

Building Belonging: A Case Study of Jewish Student Experience at Clark Hillel

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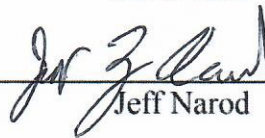
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Abstract

This study explored how participation in Clark University's Hillel chapter, a Jewish student organization, shaped students' experiences of identity, belonging, and sense of purpose during college. Through semi-structured interviews with five past and present Hillel students, I examined how the club functioned as both a community space and a place to learn about their personal identity. Findings revealed that Hillel offered students a sense of "home on campus", deepened their connection to Jewish identity and motivated meaningful involvement through leadership and community service. These outcomes illustrate the critical role identity-based campus groups play in enhancing emotional well-being, belonging, and meaningful engagement, especially for marginalized student groups.

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Introduction

There is a lot of pressure at the start of college to not only thrive academically, but also to make strong social connections and participate in extracurricular activities. When I came to Clark I barely had any idea of what Hillel was. My mom had told me that it was a Jewish club on campus and had urged me to go to a dinner or two there sometime during my first semester to see if it could be a place for me to make friends. That first semester I went to multiple dinners and really enjoyed them! I was always struck by the strong sense of community and joy among the members. In March of 2020 during my second semester of Freshman year we were all sent home due to COVID and I wound up not returning to on-campus living until the fall of my junior year. Being away from college living during the majority of my first two years of college made it very hard for me to develop and maintain friendships.

When I returned to campus I began attending Hillel dinners as well as Hillel events more frequently. During a pretty lonely time in my college career I found a lot of joy in being a part of a club that offered opportunities for social engagement multiple times a week. Over the course of that semester, I formed many friendships within the club and by the end had secured a spot on the executive board. Being not only involved, but also having a leadership role within the club gave me the opportunity to create deeper connections with club members.

During my junior year I struggled significantly with my mental health. In that period of instability, Hillel became more than just a campus club for me, it became the place where I felt the most seen and supported. Whether we were focused on club related endeavors like planning events or just simply spending time together, I found comfort in the relationships I formed and the rhythm of showing up to many events throughout each week. While there were certainly moments of challenge and disagreement, what stuck with me the most was the deep sense of

connection I felt in being a part of something shared. It was one of the few spaces on campus where I felt like I could bring my full self even when I was feeling vulnerable and uncertain, and still be met with acceptance and understanding.

Being a part of Hillel also has given me an opportunity to evaluate my personal values. I was raised Jewish, but was rarely exposed to any Jewish teachings or values. Through Hillel's Tikkun Olam committee (which I later became the head of), I learned so much about the importance in the Jewish faith of repairing the world and community service. Every week the committee would host a shopping trip for our local community fridge as well as other charitable events. I have always had a passion for service and Hillel helped me to realize these passions tie into Judaism. Growing up I had a lot of trouble identifying with my religion and the realization that repairing the world is just as important as more religious aspects of Judaism was comforting to me.

I was not alone in feeling like Hillel was a huge part of my life. Through my conversations with peers, I came to the realization that Hillel is a place that significantly shapes students' college experience. I started wondering what factors contributed to these students' positive experiences and how similar my experiences had been to theirs. This sparked my interest about the ways in which club involvement impacts college students on a larger scale. I knew tons of students who participated in clubs on campus. I asked myself, "Why did we do it? What were the benefits or costs, if any?" "What are the specific impacts of a club being religious?"

For this research project, I conducted interviews with current students who participated in Hillel during their time at Clark as well as some alumni. I wanted to learn more about their experiences within the club. I asked them about personal connections formed, areas for

improvement, and lasting impact. My hope is that by collecting this data I would be able to provide the club with a snapshot of ways in which it has been successful as well as feedback for improvement. I am also using this research as a case study to better understand the involvement in university clubs more broadly, beyond Hillel. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How has participation in Hillel impacted its members in terms of identity, social life on campus, and sense of belonging?
- What are elements of the Clark Hillel climate that are working well? In what ways can other Hillels and college religious communities learn from them?

I did my best to gather data that would be relevant to my research questions. I incorporated the findings developed from my interviews with current and former Hillel students with my own lived experiences to complete the analysis and generate the findings and conclusions.

Literature Review

To begin this project, I explored a range of academic databases available through Clark's library system as well as Google Scholar. I started broadly, using search terms like "Hillel," "Jewish community," "religious community," and "college belonging" in various combinations to see what conversations were already happening in the literature. I quickly discovered that while there is some research on campus belonging, there is relatively little that directly addresses the intersection of religion and community in college settings, especially from a Jewish lens. I selected sources that helped clarify key concepts relevant to my research and provide context for understanding the unique dynamics of campus-based cultural and religious

communities. This literature does not offer a full roadmap for my questions, but it helped orient me, and hopefully the reader, to the broader landscape in which this project sits.

Being part of a community as well as finding ways to develop one's identity are two key elements of living a happy and healthy lifestyle. The development of this sense of community and clarity around one's identity often reaches its peak during the college and early adult years. One of the biggest influences on the communities students engage in during college is the peers they surround themselves with. Peers have been described as "the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398). In a similar way, the values college students develop are "strongly influenced by the *extent* and *intensity* of involvement with college peer culture and the values which are prized in that culture" (Dalton, 1987, p. 181). The college years are some of the most social ones in our lifetime. Students not only take classes and participate in extracurriculars together, but also eat their meals together and live with one another in dorms or off-campus housing. The people students surround themselves with during this time will ultimately have a significant impact on the evolution of their value development which is a huge part of identity development overall.

Spending extended amounts of time with peers during this phase also often evokes an overall sense of belonging which is a key element when it comes to community building. Peer culture serves as "a medium through which sense of belonging is conveyed or denied and thus holds a powerful place in the lives of college students and their possibilities for identity development" (Renn, 2020, p. 241). When one spends extended time and gains comfort within a community it is common to experience a feeling of belonging. If they feel accepted by their community they will not only be willing to express their true selves, but also gain trust and respect for other members. This sets community members up well for deeper conversations that

will nourish identity development.

Another important factor for consideration when finding community is whether one feels “at home” when they are around club members and attending events. Peer social networks are described as “the fabric of campus life,” where “small groups of peers, like ‘urban tribes’ form an essential, family-like support group for many undergraduates.” (Watters, 2003, as cited in Sales & Saxe, 2006, p. 6). Receiving that family-like support through community in college is especially significant when one does not always have a clear “home” when living in a new place.

Community building and identity development are especially significant for Jewish students due to being from a marginalized group. Therefore, bonding and feeling confident in your identity is more important than ever.

Students’ feelings of closeness to the Jewish community often reflect the makeup of their social circles, as research has shown that, “two-thirds of the students who feel very close to the Jewish community report that at least half of their close friends are Jewish” (Hersh, 2022, p. 29). Being a part of a marginalized community can be emotionally taxing. For these folks, surrounding themselves with people who share an identity with them can be comforting as they know they will be understanding of their experiences. Focus group findings suggest that much of the connection that Jewish students feel toward their communities is “driven by the comfort that Jewish students feel with other Jews and the sense of understanding and connection that exists among Jews” (Sales & Saxe, 2006, p. 6). By sharing similar values, shared experiences, and culture, these students share many elements of their identity. This is a key part of building a strong community. Having so much common ground makes Jewish students feel more understood and accepted.

Feeling at home is an especially important value of community for Jewish students as well as college students in general. One report describes how “these students paint a picture of walking in the door and immediately feeling at home. In fact, many students note that participating in Jewish events makes them feel comfortable because the activities and community remind them of home” (Hersh, 2022, p. 37). Home in the context of Jewish community can be viewed as both a physical and an emotional space for students. The activities they participate in and the people they are surrounded by not only remind students of their physical homes, but also of the emotional warmth and connection that family provides.

