that point in my religious learning, but I felt detached. It felt more like an isolated milestone than an entrance to something larger. Eventually, my family did find a small accepting synagogue that Eli went on to be Bar Mitzvahed at and my family still belongs to today. It's warm and inclusive which was everything we once needed, but because I wasn't raised there and the community is small, I never fully found my place.

Looking back, I realize that much of what I had experienced as "Judaism" was limited to rigid religious school settings and formal services. I had almost no exposure to the relational, cultural, and justice-driven elements that make up so much of Jewish life. I didn't know there were spaces for questioning, for community building, and for activism. When I got to college, I connected

with many other Jewish students, many of whom shared those same values. That was when I started to see Judaism differently. For the first time it felt alive, expansive, and deeply resonant. I realized that my Judaism had always been within me, I just hadn't recognized it yet.

Reclaiming my Jewish identity has meant shifting away from seeking inclusion in spaces that don't reflect my values, and instead finding belonging in communities and within myself that affirm the values I have already been living out.

My Jewish identity is the most salient aspect of who I am not because it has always been central, but because it has required the most negotiation. For much of my early life it was there in the background, familiar but distant, something I didn't feel fully connected to or sure I had the right to claim. The exclusion my family experienced in Jewish institutional spaces, particularly due to ableist responses to my brother, shaped my earliest understandings of what belonging could and couldn't look like. As a result, my connection to Judaism felt complicated, often shaped more by rules, exclusion, and formality than by warmth or belonging. Yet even in the absence of communal belonging, Jewishness lingered. It quietly informed the values, rituals, and emotional rhythms of my home life. Its influence was never absent, only unspoken.

For a while I kept some distance from it, but the tension between how I experienced Jewishness at home and in formal spaces never fully left me. It eventually became something I needed to return to and make sense of. I didn't grow up with a clear affirming sense of what it meant to be Jewish, but instead with fragments: a Bat Mitzvah held outside a congregation, holidays marked by family but not by community, and a strong ethical framework without the experience to trace where it came from. As I grew older and began to piece those fragments together, I realized that my relationship to Judaism had been shaped as much by absence as by

presence. Coming back to it in my own way made it feel less like something I had inherited by default, and more like something I could actually connect to and carry with intention.

Unlike aspects of my identity that I could more easily perform or compartmentalize, Jewishness demanded my reflection. It pushed me to sit with a lot of contradictions. I felt connected and disconnected at the same time, proud of my identity but unsure of how to fully claim it. I knew I was a part of something bigger, but I didn't always know where I fit within it. That kind of identity isn't background noise, it's something I carry consciously, especially in spaces where you are expected to blend in without explaining where you are coming from. In that sense, Jewish identity is salient not only because of how it shaped me internally, but because it continues to show me how things like ableism, exclusion, and conditional belonging operate in the world around me.

I didn't expect college to be the place where I would reconnect with my Jewish identity, especially after feeling so distant from it growing up. When I toured Clark asking if they had an active Jewish community was not even a question that crossed my mind. But it was there that I began to see a side of Judaism I had never experienced before, one that was rooted in relationships, values, and the freedom to show up as your full self. It felt less about following rules and more about building meaning, which was what I had been missing all along.

I felt that most clearly at Shabbat dinners. There was something so deeply grounding about gathering around a table with people who felt like family, even if we had just met. Those dinners became a space where I felt emotionally safe and where warmth and togetherness were prioritized over formality or expectation. I began to see how central the act of coming together is in Jewish life, and how much meaning there can be in the ordinary moments of connection. Through those dinners I also built relationships with people who had grown up with vastly

different experiences of Judaism. Some of them were more observant than me, some deeply cultural, and some just beginning to explore their identity like myself. Hearing their stories made me realize that there was no one "right" way to be Jewish. That realization gave me room to be curious about what my own version of Judaism could look like.

That contrast became even clearer when I thought about my childhood experiences. Back then, it had been hard for me to form real relationships in Jewish spaces. We moved between temples often, and I usually arrived in places where other kids already knew one another. There wasn't much room for someone new. The Jewish community I found in college felt very different. People were constantly coming and going, and there was no expectation that you would arrive knowing everything. I was surprised by how welcomed I felt, even though I didn't come in with a deep knowledge of Jewish history or practice. It turned out that the shared values of community, questioning, and openness were more than enough.

As I continued to grow into that space, I began to understand which parts of Judaism felt the most central to me. The value of community has always stayed at the top of my list, both as something I received and something I want to help create. I also connect deeply with the idea of tikkun olam, or repairing the world. That value of showing up for others has stuck with me and it plays a big role in how I try to move through the world. I've always appreciated that Judaism doesn't shy away from questions, but instead embraces them, rather than pretending everything needs to be figured out.

Redefining this identity hasn't been one big moment, it's been small, ongoing choices. Choosing to learn and to name what shaped me, to find pride in something that once felt uncertain, and to understand that being Jewish doesn't always have to look traditional to be deeply felt. Now that I have graduated and no longer have the built in structure of Hillel, I'm still

figuring out exactly what this relationship looks like now. However, I know for sure that it is still a central part of my identity and life. Almost all of my close friends are Jewish, and while some of that is based on how and where we met, I also think it speaks to the values that I'm drawn to. I celebrate Shabbat whenever I can with friends and family, and I look for opportunities to engage in service and community building with other Jewish folks. My Jewish identity continues to shape the kinds of spaces I seek out, and the kind that I hope to create: one that feels welcoming, real, and grounded in care.

As I've come to understand and reclaim my Jewish identity, I've realized how deeply its core values align with the kind of social worker I hope to become. Judaism's emphasis on community care, critical questioning, and repairing the world mirrors the commitments I want to carry into my professional life. These aren't just abstract ideals, they are values I've lived and witnessed in real time, and ones that continue to shape how I show up in relationships, systems, and moments of uncertainty. I see social work as another way to live out those principles in the world.