A Brandeis center becomes go-to place about Jewish state

Schusterman draws scholars from around globe

By Leah Burrows
Advocate Staff

On a sunny Friday morning, in a bright conference room on Brandeis University’s campus, something strange happened.

A group of about 20 people, young and old, conservative and liberal, American and Israeli, Jewish and Christian, gathered around a table, ate egg salad sandwiches and talked about Israel. Civilly.

There was no eye rolling, mumbling, pointed political comments or gotcha questions. It was simply a group of students and professors, trying to understand a country.

And it was a typical afternoon at the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, the largest academic resource of its kind outside of Israel.

Last summer, the center moved to the third floor of the $22.5 million Mandel building, the university’s new home for the humanities.

In addition to housing the offices of some faculty and staff, the center also displays the work of Israeli artists and maintains a small library of scholarly books about Israel.

Founded in 2007 by a Schusterman Family Foundation grant, the center is a hub for Israel research, not only for the Brandeis campus, but for scholars worldwide. Since it opened, the center has been visited by professors from more than 160 universities.

The center runs programs, hosts lectures, produces a scholarly journal and provides funding for the study of Israeli politics, history, culture and art.

Unlike an academic department, the Schusterman center does not offer regular classes. Instead, the center serves as a meeting point, helping scholars and students develop contacts and tap resources.

It offers conferences that help professors from other universities learn how to establish their own Israel studies departments or classes.

It also runs a fellowship program, Schusterman Scholars, which supports about a dozen Brandeis doctoral students from such departments as sociology, anthropology, political science and Near Eastern Studies. Their dissertation topics range from Israeli hiking trails to Palestinian to Russian Zionism.

If it has to do with Israel, there is probably a place for it at the Schusterman center – with one exception.

“There are those who may think we engage in advocacy, but that’s not true,” said Ilan Troen, who has been the center’s director since it opened. “Within the camp of those who engage in Israel studies are people of every perspective that one can imagine.”

The center has sponsored conferences that attract scholars from every political stripe.

“Most of us have internalized the idea that there is a place for advocacy,” said Shay Rabineau, a third-year Schusterman fellow.

“Ilan Troen, Schusterman Center director

Weekly seminars for fellows and professors, held Friday afternoons over lunch, have featured lectures on Israeli democracy, politics and history.

Even when people disagree, Rabineau said, they do so respectfully. “There is passion, not anger. People can say what they want without feeling attacked.”

Rabineau, and other fellows, attribute that atmosphere of acceptance to the center’s director.

“I’ve been Professor Troen’s [teacher’s assistant] for two semesters and when people sit in his class, he doesn’t show his hand,” Rabineau, 30, said. “They don’t know where he stands … in his class, any viewpoint is OK.”

Troen is a Boston native and an alumnus of both Brandeis and Hebrew College. He traveled to Israel as a young man and fell in love with the country. After earning a doctorate in history at the University of Chicago, Troen made aliyah in 1975. “I wanted to be part of the most significant story in Jewish history in last century,” he said.

As a professor at Ben Gurion University, Troen pioneered the field of Israel studies, creating classes, curriculum and petitioning the department to offer its first degree in the subject.

Since that first degree, the academic study of Israel has grown exponentially on campuses throughout the world.

While at Ben Gurion 16 years ago, Troen founded the journal Israel Studies to cover the new field. Now based at the Schusterman center, the journal circulates at 2,000 university libraries.
Scholars promote civil dialogue on Israel

Continued from Page 14

Over the last four years, the center has widened its scope beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and international politics to include the humanities and social sciences. It covers Oz as well as Rabin, just as a Russian studies program may cover Tolstoy as well as Gorbachev.

“Because people are coming in from all different disciplines, each one with a different method, you become exposed to different ways of thinking,” said Joseph Ringel, a Schusterman scholar studying Sephardic Judaism in Israel.

The scholars also bring varied personal backgrounds. Although the fellows are primarily Jewish, they include Christians and Muslims as well.

“We all have different backgrounds,” said Ringel, who is also studying to be a rabbi at Yeshiva University, “but we are all interested in exploring what Israel is all about. That’s part of scholarship, the search of truth. It’s not about imposing your own belief system, it’s about learning.” Schusterman scholars say they hope to change the tone of the debate over Israel.

“Schusterman scholars say they hope to change the tone of the debate over Israel. “This is an important model for other campuses,” said Rachel Fish, a fourth-year scholar. “The more knowledge students have about Israel the greater the chance you have for students from a variety of positions to understand the state and the challenges that face it.”

Beat of Israel to replace CJP festival this year

New England Celebrates Israel will not be held this year. Instead, Combined Jewish Philanthropies will be sponsoring the Beat of Israel, an afternoon of music and dance for families with children ages 5 to 10.

The event will take place June 12, from 1 to 3 p.m., at Congregation Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill. It will feature music by Mama Doni Band and Yom Hadash; Israeli dancing; face-painting; and Israeli food.

In past years, CJP has mounted a festival with booths representing Jewish organizations; music; and camel rides. Citing staff changes, CJP said it didn’t have time to organize New England Celebrates Israel this year.

For more information on the Beat of Israel, call 617-457-8782.

The Schusterman Center’s new home at the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis University

Spaces still available

SHAS Summer Program
June 27-August 5 (for ages 21 mos.-6 years)
Outdoor fun, water play, art, music, sports, AC inside
Pick your days and pick your weeks
NEW FAMILY DISCOUNTS
(contact Anne or Suellen: summer@striarhebrew.org)

SHAS 6th graders visiting author Lois Lowry at her Cambridge home.