

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Ethan Bair:

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John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the Cuse Conversations Podcast is Ethan Bair, the new rabbi here at Syracuse University. Ethan, we are so pleased you took the time to join us here on the podcast. How are you doing these days?

Ethan Bair:

I have a staff of multiple people, and so I have teammates who have been keeping me abreast, and just like bootcamp, telling me about Syracuse and what to expect and planning the year, so that's been really helpful. Then last week, we had our FreshFest, our pre-orientation program for Jewish students. It was really an amazing way to start the semester and meet a ton of students, because we had 280 freshmen who participated and 90 upper class mentors. It was really energizing to meet so many students and to start having conversations about what we're going to be doing this year.

John Boccacino:

I know you've only been on campus for a short time, but during those six-plus weeks, what have you found makes this university a really special place?

Ethan Bair:

I was very inspired by Chancellor Syverud's remarks at our FreshFest breakfast, because he talked about the unique history at Syracuse University when it comes to diversity and he gave stories about the lack of quotas of Jewish students many decades ago when there were many colleges and universities that had quotas in place, and how Syracuse never did. He told a story about Japanese internment and college students from the camps in California who then Syracuse gave full rides to for college after the war and about the history of veterans and the great steps Syracuse has done around inclusivity of veterans and supporting them as well. I love that. Part of being at a large university is, I think there is a different level of diversity and almost cosmopolitan feel that can come with that. It's like a big village, and that's been great. I'm excited to get to know other areas of campus. I'm just starting to do that.

John Boccacino:

Now, before we get into specifically why you chose Syracuse, give our audience a little background about yourself. Where are you from originally? Where did you attend college, and how did you become interested in serving as a Jewish community leader?

Ethan Bair:

Sure. I am from Boston originally. I grew up in the city and attended some private schools, some public schools. I then went to Oberlin College for college, which is a small liberal arts college in Ohio. It was the college farthest from Boston that I applied to when I was applying to college, and it was a great school for me. It was probably very different than Syracuse, because it's small and doesn't have fraternities and sororities and that kind of thing, but I had a very close relationship with my Hillel rabbi and was very active in Hillel there.

I think I actually attribute my college experience very much with why I became a rabbi. There was a lovely Jewish community and the largest Jewish community that I was really ever a part of was in college. I became a rabbi because I was considering, I was a religion and Jewish studies major in college, and I was considering going into academia. I did a Fulbright in Berlin right after college. I was considering going down a more academic route and realized I wanted to teach, but I liked the idea of teaching in a way that really connected to people's lives and the ways that people make meaning and build community. I wanted to teach outside the classroom, and that's really why I became a rabbi.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned the strong role that you had affiliation-wise with Hillel when you were at Oberlin. Can you explain a little bit more about the profound impact that those relationships had and how that really affected your development?

Ethan Bair:

Absolutely. My Hillel rabbi I knew I could sing when I was a freshman and recruited me to lead services and, actually, he was seeing-impaired, so he walked with a walking stick and he sometimes gave great little sermons, but he did not lead services. He didn't have the prayer book in front of him to say what page prayer is on. He didn't like leading, so he asked if I wanted to lead High Holy Day services for the next three years. I said, "Oh, what's involved exactly?" He said, "Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah is two days and Yom Kippur is one." I had never even attended Rosh Hashanah on the second day.

I was like, "Oh, I wish I would've." I learned all of the liturgy and it was really an amazing experience, learning the melodies and improving my Hebrew, at least liturgical Hebrew, enough to lead services. I loved doing that in college and I was also part of a Jewish studies program house and a kosher halal co-op in college. We had a co-op that had the observant Jewish and observant Muslim students together because dietary needs are similar, but it's also a wonderful community-building space. Yeah, it was really, I just found a wonderful community, and made a lot of my friends through that community. Becoming a rabbi was not, I don't know, it wasn't a stretch. It was, yeah. I want to do more of this.

John Boccacino:

Why did you want to come to Syracuse to become our newest rabbi?

Ethan Bair:

Oh, I think with a big school, there's just so much opportunity and greater need, but also there's so much that you can do and it's exciting. I think students at Syracuse seem really engaged, really committed. They come sometimes knowing very specifically what they want to do, sometimes not at all, but the point is, I'm here to serve students and how great to be at a big school where there's more opportunity for that. I mean, I'm 41, so college, for me, was a long time ago.

John Boccacino:

It's a good point because we forget these are 17-to-21-year-old students and they come to the university with a different worldview. How do you try to relate to these students to let them know that, okay, yes, you are a rabbi, a person of faith, but you're also a person? You're also trying to help them with their development. How do you bridge that gap and connect with them?

