



INSIDER'S GUIDE TO COLLEGE LIFE CAMPUS LIFE

Campus Life 201: When Jewish Friends Are Hard to Find

While I've never been particularly religious, my Judaism is an integral part of who I am. I've always had Jewish friends, been in Jewish environments, and celebrated my Judaism. So when it came time to go to college, I knew the school's Jewish profile would be a factor in my choice. Besides, I wanted to avoid my mom's experience at a college in the Midwest; her roommate greeted her with "Oh, I have never met a Jewish person before." Luckily, I fell in love with New York University, which happens to have the largest number of Jews of any university in the country.

NYU invites the freshman class to move into dorms one week before the start of classes for "welcome week," a university-sponsored week of activities to allow incoming students to make new friends, get acquainted with a sampling of NYU's extracurricular activities, and become more comfortable with the university and surrounding areas. During welcome week I went to several events sponsored by NYU's Hillel—The Bronfman Center, and each time I met people, talked to them, exchanged phone numbers, and then, for the most part, never saw or heard from them again. It was the classic situation of "Yeah! We'll get together!" and then nothing.

Still, I figured I'd eventually find Jewish friends, by one means or another, taking comfort in the knowledge that NYU's Jewish undergraduate population is 4,000 strong.

During the fall and winter months, my plan to search for Jewish friends was consigned to the back burner; academics and swim team simmered and sometimes boiled over on the front.



A MATZAH MOMENT WITH MY NEW FRIEND, LINDSAY DERARIS (RIGHT).

Being a varsity athlete at the collegiate level requires a great deal of time. With that and getting my schoolwork done, I couldn't concentrate on anything else. The girls on the swim team soon became my closest friends at school, and only two of them were Jewish. None of my three suitemates were Jewish, the great majority of my hallmates weren't Jewish, and the friends I made in classes weren't either. It bothered me that I had so few Jewish friends and that I seemed unable—or perhaps not motivated enough—to do something about it.

So when the High Holidays rolled around, instead of taking the hour-long train ride home to New Jersey to spend the New Year with my family at my home temple, I decided to attend services at school. While I didn't make a Jewish friend then, something else happened. It started when my roommate decided to accompany me to a Rosh Hashanah service. Having attended a Catholic parochial school all her life, she'd had little exposure to Judaism and was very interested in learning more. Proud to be her teacher, I began with the customs surrounding

the holiday she had just experienced, teaching her about its meaning and its traditions, such as eating apples and honey. Then, during Chanukah, I lit an electric menorah every night in my dorm room and engaged my three roommates in learning the prayers. Immediately after the menorah was lit, my Catholic roommate reciprocated by opening a door on her advent calendar and teaching me her holiday customs. We simultaneously enjoyed latkes and chocolate from the advent calendar and began to call ourselves "the

multicultural holiday room." I loved being able to celebrate my holiday as well as an unfamiliar holiday with my roommates. It was interesting to see both the differences and the similarities in observance. Although our beliefs differ, our holiday celebrations all follow specific customs and become all the more special when they're shared with others.

When second semester arrived, my swim team responsibilities ended and I was left with exponentially more spare time. Now, I decided to make a more valiant effort to connect with Jews on campus. I attended Shabbat services at the Bronfman Center Hillel with the one Jewish girl I had kept in touch with from welcome week, but by now everyone at Hillel knew each other and I felt slightly awkward and out of place. But then I began receiving emails about a program NYU hosts called Jewish Learning Fellowship. This once-a-week "Hebrew school college-style" program consists of a one-hour discussion on a variety of topics with Rabbi Yehuda Sarna about the culture of Israel, followed by dinner and then smaller, theme-based