

A Proposal for the Establishment of a Jewish Fraternity at Lehigh

We, the undersigned, submit this proposal for the establishment of a Jewish fraternity at Lehigh. For the reasons outlined below, doing so would bolster both Jewish life specifically and Lehigh student life as a whole.

Since Peggy McIntosh's essay on male and White privilege in 1988,¹ social scientists have engaged in a thorough analysis of racial and other forms of privilege, examining the way in which social systems confer unearned advantages and benefits on members of dominant groups based solely on their identities. These studies have made their way from the academy into the field of students, with educators and other professionals sharing privilege theory and factoring its underlying ideas into their work. As a result, a generation of college and university students has come of age aware of privilege and its consequences and has come to understand the need for safe spaces for marginalized groups across a variety of identities.

While far less discussion has been had about religious privilege and its effect on Jewish identity, researchers have noted that many of the concepts relevant to racial privilege are applicable in a religious context: Christians carry certain unearned advantages, pushing other religious groups to the margins. Borrowing from McIntosh's enumeration of the benefits of racial privilege, Lewis Z. Schlosser devised the following examples to highlight the manner in which Christian privilege functions:

1. I can be sure to hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion.
3. I can assume that I will not have to work or go to school on my significant religious holidays.
4. I can be financially successful and not have people attribute that to the greed of my religious group.
8. My religious group gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other religions.
9. I do not need to worry about the ramifications of disclosing my religious identity to others.
10. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my religion.
13. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my religious group.
20. I can buy foods (e.g., in grocery store, at restaurants) that fall within the scope of the rules of my religious group.²

Judaism and Jewish are complex in that they are identities that straddle the confluence of religious, ethnic, cultural and national identity. However, regardless of which aspect of Jewish identity one examines, there is no question that Jews are a subordinate group in a variety of

¹ McIntosh 1988.

² Schlosser 2003.

ways, as Schlosser, Warren Blumenfeld, Ellen Fairchild and others point out,³ and spaces in which Jews are free to express themselves as such are few in number and require special attention in their creation and maintenance.

Jews often experience this exclusion on campus as well as in the wider world. Alexandra Froehlich has documented the numerous ways in which Jewish inclusion is often counterbalanced by exclusion from the broader community, especially when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality. This is especially true in Greek contexts, where many organizations' rituals and founding narratives were challenging and alienating.⁴

While no formal assessments have been undertaken specific to gauge the impact of Jewish fraternities on Jewish student identity development, numerous works evidence the importance of marginalized and object identity groups having their "own" spaces in a mainstream context and the marginalization of Jews on campus. Samuel Museus, as one example, has found that culturally based student organizations serve a variety of purposes, including building cultural bridges with others, bolstering self-understanding and providing avenues for self-expression and advocacy.⁵ More specific to a Greek context, Tricia Shalka, Eric Atkinson and others have examined African-American students' development and documented the strong, positive impact culturally based fraternities have on leadership, campus involvement, self-confidence and other positive qualities, especially in the context of identity formation.⁶ Drawing this information together, it is reasonable to infer that Jewish student identity development in a range of areas will be enhanced by having a space in which Jewish men and others interested in exploring Jewish traditions can do so with strong external support.

In turning our attention to Lehigh, it is worth from the outset defining the phrase "Jewish fraternity" and what it could look like here. A Jewish fraternity is not simply a chapter where a solid portion or even a majority of the brothers are Jewish. It is, rather, a fraternity open to all Greek-eligible Lehigh men and a fraternal organization that promotes character development, values and learning rooted in Jewish traditions and perspectives, including philanthropy, social justice and acts of kindness. Because Jewish identity can be expressed in cultural or ethnic fashions, it is highly improbable that the chapter would be primarily religious in nature; instead, the fraternity would provide a Greek home for men who embrace and seek to explore and share Jewish heritage in a wide variety of ways.

To provide some historical context, until the 1960's, Lehigh had a strict quota on the number of Jewish undergraduates admitted, the overwhelmingly majority of Lehigh's fraternities refused to admit openly Jewish members, and the remaining three or so fraternities were almost exclusively Jewish in their membership.⁷ Over the past several decades, fraternities have become more welcome to the point that no chapter is either all Jewish or without any Jews. However, each of the formerly Jewish chapters has been closed, and none of them, either locally or nationally, maintained a primarily Jewish identity into this century.

