I’m sitting cross-legged inside the small refugee tent, decorated with posters from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Across from me is Mohammed, a new Canadian and former Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem. We make eye contact, I give a little smile. Diagonally to my left, sitting down, smiling and hugging his knees is Ori. He’s an Israeli who’s recently shown me a film he made while serving his mandatory military service in Southern Lebanon. The video, shot from an opening in his jacket with a hidden camera (the IDF doesn’t take kindly to soldiers filming while on duty) depicts the hardships of army life as the soldiers of his unit lip-sync the lyrics to Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”. “Mamma mia let me go” is not exactly the lyrical basis of a pro-military kind of film. To my left is Racheli. Also an Israeli, Racheli fits the stereotype of someone from Northern Tel Aviv; worldly, stylish, and VERY lefty. Racheli was condemning the occupation long before Ariel Sharon decided the “O” word was kosher. Outside the tent, the lobby of Sid Smith (the main student building at the University of Toronto) is a very tense mixture of students; one-third Palestinian solidarity activists, one-third Jewish students, and one-third...
interested bystanders. I look at Mohammed, at Ori and Racheli, and at the photographs of suffering Palestinians depicted as windows inside the walls of the tent. At this moment, I am in Mohammed’s house, and I am trying to see things from his perspective. Not only that, but there are two Israelis with me, trying to do the same. “Wow”, I think, “This is fantastic! What a model for peace and tolerance! If only there were more situations like this, maybe the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could finally come to an end!” And then, like a thunderclap that catches you off guard, my naïve yet hopeful musings are brought to a crashing halt. From outside our little peace-tent I hear a Palestinian student angrily remark, “Great, we put up a refugee tent on campus, and the Zionists come and occupy it.”

After we exited the tent (somehow I didn’t feel so welcome after that) any residual delusions of happy campus Israeli-Palestinian coexistence were completely put to rest. Pro-Israel students had gathered in the building and were circulating flyers decrying the notion of Israeli apartheid. Several small groups of Pro-Palestinian and Pro-Israel students began to gather and loudly debate each other’s positions. As Arab students chanted “Globalize the Intifada”, Zionist students began to sing Ha Tikvah – the Israeli national anthem – to drown them out. As more Zionist students began to arrive, draped in Israeli flags and IDF t-shirts, members of the Arab Student Collective called them racist Nazis, and “dirty Zios”.

This description comes from ethnographic fieldwork I conducted over a period of 16 months with Hillels of Greater Toronto at York University and the University of Toronto. Founded at the University of Illinois in 1923, Hillel – the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life now has over 500 regional centres in North America, Israel, Latin America, Australia and the former Soviet Union. Organized through a head office located in Washington D.C., Hillel’s role is to provide a space on campus where Jewish students can access Jewish programming and educational and religious activities.

The experience that I just described was part of the opening of Israeli Apartheid Week, an event organized by the Arab Student Collective (ASC) at the University of Toronto in January 2005. During this week, the ASC organized five evenings of panels dedicated to discussing Israeli apartheid - the occupation of Palestinian Territories, the Palestinian right of return, the security barrier, and other human rights and justice issues facing Palestinians in Israel. Coincidentally, that year Israeli Apartheid Week overlapped with Israel Fest, Hillel’s annual celebration of Israeli culture and society. Less than 12 hours after the Palestinian refugee tent was dismantled, the student building was transformed into a sea of blue and white - the opening Shuk or Market Day of Israel Fest. What followed was a week of clashing claims of national belonging between two diasporic groups who live ‘here’, but collectively identify through their shared connection to a distant ‘there’. During the confluence of the Palestine and Israel weeks the university campus constituted a stage for conflicting enactments of long-distance nationalism. The political climate of the campus was inflated not only by the views of the various student groups involved, but also by the political sentiments and external involvements of the two broader diasporic communities in question.
In this paper, I will attempt to shed some light onto how and why the campus becomes a stage for diasporic enactments of long-distance nationalism, by focusing on one particular element of this polarized political performance: the relationship between Zionism and Jewish diasporic identity. Specifically, the emphasis on Israel within the Jewish political community – and the public enactments of long-distance nationalism that they inspire – can be understood as part of a much deeper discourse about Jewish diasporic identity and its relationship to Israel. Using campus as a lens, I will argue that Israel has been instrumentalized by the organized Jewish community (OJC) and positioned as a central feature of Jewish diasporic identity. I will demonstrate that fears of assimilation and antisemitism have been key factors in this process.¹

