



The Quad Squad

Josh Rolnick

Last fall, Moment asked me to write an article addressing “the situation for Jews on campus.” My charge was to ascertain the extent of Israel bashing and anti-Semitism on college greens, from Cambridge to San Francisco, Chicago to Austin, Texas, and everywhere in between.

Dozens of articles had been written on the subject since the spring of 2002—many using the language of war to describe the “battle” between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian students on campus. Indeed, a careful reader might have detected a narrative arc worthy of the Maccabees.

The campus situation began deteriorating in April, as reported in a New York Times article, “Campus Tensions Growing With Support for Palestinians.” “Pro-Palestinian groups have become something of a cause célèbre on university campuses,” the Times noted. “Using emotional demonstrations that depict the Palestinian struggle as one for human rights and justice, they have attracted support from other popular campus movements of recent years, including sweatshop opponents, affirmative action supporters, and campaigners for a so-called living wage.”

In August, a Jerusalem Post article, “Take Back the University,” explained that Jewish organizations were “mobilizing” to take on the “resurgence of anti-Israel activity on U.S. college campuses [that] has left pro-Israel students dazed and unprepared.”

By October, a “battle” was in full swing, and campus war correspondents sharpened their pencils. A Time magazine article, “A Campus War over Israel,” noted that “a new kind of pro-Palestinian college activism is spreading. Guerrilla theater is one of the tactics.” Days later, a Washington Post article headlined “Campus Collision on Israel” noted that Jewish groups were concerned about the “creeping tide of anti-Semitism on campus.”

Yet this war would not last long. In December, the Forward, one of the nation’s leading Jewish newspapers, ran a page-one article headlined “Anti-Israel Tide on Campus is Waning, Activists Report,” explaining that “pro-Israel students” were “growing increasingly more confident” on campus. Days later the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the global Jewish newswire, released an article proclaiming “Israeli Forces Winning Campus Battle.”

The Jewish community, stung by anti-Israel incidents on dozens of campuses last spring, had leaped in to fill a void.

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the 65,000-member organization that lobbies Congress on Israel’s behalf, led the charge, recruiting and training four student activists on each of 60 campuses in 35 states—students who would become the foot soldiers on campuses from coast-to-coast.

Hillel, the largest Jewish campus organization in the world, brought some 400 students on an advocacy mission to Israel, 80 of whom stayed on for two weeks of intensive pro-Israel training at Tel Aviv University.

Alpha Epsilon Pi, the Jewish fraternity, made Israel advocacy a central component at its international convention, attended by 260 students from 98 schools. After the convention, 54 students from 36 schools stayed behind for more intensive pro-Israel training.

Twenty-six Jewish organizations, including AIPAC, Hillel, and AEPi, came together to create the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC), an organization that holds weekly conference calls during which Jewish leaders talk strategy and share intelligence about Israel-bashing and pro-Israel initiatives nationwide.

Groups from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to the Jerusalem-based Upstart Activist put together training materials and programs for beleaguered pro-Israel students across the country. Web sites sprang up with tools for student activists. Jewish foundations, other organizations, and independent donors pumped millions of dollars at the problem, determined to stamp out the anti-Israel campus menace.

But did it work? Had pro-Israel students truly gained the upper hand on campus?

Yes, according to Jonathan Kessler, AIPAC's leadership development director.

"Students were unprepared to meet the challenges on campus last year, and they too often conceded the field to Israel's detractors," Kessler says. "This year they are running circles around Israel's detractors."

No, says Debbie Schluskel, a Detroit area attorney and outspoken Israel advocate, who spoke at AEPi's convention. "Jews are under siege on campus," says Schluskel. "Anti-Israel movements on college campuses are growing and becoming more powerful."

Maybe, argues Jeffrey Ross, director of campus and higher education affairs for ADL. "The anti-Israel coalition seems to have abated somewhat," Ross says. "It was like a fever; it increased and went up to a crisis point last spring, but the fever has peaked and now it's come down."

"But if you have a [protracted] war with Iraq," he adds, "it is fair to say a good part of the anti-war movement will reinvigorate and take up the themes of the anti-Israel campaign." So have pro-Israel Jews "taken back the campus"?

It depends on whom you ask.

Israel Bashing on Campus

There are about 15 million students attending 2,400 U.S. colleges and universities. About 3,400 of them are Israelis, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE). But more than 76,400 are from predominantly Muslim countries, according to an analysis of figures provided by the IIE.

