

My name is Romi Benasuly, and I am a third-year Communication major at UCSB from Irvine, California. I am the Vice President of Activities at Hillel, as well as UCSB's representative for Hillel International's Israel Leadership Network.

As an Israeli-American Jewish student, I can honestly say that Santa Barbara Hillel has changed my life.

In 1948, when Israel declared its independence, my grandparents left their homes in Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen, and made aliyah to Israel. Fifty years later, I was born in Tel Hashomer, Israel. But my time there was brief as my parents moved us to the United States when I was seven months. Luckily, in California, my Israeli and Jewish identities remained strong as my parents immersed us in Israeli culture.

When I started applying to colleges, my priority was academics above all else. I wasn't really thinking about my Jewish or Israeli identities. In my first year, I did well in classes, made friends, and joined a sorority.

But soon I realized that a significant part of my identity was not being fulfilled. I missed belonging to a Jewish and Israeli community. On top of all that, the pandemic hit just over halfway through my first year.

I wanted to be a leader and make a difference. So I got involved at Santa Barbara Hillel and joined the board. As a passionate Israeli student, I

was immediately drawn to becoming the Israel Education and Programming Chair.

This was during the first full year of the pandemic, which made everything very difficult. Our team was able to put on a couple of successful events over Zoom, but it wasn't the same. Virtual Hillel was better than nothing, but we struggled.

Later in my sophomore year, when school was still online, we faced a challenge that brought our community together. The conflict between Israel and Gaza last May incited rampant anti-Israel sentiment nationwide. UCSB was no exception. In response to this crisis, Hillel convened and facilitated a zoom conversation between Jewish students and top UCSB administration, along with facilitating a dialogue within the Jewish student community. This dialogue lifted our spirits and helped prepare us for the next challenge.

On May 25th last year, a BDS resolution to divest from US companies doing business with Israel was brought up in our student government, setting into motion an eleven-hour long overnight meeting. Despite the odds, during a time when Israel was being demonized, Hillel helped us organize strategically so we could prevail and defeat BDS. With Hillel's support and guidance, UCSB has faced down BDS motions annually nearly every year since 2013.

Thankfully, this past year has been so much better. UCSB and Hillel have reopened in person and that has made such a difference.

This fall I returned to Santa Barbara eager to get started in Jewish leadership. I became involved in the Israel Leadership Network, I was selected for an executive position in Hillel as the Vice President of Activities, and I became a Mishelanu Fellow, which is our Israeli Cultural Club. This year, I have taken two courses of study with Hillel - an Israel Learning Fellowship and a Jewish Learning Fellowship. Through these courses, I have connected to new aspects of my Jewish identity and have learned about marginalized Jewish communities in Israel, something that I was never taught before.

Earlier this month, my Hillel experience peaked with helping plan and run Israel Peace Week. This brought together the entire Jewish community for everything from Tel Aviv beach day to a Yom Hazikaron memorial ceremony. Every day we had huge events, sharing our pride and our joy. Due to Hillel and Liv's hard work, many hundreds of students participated.

This time, we were able to build community in a positive way.

All this helped us become prepared for what came to UCSB just last week. The anti-Israel group SJP put up a wall of lies in the middle of campus. While its presence did not come as a surprise to us, it was nevertheless disheartening and damaging to our community. Rabbi Evan

and Liv jumped into action, created and printed flyers that countered points made on the wall, and helped us organize. We handed out flyers to nearby students with the hope of engaging them in discussion, bringing to light the disinformation on the wall, and offering another perspective.

While the wall loomed over the center of campus, Hillel organized us and gave us the resources to be prepared in case BDS came back last Wednesday. In the end, a BDS resolution was not brought up in our student Senate. In my opinion, if there is just one thing that deterred them from doing so, it is the preparation, dedication, and resilience of our Jewish community.

Because of Hillel, Jewish students like me have our home away from home. We receive unconditional support from our Hillel staff to achieve all of our goals, from a simple programming event to making a statement to the Senate condemning anti-Semitism. All of this is possible because of your generous support. So thank you all for coming to support our honorees and students like me. We couldn't do it without you!