





John Boccacino:

It's a good point because we forget these are 17-to-21-year-old students and they come to the university with a different worldview. How do you try to relate to these students to let them know that, okay, yes, you are a rabbi, a person of faith, but you're also a person? You're also trying to help them with their development. How do you bridge that gap and connect with them?

Ethan Bair:

Yeah, that's a great question. We're very fortunate, I feel, at Syracuse Hillel. It's a very, of course, we're a religious organization in a certain way, but we're also a cultural organization. This is a space for Jewish community and most of the programs that we do on a regular basis are really about building community first. Then we also have opportunities for Jewish education and we have opportunities, I hope soon, for group support and more of a wellness environment and social justice activities like community service and so forth. So far, the last couple weeks, it's just been great getting to meet students in more of a social mode as part of the FreshFest program. I don't know, students haven't complained that I'm hard to approach or intimidating. I don't think I give off that vibe.

If anything, I like to hang out with students first. Then if it goes into a conversation where something from Torah, something from Jewish tradition becomes relevant, even better. Then we have our more "religious" things we do like Shabbat and services and Shabbat dinner Friday night, and we're going to be offering a Jewish learning fellowship that we do every semester on Tuesday nights that's a cohort conversation-based Jewish learning, but also very much has conversations between students at the forefront. It's not a lecture class. Yeah, I think it's about meeting students where they are and getting to know them and then we see what their interests are and it's really about building the Jewish content around those interests.

John Boccacino:

It seems like to me, the role of the rabbi on a college campus, yes, you've got the spiritual connections. You've got the social implications, but it really seems like you're trying to help with the holistic development of our students.

Ethan Bair:

Absolutely. We're absolutely here first and foremost to support students in their journey and their development. For me, their Jewish journey and their academic journey are two sides of the same coin because I think being connected to Jewish identity and Jewish community can only enhance a student's personal and academic goals, but that's right. I mean, we're here to support students in their journey, and really, my goal is that students really flourish so that they can contribute to the world and make the world a better place. Really, that means investing in them as people first and foremost. I feel like on a college campus, my role is really threefold. I'm a Jewish educator and we have the Jewish education aspect of what we do at Hillel. Then it's really about wellness and wellbeing and then also social justice and interfaith partnerships around that.

Those are the three areas that I'm interested in, and on the wellness front, I mean, we know 40% of students are grieving the loss of a loved one. A huge percentage of students are dealing with challenges around mental health issues or around various emotional things that they're dealing with. We have to treat students as full people who we're investing in, and in their future. I'm interested in being that adult on campus to students that's in between a professor and an advisor or a therapist, somewhere in between and being able to facilitate, also, environments where students can support each other and

have the real talk conversations about what they're going through and building relationships not just based in proving how cool students are to each other, but also really with vulnerability and being able to support each other. I think in order to get there, there's a lot of trust and a lot of the social community-building that we have to do first to be able to form those relationships and build that trust with students.

John Boccacino:

You seem like such an energetic person to lead us here at Hillel as our new rabbi. You mentioned before you've been trying to get to know the students. What are some other ways you plan on going out there into the community on campus to make people see who you are and how you can help them with their development?

Ethan Bair:

That's a great question. We park ourselves at People's Place at Hendricks Chapel on a weekly basis, a wonderful spot for coffee on campus, also student-run and cheap coffee. That's great, and I'm hoping to do some tourist study and some other creative education things on campus as well. Of course, we have High Holy Days coming soon and High Holy Days are the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the days between the Days of Awe. Rosh Hashanah starts the evening of September 24th and some services and meals will be here. Some will be at Hendricks in the center of campus at the multi-faith chapel and in front of the quad. Rosh Hashanah lunch will be a nice Jewish barbecue in front of Hendricks Chapel. Those are the important, big things I want to mention, but I am definitely still thinking about how just showing up. I think it's really just showing up at interesting things, interesting to me, but also where my presence can be value added and figuring out what those things are, so definitely open to invitations from anyone watching this.