"While it's not true that every Muslim visiting is involved in anti-Israel activity," Kessler says, "none are involved in pro-Israel activity. So there is a basic asymmetry in the Middle East narrative on campus which does form one of the parameters of our work."

Although there are some 350,000 Jewish students on U.S. campuses, officials say, only about 52,000 of them have ever been to Israel. About 1,200 U.S. students studied abroad in Israel during the academic year that ended in 2001—a 68 percent drop from the previous year, according to the IIE.

Many Jews simply do not have the knowledge or personal Israel experiences to distill fact from fiction. "The Jewish students on our campus are either too afraid, or apathetic, or just ignorant about the cause of the conflict altogether," says Dennis Dubinsky, 23, an AIPAC-trained senior at San Francisco State, one of the campuses hardest hit by Israel detractors last spring.

Many Jewish collegiate supporters of Israel, meanwhile, had, in the years following the Oslo Accords, been focused elsewhere. "There was a whole generation of Jewish college students that had no concept they would ever need to defend Israel," says Eric Bukstein, 21, a senior at the University of Michigan. "When I got to campus, we were doing cultural programming or advocating for the peace process. It never had anything to do with the Palestinians."

All of that changed, some would say overnight.

The initial anti-Israel salvo was launched at Berkeley last February, when students held the first nationally promoted divestment conference, aimed at pressuring universities to sell stock from their endowment portfolios in corporations doing business in Israel.

In the first five months of 2002, according to the ADL, there were at least 63 anti-Jewish incidents on campuses nationwide—a 320 percent increase over the same period in 2001. In April alone, as daily headlines told of Israel's military incursion into the West Bank following a suicide bombing at a Netanya Passover seder, there were 33 anti-Jewish incidents.

Here are some lowlights:

On the first night of Passover, a vandal threw a brick through the glass door at Berkeley's Hillel and spray-painted "F— JEWS" on the wall, according to the ADL.

A week later on Holocaust Remembrance Day, Students for Justice in Palestine held a raucous rally in remembrance of the April 9, 1948, "Deir Yassin massacre," when "Zionist militias" killed 100 civilians. "I saw signs that said 'Sharon = Hitler' and 'Magen David = Swastika,'" says Jesse Gabriel, 21, a Berkeley junior and student body president.

After the rally, about 500 pro-Palestinian protesters stormed Wheeler Auditorium, where 600 students were taking a midterm, demanding that Berkeley divest its \$6 billion in Israeli holdings. Police handcuffed the doors shut to keep out demonstrators, but 79 were eventually arrested.

That week, the Daily Californian student newspaper came out with student government endorsements. The editors were prepared to endorse Salaam Rafeedie for student advocate, until she elaborated on her platform.

"The student advocate's office is responsible for protecting all students' rights," Rafeedie told the paper's editorial board. "This includes rapists, this includes cheaters, this includes plagiarizers, thieves, Zionists—people who you necessarily would not want to go have dinner with."

Some of the worst incidents occurred on the campus of San Francisco State. The inflammatory flavor of dissent was captured during an April 9 anti-Israel rally, when, according to the ADL, demonstrators hoisted posters bearing pictures of soup cans reading "Made in Israel," listing "Palestinian Children Meat" among the ingredients. (See "Human Rights & Wrongs," *Moment*, August 2002.)

Dubinsky had set up a table nearby in honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day. Jewish students lit yahrzeit candles and handed out information as pro-Palestinian demonstrators waved Israeli flags bearing swastikas instead of stars of David. "Jews for Jesus came over and asked us if they could stand next to our table," Dubinsky says. "They were scared."

"The police came and stood next to us to protect us, and when the rally came they formed a barrier in front of us ... We had to be escorted by police to Hillel on Holocaust Remembrance Day."

That same day, students at more than 30 schools, including the University of Washington, Columbia, and the University of Massachusetts, launched a national "Day of Action" to generate momentum for divestment—a campaign backed in some cases by left-leaning Jews. (At the Berkeley rally, a Jewish speaker invoked kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning, to honor slain Palestinians.)

Pro-Palestinian students often resorted to guerrilla theater, adopting tactics from the anti-apartheid campaigns of the 1980s. At the University of Maryland, College Park, students from the Muslim Students Association and the Organization of Arab Students erected a "mock checkpoint" and labeled a campus courtyard "Occupied Territory."

At the University of California, Irvine, anti-Israel demonstrators displayed mock "body bags" of Palestinians "murdered" by the Israeli army.

Sometimes, outrageous slander made it into the pages of student newspapers.

At Rutgers University, the Daily Targum ran a front-page article about a pro-Palestinian rally, quoting a pharmacy student who noted that the media portrays Palestinians as terrorists.

In contrast, the student said, "When the Israeli government went into an all-female hospital and randomly selected 30 women, called them terrorists and executed them, you don't hear about it."

No pro-Israeli source was quoted in the story, and the statement ran unchallenged.

The rhetoric seemed to grow more inflammatory with each incident. At the University of Colorado, Boulder, someone scrawled the phrase "Zionazis" on the sidewalk during the planned observation of Holocaust Awareness Week. At UC Santa Barbara, a dorm construction site was defaced with anti-Israel graffiti, including "Anti Zion/Nuke Israel," and "Burn the Torah."

Professors targeted Israel as well.

At Berkeley, the instructor for the course "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance" sought to dissuade students who were not pro-Palestinian from taking his class. "The brutal Israeli military occupation of Palestine, an occupation that has been ongoing since 1948, has systematically displaced, killed, and maimed millions of Palestinian people," wrote the instructor Snehal Shingavi, in the course description, according to the New York Times. "And yet from under the brutal weight of occupation, Palestinians have produced their own culture and poetry of resistance."

The university pulled the listing, but only after pro-Israeli and civil liberties groups expressed outrage.

In what would be a harbinger of things to come, an associate professor at Yale circulated an anti-Israel email petition in April, according to the ADL, which had garnered more than 300 signatures by the fall.

In September, Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, founded Campus Watch, a Web site that monitors and gathers information on anti-Israel and anti-American professors who "fan the flames of disinformation, incitement and ignorance." The site, which has been blasted by some as an attack on academic freedom, currently tracks academics at 34 institutions.

Prominent Israeli detractors, meanwhile, spoke on campuses across the country. Hanan Ashrawi, the Palestinian spokeswoman, was a guest lecturer at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. Sami al-Arian, a University of South Florida professor, arrested for alleged ties to Palestinian Islamic Jihad, gave a talk at the University of Florida. Al-Arian also addressed the second national student divestment conference, held at the University of Michigan in October.

Meanwhile, pro-Israel speakers have been thwarted or seriously challenged. In September, riot police clashed with anti-Israel protesters at Concordia University in Montreal, forcing cancellation of a planned speech by former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In January 2003, students at York University in Toronto initially blocked Pipes from delivering a public lecture sponsored by a campus Jewish organization. The university expressed concerns about having a repeat of Concordia-style violence, but under pressure, it eventually agreed to host Pipes elsewhere on campus.

The Jewish Community Responds

In February 2002, the Oklahoma-based Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation awarded AIPAC a three-year, \$1.2 million grant to overhaul its college training program. The grant established the Schusterman Advocacy Institute, under which all of AIPAC's training would be conducted. The following month, AIPAC concluded a 15-month internal assessment when its board of directors approved a plan to thoroughly revamp and upgrade its political leadership development program, tripling its budget for pro-Israel campus training.

Kessler was arguably the best person to head the new effort. Shortly after graduating from Colgate University in 1978, Kessler had gone to work for AIPAC as the head of its newly created Political Leadership Development Program. He made more than 1,000 presentations to students on 200 campuses between 1980 and 1987, training a generation of pro-Israel activists.

After his departure from AIPAC in 1987, he worked at a pro-Israel political action committee; set up a political consulting firm in Washington, D.C., specializing in Middle East diplomacy; and then joined Middle East Insight Magazine, which had been a client at his consulting firm.

When Kessler returned to AIPAC in May, he brought with him a unique perspective on the campus problem. Kessler had co-authored a 1984 publication called *The AIPAC College Guide*, which noted that anti-Israel agitation on U.S. campuses goes back very nearly to Israel's founding. At the first Arab student convention in the United States, held at Michigan in July 1952, students unanimously agreed that the "issue of Palestine" was "beyond the possibility of compromise." "What we are seeing on campus today is just a new form of what we experienced 20 years ago," Kessler says. "Now it's 'divestment.' Then it was 'Zionism equals Racism.' That was also a full-blown campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state."

Kessler immediately set to work planning a leadership training conference. He got a major boost over the summer when Haim Saban, chairman and CEO of Saban Capital Group, an equity investment company based in Los Angeles, made a significant, though undisclosed, donation to the cause. Saban, the founder of Saban Entertainment and Fox Family Worldwide perhaps best known for producing the children's TV show *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, became the namesake of the AIPAC conference.

Meanwhile the Israel on Campus Coalition, supported by a \$750,000 three-year grant from the Schusterman Foundation, was hosting its weekly conference calls, and a consensus began to emerge: There was a problem with the way Jewish organizations were responding to the campus crisis. They were consistently behind the curve, reacting to events sponsored by Israel's detractors rather than setting their own proactive, pro-Israel agenda.

AIPAC's Pro-Israel Boot Camp

As one of his first acts, Kessler targeted 60 colleges and universities based on a slew of criteria, including whether the schools tend to produce policy makers and opinion leaders. All of the Ivies were targeted. So were dozens of state schools, like the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Alabama, which breed state political leaders.

Kessler also targeted several schools with sizable Jewish populations, like Yeshiva University in New York and Washington University in St. Louis, where he says many students care deeply about Israel, but they "aren't even coming close to their political potential as a proactive, pro-Israel voice.

"AIPAC is working very vigorously to engage them now," he says, "so that they will be engaged for the rest of their lives."

Once the schools were selected, AIPAC professionals went to work choosing four students from each university, handpicked for their involvement in campus politics and a demonstrated support for Israel. (The selection process was repeated in the fall, in the run-up to the second Saban conference, which was held the last weekend in December in Washington, D.C.)

AIPAC has turned dozens of would-be activists away, Kessler says, "because we have found that we can not be as effective training unlimited numbers made up of all who are only remotely interested."

The 240 students were brought together in July for the "AIPAC Schusterman Advocacy Institute—Saban Political Leadership Training Seminar" at the Westin Embassy Row hotel in Washington, D.C.

"It was Israel activist boot camp," says Bukstein, of Michigan. "You get up early in the morning and you go to bed late at night, and the hours in between are filled. We would eat lunch for 10 minutes."

Activists were given specific roles. The "political coordinator" was charged with motivating pro-Israeli students. The "advocacy coordinator" was taught to make the case for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. The "campus relations coordinator" builds relationships with College Democrats, College Republicans, student government officials, and campus media representatives. And the "liaison" recruits and guides the activists.

And, whereas past training has focused on teaching students how to respond to Israel's detractors on campus, Kessler's new approach encouraged activists to create a non-reactive, pro-Israel agenda on campus. They were taught to focus on Israel's positive attributes, such as its status as the Middle East's lone democracy, rather than to spend time defending Israel against charges that it is a racist state.

"It's very professional," says Toby Osofsky, 22, the liaison at UNC Chapel Hill. "They treated us like it was our job to be pro-Israel activists."

There are, it turns out, certain similarities. "If the students selected as portfolioed activists don't generally distinguish themselves in terms of their accomplishments," Kessler says, "then they are replaced very quickly."

At the summer conference, Republican pollster and political consultant Frank Luntz taught activists key words to use when speaking about Israel ("democracy" and "freedom" were two, says Avi Yotam, 20, a Stanford sophomore and liaison.)

Students attended narrowly focused breakout sessions, where AIPAC field organizers, Jewish professionals, and other activists urged them to form relationships with College Democrats and Republicans, student government representatives, and administrators, and to reach out to campus Christians.

At one session, "they taught us to always stay on message with the media," says Yotam. "If you say the word 'pro-Israel,' it should go hand-in-hand with 'pro-peace.'"

Perhaps the most tangible "how-to" strategy developed at the conference was the pro-Israel petition campaign. Students were trained to craft pro-Israel petitions with messages that would resonate at their schools. The finished products ranged from the University of Washington's "We stand with Israel in its quest for peace," to Yale's "We support our university's decision to invest culturally, financially, and intellectually in Israel and in her future."

As of January, AIPAC activists had collected 50,000 signatures on 60 pro-Israel petitions in 150,000 face-to-face encounters.

"Our students take pen and paper and clipboard and go door-to-door, dorm-to-dorm, and student-by-student, engaging them about the value of the U.S.-Israel alliance," Kessler says. "These are not petitions circulating on the Internet ... The point is not to get signatures. The point is that every signature represents a personal face-to-face encounter between a pro-Israel activist and an interested student."

Kessler estimates that for every person who signs, two don't—but in most cases, activists are able to engage all three in a positive discussion about Israel, dispelling anti-Israel myths. "One student might say, 'Are you telling me that Arabs vote in the Israeli elections? I had no idea,'" Kessler says.

At UNC, Osofsky says, they gathered 500 signatures last fall on a pro-Israel petition. "I walk up to people and I say, 'Hey, I have this petition, all you have to do is read it, no pressure,'" Osofsky says. "Most people, their automatic response is, 'Absolutely, I'll sign! Israel's great!' I've only gotten a few who say, 'I'm sorry, I don't want to sign that.' But I try to have a dialogue with everyone."

When activists get at least 1,000 signatures, they publish the petition as an ad in the campus paper. They then clip the ad and send it to their congressional delegation, requesting feedback. If legislators write back expressing support, those letters are published as ads—and those ads are sent back to the congressional representatives with invitations to speak on campus. As of January, AIPAC activists had invited, or drafted invitations to, more than 50 pro-Israeli members of Congress—14 of whom had already spoken on campuses about the importance of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

"Lots of people are doing 'leadership training,' but most of it is geared toward educating individuals," Kessler says. "AIPAC's leadership development work is all about the synergy between activists, the networking of sometimes remote campuses, and the orientation toward Washington, D.C."

"The whole idea is grassroots, retail, political engagement," Kessler adds. "It's a political model. That's why it's so different."

Gabriel, of Berkeley, says the training conference was a life-changing experience. "I always knew why to advocate for Israel, but I never knew how," he explains. "For the first time, I learned how."

Hillel: Taking the Show on the Road

Of all the Jewish groups that ramped up their Israel programming last spring, perhaps none is more visible on campus than Hillel, which has a presence at more than 500 colleges and universities nationwide.

Like AIPAC, Hillel recommitted itself to Israel programming with the help of several grants: \$250,000 from the Schusterman Foundation for campus training; \$100,000 from the Avi Chai Foundation to support student initiatives in 2003; \$100,000 from the Skirball Foundation to bring Israeli speakers to campus. All told, Hillel is dedicating some \$1 million annually to support Israel's cause on campus.

As part of its effort, Hillel launched its Grinspoon Israel Advocacy Internship program last year, providing hands-on training for some 50 pro-Israel students. Its Web site (www.hillel.org) offers students access to Israel advocacy tools, including downloadable banners and flyers. It created the Center for Israel Affairs in September to coordinate pro-Israel outreach.

But Wayne Firestone, who heads the center, says Hillel also appeals to students "who are less knowledgeable about Israel, and who are not quite ready for what some would call advocacy"—students who AIPAC's training doesn't reach directly. "These are students who are not necessarily impressed or reeled in by conflicts and confrontations," says Firestone, who also heads the ICC.

To that end, Hillel supports a range of grassroots pro-Israel student projects. At the University of Indiana, Hillel backed mock elections this winter, coinciding with Israeli balloting, to celebrate Israel's electoral process. At UC San Diego, Hillel supported a series of events throughout the semester, including an Israeli martial arts demonstration and an Israeli film festival, under the cleverly marketed slogan "Got Israel," borrowed from the well-known milk advertisements. At the University of Pittsburgh, Hillel is backing a poetry slam this spring.

Last semester, a Hillel board member initiated the "Israel at Heart" program, which, in conjunction with Israeli consulates in several cities, brought teams of three Israeli students to more than a dozen campuses. The students, who spoke in highly personal terms about what it's like to live in Israel, make wonderful ambassadors on campus, Firestone says. As of January, hundreds more Israeli students had applied for the few coveted spots, hoping to make the campus tour this spring.

Hillel also supported the effort of the Israeli consulate's New York office to bring the King David Drummers, a group of Israeli musicians, to campus greens last fall. In September, at Arizona State University, the drummers led an impromptu student procession to a sukkah, where many participated in the outdoor meal for the first time. "It turns out that four or five bare-skinned guys banging on a drum did more to generate interest in Israel than a five-star general would have," Firestone says. Plans were in the works to bring the drummers back for a second swing through campus this spring.

Meanwhile, Hillel and the regional consulates were working together to bring Yossi Vassa, an Ethiopian-Israeli comedian, on a 15-campus tour—supported by a \$20,000 grant from the United Jewish Communities/Federation Campus Campaign. Firestone says the 28-year-old comic, who talks about his transition from life in Ethiopia to life in Israel, forces students to think twice about portraying Israel as a racist state in the apartheid mold, and allows young Jews to connect in a way that professors and rabbis don't.

In January 2003, Hillel launched "Israel 101." With 101 days until Israel's Independence Day, the organization sent 101,000 postcards with pro-Israeli messages (one quoted Martin Luther King) to more than 500 campuses, challenging students to come up with creative pro-Israel programs. Hillel officials are hoping to inspire the creation of programs on at least 101 campuses, aiming for 1,001 participants at each venue, which would expose more than 100,000 students to positive, pro-Israel experiences.

Wherever We Stand ...

Has it worked? Did the community's infusion of time, money, and resources help students stem the anti-Israel tide?

In some places it's clear students never had to take back the campus in the first place. That's the story across much of the Bible Belt, where activists say their peers are often pro-Israel. Places like the University of Alabama. "There are more Christians here who have gone to Israel than Jews," says Ariela Aaron, 29, a second-year graduate student and AIPAC trainee. "I contacted the faculty advisor for the College Republicans, and the minute I told him I was Israeli and I speak Hebrew, he was behind me 100 percent."

On the other extreme sits San Francisco State University, where things are mercifully quiet right now. But, says Dubinsky, it's almost too quiet. "We are almost afraid to be proactive," he says. "We don't know how the rest of the campus will react."

And for institutions in between these two poles? Anecdotal evidence suggests that the situation is improving.

When Gabriel returned to Berkeley after attending AIPAC's conference in July, the atmosphere changed fast. In October, Hillel brought Dennis Ross to campus. The former U.S. envoy to the Middle East addressed nearly 600 students in the same building that had been overrun eight months earlier.

Meanwhile Gabriel, working with other pro-Israel students, put his AIPAC training to work, crafting a petition with a simple but forceful message: "We, UC Berkeley students, declare our opposition to the terrorism which has plagued Israel for 54 years. We Stand With Israel, Now and Forever." They got 1,087 students to sign it, and published it—a veritable wall of names in fine print, 10 solid columns across—as a full-page ad in the Daily Californian.

The next day, former Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak addressed some 2,000 students at Zellerbach Hall, an event sponsored by the student government and Hillel. A few students voiced opposition to Barak, and about 30 walked out. But the vast majority stayed and received Barak warmly. Afterward, Gabriel presented the former prime minister with a framed copy of the petition.

"Things are getting better," says Gabriel. "Pro-Israeli students at Berkeley are working together, inside and outside of government, and in the Greek system, to proactively advance the cause of Israel on campuses."

The same thing appears to be true at the University of Michigan, where student activists upstaged the second student divestment conference in October by holding an "Invest in Israel" rally several days earlier, blunting a negative message on Israel with a positive one of their own devising.

"We really tried to view this conference not as something to react to, but as a bump in the road of proactive activism," says Bukstein, who had trained at the summer Saban conference. "We took the whole idea of divestment and turned it on its head."

In the weeks leading up to the rally, they came up with the slogan "Invest in peace, Invest in Democracy, Invest in Israel." They worked closely with the local Jewish community, faculty and administrators, as well as with Jewish professionals who had already confronted the divestment movement at Berkeley. They advertised their rally in the Michigan Daily, the student paper, met with College Democrats and Republicans, and sold more than 1,000 bright blue T-shirts with a home-grown, big-tent slogan: "Wherever we stand, we stand with Israel."

Several hundred students attended the Thursday-night rally and heard Michael Bar-Zohar, a former Israeli Knesset member, speak about Israel as a Middle East beacon of peace and democracy. He didn't mention divestment. The next day, the Michigan Daily ran a front-page story headlined, "Hillel Rally Urges Campus to Take a Stance." A photo shows scores of blue-clad rally-goers hoisting pro-Israel placards.

As it turns out, Bukstein says, the media covered the pro-Israel lead-up to the conference more prominently than the conference itself—this despite a counter-demonstration held during the divestment conference by the Michigan Student Zionists, a group operating outside the AIPAC-Hillel fold.

Flush with victory, Bukstein was invited to Philadelphia in November to speak at the General Assembly, one of the largest and most important annual gatherings of the Jewish world, where he gave one of the most clear-headed assessments of the "situation on campus" to date.

At the conference, Bukstein warned against the kind of hyperbole and over-simplification that has prompted many to conclude “the campuses” are “on fire” and Jewish students are “under attack.” It would be preposterous, he said, to conclude that the campuses are burning. And yet in nearly the same breath, he warned that anti-Semitism remains “a huge problem.”

“There is good news,” Bukstein said. “There are scores of college students whose Israel advocacy emanates from the very core of their being. These students are bringing innovation and intellect to a generation of Jews and non-Jews who up until recently didn’t have a clue what advocacy was.

“But the work, our work, has only begun. This kind of shift takes time and requires serious commitment on many levels.”

“The task is great,” he concluded. “But so are the students.”