

Bridging Understanding | Shira's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

Warning: The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

Interviewer: Tell us about your connection to Israel.

Shira: For sure. As a Jewish person, I think I speak for a vast majority of Jews when I say that we see Israel as our ancestral homeland. So even though we've been exiled from the region several times throughout history and found homes throughout the world in the diaspora — myself, like many other Jews, view Israel as our homeland. Even if we're not living there currently.

I've actually never been to Israel, but I'm looking forward to going this year for the very first time.

I do have some distant family, some cousins, as well as I have a lot of friends who ended up moving to Israel permanently — that's known as making *aliyah* in Hebrew, which is a very special process — who've decided to like go back and reclaim their ties to Israel.

And what brought you to McMaster?

So, I was really drawn to one of McMaster's more specialized programs, and it was my top choice when I was in high school. And I was fortunate enough to be accepted, so I was really excited to come to McMaster.

I didn't know so much about the Jewish community when I was coming in, but I was really excited to join the community when my high school had the president of Hillel come speak to us, to introduce herself and introduce Hillel.

And that's the first time I'd really heard about it.

And I was really inspired by her, and I remember sitting in the Zoom call — because it was COVID — and I thought that I really wanted to be like her because she was the president of Hillel. She was in my program that I really wanted to get into at the time, and I really, really looked up to her, so it was really exciting to both be accepted into her school as well as take on a leadership role.

And I immediately got really involved in the Jewish community here and throughout my years I've been lucky to be involved in different roles in Hillel as well as make connections with other religious and cultural clubs, both at McMaster and in the Hamilton community.

And so, I guess that's how I found myself here.

Is there something you wish your fellow students knew about you or your experiences?

I wish that other students knew about the nuances of the Israel-Palestine conflict and understood that there's such a variety of viewpoints within the Jewish community and that one person cannot, like, possibly encapsulate the views of the entire community.

So oftentimes words are used in like a very charged way. For example, "Zionist." ... I'd say "Zionist" is the main one that I think is a word that's been taken on campus and turned into almost a slur or a bad word when 90% of Jews identify as Zionists, which just means that you think that a Jewish state should exist in that land because that's the lands that the Israelites came from.

And I think that seeing this word being turned into a bad word, and we see a lot of, like, harmful rhetoric towards this group of Zionists, both on social media or on posters at protests on campus.

And when average Jewish students or faculty or staff see that language, it's really hurtful whether or not it's meant that way. Just because a majority of us identify as Zionists. And I wish I was able to tell other students how much it really impacts our community; that's a very small community on campus.

So, I would hope that students can either educate themselves on like the meaning of these words, and also just talk to a Jewish student or talk to a Jewish professor to learn about their connections to the region. Because a lot of us do have family and friends there, and when you use words like "all Zionists are racists" or "all Zionists support genocide" they're really just talking about people who are sitting beside them in class or teaching them in class.

So, I think that having more dialogue where we learn about what these terms mean and also how they impact members of our community is really important.

What is the impact when that happens?

I think it's very isolating. As I mentioned I'm in a more specialized smaller program, and there's only a few Jewish students in my year.

I would say that a majority of my peers in my year of my program know who I am and know my level of involvement with the Jewish community and know that I'm Jewish.

And around October 7th it was very isolating because of my involvement. I think the label of "Zionist" and its association with being a bad word and being associated with the government of Israel became clear very quickly and I very much felt the shift within my program in terms of my social circles and the way that I was like being interacted with even by the administration of my program.

So, I would say that it's had a very personal impact where I don't feel like I can go to some members of the administration, or I don't feel like I can say certain things around certain people.

And I think that this like level of self-censorship almost and not being able to be like who I truly am, it does take a personal toll. And I would say that it's

pretty representative of what my friends and what other people in Hillel are going through as well.

In your time here, are there supports that have helped you?

Yeah, for sure. I would say that Hillel is definitely my strongest source of support on campus. It's just really been a safe space that I know I can go to and just to talk and vent about my feelings but also be able to be my true self.

I know that when I go, I can talk about Judaism and have, like, nuanced conversations about the conflict as well. I think that it's also allowed me to like work through some of those complex thoughts because as I mentioned, it's such a nuanced issue and sometimes it's hard to receive like almost ... almost like the intellectual stimulation of understanding the full geopolitical conflicts in like our regular academic spaces because those like nuanced conversations don't happen. It's very black and white.

So I can go to Hillel and we can have these hard conversations and ask these hard questions and it allows me to sort of process all of these really hard things that we hear about in the news as well.