Not only is it important for students to feel a connection to other Jewish students to feel connected within their community, but it is just as important to feel accepted in order to feel truly connected. Finding a space on campus where students know their culture, traditions, and values are respected is imperative in establishing a sense of belonging. When asked whether they agreed with the statement “Going to Jewish activities makes me feel like I belong somewhere,” 85% of students agreed and 30% strongly agreed (Hersh, 2022, p. 35). This response highlights the extent that Jewish campus events can foster a sense of inclusion and personal affirmation for students seeking connection.

Conceptual Framework

As I conducted my interviews two concepts that I felt really tied all of them together were community and belongingness. I was able to find literature that focuses on each of these concepts on their own, but through my own research process I have found that these are connected. Specifically, community is a non-negotiable factor when it comes to establishing a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, I will explore them as two distinct concepts recognizing that they are

deeply interconnected.

Community

The core elements of community include membership, influence, integration, and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (Chavis & McMillan, 1986, p. 9). These elements collectively describe how people develop a psychological sense of community. This framework is especially useful when studying identity-based groups like Hillel, where feelings of belonging and support are central to member engagement. Once an individual is comfortable within their community the opportunity to form a stronger sense of belonging arises.

Membership is considered the foundation of a sense of community and includes five key elements: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system (Chavis & McMillan, 1986, p.11). Membership extends beyond physical presence, it reflects a sense of emotional safety and mutual recognition. It is defined as “a feeling that one has invested part of oneself to become a member and therefore has a right to belong” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Organizing events, rituals, or shared activities gives members the chance to invest in the group which is one of the key ways a sense of membership is built. Groups often use language, dress, and ritual to establish boundaries that help define who belongs and who doesn’t (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). While attendance may fluctuate, consistent rituals and shared symbols help establish who belongs and sustain emotional safety within the group. A core group of returning members can help establish emotional safety and recognizable boundaries. These are two attributes that McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify as essential to group membership.

Influence is defined as “a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Influence depends on members believing that their participation has a real impact on the direction or experience of the group. A key aspect of influence is the belief that one’s unique contributions shape the group’s actions and values. When individuals feel influential, they are more attracted to and invested in the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). A sense of shared influence often arises through corresponding interactions where members contribute ideas and adapt based on group feedback. In student organizations like Hillel, opportunities to create programming or be a leader at an event allow students to express their influence and feel a sense of ownership of the group. Students who design programming based on their own experiences and values tend to feel a stronger sense of investment, knowing that their contributions shape the direction of the group.

Integration and fulfillment of needs is the third component of sense of community and is described as “reinforcement” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 12). This includes “group success,” “status of membership,” and “competence,” which are examples of reinforcement that “bind people together into a close community” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 13). In student organizations like Hillel, these reinforcements can emerge when members feel trusted with responsibility or see their contributions reflected in the group’s success. These experiences not only build confidence and pride, but also deepen members’ emotional investment, especially when their values feel aligned with the group.

Shared emotional connection is the fourth element of sense of community and is defined as “the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Emotional connection develops through shared experiences that are meaningful, and often involve a sense of history.

While shared identity serves as an entry point, what truly fosters a lasting emotional connection is the consistent meaningful interactions within the group.

While this framework focuses more heavily on the concept of community, I felt that it still relates to my data in the sense that building a strong community is the key stepping stone to students feeling a strong sense of belonging.

Belongingness

In conceptualizing “belongingness, I drew from Terrell Strayhorn’s (2012) book *College Students Sense Of Belonging*. He says, “In terms of college, sense of belonging refers to a students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, 2012, p.4).

He also notes that “belonging needs take on increased significance in environments or situations that individuals experience as different, unfamiliar, or foreign, as well as in contexts where certain individuals are likely to feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed.” (Strayhorn, 2012, p.20). His emphasis on the significance of belonging for marginalized groups really resonated with some of the anecdotes that my participants shared.

In her article, “*The New Psychology of Belonging*”, Kim Samuel (2023) discusses her thoughts on belonging: “Belonging isn’t just a connection to other people, but also to place, power and purpose. The experience of belonging is about connectedness through community, as well as rootedness in a place, a feeling of ownership in shared outcomes, and a sense of mission with others” (Samuel, 2023, para. 6.). To form a strong sense of belonging one must engage

more deeply with their community. Working together on a project or initiative within a community rather than simply attending events can really cement a strong sense of belonging. Going through that process together and the ups and downs that come with group work helps to form a much stronger sense of involvement and belonging.

In her book *On Belonging*, Samuel (2022) interviews people all around the world about what belonging looks and feels like for them. One of the women she spoke with, Nujeen Mustafa, a Syrian refugee with cerebral palsy depicted belonging in ways that really resonated with me and the research that I have done. She depicts belonging as, “a sense of relief when you arrive at the place” (Samuel, 2022, p. 159). Samuel’s use of the “place” that Mustafa refers to is viewed as “a state of connection to one’s internal purpose and power, to one’s community and geography, to the larger communion of being alive” (Samuel, 2022, p. 161). Her emphasis on internal purpose and power particularly resonated with me as those are both important focuses specifically in religious communities. An important element that connects folks to a community is shared values. This study is relevant because it highlights how belonging is not just about physical presence or space, but also about emotional and spiritual connection. This idea closely aligns with the experiences of Hillel students, who often find a sense of purpose, empowerment, and shared values through their involvement in the Jewish community on campus.

Ultimately, belonging cannot exist without community. Community is the structure that provides the relationships, shared values, and emotional safety that is needed for individuals to feel that they truly matter. As the research shows, when students find a community like Hillel that meets their emotional, spiritual, and cultural needs, they are not only able to engage more deeply, but also to feel a profound sense of belonging that supports their overall identity development.

Methods

Methodology

This project uses a qualitative case study methodology to explore how Jewish college students experience belonging, identity, and purpose through their involvement with Clark Hillel. Yin defines case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 2018), while Stake notes that “a case study is expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995). Merriam adds that case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1998). These three definitions collectively position case study methodology as a useful framework for understanding the lived experiences of students within a specific organizational setting.

In terms of my own work, the “case” is Clark Hillel, a Jewish campus organization and the phenomenon that is being studied is the experience of belonging among its members. The boundaries of the case were defined by time (students who have been actively engaged in Hillel within the past 1-3 years) and by location (students affiliated with Clark University’s Hillel). There are two important purposes for case study research, “(1) to provide descriptive information and (2) to suggest theoretical relevance.” (Salmons, 2021). This project is primarily descriptive in nature, aiming to offer a detailed account of how a singular campus-based community fosters connection and meaning that allows students to truly feel they belong.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with five current or recently active members of Clark Hillel. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in questioning while maintaining a consistent focus across interviews. This approach enabled me to

follow the flow of conversation, adapt to participants' responses, and create an environment that felt more like a dialogue than a formal interview. As a researcher with insider status in the Hillel community, I approached each conversation with reflexivity, sharing my own experiences when appropriate and remaining aware of how my presence shaped the tone and depth of my interviews. This relational dynamic made it possible to build trust and access moments of vulnerability that might not have surfaced in a more traditional research approach.

The overall goal of this case study is to offer a close up look at one organization in a particular context. In doing so, it provides insight into how Jewish students are constructing meaning, community, and resilience in the midst of their own personal development.

Site

Clark Hillel was an organization that I was already very familiar with prior to the start of my research. I was an active member all four years of college and even served a term on their board. Hillel is a club on campus for Jewish students (but everyone is welcome at all events) to form connections with one another, practice Jewish traditions, celebrate holidays, repair the world through service, and much more. It is one of Clark's largest clubs on campus which was one of the things that led me to choose it as my research site. Hillel is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world (with 180,000 active students and alums on nearly a thousand campuses every year) and was established in 1923 by Rabbi Benjamin Frankel at the University of Illinois. Their founding philosophy is "there isn't one way to be Jewish" (Hillel International, 2023) and they put a huge focus on student leadership: "we value letting the students take the reins, creating their own version of Jewish life rather than imposing an idea of what that means" (Hillel International, 2023).

The interviews for this project took place in October and November 2023, shortly after the violent events that began on October 7th in Israel and Palestine. This timing had a notable effect on my research process. The emotional weight of the moment led me to postpone the interviews, which were originally scheduled to begin during that same week. When I resumed scheduling, I made a deliberate decision not to include any direct questions about the conflict. Several participants expressed that they would only feel comfortable being interviewed if they could be assured that the topic would not come up in discussion. As both a researcher and a member of this community, I chose to prioritize emotional safety and create a space where participants could reflect on their Hillel experiences without the added pressure of discussing a highly charged and deeply personal topic. While the conflict remains a critical part of the broader context in which this research was conducted, I focused my inquiry on students' relationships with Jewish identity, belonging, and purpose as shaped within the Hillel community itself.

Clark Hillel operates through a clearly defined, student-led leadership structure supported by a full-time executive director. The main leadership roles include President, Vice President, Treasurer, Head of PR, and Secretary, all of whom are undergraduate students. Beneath the Executive Board is the Coordination Council (otherwise known as CoCo), which consists of four committees: Social Arts and Culture (SAC), Holidays and Traditions (HAT), Tikkun Olam (TO), and Israel and Diaspora (ID). Each executive board member, aside from the President, serves as a liaison to one of these committees. Together, the Executive Board and CoCo plan programming that touches on a wide spectrum of Jewish life, from holiday celebrations and service work to cultural events and educational offerings. During my time on the board, I served first as Head of PR and later as both Head of PR and Vice President. In these roles, I managed our club's social media, created flyers and event materials, supported the President with event planning and board

meetings, and wrote our weekly email newsletter. I also served as a liaison to the Tikkun Olam committee, which met weekly and organized events focused on service and justice, including regular community fridge runs.

A typical week at Hillel included our Friday night Shabbat dinners, which often brought in over 50 students, as well as multiple committee meetings, CoCo check-ins, and board meetings. In many ways, Hillel had something happening nearly every day, which gave it a strong rhythm and helped foster both consistency and connection. While our executive director played an extremely active role by attending board meetings and supporting planning, he intentionally positioned himself as a mentor rather than a decision-maker. The students led most of the programming and vision setting, and major decisions were typically made through board-wide votes. For smaller matters, we sometimes extended decision-making to include CoCo members, and our board meetings were always open to any Hillel member interested in attending. This emphasis on transparency and collaboration allowed students to feel empowered and heard, while still offering the grounding support of a trusted adult guide.

Positionality

My relationship to the participants in my research is somewhat complex. I spent time debating whether I would consider myself to be an insider or an outsider to the Clark Hillel community. I am far from a stranger within Hillel. I was a member of this club for four years and it was a huge part of my life. I have a close relationship with both the director as well as a few current members. Furthermore, Hillel was not only just a club for me, but also somewhat of a home away from home. I spent almost every Friday night in college with a variation on the same group of people, and even if many of them are no longer members, the club itself still serves as a

home away from home for me. However, at the same time I was no longer a part of the day-to-day happenings within the club and did not have a good sense of the current climate of the club as a whole. I was coming in as an outsider who had not been actively engaged in the club since the previous school year.

Another way in which I identify as an insider is that, of course, I am Jewish. Just like many of my participants I feel a strong connection to my religion. Being Jewish to me is deeply rooted in cultural identity and community. Growing up, I had a Bat Mitzvah, but I didn't attend services regularly, so my connection to Judaism was more through cultural traditions than religious practice. In college, I really connected with other Jewish students at Hillel, and it was through social events like Shabbat dinners that I found a strong sense of comfort and belonging. Being Jewish for me is about being part of a community, sharing traditions, celebrating the exciting moments and supporting one another through the tough ones with people who understand and value the same things. While I don't necessarily follow all the religious practices, the sense of connection, the cultural history, and the shared values within the Jewish community give me a deep sense of pride and identity.

I was aware of how the overlap in identity (age, connection to the club, and religion) might impact my conversations. On the whole, there was a level of assumed trust between me and the interviewee due to our religious identity.

Participants

I conducted five interviews total for this project. All five participants have either been an active member or are currently an active member of Clark Hillel. All five of them are Jewish and chose to be members of Clark Hillel to find a Jewish community for themselves in college. I

sought out members who had a wide range of involvement in the club as well as a mixture of current and former members. For example, two of my participants were Club President, two were Board Members, and one was a member of the Coordination Council. This range of roles allowed me to get a sense of the overall effect of club involvement rather than just the effects on those who were a part of club leadership.

Name	Graduating Class	Identity Markers
Andrew	2022	Jewish, Male, Club President, Former member
Jared	2022	Jewish, Male, Board Member, Former Member
Anna	2025	Jewish, Female, Coordination Council, Current Member
Lila	2025	Jewish, Female, Board Member, Current Member
Ezra	2023	Jewish, Male, Club President, Former Member

Data Collection and Analysis

As I previously noted in my methodology, the data I collected consisted primarily of semi-structured interviews. I asked participants about their views on and experiences they had within Hillel. All interviews took place on Zoom and were recorded for the sole purpose of having them to look at when reflecting and analyzing what was said. I interviewed each person one time and they lasted anywhere from 15 minutes to about an hour in length. Participants were given the time to expand upon the questions that I asked and the answers they gave often led to other topics that prompted follow-up questions from me

The interviews provided significant evidence in relation to the connection between community and belonging within identity-based clubs. When analyzing my data I turned to Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to use as a guiding method. I first spent some time getting familiar with my data. I both listened to and read my data multiple times through actively searching for patterns or themes that popped out to me. After I conducted and recorded all of my interviews, I went through each one and transcribed them using a software called Happy Scribe. While this was a time consuming task I actually found it quite useful for my overall data analysis. By going sentence by sentence through each interview I was able to really dissect what my participants were sharing and break them down into multiple relevant codes and themes. I next went through the process of coding my data and I identified “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way” (Boyatzis, 1998). Identifying these smaller aspects of the data helped me identify repeated patterns that eventually developed into my themes. I then sorted all of the codes and considered how groups of them could work together to create broader themes. By the end of this process I had come up with three major umbrella themes: Home on Campus, Jewish Identity, and Sense of Purpose/Making A Difference. Once I had identified these themes I was able to sift through my data and sort various responses from my participants into these different categories that I wanted to address more in depth throughout my paper. After gathering all of the interview data I wanted to use and organizing it, I worked through each of the three themes and provided my own analysis for each quotation I chose in the context of the theme I chose to place it under. The analysis and quotations that I brought together on these three major themes resulted in my findings section

Findings

Home on Campus

Among the many recurring patterns that surfaced during my data analysis, one particularly salient theme centers on students' perceptions of Hillel as a source of stability, comfort, and connection throughout their college experience. For many, Hillel served as not only a physical space to gather, but also an emotional and cultural home. A place where they could be themselves, form deep relationships, and practice their Jewish identity without judgement. In analyzing the interviews, four interrelated elements emerged that come together to collectively shape this experience of "home on campus". Consistency and tradition, emotional safety and love, cultural familiarity and shared identity, and the ability to show up as one's true authentic self. The following section explores each of these elements, drawing on participant anecdotes to illustrate how Hillel functions as more than just a club, it became a chosen family.