In order to understand exactly how the expression of Jewish diasporic long distance nationalism or Zionism has become a defining feature of Jewish identity in Toronto, it is helpful to take a look back at the evolving structure of the OJC, particularly how and why it has changed over time. For this, we must begin with the issue of cultural assimilation. Central to the fear of Jewish assimilation is the notion that the boundaries that separate Jews from others have diminished. However, it is important to note that anxiety about cultural assimilation in the United States (and by extension, Canada) is by no means limited to the Jewish community. Since the 1960s, ethnic and immigrant groups have all struggled with the tensions between American assimilation and preserving ethnic heritage. With the rise of the civil rights movement in the ’60s, the assimilation theories of the Chicago School began to wane in popularity and ethnic groups began to galvanize around issues of identity politics. As I begin to outline the role that fear of assimilation has played in the central positioning of Israel for the Jewish community, it is important to recognize that such fears have arisen within this broader social and political context of identity politics and emergent ethnic self-awareness.

In 1990, the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF)² commissioned a national survey of the American Jewish Community, the findings of which had an enormous impact on Jewish planning and policy both in the U.S. and Canada. This survey, the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), was the second of its kind; the first having been commissioned in 1970. The NJPS 1990 indicated a drastically increased rate of assimilation within the U.S. Jewish community, findings that sent shockwaves through the OJC. The 1990 data suggested a 4.6 percent decline in Jewish population (Goldstein 1992:93). Goldstein interprets this decline to be the result of a number of factors, such as: a growing rate of intermarriage – from 8 percent in 1970 to 31 percent in 1990 (1992:126); generation status – more American Jews assimilate as they move further away from the original generation of immigrants who tended to adhere to traditional religious practices (1992:108); declining fertility levels – rates in 1990 were half of those indicated in the 1970 NJPS (1992:122); and very low rates of ritual practice – 62 percent reported that Shabbat candles were never lit, 83 percent
reported that laws of kashrut were not followed, and 28 percent indicated that they had a Christmas tree in the home (1992:132-136).

With the NJPS 1970 numbers as a point of comparison, the declining numbers of practicing Jews in 1990 were quite alarming for the Jewish community. Referred to as the “silent Holocaust” by one writer (Fiedler 1991:3), the issue of “Jewish continuity” became the primary focus of Jewish community efforts and the central concern of the OJC. Task forces and study groups were struck to address what was considered to be the critical Jewish issue of the time. As a means of addressing the threat to Jewish continuity, two major issues dominated the Jewish agenda – Jewish education and Israel (Grossman 1995:166). Interestingly, these two imperatives – Jewish education and Israel experience – came together and were realized in the revitalization of Hillel. As a result of the NJPS 1990, the university campus was deemed to be a “key gateway opportunity for strengthening Jewish identity” (Rubin 2000:7). Since 85 percent of all young Jewish adults pass through the campus system, the CJF decided to focus its efforts there (Rukin 1994).

Since Hillel was an institution that was already established and available on university campuses across the continent, it made sense that it would be operationalized to help mitigate what was seen as an “uncertain Jewish future in the open society of North America… decreasing knowledge of Judaism, decreasing involvement with Jewish communal life, growing rates of disaffections and indifference and increasing intermarriage” (Rukin 1994:1). Under the new system, Hillel would be provided with a bolstered budget and would become the central agency through which campus services would be delivered. These changes – direct responses to the threats to Jewish Continuity indicated in the NJPS 1990 – led to a complete overhaul of Hillel.

The revitalization that took place at Hillel in response to the NJPS 1990 was characterized by, among other things, a renewed emphasis on Israel as a means of attracting young Jews to Judaism. It should be noted that the connection to Israel is a foundational aspect of Jewish existence, however, feelings of diasporic attachment and belonging are constantly re-created and maintained through a very specific set of practices that emphasize the centrality of Zionism for Jewish identity. Through the involvement of Jewish philanthropists, Hillel helped pioneer the Birthright Israel program. This program was designed in recognition of the fact that “Israel is an important element in helping Jewish students to explore their Jewishness” (Rubin 2002:18); through Birthright, any Jewish 18 – 26 year-old that had not previously been on an organized tour to Israel was eligible for a free ten day educational tour of the country. Through this initiative, as well as the eventual (2002) partnership with the Jewish Agency in Israel to create an Israel Affairs and Advocacy centre, Israel eventually became an important tool for the realization of Hillel’s motto of the time – “to maximize the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews” (Rubin 2002:13). In other words, once Hillel had been overhauled to address the challenges posed by assimilation and lack of Jewish identification, Israel was chosen to be the vehicle through which “Jewish continuity” would be maintained. Through these efforts, it was believed that unaffiliated students would be attracted by Israel programming and that assimilation might be
diminished by a renewed interest in Jewish campus life. In other words, successful marketing of Israel to unaffiliated Jewish students was believed to be the key to attracting them to Hillel and to Judaism in general.

