

Hevra: Male Engagement Retreat Overview

From January 26-29, 2025, nine male-identifying Hillel professionals gathered in Nashville to explore the issue of male engagement in the Hillel movement. These included engagement associates, Israel educators, assistant directors, rabbis, and senior Jewish educators. They came from Hillels across the country (Ohio, Massachusetts, Virginia, California, and Michigan). They represented Hillels on large, medium, and small campuses, both public and private.

The Challenge: A Shifting Landscape

“We’re missing the mark in engaging young men,” one participant stated, setting the tone for the discussion. The data is clear: in 1972, men earned 57% of U.S. college degrees; by 2023, that number had dropped to 41% (Reeves, 2023). Beyond academics, male students are also disengaging socially, weakening their sense of belonging in campus communities (Marklein, 2021).

The cohort discussed the “gender tipping point”, a phenomenon at small private colleges where, once enrollment surpasses 60% female, institutions become less attractive to men and, in turn, to women. “Are Hillels liable to the same dynamic?” one participant asked. This concern is compounded by broader demographic trends: the U.S. college population is projected to decline by 13% over the next 15 years (Lane, Falkenstern, & Bransberger, 2024), with Jewish student numbers likely falling at an even steeper rate due to lower birth rates (Pew Research Center, 2021).

“Men are struggling academically and socially,” another participant put it bluntly. The question is no longer whether male students need engagement, but how Hillel can create a space for their development. Participants noted that organizations like Chabad and Olami offer clear pathways for long-term involvement, while Hillel’s “choose-your-own-adventure” model may lack the structured, duty-driven engagement that many young men seek. “Chabad offers lifelong membership, Hillel doesn’t.” one professional observed. Another asked, “Are we setting students up for success, or just acting as a bridge between high school and the real world?”

Experts on male engagement suggest that a lack of meaningful responsibility may be fueling broader struggles (Reeves, 2022).

Understanding the Challenge: A Hillel Context

The Gender Engagement Gap – “Hillel excels in programming that resonates with young women, but where’s the equivalent for men?” asked one participant. Anecdotal evidence and participant campus data suggest Hillel is significantly less successful at engaging men. Comparisons to Chabad abounded in our conversation. Yet full verification of the gap between Hillel’s draw for young men and women remains out of reach as long as HEaRT engagement tracking does not encourage it. “HEaRT isn’t built to track this,” said one professional, “but we all feel it.”

Programming and Connection – “Hillel’s programming emphasizes safety, belonging, and deep conversation, but men bond through risk, achievement, and competition.” That comment synthesized a vein of intense discussion about the ways students connect. Some biological and psychological research suggests that men do indeed bond strongly through vasopressin-driven experiences (i.e., risk, competition, achievement), while women more easily form bonds through oxytocin-driven experiences (i.e., safety, belonging, deep conversation) (Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Young & Wang, 2004). As one organizer said, “I couldn’t earn certain guys’ trust, or get them engaged, until we offered Go-Karting. They seemed to need to compete with each other before they wanted to connect with each other.”

However, we acknowledge that bonding styles are also influenced by cultural expectations and not solely by biology. In either case, participants noted that “Hillel’s programming overwhelmingly emphasizes” safety rather than achievement. “It’s no surprise that men aren’t walking through the door,” one participant felt. “We’ve built a model that works incredibly well for some, but we need to ask who’s getting left out.”

Staffing and Role Models – It was obvious to all participants that early-career Hillel staff tend to skew female. That insight is corroborated by Leading Edge data, which confirms that male staff at Jewish nonprofits compose only 20% of the workforce. Despite continued male predominance at the highest level, the pipeline for future leaders is decidedly female and this trend is likely to continue. Looking at demographic shifts in educational attainment and hiring into junior roles, women continue to outpace men in obtaining degrees relevant to nonprofit work. Entry-level programs like Springboard have already seen cohorts that are over 80% female, a number that is unlikely to decrease given these broader workforce trends.

This raises a critical question: Does the gender disparity in staffing contribute to programming that inadvertently excludes men? One participant noted, “Do we need a ‘bro’ on every campus? No. But we do need staff who understand how to engage young men intentionally.” Ensuring that Hillel has role models and engagement strategies that resonate with male students will be essential as these staffing trends continue. One early-career professional, who is the only male-identifying staff member at his Hillel, observed: “My male identifying-students tell me when I leave their connection with Hillel will stop because they feel their needs aren’t being addressed by the staff at large.”

Strategic Recommendations: Turning Insight into Action

Improve Data Collection and Tracking

- Work with the HEaRT team to get an accurate gender engagement percentage for the 2024/2025 academic year, and test for differences between outlier and average campuses.
- Roll out this measurement criteria in training at NPI and for existing campus data captains starting in the 2025/2026 academic year.
- Continue to measure these breakdowns as strategies are rolled out to ensure they remain efficacious.

Design Programming with Male Engagement in Mind

- Develop a suite of user personas and engagement initiatives incorporating competition, achievement, and responsibility.
- Some initial strategies were workshopped at the retreat (viewable [here](#)), but more comprehensive test plans should be rolled out on select campuses for the 2025/2026 academic year and reviewed for impact in summer of 2026.

Address the Mentorship Gap

- Actively recruit male-identifying staff and non–male-identifying student engagement staff that excel at connecting with male students for the 2026/2027 academic year.
- Offer a training module at NPI for all staff on effective male engagement.
- Develop a set of strategies and mentoring opportunities to increase retention of these professionals.
- Create Hillel International roles for male engagement advising, program development, and mentorship.
- Discuss numerical targets / soft quotas working towards gender parity in early-career and mid-career positions.
- Develop opportunities for emerging male student leaders and connect them to male mentorship opportunities across the movement

Leverage Research and Expertise

- Conduct data collection beyond HEaRT (e.g., staff-focused qualitative research) during the course of the 2025/2026 academic year to increase knowledge of engagement trends with male staff and students.
- Feature an expert on male engagement and education at HIGA 2025.
- Organize a panel of organizers and participants from the Hevre retreat at HIGA 2025.
- During the 2025/2026 academic year, establish an advisory group to refine strategies and assess impact.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

"If Hillel fails to engage young Jewish men effectively, the consequences go beyond them, it impacts the entire Jewish community," one participant concluded. The retreat illuminated a deep need to rethink and expand Hillel's approach, ensuring that all students, men included, find belonging, responsibility, and purpose. "We don't need to coddle men. We need to empower them to step up, take responsibility, and build community."

We live at a time when masculinity is often seen as inherently toxic. On the other hand, proposals for non-toxic masculinity are frequently perceived by young men as lacking authenticity and requiring them to negate themselves. By taking proactive steps, Hillel can model positive and authentic Jewish masculinity to inspire a generation of Jewish men committed to their tradition and eager to cultivate inclusive campus communities. While we recognize that there is no singular definition of positive Jewish masculinity, some of the Jewish values that emerged from our conversations included: duty and responsibility (*chiyuv*), strength and vulnerability, fraternity and friendship, integrity, and generosity.

We believe that working to understand the unmet needs of Jewish men on campus, taking those needs seriously, and addressing them through the lens of Jewish values will help foster thriving Jewish communities and a bright future for all of our students.

"Keeping Men Engaged—by Keeping the Movement Engaged in Them."