

Steven M. Cohen on the HUC-JIR Rabbinical Student Year in J'lem

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A post from BJPA Director Steven M. Cohen:

A recent (and very admirable) JTA article by Sue Fishkoff on the strengthening of Reform Judaism in Israel contains a rather peculiar observation by an anonymous individual, as follows:

“One World Union for Progressive Judaism leader, who spoke anonymously, suggested that the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion rabbinical program is partly to blame for its policy of sending first-year students to Jerusalem where they “live in an American ghetto,” and return home convinced that Israel is hostile to Reform Judaism.”

I am a part-time resident of Jerusalem, a member of the HUC-JIR faculty, a life-long Zionist, and hold dual citizenship, and am as concerned as anyone with the attachment of young Jews to Israel. From my perspective, it is positively loony (i.e., meshuggeh) to think that having first-year rabbinical students spend a year in Jerusalem -- where the 25-acre HUC-JIR campus is located -- is somehow responsible for convincing students that "Israel is hostile to Reform Judaism." Had they only spent the year, instead of Jerusalem, in, say, Afula, or on Shenkin Street, or the beaches of Eilat!

A *very* long literature on the impact of travel to Israel demonstrates two effects with respect to Israel. One is that people grow more attached to Israel (see “**Beyond Distancing**,” by Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, or “**Still Connected**,” by Charles Kadushin, et al). The other is that they learn to be more critical of Israelis as individuals and of Israel as a society. In other words, they come to resemble Israelis, developing an unromanticized and non-idealized portrait of Israeli life (for an evidence of these trends as early as 1983 , see **Survey of American Jews and Communal Leaders**).

Steven M. Cohen