

Jewish faculty, staff need spaces for community (opinion).

[Marina Umaschi Bers](#)



I am a Jewish professor at a Jesuit university. I am lucky. While many of my colleagues at other institutions are struggling with the inappropriate responses by their leadership to the tragic massacre perpetrated by Hamas on Oct. 7 and are surprised to learn how much anti-Israel hate and antisemitism hides in their academic departments and in student groups, I feel supported. I am not alone.

I can breathe on my campus, and I can openly share my Judaism and my hurt. I am the founding chair of [J-FAST](#), the Jewish Faculty, Staff, Administrators and Allies affinity group at Boston College, funded and supported by the Office for Institutional Diversity. This group currently comprises more than 60 Jewish members and many non-Jews who consider themselves friends or allies.

Our mission at J-FAST is to provide opportunities for all members of the BC campus community to learn about Judaism, celebrate Jewish holidays and cultural traditions, engage in open dialogue, and discuss current events. The group aims to create a supportive environment to build community and develop partnerships to raise awareness about the Jewish experience on campus.

Little did we know that the group would quickly turn into a place for grieving. Our first event of the academic year, scheduled for Oct. 19, was planned months before the attack, as a social get-together lunch. However, we quickly switched gears.

I chose to stay away from politics and focus on feelings. While we all might have different political affiliations, different perspectives on the intractable conflict in the Middle East, and different approaches to religion and secularism, on that day, we all came together as human beings who work in a house of learning: a university. Thus, I chose to honor with learning those who have been slaughtered, those who are wounded, those who are kidnapped and those who are losing everything they have.

I chose, as inspiration, to start our gathering by focusing on the text of our weekly Torah—Old Testament—portion. After all, the terrorist attack happened on Simchat Torah, when we Jews celebrate the ending of one cycle and the beginning of a new one of learning Torah. Our gathering

corresponded with the story of Noah and the flood. I asked my colleagues to imagine how Noah must have felt, seeing his world destroyed, what he felt while he was inside the dark ark ... his fears ... his anger ... his confusion ... his despair ...

For most of us, our world, as we knew it, was also destroyed Oct. 7. The illusion of an academia in which there is a moral compass, and of a [liberal education](#) that teaches fundamental human values and can hold different political perspectives in respectful conversation with each other—this is now gone. I am not surprised. The academy has been a [brewing space](#) for baseless slogans, hurtful intersectionality and misinformation about the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for many years now. That is the reason why organizations such as the [Academic Engagement Network](#) were created (in 2015).

Many of my colleagues on campuses across the U.S. are genuinely surprised at the different forms of antisemitism that are now flourishing across the world. I am Argentine. I lost my cousin in the 1994 bomb attack on AMIA, the Jewish center in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people and wounded hundreds and is still unpunished. I am not surprised. Antisemitism for me is always a threat. And that is why we need community. To prevent. To be ready. To respond.

Jewish faculty, staff and administrators in the U.S. academy do not have built-in spaces for forming community. Hillel International is a wonderful institution, but its primary goal is to serve students. Jewish Studies departments might not exist or might be weak in many universities and, furthermore, they might not even have Jewish faculty teaching their courses. How do we find each other in times of crisis? How do we support each other? How do we advocate to our academic leadership when needed?

Our world has been destroyed and keeps being destroyed every time we read the paper, connect on social media, watch the news or hear directly about the horrors from Israeli and Palestinian friends. However, as the story of Noah reminded us, the flood did come to an end, and a new world needed to be constructed. Noah's generation paid a very high cost, but out of destruction came hope and the possibility of constructing something new. As Jews, we have seen this happen throughout history.

We concluded our gathering of the J-FAST affinity group by singing together, "*Hineh ma tov uma na'im, shevet achim gam yachad*"—"How good and pleasant it is for brothers and sisters to sit together." As faculty, we are not used to singing together. We lecture, we argue, we teach. That day, our singing voices were loud. There were tears; we felt safe and supported. It is time for faculty members across the U.S. to work with their own diversity offices, within their own academic structures, to provide the mechanisms and support for Jewish academics to find each other and build a much-needed community.

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