When I first joined Hillel, it felt like a fun and welcoming space, but not necessarily one I felt profoundly connected to. I enjoyed the people, the Jewish geography conversations, and having a regular place to go for dinner with my existing friend group but wasn't yet looking to engage more deeply. At the time, it was clear that some members already had a strong emotional connection to the club, and while I respected that, I didn't fully understand how to access it or even if I wanted to. That changed during COVID. Even when all programming shifted online, Hillel provided meaningful spaces for connection, and I started getting to know some of the older members in deeper and more intentional ways. That shift made me feel more invested. I began to notice the cultural rhythms I hadn't grown up with, like blessings before dinner or holiday traditions, but everyone was so welcoming and nonjudgmental that I was able to learn gradually while still feeling like a valid and respected member of the community. By the

time I joined e-board full time, I began to feel like I was helping shape the culture and not just inheriting it. My board cohort and I prioritized engagement and built systems that brought in new members: one-on-one coffee meetings, intentionally welcoming new faces at events and creating low-barrier leadership opportunities. That year, Hillel's event attendance was the highest it had ever been. There was a clear culture in place when I arrived as well as strong leadership, excitement around Jewish culture, and a deep sense of community. It meant a lot to be a part of evolving that culture and expanding who felt like they could belong in it.

The first element that students associated with the feeling of home was the consistency and grounding that from ritual and tradition. For Andrew, Hillel provided a reliable, comforting presence amidst the unpredictable and often overwhelming nature of college. In his interview, he described how attending Friday night Shabbat dinners became an anchor for him: "Every single Friday night that I chose to go, I didn't go every Friday, but most Fridays, like, I knew that I would find myself at Shabbat dinner. And I think... You know, as just a college student exploring the world, figuring out myself, the things I'm interested in, relationships, career, blah blah blah, and dealing with all the other chaos that goes on in the world. It was—it was really great to have Hillel as like my rock, as the constant thing that was just there solidly, no matter what else was happening in my life." (Andrew, 23:37). I found myself reflecting on how significant that idea of "a rock" is, especially in a period of life where so much feels fluid and uncertain. For Andrew, the act of showing up to the same space, on the same day, for the same purpose created a rhythm, a ritual that gave shape and stability to his week. These repeated moments, filled with familiar faces and comforting routines, did more than provide social or religious engagement, they grounded him emotionally and spiritually. In this way, tradition and consistency don't just

facilitate community, but also help create a sense of rootedness that many students described as essential to their well-being.

The second element that contributed to this feeling of home was the emotional safety and closeness that participants experienced within the Hillel community. While the word “community” is often used to describe student clubs, many of my participants used language that reflected something much more intimate. Lila, for instance, described the atmosphere of Hillel not just as supportive, but as loving: “The love is so strong there.” (Lila, 01:00:31). Her use of the word “love” felt especially powerful. In our conversation, it was clear she wasn’t just describing the warmth or friendliness, but a deeper, familial kind of care that went beyond surface level connection. For Lila and others, Hillel was a space where people consistently showed up for one another, not just at events, but emotionally. Love, in this context, was expressed through shared presence, vulnerability, and mutual investment. This atmosphere of emotional safety allowed students to take risks socially and personally, knowing that they would be met with understanding and care. That kind of environment is rare in college, and it’s one of the things that made Hillel feel so distinctly like a home.

A third component of the “home” experience at Hillel was the cultural familiarity students felt when surrounded by other Jewish peers. Lila spoke directly to this when she shared: “I haven’t met a single Jewish person who says this otherwise, that when you meet a fellow Jew, you automatically feel a connection. Um you just automatically feel like either like you are my friend or I can trust you or let’s talk about our upbringing and how they were similar, how they were different, you know?” (Lila, 16:28). This idea of “automatic connection” came up in several interviews. For Jewish students at a predominantly non-Jewish school, simply entering a space where others share your cultural reference points (holidays traditions, religious school stories,

etc, being part of a minority group) can feel like a breath of fresh air. That kind of recognition fosters an immediate sense of trust, which then lowers social barriers, making it easier to form meaningful relationships. While each student's upbringing was different, there often was just enough overlap for them to feel "known" by one another without having to explain themselves. In this way, cultural familiarity served as a powerful pathway to belonging.

The fourth and final element participants described as contributing to a sense of home was authenticity, and the ability to show up fully without having to mask any part of themselves. For Jared, Hillel was a space where he could not only be accepted, but celebrated for his individuality: "It's given me a space to be myself. To be my quirky, lovely, weird self. Um. And I've been extremely blessed to have such amazing people around me." (Jared, 21:27). In college, many students feel pressure to curate their personalities or present a version of themselves that allows them to fit in academically or socially. Jared's experience at Hillel offered something different: a space where his quirks were not only tolerated but embraced. That kind of acceptance is a key indicator of what makes a space feel like a home. This freedom was enabled by the emotional safety, shared identity, and mutual care that was already present in the Hillel community. In that sense, authenticity wasn't just permitted at Hillel, but it was encouraged.

Taken together, these four elements, tradition and consistency, emotional safety, cultural familiarity, and authenticity come together to form a rich and layered understanding of what "home" means to Hillel students. While each participant focused on different aspects of their experience, their reflections reveal that a sense of home is not rooted in physical space alone, but in emotional and relational qualities as well. Being known, feeling safe, being loved, and feeling free to be oneself are just a few of these trademarks. Especially in the context of college, where

students are navigating their identity, their independence, and sometimes the feeling of disconnection, having a space like Hillel offers not just support, but a place to belong.

Jewish Identity

When students feel a sense of belonging within a community, especially when they know their background and values are understood, they are much more likely to explore and express their identity in meaningful ways. For Jewish students, this process often takes place within communities like Hillel, where the familiarity of cultural traditions and shared values provides a foundation of emotional safety and connection. As outlined in my literature review, peer groups and the feeling of being “at home” are not only central to community building, but also to identity development during the college years. For many students, Jewish identity is not defined solely by religious observance or a belief in God. Instead, it reflects a dynamic combination of cultural heritage, social values, political views, and communal practice. Some students connect through faith and ritual and others through other elements such as ancestry, activism, or shared cultural history. This theme of Jewish identity surfaced frequently during interviews, showing up in ways that emphasized not just personal beliefs, but also inherited traditions, community connections, and individual meaning making. Within the Hillel community, students encounter opportunities to deepen and redefine their Jewish identity across spiritual, cultural, and interpersonal dimensions.

The theme shows up in different ways. For Lila, Jewish identity is shaped by a combination of ancestral pride, religious tradition, cultural familiarity, and meaningful connection with other Jewish people. Each of these components, which stem from her Modern Orthodox upbringing and were further shaped by her interactions with more secular Jewish

peers, contributes to a layered and evolving sense of self. She sees Judaism as a totality, where religious practice, cultural memory, and communal bonds are equally vital. Lila's perspective illustrates how being Jewish for her is not necessarily just about religious belief, but about living with shared experiences. It is more about participating in the acts of being Jewish: practicing traditions, engaging with the community, honoring ancestry etc. than about believing in a prescribed set of religious beliefs.

While Lila feels most connected to her Jewish identity when multiple elements such as ritual, ancestry, community, and tradition are present within the club, other students engage with Judaism in different ways. Anna, for example, grounds her identity less in religious ritual and more in flexibility, community, belonging, cultural inclusivity, and a strong sense of community belonging. For her, being Jewish is not primarily about belief in God or formal religious education. Instead, it includes participating in holiday celebrations, building friendships with other Jewish students, and connecting through shared values, histories, and a broader cultural and ethnic identity. In contrast to Lila's integrative approach, Anna's sense of identity is shaped by the freedom to engage with the aspects of Judaism that are most meaningful to her. While their approaches to the religion vary, they both highlight that agency and authenticity play a critical role in Jewish identity formed within Hillel.