Ethan Bair:

Yeah, that's a great question. We're very fortunate, I feel, at Syracuse Hillel. It's a very, of course, we're a religious organization in a certain way, but we're also a cultural organization. This is a space for Jewish community and most of the programs that we do on a regular basis are really about building community first. Then we also have opportunities for Jewish education and we have opportunities, I hope soon, for group support and more of a wellness environment and social justice activities like community service and so forth. So far, the last couple weeks, it's just been great getting to meet students in more of a social mode as part of the FreshFest program. I don't know, students haven't complained that I'm hard to approach or intimidating. I don't think I give off that vibe.

If anything, I like to hang out with students first. Then if it goes into a conversation where something from Torah, something from Jewish tradition becomes relevant, even better. Then we have our more "religious" things we do like Shabbat and services and Shabbat dinner Friday night, and we're going to be offering a Jewish learning fellowship that we do every semester on Tuesday nights that's a cohort conversation-based Jewish learning, but also very much has conversations between students at the forefront. It's not a lecture class. Yeah, I think it's about meeting students where they are and getting to know them and then we see what their interests are and it's really about building the Jewish content around those interests.

John Boccacino:

It seems like to me, the role of the rabbi on a college campus, yes, you've got the spiritual connections. You've got the social implications, but it really seems like you're trying to help with the holistic development of our students.

Ethan Bair:

Absolutely. We're absolutely here first and foremost to support students in their journey and their development. For me, their Jewish journey and their academic journey are two sides of the same coin because I think being connected to Jewish identity and Jewish community can only enhance a student's personal and academic goals, but that's right. I mean, we're here to support students in their journey, and really, my goal is that students really flourish so that they can contribute to the world and make the world a better place. Really, that means investing in them as people first and foremost. I feel like on a college campus, my role is really threefold. I'm a Jewish educator and we have the Jewish education aspect of what we do at Hillel. Then it's really about wellness and wellbeing and then also social justice and interfaith partnerships around that.

Those are the three areas that I'm interested in, and on the wellness front, I mean, we know 40% of students are grieving the loss of a loved one. A huge percentage of students are dealing with challenges around mental health issues or around various emotional things that they're dealing with. We have to treat students as full people who we're investing in, and in their future. I'm interested in being that adult on campus to students that's in between a professor and an advisor or a therapist, somewhere in between and being able to facilitate, also, environments where students can support each other and

have the real talk conversations about what they're going through and building relationships not just based in proving how cool students are to each other, but also really with vulnerability and being able to support each other. I think in order to get there, there's a lot of trust and a lot of the social community-building that we have to do first to be able to form those relationships and build that trust with students.

John Boccacino:

You seem like such an energetic person to lead us here at Hillel as our new rabbi. You mentioned before you've been trying to get to know the students. What are some other ways you plan on going out there into the community on campus to make people see who you are and how you can help them with their development?

Ethan Bair:

That's a great question. We park ourselves at People's Place at Hendricks Chapel on a weekly basis, a wonderful spot for coffee on campus, also student-run and cheap coffee. That's great, and I'm hoping to do some tourist study and some other creative education things on campus as well. Of course, we have High Holy Days coming soon and High Holy Days are the Jewish New Year and the Day of Atonement, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the days between the Days of Awe. Rosh Hashanah starts the evening of September 24th and some services and meals will be here. Some will be at Hendricks in the center of campus at the multi-faith chapel and in front of the quad. Rosh Hashanah lunch will be a nice Jewish barbecue in front of Hendricks Chapel. Those are the important, big things I want to mention, but I am definitely still thinking about how just showing up. I think it's really just showing up at interesting things, interesting to me, but also where my presence can be value added and figuring out what those things are, so definitely open to invitations from anyone watching this.

I am available to the whole campus community. Of course, as a rabbi, my first concentric circle of obligation is to the Jewish community on campus and, of course, the greater community as well. Hendricks has a variety of chaplains from many different faith traditions. I think there are, I don't want to say the number, but I know more than ten of us. There's many of us. We're all available to students who are interested. I think finding those programs that would be as accessible to non-Jews as well as Jewish students is definitely something on my mind. I'm interested in doing these wellness circles that bring students together to talk about real things that they're struggling with or questions that they're having and creating space for students to support each other.

I'm going to be looking at ways to do that, maybe in partnership with Barnes down the road, but at first, probably here at Hillel. Then I know we also have an interdialogue center on campus, which is a wonderful resource for bringing students together from diverse backgrounds who are interested in social justice learning in different ways, so I'm hoping to get involved there as well. I was at Hamilton College directing the Hillel last year and we had an Interfaith Youth Corps grant to bring students together to have conversations at the intersection of religion and race. We did a social justice fellowship around that grant, and that was one of my highlights last year, so I'm hoping to get involved in a similar way on campus here.

