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# A CONVERSATION WITH DEAN BELL

**Dean Bell has worked at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership for 30 years, as associate dean, dean, vice president and now president. As Spertus celebrates its 100th birthday, *Moment* spoke with him about the institution's history, goals and the need for open and critical conversations in an ever more polarizing world.**

**What are Spertus's goals as an institution?** There are three groups of values that I see as historically underpinning the institution: One is around academic excellence—this idea that you should have meaningful, deep education in Jewish studies. The second is around community building and community responsibility. We are outside of the community as an accredited higher education institution, but we are deeply embedded in so many Jewish communities. And then the final group of values is around convening across differences. We have a lot of adult learners with varied backgrounds in our Jewish studies programs. It's an opportunity for people with very different worldviews and needs to come together and engage in conversation. One of our central programs is something we call "Critical Conversations," where we identify a theme or an issue, and then we bring people with different ideas, perspectives and experiences into conversation with one another.

**Why is Spertus vital to the American-Jewish landscape?** We bring a Jewish perspective, texts and learning into conversation with big issues, and we do that in the context of higher education. There are a lot of great places that do adult Jewish education or grapple with big questions. And there are a lot of great universities that are teaching important critical thinking skills on specific topics. Spertus is fairly unique in that it brings those ideas together under the rubric of

what we call "applied Jewish learning," which means taking Jewish learning and applying it so that it can help solve problems and resolve issues.

**Is there a certain profile of a person who's drawn to Spertus?** Learning at Spertus gives you a sense of a broad Jewish ecosystem, where people from different places are coming and going. We attract people who are really open to interrogating their own perceptions and assumptions, and who strive to understand others. One of my favorite examples: I was interviewing a student for our Leadership Certificate in Combating Antisemitism who was a 40-year veteran Jewish community organizer. And I remarked, "Wow, you could teach in the program. Why are you registering for the program?" He said, "Because I want to understand the experiences of people in other places, and I don't know everything." Those are the kind of learners we get here, people who are hungry for learning. They see themselves as lifelong learners.

**How has October 7 and the war that has followed changed the institute's priorities?** Obviously the most significant thing that we've seen in many places is the rise of antisemitism. We saw that rise before October 7, and we launched the Leadership Certificate in Combating Antisemitism in 2022. Curiously, the flip side is there's been a lot of growth in our Jewish studies programs, in part because people are feeling concerned about their Jewish identity and in part because they want to celebrate it and find connection.

**Any organization, especially a Jewish one, reaching 100 is unusual. To what do you attribute Spertus's longevity?** It does suggest that Spertus fills a niche and is able to adapt to changing needs. Many organizations, if they last 100 years, completely shift from where they were, and become a different kind



**Spertus Institute President Dean Bell**

of institution. But there has been a set of principles and values at the heart of our institution that have guided us and continue to guide us.

Spertus is a 100-year startup. What I mean by that is that it's an institution that has a history and depth, but is always willing to ask different questions and try different things. We were an early leader in distance education. Already in the early 1990s, we were doing correspondence programs and in the early 2000s we were using online platforms for teaching regular weekly courses. So when COVID hit, we had no issue in pivoting to fully online. We've spent a lot of time thinking about the fact that we have adult learners. It means that you need to always be open and innovative because adults are really complicated, challenging people. Their personal lives get in the way. Their professional lives get in the way. We not only think about what content we are bringing to address their needs but how we can deliver it in a way that will be the most accessible and impactful.

As we move into the future, we are going to continue to engage in deep academic Jewish studies that move us forward to meet emerging needs in the Jewish community and in the broader society. I think that gives us a clear path for at least the next 100 years. I'm about to sign my contract for the next 100 years, so I'm ready to go!

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of her *Daily Bruin* colleagues to recognize her frustration, left her feeling alienated and anxious and colored her feelings about her school. “It was a really, really hard year for me,” she says, echoing a sentiment shared by Jewish student journalists at other schools. “There were a lot of days where I felt ashamed to be a student at UCLA. I felt very lonely, like nobody knew what I was going through.” She notes that most of her college friends were not Jewish. “They were absolutely amazing and always listened to me when I told them what was going on, but it was different just by nature of them not being Jewish,” she says. “I felt like a lot of the closest people in my life didn’t really understand why what was happening on campus was so painful for me. Although they understood it was wrong, they didn’t feel the same pain and hurt I was feeling.”

**R**elative peace has returned to U.S. college campuses this fall. University administrations have tightened restrictions on campus gatherings. At many institutions, college presidents have significantly cut back on their public appearances in order to avoid disruptions. Regents have regularly rejected demands to move on divestment policies. The prolonged war in the Middle East and the inability of society to agree on the limits of free speech and protest, however, means the underlying rifts of the past year remain. Student-run news outlets are highlighting these shifting campus realities. After the University of Michigan regents refused to shed Israel-related investments, a pro-Palestinian group called “Shut It Down” took control of the student government, but more than 500 Michigan students, faculty and others gathered on the one-year anniversary of the October 7 massacre to show solidarity with the Jewish community. A review of the student paper’s stories on both developments showed the coverage to be straightforward.

It’s unclear what the long-term effects of the 2023-24 school year will have on student journalism, but it will stand out

in student memories. Certainly, each Jewish student journalist I interviewed who felt marginalized in the year after October 7 was personally affected by the experience, although they reacted in different ways. Rachel, who graduated in the spring and is now leaning toward a career in law, says she feels “more connected with the Jewish side of myself. I always liked being Jewish, but it wasn’t like I felt it was the most important part of my identity.” She is following developments around the Gaza war with a more personal perspective. “The more everyone else totally demonizes Israel,” she says, “the more I feel defensive of it.” Similarly, Emily Samuels says the past year left her with “a newfound love and passion for being Jewish.” Having graduated from UCLA, she too is planning to go to law school, where she wants to concentrate on First Amendment issues. She says her experience pushing to have her columns published “taught me some important lessons about how to advocate for yourself when no one else will.”

Other students remain committed to journalism, at least in the short term, though perhaps with a new interest in advocacy. At the University of Florida, Molly Seghi went to work among more like-minded writers at *Beyond the Borders*, a pro-Israel student publication at her school. At Binghamton, Eytan Saenger spent the summer as an intern in the office of Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-NY), a strongly pro-Israel member of Congress. He then returned to work another year on the *Pipe Dream*, though he says he is “not likely” to remain in journalism. At the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Rebecca Massel is still fully invested in her reporting. As the 2024-2025 school year opened, she profiled six Jewish students who declined admission offers from Columbia because of antisemitism concerns. She is “considering” journalism as a career and now serves as deputy editor for the University News section of the paper. She’s relieved to report that not one of her stories has prompted a hateful response akin to what she experienced during the last school year. 

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