In her interview, Lila reflected, "Hillel, I think, has helped me grow into the totality of what it means to be a Jewish person, that it's not just literally being Jewish. It's not just practicing the commandments. It's not just having that special connection to other Jewish people or having pride in your ancestry. You know it's all of these things combined. Um yeah and it's also given me a space, too. I think also with how it's helped me deepen my relationship with my Jewish identity" (Lila, 26:59). Her perspective captures the varied nature of Jewish identity and

how her participation in Hillel helps her understand and embrace that complexity. One's relationship to their religion is deeply personal and ever changing based on their experiences. Lila grew up in a Modern Orthodox Jewish neighborhood and attended a Jewish day school. Prior to her time at Clark she had never experienced a fully secular environment. This shift in environment gave Lila the opportunity to define what her personal relationship with Judaism looked like outside the structures she had always known. Being a part of Hillel exposed her to peers who connected to their Judaism in some of the same ways, but also in many different ways. Through Hillel she not only explored the boundaries of her relationship with her faith, but also put herself in the position to learn from the different paths other members took to connect with their religious identity. These paths included not just religious practices, but also cultural expressions, shared histories, and the sense of belonging that comes with being part of an ethnic and social community. For Lila, engaging with these diverse forms of Jewishness expanded her understanding beyond what she had previously seen as "Jewish life". This wider perspective deepened her understanding of Judaism as a complex experience, reinforcing her point that there is no one correct way to be Jewish. Her reflections highlight a key distinction: Judaism does not require a fixed set of beliefs in order to be meaningful. Instead, Jewish identity can be practiced through participation, tradition, culture, and community, even for those who are still questioning or redefining their relationship to belief. Her journey suggests that Hillel serves a microcosm of the wider Jewish world, an environment in which practicing Judaism can involve ritual observance, as well as conversation, presence, or cultural participation. In this space, students like Lila are not only welcomed as they are, but are given room to grow, question, and rediscover what it means to be Jewish on their own terms.

Lila's reflection highlights how being exposed to different elements and expressions of Judaism can significantly enrich one's own identity. Anna also reflected on this idea, offering a different perspective on how Jewish identity can be shaped through personal choice and flexible engagement. In her interview, Anna described the variety of ways her peers at Hillel engage with Jewish identity, highlighting the community's openness to diverse expressions of Judaism. She notes:

“ I think Hillel has shown to me that, like, there are so many different ways to practice Judaism and be Jewish. And like I see that even, you know, with my friends within Hillel, you know, like... one of my friends, like, you know, wants like a super religious aspect of it, you know, bringing like... more like teachings and having it be a learning experience. Whereas, you know, some people who grew up with not as much like Jewish education, just want it for community. And I love how whatever you... like you can kind of find there and if it doesn't exist, then Jeff will make it happen, if you like want that to happen.” (Anna, 5:28)

Anna's remarks demonstrate how Hillel functions as a dynamic and responsive place where students are given the freedom to shape their own religious and cultural engagement. Whether someone is seeking the more religious elements such as customs and teachings or simply a place to belong that upholds Jewish values, Hillel adapts to meet those needs. It makes room for both traditional and non-traditional forms of Jewish practice. This adaptability supports the notion that Jewish identity is not a static idea, but instead a range of experiences and ways of expression. While Lila focuses on integrating many expressions of Judaism into one total identity, Anna emphasizes the freedom of choice within Judaism. She has the ability to select the

aspects of Jewish life that resonate most personally for her. Her comments highlight the role that individual agency plays in shaping identity at Hillel.

While Anna focused on personalization and selective engagement, Jared's experience reveals how Hillel also broadens students' understanding of global Jewish identity. Learning about unfamiliar Jewish traditions transformed Jared's previously narrow view and opened up new possibilities for what Judaism could look like. He shared, "I think Hillel. Hillel has shaped my Jewish identity by also exposing me to new attributes or new thought processes of different types of views around me like I. I barely really knew before I came to Clark. I really didn't know what Mizrahi or Sephardi Jews were. Um. And Clark. Hillel, I think in coordination with both Birthright and our Israeli emb- ambassadors, I think that really helped shape and broaden my view of what Judaism is" (Jared, 9:51). Jared's Jewish identity is characterized by curiosity, cultural expansion, and a growing global awareness. Learning about Sephardi and Mizrahi traditions marked a turning point for him; it complicated and enriched his previously limited, Ashkenazi-centric, understanding of what it means to be Jewish. His experience demonstrates that Hillel supports not just personal practice, but also intellectual and cultural expression through encounters with unfamiliar Jewish narratives. Unlike Anna, whose identity is shaped by personalization and community, or Lila who integrates multiple inherited traditions, Jared's development is driven by engagement with diverse perspectives and a deeper historical awareness. Taken together, these reflections highlight that Jewish identity is neither fixed nor uniform. For some, it is constructed through inherited tradition and religious practice. For others, it emerges through intentional exploration or exposure to diverse expressions of Judaism. Yet all participants share a desire for authentic connection, whether through prayer, culture, learning, or

community. This affirms that Hillel's pluralistic, student-centered model of Jewish life fosters identity development through both commonality and difference.

Purpose Through Contribution

As students explore and deepen their Jewish identities through Hillel, many develop a growing sense of responsibility to something larger than themselves. This sense of connection often motivates them to act and contribute meaningfully to others, their community, and the world around them. This is the foundation for the theme of Purpose Through Contribution. This theme explores how students find meaning by translating their personal values into communal action. For some, this sense of purpose is expressed through emotional care and relational support, for others it appears in program leadership, organizational improvements, or social action. Regardless of the form it takes, purpose becomes real for students through acts of contribution.

The theme Purpose Through Contribution describes how Hillel students develop a sense of responsibility that connects their personal values to meaningful action beyond themselves. This sense of purpose is realized in multiple spheres. Within personal relationships, the Hillel organization, and the broader Worcester community. For Lila, the internal sense of purpose comes from a calling to educate, nurture, and build connection. She enacts this purpose through her leadership and programming within Hillel. Though this passion predated her involvement in the club, Hillel provides a supportive space for Lila to bring her vision to life. Andrew's sense of purpose emerges from a desire to improve the community's experience and empower others, which he fulfills by initiating organizational movements. Despite their different approaches, both Lila and Andrew share a belief that individual passion gains meaning when it

contributes to the collective, in this case, the Hillel community. Together, their experiences demonstrate how personal purpose finds fulfillment when translated into service that benefits the collective. Lila's leadership centers on emotional and spiritual care, while Andrew's focuses on structural change; both exemplify service as a core value.

This idea of the individual contributing to the collective is not just about leadership or activism, but also deeply tied to care, intention, and emotional investment. For Lila, this internal motivation to care and invest emotionally is expressed externally through thoughtful leadership and community nurturing. For some students, making a difference means showing up for others in a thoughtful, values driven way that prioritizes well-being and connection. She embodies this by prioritizing well-being and connection in all of her roles within Hillel. Lila emphasizes that purpose often shows up through small, intentional actions embedded in programming and relationships. She sees her role as more than organizing, it is about nurturing meaningful experiences that support community growth. In her interview, Lila mentioned to me that she and our Hillel director created an internship for her called the Nefesh internship. To bring this purpose to life, Lila co-created the Nefesh internship with her Hillel director. "Nefesh", meaning "soul", reflects the internship's mission: to nurture the spiritual heart of the Hillel community. Motivated to deepen spiritual engagement, Lila collaborates weekly to integrate accessible religious content into programming. One of her key contributions is introducing weekly dvar torah readings: short reflections on the Torah portion. Lila notes that these readings foster personal meaning and growth, emphasizing that identity-based clubs carry a responsibility for members' well-being. As she explains, "Like personal meaning and personal growth and that's a part of like why I think including...dvar torahs is important, why I think you know just having general conversation and- and you know in any event that we put on, there's so much soul that's