John Boccacino:

I think there's definitely an appetite for that type of programming here on campus, and we all need to get involved and take an active role in healing our country and healing our campus community with the wounds we've dealt with, with social justice issues with issues of insecurity when it comes to food. There's so many, mental health awareness. You mentioned this earlier. There's a lot of issues that affect

all of us on campus, and I think you're in the perfect place at Hendricks Chapel. I believe Hendricks was the first multi-denominational campus center of faith on a university in this country, and you mentioned how many great interfaith partners you've got at Hendricks. How special is it to be a part of that team?

Ethan Bair:

I think it's really important. I think it's really important because the community that we build as interfaith chaplains, even just among ourselves, I think permeates out into the campus community. It's a wonderful group of people who serve as chaplains at Syracuse through Hendricks, and it's a blessing to get to know them and to work with them and to think together how we can do things together. I think sometimes, we all emphasize our own programs in our own community and wanting to be available in that way, but I think the interesting work is also when we come together and do things together. Yeah, I'm looking forward to those partnerships and deepening those relationships. Yeah, I think it's really, really important that there's a strong multi-denominational approach to religious and spiritual life on campus, whether it's housed in a chapel or another building of campus.

Here, we have this Hendricks Chapel, which is right at the heart of campus and I think is an inclusive space. That's not to say that Jewish students would naturally gravitate to going to a chapel no matter what it's called, but we're very fortunate at Syracuse that the Jewish community, we really have the best of both worlds with the Hillel building that is dedicated space and with being part of the multi-faith community at the same time. I think this is who we are as a campus, but also as a country, and it's really important that we learn from each other and that we respect each other and that we love each other. We can only do that when we know each other and show up together.

John Boccacino:

Very poignant and very on topic with what your job is going to bring to the campus here at Syracuse University as our new rabbi. I do want to give our audience a little insight into who you are as a person, and I want to start off the personal questions with this. I hear you're quite the singer. How did you become interested in singing, and do you have any go-to genres or songs that you like to sing for your friends and family?

Ethan Bair:

Wow, that's a nice question. Yes. In my previous congregation, I was both rabbi and cantor and I started singing as a kid and was in a lot of traveling choirs as a kid. Yeah, that was a big part of my life at one point. I wouldn't say it's such a big part of my life now, but I do enjoy leading services and I think the participatory singing is really a wonderful way to express ourselves spiritually. I think music is a universal language of the soul and of the heart, and so whether it's singing in Hebrew or going to your favorite dance concert and singing along and listening to music before and after, I think music is a really important spiritual tool.

For myself, I mean, I have two- and a four-year-old, two girls. Right now, the most singing I do is children's songs in the car with them, but yeah. I love teaching them and teaching college students and teaching everyone about Jewish music and Jewish music from different parts of the world. We're very blessed in the Jewish community to have so many different musical influences. I try to incorporate Mizrahi or Eastern Jewish music as well as the Ashkenazi, the European-centered and Sephardic melodies. It's a rich musical tradition in Judaism, and it's exciting to be able to pull from different parts of that.

John Boccacino:

Besides singing, what are some of your other favorite hobbies or things to do during your free time?

Ethan Bair:

Well, when I have free time and I'm not with my kids these days, which is a lot of it, I try to take care of myself, go running, work out. I still have my COVID 15-minute workout routines that I'm trying to keep up. I try to do those and just explore the local community. Someone told me that there's more small farms in this area than anywhere outside of Napa wine country in the country. Yeah, I mean over the summer, going berry picking and finding the local wineries and going wine-tasting and those kinds of things. Right now, I'm pretty focused on campus and getting my kids to sleep in the evening.

John Boccacino:

Last question in closing for you, what is the best piece of advice you ever received that really stuck with you?

Ethan Bair:

Best piece of advice I ever received. I think it's really important to find what makes you most alive, to find, especially when it comes to vocation and thinking about what you want to do in the world, really finding your joy and your bliss and following that, because if you do, you might get really lucky and end up with a job like I have, which is just, I get paid to what? To support students, to teach about Judaism, to be here for the most difficult, but also the most joyful part of people's lives. That's amazing. I think some people might not have this approach. It might think, "Oh, my job is my job and then I do what I want in my free time," but I think if you're really lucky, you can find what really brings you joy and also makes you feel like you're contributing to the world and making it better in some way. That is the nexus, how you can make a difference and where you find joy in doing it. That's the advice I would pass on.

John Boccacino:

I love it. Wise words from the newest member of the Syracuse University community. He is Hillel's newest rabbi. He's also the Jewish chaplain at Hendricks Chapel. He is Ethan Bair. It's been our pleasure getting to tell your story here on the podcast. Best of luck, and thank you for joining us.

Ethan Bair:

Thank you so much for having me. Have a great day.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the Cuse Conversations Podcast.