In the Canadian context, the NJPS findings resulted in similar developments; Hillel was assigned a more prominent role on campus and Israel became a primary focus of its campus programming. Interestingly, despite the fact that Canadian Jews are approximately one generation behind the processes of acculturation and assimilation of American Jews, the statistical data suggests that social trends impacting American and Canadian Jews are similar; as a result, constructs of Jewish identity in both countries are quite comparable (Kosmin 1994:2). Just as in the U.S., in the early 1990s the Canadian OJC commissioned numerous studies and reports concerning the diminishment of Jewish identification.

A couple of interesting points of divergence are that, compared to American Jews, Canadian Jews are actually more connected to and knowledgeable about Israel (Shahar and Rosenbaum 2006a:2). According to a Canadian census analysis done in 2006, 40 percent of Canadian Jews had visited Israel twice or more, compared to 17 percent in the U.S.; and while only 25 percent of American Jews consider themselves Zionists, this number is nearly double for Canadian Jews, at 42 percent (Shahar and Rosenbaum 2006a). Out of any Jewish community in North America, Toronto has the highest rates of visitation to Israel (Shahar and Rosenbaum 2006b:49). Despite these differences (or perhaps in light of them), as in the U.S., the Canadian reports consistently point to Israel as a potential tool against the forces of secularism and assimilation.4

As in the U.S., in the post-90’s Canadian context there were also some major changes in the structure and organization of Hillel and the campus community. However, these changes were heavily influenced by fears of antisemitism that were set off by one event in particular; during the second Palestinian Intifada, tensions at Concordia University elicited a dramatic response from the Canadian OJC. In the fall of 2002, Hillel (as well as some other Jewish community organizations) had planned an event for campus.5 They had invited former Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu to give a talk on campus. The talk was to take place in the university’s main downtown building, the Hall Building. When Solidarity for Palestinian Rights (SPHR) found out about the talk, they decided to protest the event. Eventually, several groups came together and under the new name Coalition for a Just Peace in the Middle East and attempted to shut down the event. As one protester explained, “We are having a strike on Monday morning to prevent Mr. Netanyahu from coming and giving his Zionist speech” (Canadian Press Newswire 2002). Coalition students protested outside the building and prevented attendees from entering. Eventually a riot broke out, and there were some minor injuries sustained and physical damage done to the Hall Building.

The Concordia event elicited a dramatic fear of rising antisemitism and set off an important chain of events that re-mapped the structure and function of the Canadian OJC. In response to what was perceived to be an intensely antisemitic act, several influential community members got together and struck the Israel Emergency Cabinet (IEC), “to address
the mounting anti-Jewish sentiment that has become part of our global reality” (Hineni Magazine 2003). Eventually, this temporary group evolved into a permanent structure, the Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA). CIJA’s board members (the influential community members of the IEC) were set with the task of addressing and combating not only the lack of Jewish identification in young Jewish adults, but what was perceived to be the new antisemitism on Canadian campuses. CIJA became the leading force for Israel advocacy in Canada and the umbrella of the existing Federation structure. Within this new structure, CIJA would be the overseeing body, and funds would go through them to the various other community groups, such as the municipal United Jewish Appeal locals, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) and the Canada Israel Committee (CIC) as well as the Canada Israel Experience, the organization that runs Canadian youth trips to Israel, including all Hillel and Birthright programs.

At this time, a new national campus organization was created to oversee all the local Canadian Hillels. National Jewish Campus Life (NJCL) is a CIJA initiative, and is meant to provide funding and other resources to all the Canadian campuses. Through NJCL, CIJA’s ideological approach to Israel advocacy is filtered down to the local Hillel level. Within this framework, Hillel was set to be the frontline of what was perceived to be a war against Israel on Canadian campuses. Through NCJL, local Hillels were provided with advocacy programs and professionals who would teach Hillel students how to be effective Israel advocates on campus. Hillel budgets were expanded and new staff members were hired to bolster the Israel Affairs departments of each campus Hillel. Israel programs and special events such as IsraelFest – the Zionist event the coincided with the ASC’s Israeli Apartheid week that I described earlier – are direct products of these developments.