put into it because you write- because identity clubs- in identity based clubs, you recognize that you're taking care of a person's well-being as well" (Lila, 39:34). Lila's quote emphasizes how the care and thought that goes into planning each Hillel event goes beyond simply planning out activities to do as a group. This care reflects an intentional effort to build a welcoming and supportive community. She mentions the importance of sharing elements like dvar torahs and engaging in conversation around them. Sharing these elements invites members, especially newcomers, to engage gradually into embracing religious Jewish culture if that is something more new for them. Such conversations offer accessible pathways for members to explore Jewish cultural aspects at their own pace. Drawing from her own background, sharing these insights reinforces Lila's personal sense of purpose. This practice extends beyond tradition, actively building community connection and inclusion. Sharing these insights is not just an act of tradition for Lila, but it's also a way of passing on knowledge, fostering connection, and making others feel included in a meaningful aspect of Jewish life. Her leadership thus empowers others to define their own Jewish journeys authentically. In doing so, she creates accessible entry points for others to explore their identity, which empowers her peers to engage at their own pace and in their own way. Through this role, Lila experiences how her purposeful actions foster growth in the community. This role of Nefesh intern reinforces Lila's sense of purpose because she sees the direct impact her actions have on the growth of those around her. Being able to care for others in such an intentional and spiritually rooted way allows her to feel connected to something larger than herself and helps her shape a community where everyone is seen, supported, and encouraged to grow.

While Lila's purpose centers around emotional care, Andrew's is grounded in practical action, specifically recognizing areas for improvement and taking initiative to enhance

communal experiences. Andrew is internally motivated by a desire to make the Hillel environment more functional, meaningful, and inclusive for others. His experience illustrates that meaningful change often comes not from dramatic gestures, but from small thoughtful acts that are life enhancing for the collective. He shared one example of this when he reflected on improving Shabbat services during his time in Hillel:

“Well I think that there are-there are little examples of um, you know, I’ll say Shabbat services. You know, for one thing. Um, I recall when I started, I think we had, um, like a bunch of paper booklets or like, binders that were honestly pretty shoddily thrown together. Um, that we would go through during services. And, you know, I didn’t feel, uh. I just felt like, you know, the ritual or the worship experience could have been significantly enhanced by having, you know, like actual books in hand or by having a clearer order where, like, pages weren’t necessarily falling out. Um, maybe with a book that students would have been familiar with. So I spoke to the eboard, I spoke to our director, and they were fully supportive of me going home during one of our breaks and coming back with a stack of, um, Mishkan Tefila, which is a, um, one one of the standard, if not like the standard Reform Weekly Shabbat prayer book. So, you know, I felt like if- if it hadn’t been for me bringing that up, they would have continued the way it was, which is fine. But all it took was one student, me, saying, hey, I think this is something we can be doing better. Um. And a change was made.” (Andrew, 14:10)

Though seemingly small, this moment reveals the power of one student’s contribution to enhance a shared ritual and elevate the spiritual atmosphere for everyone. For Andrew, purpose is found in these acts of contribution, of noticing, of speaking up, and taking action. These moments reflect his belief that purpose comes from actively improving his environment by

observing what he can do better and working towards those changes. By stepping into leadership through care, Andrew's internal sense of responsibility is fulfilled, moving from a passive participant to an active community builder.

While Andrew's experience shows how individual initiative can shape the community, Anna's sense of purpose emerges through shared action and collective responsibility. Anna describes how participating in Hillel's Tikun Olam Committee supports her sense of communal responsibility and makes giving back feel achievable. She explains, "we, um, through the TO committee, we, you know, go to the supermarket and buy about \$200 worth of groceries each week and fill the community fridge. Um, and it just- it feels good to be like giving back to the community, especially when, you know, it becomes hard. You know, when you're busy with school and work and you know all your other responsibilities, like, I feel like Hillel, like, holds me accountable and it's like you're doing it with other people. So, you know, when there's opportunity to do it, you know, you're more likely to latch on to it rather than like having to, like, seek it and find it yourself. Like they make it really accessible to like, you know, be like, we have this event. Like we provide rides, we provide, you know, they provide everything for you. You just have to show up." (Anna, 6:28). Her reflection shows how Hillel doesn't just offer service opportunities, but also embeds contribution into the fabric of student life. For Anna, stocking the local community fridge offers a meaningful way to live her values while balancing the demands of college life. What makes this effort especially powerful is the support system that Hillel is able to provide for its members. This support structure allies her internal motivation to be translated into sustained, real-world action. By offering rides, supplies, and logistical support, Hillel lowers the barrier to meaningful involvement. This sets up the blueprint for students to not only contribute, but to step into roles where they can actively make a difference in the

community. It's a model where purpose and contribution are built into everyday participation, encouraging students to take a collective initiative. This built-in accountability helps cultivate a sense of purpose grounded in community and shared values. For Anna, it's not just about volunteering, it's about participating in something larger than herself, rooted in the ethical values of Judaism.

Across each of these reflections from Lila, Andrew, and Anna, it becomes clear that Hillel fosters a culture where students explore their Jewish identities while discovering a sense of purpose through acts of service and contribution. From emotional care and spiritual leadership to program enhancement and community service, each student demonstrated that purpose can be realized through diverse forms of contribution. What unites these experiences is how each student embraced a sense of responsibility beyond themselves to the Hillel community, the broader Jewish world, or the local neighborhood. Through accessible opportunities, supportive student leadership, and a values driven environment, Hillel empowers students to act and serve with intention, connecting their personal values to meaningful action. Hillel is not only a space of belonging but also an empowering environment that encourages students to look outward, assess their personal impact, and pursue purpose through contribution.

Conclusion

This project was guided by two central research questions: 1) How has participation in Hillel impacted its members in terms of identity, social life, and sense of belonging? 2) What elements of the Clark Hillel climate are working well? In what ways can other Hillels and college religious communities learn from them? The three themes: Home on Campus, Jewish

Identity, and Purpose Through Contribution offered not just answers, but deeper insight into the mechanisms through which Hillel shapes student experience.

The Home on Campus theme responded directly to my first question, revealing that belonging doesn't just happen because people attend the same events. Belonging really develops when consistency, emotional safety, and cultural familiarity are deliberately cultivated. What emerged wasn't just that Hillel created connection, but that it did so through rhythms like Shabbat dinner, norms of emotional presence, and unspoken cultural shorthand that allowed Jewish students to feel seen without needing to explain themselves. These findings show that feeling "at home" is less about the programming the club provides and more about relational trust, shared identity, and the space to show up authentically.

The Jewish identity theme complicated any notion of identity as fixed or uniform. Instead, it revealed identity as something shaped by personal history, community exposure, and the freedom to engage selectively. What stood out is that Hillel's impact wasn't in prescribing a "right" way to be Jewish, but in making space for multiple entry points for students through ritual, ancestry, culture, and curiosity. That flexibility became foundational to students' willingness to engage. In turn, it suggests that religious communities on campus don't need to define belief for students, but should instead offer room to wrestle with it and allow students to create their own definitions of what religion means to them. This nuance matters for other institutions aiming to create inclusive religious and spiritual spaces for their students.

Finally, the Purpose Through Contribution theme answered both questions at once. Students weren't just finding meaning through service, they were given real responsibility and trusted to lead with their values. That trust is part of what makes Clark Hillel's climate so effective. But just as importantly, many of these contributions were rooted in care work, spiritual

support, and culture-holding. These less visible forms of leadership were deeply impactful and show that purpose isn't just about doing, it's about being needed. That insight is instructive: when students feel like their presence matters, they show up differently. For other Hillels, the takeaway is that meaningful contribution must extend beyond logistics, making intentional space for emotional, cultural, and spiritual forms of leadership.

Together, these themes move beyond simply confirming that Hillel matters. They reveal the specific emotional, cultural, and structural conditions that make its impact possible. In doing so, they offer a blueprint for how other identity-based communities might foster similar outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

While my literature review and conceptual framework emphasized the importance of peer relationships, identity-based community, and belonging for college students, especially those from marginalized groups, my findings reveal additional layers that challenge and deepen these understandings.

Another tension that surfaced in my findings, though not always explicitly named, was the balancing act between affirming a shared sense of Jewish identity and creating space for the many diverse ways students relate to Judaism. Hillel was consistently described as a space of cultural familiarity, where students felt a deep emotional connection through things like shared language, values, or traditions. At the same time, the club made a point of emphasizing pluralism, allowing students to engage in ways that felt personally meaningful. Some students were raised in deeply religious households, while others had little formal background but were seeking community or cultural connection. This created a powerful sense of openness, but it also raised questions: how much shared ritual or cultural baseline is needed to make the space feel

rooted in Jewishness? How much freedom can exist before that shared sense begins to blur? There was no clear answer, and that ambiguity was something we all lived with. At Clark Hillel, we maintained a few grounding rituals, like lighting Shabbat candles or blessing the challah, that helped anchor the space in tradition. But students could also explore other elements more deeply through smaller events or one-on-one conversations, often connecting with different leaders whose own Jewish journeys reflected a range of experiences. The club didn't try to resolve the tension between structure and flexibility, it lived in it, and in many ways, that's what made it feel alive. The boundaries of what "counts" as Jewish engagement weren't fixed. And that openness, even in its uncertainty, allowed more students to feel like they belonged.

Existing literature often conceptualizes belonging as an outcome of participation in community spaces. My research suggests that belonging is not simply the result of being included. It is something students build and protect through relational care that signals they are not just welcome, but relied on. They need to feel chosen, recognized in a way that affirmed both their identity and the value of their presence in the community. The students I interviewed described a sense of belonging that was deeply tied to being needed, emotionally supported, and culturally understood. In this context, belonging is not a fixed state, it is relational, dynamic, and requires ongoing care from both the individual and the larger organization at large.

While my conceptual framework outlined key elements of community such as membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection, my data showed that these elements function most powerfully when they are present in combination with one another. Being surrounded by familiar traditions or peers with shared backgrounds only created a sense of "home" when paired with emotional safety and mutual presence. My findings also highlight the often overlooked role of identity-based clubs as spaces for meaning making. For many students,

Hillel was not a backdrop to their college life, it was a core site of personal and ethical development. This connection between purpose and belonging challenges the idea that getting involved in college is primarily for social or extracurricular purposes. For students from marginalized backgrounds, clubs like Hillel serve as core environments where identity development, emotional care, and social responsibility all take shape.

These findings expand current theoretical understandings of community and belonging in the college setting. They suggest that these are not abstract concepts but lived experiences that emerge through sustained relationships and the work of being accountable to others. Our current society is experiencing drastic increases in polarization, identity-based harm, and isolation. These findings suggest that institutions must move beyond superficial diversity and inclusion efforts and instead invest more heavily in spaces that foster deep sustained connection, cultural affirmation, and shared purpose.

Practical Implications

My research highlights several key practices within Clark Hillel that higher education professionals can learn from when designing or supporting identity-based communities on campus. While every campus context is different, the strategies and experiences shared by participants offer replicable insights that extend beyond Clark Hillel itself.

Across my interviews students emphasized that what made Hillel feel like “home” to them was not just the number of events held each week, but more importantly, the emotional tone and consistency of those gatherings. Weekly Shabbat dinners for example, became reliable rituals that students looked forward to, not because of novelty, but because of the warmth, familiarity, and community that they offered. Higher education leaders should consider how to

build emotional consistency into programming. Creating these repeated, intentional moments of connection often matters much more than putting more events on the calendar each month.

Students also shared that they felt a sense of purpose when they were trusted with real responsibility and when opportunities to contribute to the larger community were made accessible to them. For example, the Tikun Olam committee offered ways for students to participate in service initiatives without needing to make monetary contributions or a high time commitment. Similarly, students were encouraged to propose ideas and shape programming based on their individual passions. Campus groups thrive when students feel that their input matters and when leadership roles are flexible enough to meet students where they are at. Advisors and administrators should make space for students to step into leadership roles at varying levels whenever possible.

One of Hillel's greatest strengths as reported by participants, was its ability to meet students with diverse relationships to Judaism, from Orthodox to secular, and from culturally affiliated to spiritually curious. This pluralistic approach fostered both inclusion and learning. Higher education professionals supporting faith-based or cultural groups should be mindful that these identities are not static or one size fits all. Communities should create space for students to engage in ways that feel personally meaningful to them without rigid expectations.

Much of what made Hillel so successful, including welcoming new members, planning meaningful gatherings rooted in Jewish tradition, and fostering trust, was the result of behind the scenes labor often performed by student leaders themselves. This emotional and cultural caretaking is rarely acknowledged in formal campus structures, but it is essential to maintaining student communities. Institutions should find ways to recognize and support this labor, whether through stipends, course credit, mentorship, or opportunities to reflect.

Several of the students that I spoke with credited their connection to Hillel to the leadership of the club's director who was consistently described as open-minded and willing to collaborate with students. His role was not just administrative, but so much more than that. He is seen as someone who genuinely cares about the well-being of his students and trusts them to shape the Hillel space. Higher education leaders should consider how professional staff in campus identity spaces are selected and supported. Hiring people who build genuine relationships with students and approach the work with openness and respect can have a powerful impact on how these communities function on a daily basis.

These practices suggest that identity-based communities thrive not because of elaborate programming or outward appearances, but because of sustained emotional investment, structural flexibility, and a culture of mutual care. Colleges and universities aiming to support belonging for marginalized students should look beyond performative inclusion and focus instead on the daily practices and personal connections that give communities a true sense of home.

Limitations

While my research offers valuable insights into the role of Clark Hillel in fostering belonging, identity, and purpose, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Taking time to reflect on these elements can help clarify both the scope of this research and directions for future study.

One notable limitation is the nature of my research questions. In an effort to create a comfortable and affirming space for participants, many of the questions I asked focused on positive experiences they have had within Hillel such as favorite memories, why they chose to stick with the club, or what they felt the club does well. Although I did include questions about

areas for improvement and constructive feedback, students often gave vague or neutral responses to them. Their answers did not result in strong data points and often would pivot right back to strengths rather than digging in deeper to define areas for improvement. In future research, I would revise the interview questions to elicit more nuanced and constructive feedback. The revised questions would require deeper reflection on topics of discomfort, exclusion, or unmet needs within the community, while still maintaining a space for participants to feel emotionally comfortable sharing these thoughts.

Another limitation is my relationship with the participants. All five students that I interviewed were either current or former members of Clark Hillel who agreed to speak with me due to their connection to the community, but I would also venture to guess it had to do with their personal connection and comfort with me. While this insider status created an immediate level of familiarity and trust, it also raises questions around selection bias. These students may have felt more inclined to speak positively about Hillel out of loyalty or desire to affirm shared experiences. Even when prompted with more critical questions, their responses were often cautious. This was possibly due to the fact that they knew I was closely connected to the space as well. As a result, the interviews reflected a strong sense of communal pride but left less room for deeper and more highly critical critique.

The state of the world sociopolitically during my interview process also shaped my results in notable ways. While my original research design and interview questions were created before the events of October 7, 2023, the interviews themselves were conducted very shortly after. Although I did not initially intend to focus on this topic, the evolving political climate, and more specifically the rising tensions of college campuses could have been a powerful and timely element to add to my research. However, most participants either avoided the subject or

expressed deliberate reluctance to speak about it. This reluctance limited the scope of the data and left a significant, current layer of Jewish student experience underexplored.

It is also possible that the weight of the Jewish political climate contributed to participants' strong emphasis on the positive aspects of their Hillel involvement. In a moment where being Jewish on campus felt complicated, students may have leaned into positive stories as a way of preserving the safe, joyful, and meaningful parts of their Jewish experience on campus. While this dynamic is telling in and of itself, it also further limited the emergence of critical or complex reactions within the interviews.

This project opened the door to several opportunities for future research. One particularly valuable next step could be to explore the internal dynamics of leadership and participation within Hillel, and more specifically, how leadership roles are formed, how responsibility is distributed, and whether there is a sense of shared ownership among members. Several participants referenced leadership as a key part of their experience, but my research did not explicitly explore how leadership culture impacts inclusion, burnout, or long term engagement. A future project might explore whether Hillel feels like a space that empowers all members to contribute meaningfully, or if involvement is concentrated among a small group. This research could provide important insight into how community spaces sustain themselves and adapt over time.

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the current state of the world, finding community is more important than ever, right now, especially for marginalized groups. Being a college student today presents unique and profound challenges. In a time when news about the conflict in Israel and Palestine

dominates headlines, Jewish students, who are already a small minority on many college campuses, often find themselves feeling isolated or even divided from peers based on differing political views. The emotional burden of witnessing daily tragedies, compounded by navigating complex campus dynamics, can be overwhelming. Having a supportive community of peers who share not only a cultural background but also an understanding of these struggles is crucial. Such spaces offer students a place to process their emotions, find solidarity, and protect their mental health in a time of heightened vulnerability. Community, in this context, is not just helpful, but essential for survival, resilience, and healing.

Loneliness, in this context, goes far beyond the college experience. Right now, many Jewish people are experiencing deep, unsettling kinds of loneliness, one rooted not just in distance from others, but in a growing sense of not being fully supported, understood or safe. In the wake of global conflict, antisemitism, and a national atmosphere that often flattens Jewish identity into a political stance, many students are navigating campus life with a heightened sense of vulnerability. Their grief and fear often go unacknowledged. Their desire for nuance is met with silence, or hostility. This loneliness mirrors the pain felt by so many other marginalized groups right now, especially under an administration actively advancing policies that threaten bodily autonomy, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, education, and broader human rights.

When people feel the world is turning against them or that their stories are being erased, the need for community becomes critical. Hillel, and other spaces like it, serve as anchors. They offer students not just a place to gather but a place to be witnessed in their complexity, their pain, and their joy. For Jewish students and others who carry weight in similar ways, these spaces are not a luxury, but a lifeline.

Loneliness in college can be deeply disorienting. When students lack a sense of belonging, even small challenges can feel much heavier. Several students in this study described Hillel as a place that brought steadiness during uncertain times. It provided them with a reliable place to return to and helped them feel less alone. The rhythms of showing up each week, sharing meals, or spending quiet time in familiar company gave students a clear sense of who they were and how they wanted to move through the world.

This project has reinforced the idea that belonging is not something that simply happens. It begins when people feel recognized and continues when the recognition is met with care and consistency. Jewish campus spaces like Hillel do more than just host events, they anchor students in something bigger than themselves. During these uncertain times, these communities offer grounding for students.

As we continue to navigate an increasingly polarized world, it is more important than ever to invest in spaces where people feel grounded in who they are and are supported in what they're going through. If colleges are serious about supporting student well-being, they must recognize that cultural and religious communities are not peripheral. They are essential infrastructures of care.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

The following semi-structured interview questions were used to guide conversations with participants. While each interview followed a conversational format and allowed for follow-up questions, these prompts served as the foundation for data collection:

1. What is your graduating class, and when were you involved in Hillel?
2. How long have you been a member (or how long were you a member)?
3. What is/was your role in the club?
4. What led you to join Hillel?
5. What is a favorite memory you have from being a member of Hillel?
6. Not everyone stays with Hillel after they first join. Why have you stayed (or why did you not stay)?
7. In what ways, if any, has Hillel shaped your awareness of your Jewish identity?
8. What other impacts has your participation in Hillel had on you?
9. What do you think Hillel is doing well?
10. In your opinion, what about Hillel could be improved? What would you like to see more of from the club?
11. How has being a part of Hillel impacted your college experience as a whole?
12. What impact do you think Hillel has on the broader Clark community? How might that impact be improved?

Appendix B: Reflection Memo for Future Hillel Board Members

This memo is rooted in interviews, reflection, and lived experience from serving on the Hillel board. It's designed not as critique, but as encouragement, a guide to what's already working well, and where a little more intention could go a long way. These suggestions are meant to be practical and rooted in the reality of student leadership.

What Makes Clark Hillel Work?

1. Shabbat as a Community Anchor

Shabbat is more than just dinner, it's where students return to feel grounded and connected. The rituals (candle lighting, blessings, etc.) are accessible and comforting.

→ *Ideas to build on what's already there:*

- Offer a feedback form once per semester asking students what makes Shabbat feel meaningful, what could improve, and what they would like to see added
- Offer an alternative to services pre-dinner event once or twice a month (grounding meditations, music jam sessions, or "shabbat prep" chat led by students)

2. Relational Culture Over Performative Programming

What people remember most isn't the flyers, it's the feeling that someone genuinely wanted them there.

→ *To continue deepening this:*

- Encourage board members to take 1-2 new members under their wing for the semester. Even just touching base with these students a few times over the semester can make an impact!
- Keep offering low-barrier entry points. Even just asking someone to help pass out challah builds connection.

3. Real Student Leadership, Trusted by Staff

Jeff's mentorship style allows students to lead authentically. That trust is part of what gives Hillel its unique voice.

→ *To preserve and strengthen this:*

- Create a mini leadership hand-off guide at the end of each term (what worked and what didn't)
- Set up peer mentorship pairings between returning and new board members to foster leadership development from within.

What's Already in Motion and Worth Expanding

1. New Member Onboarding is Happening → Make It Even More Visible.

Hillel is already warm and welcoming, but a few small structures can help new members feel even more confident and comfortable.

→ *Ideas to build on what's already there:*

- Designate a Shabbat greeter each week
- Create a rotating FAQ post on social media explaining basic traditions and who to reach out to with questions

2. Informal Leadership Is Valued → Keep Offering Micro-Roles

There is already a culture of shared contribution, and continuing to make leadership feel accessible will help engagement stay strong.

→ *Ways to keep this spirit alive:*

- Identify 1-2 mini roles at each board meeting (picking up event supplies, help with event photos, leading a pre-shabbat event etc.)
- Start a spotlight series on social media and/or in the weekly email where students are recognized for small but meaningful contributions

3. Jewish Pluralism Is a Strength → Keep the Conversation Alive

Hillel already creates space for many ways of being Jewish. Continuing to name and explore that pluralism will help it remain intentional as the community grows and changes

→ *Tangible steps for ongoing reflection:*

- Host a relaxed dinner or discussion each semester on “what does Jewishness mean to you?”
- Offer “choose your own adventure” holiday events where students can engage at different levels and through various entry points (one table for ritual, one for cultural crafts, one for discussion etc.)

You are stepping into a space that already holds a lot of heart. Hillel has warmth, intention, and a deep care for the community. Your job is not to fix it, but to notice what makes it unique, ask thoughtful questions, and help keep it a growing and thriving community. Take what’s useful here, leave what’s not, and add your own flair to any of these ideas. When it’s your turn to pass things on to the next board members, trust that your presence shaped something, even if it was subtle or small, it mattered.

With gratitude,

Leah Coen-Tarbox (Former VP, and Head of PR 2021-2022)