³ See, e.g., Fairchild 2009, Blumenfeld 2009, Fried 2007.

⁴ Froehlich 2011.

⁵ Museus 2008.

⁶ Atkinson 2010; Shalka 2008.

⁷ The exclusion of Jews from most fraternities at Lehigh was hardly unusual in its day. See Sauna 2000.

Jewish men currently have numerous options for being individual Jewish members of secular or culturally Christian chapters, and their significant representation in the Greek community indicates that many are satisfied with what is available to them. What they lack, however, is the option of a Jewish fraternal environment, a setting in which the ethnic, cultural and religious identity that makes them unique is valued, supported and cultivated.

One example of how a Jewish fraternity might provide such an environment, contrary to what is currently available, is illustrated by the December holiday season. Because most Americans understand Christmas to be a secular holiday, much of campus, including many fraternities, is decorated with red, green and white bunting, well-ornamented evergreens and images of Santa Claus. For many Jews, however, having the celebration of Jesus' birth be constantly present is strongly at odds with their understanding of what it means to be Jewish, and a "neutral" fraternal context marking Christmas can be alienating to such Jewishly identified brothers. In contrast, a Jewish fraternity would provide a space in which such holiday decorations would not be present and where Jewish men could enjoy Jewish seasonal observances among their peers.

In a similar vein, the founding narratives and motivations undergirding numerous Lehigh fraternities are firmly based in Christianity. Even today, it is open and common knowledge that many fraternities' rituals, texts and educational sessions use Christian language, parables and symbols, such as Christian magnanimity and the cross on which Jesus was crucified. While some Jews may choose to join such chapters, a Jewish fraternity would provide Jewish men with an opportunity to embrace similar values and practices through illustrations and tropes drawn from their own traditions, allowing them to amplify, rather than negate, their sense of what it means to be Jewish.

Among the more active programs a Jewish fraternity could undertake are the following:

- Support attendance at Jewish conferences, including college-age and international gatherings.
- Provide off-campus spaces in which students could observe Jewish dietary restrictions in a communal setting.
- Sponsor discussions about Judaism, Jewishness and Jewish identity development.
- Serve as a forum and resource for exploring issues of Jewish masculinity.
- Cultivate creative ways for informal and formal Jewish events.
- Partner with existing Jewish student groups on high-profile and large-scale programming.
- Foster relationships with other campus organizations and educate the broader Lehigh community about Jewish customs and traditions.

The role of a Jewish fraternity would not be limited to the support it could provide for Lehigh's Jewish men. Its brothers would be in a solid position to educate the entire campus community about Jewish traditions and customs, adding to Lehigh's multicultural palette and serving as a resource for those interested in expanding their cultural repertoires. For this reason, a Jewish fraternity would help advance all of Lehigh's core competencies for both Jewish and non-Jewish students, including:

- Intellectual Exploration
 - Demonstrates an appreciation for various forms of expression from diverse perspectives
 - Successfully engages in experiential learning opportunities such as study abroad, internships, co-op, etc.
 - Articulates the advantages and challenges of a diverse society
- Individual Identity Development
 - Understands one's individual background, culture, experiences, attributes roles, interests, etc.
 - Based on personal values, make appropriate decisions about involvements on campus
 - Explores personal, ethical, spiritual, and moral values
 - Seeks involvement in previously unexplored interests and activities
 - Defines pluralism accurately in one's own words
 - Uses moral reasoning and makes ethical decisions
- Interpersonal Development, Equity, Community and Global Engagement
 - Has a sense of belonging to a community
 - Understands the role of society and communities in shaping values
 - Understands others' cultures and engages in relationships with people of different backgrounds/cultures/views
 - Respects the identities and practices of various groups
 - Appropriately challenges unfair and intolerant behavior and the use of stereotypes by others
 - Appreciates the presence of different viewpoints
 - Understands ethics within a community or organization and makes ethical decisions
 - Advocates on behalf of the needs and equitable rights of others

Although a Jewish fraternity would be associated with the Interfraternity Council, it would serve a communal purpose not unlike the culturally based fraternities and sororities Lehigh has welcomed to campus over the past several years. These largely recent additions allow members to grow in their knowledge and awareness, provide resources for learning, growth and identity development and are among the few spaces at Lehigh in which students of color constitute a majority. Just as a Jewish fraternity would, they provide a benefit to the Lehigh Greek community as a whole, partnering with other fraternities and sororities and sharing a wealth of stories and narratives that would otherwise remain untold at this institution.

For these reasons, establishing a Jewish fraternity comports with Lehigh's commitment to diversity and would advance the educational mission of this institution. It creates a Jewishly inclusive fraternal space the campus currently lacks and offers an opportunity for Jewish men to be fraternally active without having to regularly check their Jewish identities at the chapter house door. It pulls Lehigh away from its lingering ugly anti-Jewish history and further bolsters the credibility of the Equitable Principles of Our Community.

With these aims in mind, there is a clear demand for a Jewish fraternity among Lehigh undergraduates based on informal and anecdotal evidence. Even as the campus lacks a Jewish

fraternity, Lehigh's current Jewish population is quite sizeable, currently standing at around 850 students, and continues to grow. It is estimated that approximately 18 to 20 percent of Lehigh undergraduates identify in some way as Jewish, a significant increase over the 12 to 15 percent range just four years ago. This is many times larger than the target populations for Lehigh's three current culturally based fraternities, and colleges and universities with a Jewish population much smaller than Lehigh's, both in terms of percentages and absolute numbers, are able to sustain one or more Jewish fraternities (see Appendix A).

Many of these Jewish young men have found the idea of a Jewish fraternity sufficiently compelling that they have sought it out elsewhere. The Sigma Eta chapter of Alpha Epsilon Pi currently has approximately thirty active brothers, all of whom are Lehigh students. That this chapter has continued to survive and even thrive without university recognition is a testament to the desire for a fraternity option that allows students to explore and develop a sense of Jewishness.⁸ Having a fraternity that seeks to attain similar goals under the aegis of the university is likely to be even more compelling as an option, with the added benefit of ensuring that Lehigh's policies on safety and other matters are strictly followed.

As an additional indicator, numerous prospective students and parents inquire about the existence of a Jewish fraternity at Lehigh. In fact, queries as to whether Lehigh is able to provide a supportive Jewish fraternal environment are among the most common received by Lehigh Jewish life professionals. Being able to answer this query with an unconditionally positive answer will enhance Lehigh's diversity and credibility in the Jewish community.

Creating specifically Jewish Greek space has growing importance and urgency at Lehigh. With Greek life becoming a choice half of Lehigh undergraduates make, it is reasonable to conclude that fraternities will play a growing role in student life on a variety of fronts. Ensuring that this burgeoning area provides an option for Jewish male student development, integrated into their shared identity as brothers, is essential.

For all of these reasons, we strongly support the establishment of a Jewish fraternity at Lehigh. We are at your disposal to advance that goal and look forward to responding to your questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁸ Those of us submitting this proposal acknowledge the difficulties posed by this chapter of AEPi. While no formal process for recognition has been offered to the chapter, it is the undersigneds' understanding that many of that the chapter's choices, particularly with regard to their establishment and new member selection and invitation process, would contravene university regulations were they a Lehigh-recognized chapter. We also appreciate the need for consistency and the message that granting this chapter formal recognition presents to dormant chapters that have respected university policies and those that may opt not to do so in the future.

Appendix A

Colleges and Universities with Jewish Populations Similar in Size to Lehigh and with One or More Jewish Fraternities

<u>College or University</u>	<u>Total Undergraduates</u>	<u>Jewish Undergraduates</u>	<u>Total Number of Fraternities</u>
Bentley University	4253	400	7
Bradley University	5000	250	14
Carnegie Mellon University	5000	600	12
College of William and Mary	5700	285	15
Duke University	6700	700	16
Johns Hopkins University	4800	550	11
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	4220	400	25
Ohio University	17,000	600	15
Purdue University	32,000	645	40
Ramapo College	5660	550	9
Stanford University	6800	650	11
Union College	2168	350	9
University of Chicago	5300	850	10

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