You talked about isolation and feeling like you couldn't bring it up. What would you say to other students who are struggling with something similar?

I would say that community is really important and it's really what's sustained me. Over the past year and a half, as we've seen a lot of like of this anti-normalization. I would say — I'll call it the anti-normalization agenda on campus, where there's this idea that if you associate with Hillel, associate with Jews or Israelis, you're normalizing the Israeli government and you're like giving it credibility. And if we don't want it to exist, we need to stop associating with these groups altogether.

So I'd say that's what we've been dealing with. And in order to combat this anti-normalization idea, we both need to like have strength in our own community but also be strong and reaching out to other communities and allies as well.

So Hillel has been a huge support system for me like emotionally as things have gotten more difficult socially. Hillel has also taken a really strong stance against this idea of anti-normalization on campus by trying to engage other cultural and religious groups.

So, for example, last week Hillel held a unity Shabbat and they invited people from different faith communities, also administration as well. Just to sort of go against this idea that people can't associate with Hillel because we're Jewish and therefore have this like implicit tie to Israel. And unfortunately, some students turned down our offer and said like they won't associate, but then you also see the other side of things where allies do show up. And I think that students being able to see that we do have allies is really, really important and show that we're not alone on campus, even though it feels that way.

So I would say to find community but also look for ways that your community can work with other communities to show that there's allyship and solidarity as well.

You mentioned the importance of conversation and dialogue. Can you say a bit more about what that could look like?

For sure. It's something that I've thought a lot about just because I think that it's very much lacking on campus right now and I see the gaps, especially within my program. We have courses and they've tried to like implement, I guess spaces to have these types of conversations, but I think that in some ways it's been implemented in an inappropriate way where you have facilitators who aren't educated on the topic and end up really saying hurtful things about the Jewish community.

But in my case, I've been in lectures where things have been said about Jews who take one stance versus another stance, saying that they've been able to — like that these people like have a better understanding of the topic by nature of their personal views.

So I think that it's really important to ensure that people are entering these conversations, like being willing to learn from the people who've actually gone through or, like, are experiencing these events themselves. Learning from firsthand experiences.

So for example, with this [Bridging Understanding series] project, it's so important because you're hearing from students who are directly attached to the conflicts rather than hearing it from social media or hearing it from people who've never really had these personal experiences. And I think that that's the first step is to have people enter the conversations who do have the personal attachment. And it's not just like a buzzword or a topic of interest for them that will pass. Like people who truly are connected to the issue, they should be really centred in the conversation.

And I think it's really important because as I mentioned, like a lot of my social circle in my program, a lot of them have, like, latched onto this issue as like the new social justice issue of the day. And they often speak over the voices of people who are actually impacted, which has a really, like, isolating, alienating effect to those who are actually being impacted.

So, I think having those people learn from those who are experiencing the issue is probably the first step.

Is there something that inspires you or motivates you as you're going through school with all this?

I think I would say that my family really motivates me and specifically my grandparents.

I think I learned so much from them growing up in terms of being an advocate and being an ally to other communities, and I can expand on that: On one side of my family, my grandparents are from South Africa and they were — they grew up and lived in South Africa during apartheid and they got really involved in the civil rights movement when they were like around my age, like when they were teenagers. And they knocked on doors for the more like liberal party of the time to garner support for racial equality.

And I grew up hearing a lot about that and I also grew up learning about like the history of allyship between the Jewish community and the black community, like not just in South Africa but in the States as well.

And that taught me the importance of like being a strong advocate and just like being there for people who like, have similar struggles as you, but in

different ways. And I've tried to do that just like in small ways, like on an individual level, but also within Hillel, like looking for ways that we can be allies to different communities as well.

And on the other side of my family, my grandfather is a Holocaust survivor, and he was actually saved by an ally, by a Japanese diplomat who risked his life to write thousands of transit visas to help Jews escape Lithuania and get to ... a part of China doesn't exist anymore, but it's called Manchuria, and then they lived in, I guess what was like a ghetto there for a couple of years, until they could emigrate to Canada.

And this Japanese diplomat was told that he wasn't allowed to write these visas. And he said that he could disobey his government, but he couldn't disobey God, and this is what God had been calling him to do. So he hand wrote these 2,000 plus visas saved thousands of lives and my grandfather was one of those people who had his life saved by an ally who wanted to do the right thing.

So, I grew up hearing that story as well and how important it is just like to do the right thing, even if it's hard in the moment. So I guess I grew up with these family stories and knowing that those like good people can exist and like that led to me being here today, I think that really motivates me to try and do what I can, like even if it's in a small way by like helping a friend speak to a professor about an Antisemitic instance, or just like looking for ways that Hillel can be an ally to other communities. That's I would say what motivates me to continue doing this type of work.

Do you find a way to see hope for the future and what does that look like?

Yeah, I do see hope. I see, like glimmers of hope, like as I mentioned, Hillel had like a unity Shabbat dinner last week, and I had non-Jewish friends come and sit with me at the table and we talked about Jewish traditions, and we talked about their family traditions.

That really just gave me a lot of hope to see people who really had no connection to the conflict, very neutral people who didn't see me in my Jewish identity through the lens of Israel and the current conflict. They just saw, like

me as a friend, me as a Jewish friend. And the connection to Israel, it's like, it isn't that important. Like, how they feel about the government — it's very like secondary, tertiary even, to our friendship.

And I think people like that really give me a lot of hope for the future because I know they're the silent majority. Most people don't hate me because I'm Jewish. Most people like, they simply don't. And I think Jewish students can feel like that's the case.

But there's like a silent majority of people who are just kind people and are interested in learning more about cultures. And I think the more that we can encourage those people to show up and the more that the Jewish community can show up for other people, we can elevate that more silent majority, I guess.

What has it been like for you since October 7th?

I think on October 7, I can tell you about how I found out about the events.

I woke up really early that morning because my mom and I were going on a trip to the States for Reading Week. And I woke up I saw the news that there had been some terrorist attack in Israel, and it's sad to say, but those aren't like, terribly uncommon. And we didn't know, like the scope of the terrorist attack, so we thought, "Oh, this is terrible."

I began texting some friends who are at school in Israel just to make sure that they were OK. I have a lot of friends who have family in Israel, so it's commonplace to just send a message and just make sure that they're OK.

And it seemed like the people I... all the people that I knew were OK so I boarded the plane. I was still reading through the news, and by the time I landed, there were already protests in the city against Israel. So, this is within the span of five or six hours. Israel had been hit with the largest terrorist attack in probably history, more Jews killed in a single day since the Holocaust, and already there are protests against the country that had been attacked.

And we were thinking we need to avoid this, because it was pretty scary: People in masks, I believe that there are reports of people holding even swastikas on that very day.

So, I think it's a shock and I think I'm still processing like how much a group of people in a country can be hated even when they're under attack, like the country was still under attack when these protests were happening, they were still finding bodies. People were being taken into Gaza as hostages, and they're already protesting against the people who have been attacked.

And upon returning to campus after reading week, we... As a community, we're very much in shock. And I think it's still a shock to see how little sympathy there was.

Immediately there were allegations against Israel saying that like they were the ones who had, like ... it was a bit of a conspiratorial thing, or they were saying Israel allowed this to happen, or Israel killed its own people. There was a lot of narrative shifting, trying to place the blame on the victims and it made it really hard. Like, I had friends avoiding class, avoiding friends because they were Israeli. They like, didn't feel so safe talking about it, even though they really should have been receiving the sympathy and support from their friends and their social circles.

So I think it's been really hard as a community to accept that reality of the lack of understanding and the lack of being willing to accept nuances on campus, especially in a place that's supposed to be very multicultural and understanding of differing opinions, like by nature of being Israeli or being associated with Israel, there was very little sympathy.

And I think it's something that we're still grappling with as we get this terrible news about hostages being killed, and it feels like people have forgotten about what started the conflict in the first place and the fact that our community is very much reeling from it, we haven't really gotten over it.

You mentioned feeling moments of hope. How do you feel about the potential for the climate to improve on campus?

Yeah, for sure.

I do think that as I mentioned, I have hope from students who are like willing to see past like the identities or the sides of the issue and become friends based on just like being a member of the McMaster community.

I think that it's really hard for students on any side of the conflict, to say "I want to have a conversation about Israel, Palestine and the political issues and the government."

I think that's really hard and it's really hard to put students in those situations. But if it was reframed to just be like, "Let's get coffee," "we're both third-year students," "we're both in the same program," "Let's go talk."

And I think that's the first step. Instead of putting a lot of pressure on students to solve these geopolitical conflicts that we have no influence over, I think starting with friendship first, or at least like some sort of mutual idea that we want campus to feel safe and comfortable and welcoming for everyone, that's the first step and like, that's a goal that we can agree on.

We're never going to agree on the political situation or the way to resolve the conflict, but we can agree that everyone should feel safe wearing the religious and cultural symbols on campus. And if that can be a shared goal and we can work together to solve that and work towards that, I think that would greatly improve the campus climate.