What is clear from this brief overview is that through the efforts of the OJC, and as a response to fears of increased assimilation and antisemitism, the approach to strengthening Jewish identity on campus has become highly focused on Israel advocacy. As a result of this blurring of Jewish and Zionist interests, the perceived threat to Israel (both in the Middle East and on campus) is experienced by the Jewish community as a direct assault against the primary means by which it has chosen to identify itself. In this sense, Zionism has come to hold a dual meaning; not only is it a political ideology rooted in concrete historical specificities, it is also an existential quality of Jewishness in general. As seen in the efforts of the OJC – and as mirrored in much of Hillel’s campus programming – being Jewish and Zionist have become one and the same.

In mapping out the relationship between Jewish identity and Israel for the OJC, what becomes evident is that connection to Israel has become a central feature of Jewish diasporic ethnic identification, and fears of assimilation and antisemitism have been integral factors in this process. Central to the fear of Jewish assimilation is the notion that the boundaries that separate Jews from others have diminished. The instrumentalized use of
Israel on campus to attract Jews to Hillel is an attempt to bolster the boundaries that maintain Jewish difference. As Jewish assimilation continues, so too do fears that Jewish continuity will be threatened; the emphasis on Israel as a means of offsetting this process has galvanized the Jewish community and Israel has become a central pillar of identification for a current generation with even less attachment to traditional religious forms of Jewish identification, and for whom Israel represents the ultimate defence against the historical antisemitism that victimized their parents and grandparents. As I have shown, campus has been targeted as a central avenue for the promotion of Jewish continuity, and the OJC is intimately connected and invested in these efforts. However, the blurring of Judaism and Zionism within these efforts has meant that the expression of Judaism on campus is achieved in many instances through displays of diasporic nationalism.

I began this presentation with an ethnographic example of clashing claims of belonging, and by asking how and why the campus has become a stage for diasporic enactments of long-distance nationalism. In examining one side of this polarized issue, it is clear that the instrumentalized use of Israel to bolster Jewish identity on campus has meant that Judaism and Zionism are blurred, and diaspora nationalism has become the defining feature of Jewish diasporic identity. For the Jewish community, this slippage between Jewish and Zionist identification has meant that anti-Zionist rhetoric (a common element of the anti-Imperialist, post-colonial discourse that characterizes much of the campus social and political public sphere) constitutes an attack against the Jewish people as a whole. However, this analysis only applies to one side of the all too common spectacle of Israeli-Palestinian campus conflict – the Jewish community. In order to broaden the understanding of how the university campus becomes a stage for these dramatic claims of conflicting belonging, similar ethnographic analysis of Palestinian diasporic identities must be undertaken.

Notes

1. It is important to note that there are other Jewish groups – on the right and left of the political spectrum – whose views are not shared by the mainstream, organized Jewish community in Toronto. However, the organized Jewish community as such represents mainstream Jewish opinion in Toronto and Canada.

2. Established in 1932, the Council of Jewish Federations is the North American association of roughly 200 Jewish Federations. Federations are the central Jewish community organizations that serve about 800 localities in the U.S. and Canada (Council of Jewish Federations 1991). Federations are umbrella groups that work with other Jewish agencies to promote the interests and social welfare of the Jewish community.

3. The Jewish Agency, or Sochnut in Hebrew, was established by the government of Israel after the creation of the state in 1948. Its mission involves the promotion of Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel), Jewish-Zionist education, and partnerships with global Jewish or-
ganizations to involve diaspora Jewry in the shaping of Israeli society (The Jewish Agency 2007).

4. For instance, according to a 1991 report from the Canadian CRB Foundation, travel to Israel promotes attachment and solidifies commitment to Judaism (The CRB Foundation 1991). In 1993, the United Israel Appeal of Canada commissioned a report by Brandeis University professor Gary Tobin. Tobin drew data collected from the Toronto Jewish community and provided an analysis for the Canadian context. Similar to the findings of the NJPS 1990, Tobin found that fourth generation Canadian Jews were more likely to intermarry, less likely to have Jewish friends, and more likely to feel distant from Israel than first, second and third generation Jews (Tobin 1993: 2). In a section on policy recommendations, Tobin suggests that in order to have a positive impact on Jewish identity, “special attention should be given to strengthening ties to Israel” (ibid.:3). To these ends, he recommended organizational missions, school trips and college programs, as well as a stronger emphasis on Israel as part of Jewish curriculum (ibid.). This approach to the strengthening of Jewish identity in young people relies on the same instrumentalized use of Israel as seen in the American context.

5. Netanyahu’s trip to Canada was sponsored by Israel Bonds, The Asper Foundation and Hebrew University (Canadian Jewish News 2002).

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Author contact information:
Emma Jo Aiken-Klar
emmajo.aiken@utoronto.ca