I am available to the whole campus community. Of course, as a rabbi, my first concentric circle of obligation is to the Jewish community on campus and, of course, the greater community as well. Hendricks has a variety of chaplains from many different faith traditions. I think there are, I don't want to say the number, but I know more than ten of us. There's many of us. We're all available to students who are interested. I think finding those programs that would be as accessible to non-Jews as well as Jewish students is definitely something on my mind. I'm interested in doing these wellness circles that bring students together to talk about real things that they're struggling with or questions that they're having and creating space for students to support each other.

I'm going to be looking at ways to do that, maybe in partnership with Barnes down the road, but at first, probably here at Hillel. Then I know we also have an interdialogue center on campus, which is a wonderful resource for bringing students together from diverse backgrounds who are interested in social justice learning in different ways, so I'm hoping to get involved there as well. I was at Hamilton College directing the Hillel last year and we had an Interfaith Youth Corps grant to bring students together to have conversations at the intersection of religion and race. We did a social justice fellowship around that grant, and that was one of my highlights last year, so I'm hoping to get involved in a similar way on campus here.

John Boccacino:

I think there's definitely an appetite for that type of programming here on campus, and we all need to get involved and take an active role in healing our country and healing our campus community with the wounds we've dealt with, with social justice issues with issues of insecurity when it comes to food. There's so many, mental health awareness. You mentioned this earlier. There's a lot of issues that affect

all of us on campus, and I think you're in the perfect place at Hendricks Chapel. I believe Hendricks was the first multi-denominational campus center of faith on a university in this country, and you mentioned how many great interfaith partners you've got at Hendricks. How special is it to be a part of that team?

Ethan Bair:

I think it's really important. I think it's really important because the community that we build as interfaith chaplains, even just among ourselves, I think permeates out into the campus community. It's a wonderful group of people who serve as chaplains at Syracuse through Hendricks, and it's a blessing to get to know them and to work with them and to think together how we can do things together. I think sometimes, we all emphasize our own programs in our own community and wanting to be available in that way, but I think the interesting work is also when we come together and do things together. Yeah, I'm looking forward to those partnerships and deepening those relationships. Yeah, I think it's really, really important that there's a strong multi-denominational approach to religious and spiritual life on campus, whether it's housed in a chapel or another building of campus.

Here, we have this Hendricks Chapel, which is right at the heart of campus and I think is an inclusive space. That's not to say that Jewish students would naturally gravitate to going to a chapel no matter what it's called, but we're very fortunate at Syracuse that the Jewish community, we really have the best of both worlds with the Hillel building that is dedicated space and with being part of the multi-faith community at the same time. I think this is who we are as a campus, but also as a country, and it's really important that we learn from each other and that we respect each other and that we love each other. We can only do that when we know each other and show up together.

John Boccacino:

Very poignant and very on topic with what your job is going to bring to the campus here at Syracuse University as our new rabbi. I do want to give our audience a little insight into who you are as a person, and I want to start off the personal questions with this. I hear you're quite the singer. How did you become interested in singing, and do you have any go-to genres or songs that you like to sing for your friends and family?

Ethan Bair:

Wow, that's a nice question. Yes. In my previous congregation, I was both rabbi and cantor and I started singing as a kid and was in a lot of traveling choirs as a kid. Yeah, that was a big part of my life at one point. I wouldn't say it's such a big part of my life now, but I do enjoy leading services and I think the participatory singing is really a wonderful way to express ourselves spiritually. I think music is a universal language of the soul and of the heart, and so whether it's singing in Hebrew or going to your favorite dance concert and singing along and listening to music before and after, I think music is a really important spiritual tool.

For myself, I mean, I have two- and a four-year-old, two girls. Right now, the most singing I do is children's songs in the car with them, but yeah. I love teaching them and teaching college students and teaching everyone about Jewish music and Jewish music from different parts of the world. We're very blessed in the Jewish community to have so many different musical influences. I try to incorporate Mizrahi or Eastern Jewish music as well as the Ashkenazi, the European-centered and Sephardic melodies. It's a rich musical tradition in Judaism, and it's exciting to be able to pull from different parts of that.

John Boccacino:

