



## MIT Hillel Update



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### Greetings from Cambridge to MIT's Jewish alumni, parents, and friends on campus and around the globe!

From the Students, Board, and Staff of MIT Hillel

1. Inbar Yamin '15, Noam Buckman '16, Stevie Fine '15, Greg Kravit '15, Shoshana Gibbor (staff), and Eugene Feldman MBA'12 spell-out MIT's presence at the AIPAC National Summit.
2. Keren Greenbaum '14 and sister Maya prepare for special themed superhero Shabbat dinner.
3. Birthright Israel alumni Zoe Steier '15, Evan Tencer '15, Sarah Toledano '15 reunite over a meal with trip staffers Ariel Koschitzky and Shoshana Gibbor.

### Mentshn of Mention



Alana Lidawer '16  
[alidawer@mit.edu](mailto:alidawer@mit.edu)

I am a freshman from Highland Park, a northern suburb of Chicago. I live in East Campus, and I am interested in studying course 8.

My first encounter with MIT Hillel was a couple years ago when I was a junior in high school. I was visiting the campus for the first time, and Hillel found a student to host me and tell me about being a student at MIT, specifically about being a Jewish student. Clearly my experience with Hillel was a positive one because I ended up applying and eventually enrolling here. In fact, I am now good friends with my host from that weekend. I also attended Hillel events during Campus Preview Weekend. I felt really welcome at Hillel, which made me feel welcome at MIT. I felt certain that I would be a member of a vibrant and friendly Jewish community here at MIT, which ended up being a significant factor in choosing MIT because it made MIT feel like home.

I started attending the Reform Chavurah service my first Friday on campus

### Executive Director's Update



To all of the MIT community – alumni, parents, friends – living in areas hit by Sandy, and now by this Nor'easter, my thoughts and those of all of us on campus have been with you these past days. **I hope you have power, are warm, and are finding the strength for the tasks ahead.** Last week, I sent out emails to all Jewish students and parents who live between Connecticut and Virginia to check in; we are also beginning to explore volunteer

opportunities for our students to support communities in rebuilding. As a Jewish community, as an MIT community, we aspire to do all we can.

On campus, the past few weeks have also seen non-storm activity. A full month without Jewish holidays brought some normalcy and routine to MIT. Studying, and study breaks, and breaks from studying all found their time and place:

- **Studying:** A new *havruta* study program -- described as "the ancient Jewish art of p-setting [problem-setting]" -- kicked-off this month; it is a regular evening of Jewish text learning for all skill levels organized by our Jewish educator.
- **Study breaks:** Tuesday evening is Hillel's study break night. Or, more accurately describing the atmosphere, a "snack and study" night. We even provide the tutors... or at least Isaac Oderberg, a biology graduate student, created (the much too long to remember acronym) "greatmusic7": Graduate Researchers Educating And Teaching MIT Undergraduate Students In Course 7!
- **Breaks from Studying** (also known for millennia as "Shabbat"): Shabbat comes every week; rest, and creativity, included. "Superhero" Shabbat amused many as a community-building theme of one week's meal. At our recent Shabbat



Across MIT (ShabbāM), dinner spread across campus, with multiple smaller groups of students eating, laughing, and celebrating Friday night together.

Truly exciting, and a first, students from MIT, Wellesely and their friends will **fill**



**our own Birthright Israel bus this winter!** The free trip also includes educational preparation; a recent orientation lecture highlighted Middle Eastern geopolitics. Their second orientation event will include a *mifgash*/conversation with Israeli students from the Technion, who will be visiting MIT Hillel later this month as part of our bi-campus **ConnecTech program exploring science, community service, and Jewish identity.**

Finally, our students have been attending **high school college fairs** to promote the strengths of MIT and MIT's Jewish community. If you know a high school student interested in MIT, have them be in touch!

L'shalom,  
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM '97

## Torah from Tech



*Our Torah this month is taught by Brian Ross '11 (Course 20). He is currently a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. He can be reached at [bross@alum.mit.edu](mailto:bross@alum.mit.edu).*

### **How Science Connects Jews to Judaism and the Rest of the World**

Maimonides, one of the premier authorities in Talmudic law in the Medieval world, was also an authority on Greek and Arabic medicine and a physician to the Muslim ruling family of Egypt. He became an expert not only on Jewish topics, but on non-Jewish scholarship as well.

This dual commitment to learning has become the ideal for the Jewish MIT student. Not only must he master mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology, he must make time in the hectic week for Jewish learning as well. This balance between Jewish and non-Jewish studies reflects the overall struggle that the Jewish community faces between maintaining a distinct identity while still being a part of the larger world.

The rabbis of the Talmud, like the Jewish MIT student, were interested in both religious and worldly intellectual pursuits, though in the days of Talmud the distinction between the two was blurred. The rabbis, furthermore, did not only favor Jewish scholarship on scientific and philosophical inquiries. Though they had an ambivalent attitude towards non-Jewish sources of knowledge, the rabbis sometimes favored non-Jewish scholarship to Jewish study when it came to questions of science, nature, and medicine.

The Talmud reveals that the rabbis had for their time a thorough knowledge of astronomy, zoology, medicine, botany, and other scientific disciplines. The distinction between science and religion, however, was not so clear as they often had a religious motivation for their pursuit. Scholars, such as Shmuel bar Abba, studied astronomy and mathematics so that they could accurately set the Jewish calendar and fix the appropriate days for the holidays. The rabbis also did anatomical studies on animals to determine their kashrut status and even performed human dissection to answer questions relating to ritual purity. Furthermore they made observations about disease so as to know when to break a commandment in order to save the life of someone with that disease. For example, the rabbis ruled that if a woman has two children that die of bleeding due to circumcision, she should not have her third child circumcised, as hemophilia can be heritable. Though the Talmud was written many centuries before the scientific method was formulated, the Sages use empiricism and experimentation to learn about the natural world.

It is clear, thus, that the rabbis were invested in answering questions about the natural world in order to gather insight on questions pertaining to Judaism. What was their attitude, then, towards non-Jewish pursuits of scientific knowledge? It seems that the scholars of the Talmud had an ambivalent attitude to the scientific pursuits of non-Jews at the time. On one hand they banned the study of *Hokhmat Yevanit*, or "Greek wisdom." While Maimonides argued a millennium later that that did not include Greek natural philosophy, it is unclear what the original intended boundaries of the prohibition were.

during Orientation. Since then, it has become something that I look forward to every week. Before every service, all of the members of the Reform Chavurah say one thing that was good about the past week. The service is always a wonderful break from the hectic atmosphere of MIT. It is a time for me to remember everything that I am grateful for and everything that I am looking forward to.

Hillel has given me many opportunities to learn about Judaism. I chanted Torah on Yom Kippur. I discuss Torah every week during Shabbat services and during a biweekly text study with the Reform Chavurah, and I attend Hillel events for the holidays. Hillel has made developing my Jewish identity very easy, and so far I love being a part of the Jewish community on campus.

**Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!**

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!



Despite this ambiguous ban, it is clear some of the Sages, such as Yehudah HaNasi, were indeed well-educated in Greek language and texts. Furthermore, parts of the Talmud seem to acknowledge that non-Jewish philosophers may have been more accurate than Jewish ones in answering questions of nature:

The Sages of Israel maintain that the sun travels beneath the sky by day and above the sky by night; while the Sages of the Nations of the world maintain that it travels beneath the sky by day and below the earth at night. Rabbi said their view is preferable to ours, for the wells are cold by day but warm at night.

According to modern thinking, neither the view of the Sages of Israel nor the view of the Sages of the Nations is accurate. Nevertheless, the Talmud is willing to admit that the observations of the non-Jewish philosophers have more validity than that of the Jewish scholars. Despite the ban on studying "Greek wisdom," the rabbis of the Talmud did not shut their eyes to philosophy from non-Jewish scholars. Another example is in Avodah Zara 28a, when the rabbis discuss possible cures for scurvy of the gums. Each rabbi tried to give his own cure. While all of the rabbis' treatments proved ineffective, the only effective remedy (the ashes from burning the seeds of an unripe olive) was given by an Arab. The rabbis were humble enough to realize that they did not have all the answers, and that they could look to non-Jews for advice. Therefore, it is clear that the rabbis of the Talmud were open to ideas of non-Jews when it came to questions of science.

In the Talmud, the rabbis asked questions about the natural world and used rudimentary scientific reasoning to answer them. They also, to some extent, drew from scientific knowledge obtained from non-Jewish sources. While much of traditional Jewish practice serves to separate the Jewish community from the larger non-Jewish world, the pursuit of knowledge serves to bridge the gap. Though traditional rabbinic Judaism prohibits intermarrying with non-Jews, or eating at their dining establishments, it does indeed encourage Jews to exchange scientific knowledge with non-Jews to gain a better understanding of the world we live in.

*Sources Consulted:*

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## **MIT Hillel's 2013 Annual Fund Add to Jewish life @ MIT!**

The generosity and annual support of alumni, parents, faculty, and friends contributes to a depth of Jewish life, experiences, and growth for the Jews and Jewish community of MIT.

Do you like what you read and hear about Jewish life at MIT? Please help us create vibrant Jewish life at MIT, and lasting commitments to Judaism. [Add your name](#) to MIT Hillel's 2013 Donor Roll while the year is still new!

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## **Tamid Initiative - Planned Giving @ MIT Hillel**

Endowment and planned gifts truly sustain and build an organization. MIT Hillel is excited to help alumni and friends to create your personal Jewish legacies at MIT.

We invite alumni and friends who care deeply about Jewish life at MIT to consider joining the Institute's **Katharine Dexter McCormick (1904) Society (KDMS)** and be part of the **Tamid Initiative** by making a bequest to MIT, for the benefit of MIT Hillel. Your generosity will help MIT Hillel engage today's students, securing our Jewish future with confidence.

To inform us that you plan such a gift, download and send us a [pledge form](#).

MIT and MIT Hillel are eager to help you meet your objectives. For more information, please contact Danny Watt, MIT Hillel's Director of Development, [dwatt@mit.edu](mailto:d watt@mit.edu).

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## On the Hillel Calendar

### Friday, November 9 and Friday, December 14: Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT

Professor of the Practice of the Humanities Alan P. Lightman will be speaking tomorrow on the "Cambodian Dream: Empowering Women in Cambodia." Professor Amy Finkelstein of the Department of Economics will be speaking in December.

Not in the Cambridge area? Look for announcements of "Leading Jewish Minds on the Road"... we may be coming to a city near you! Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Miami tour stops now being planned.

### Tuesday, November 27-Monday, December 3: ConnecTech Delegation of Technion Hillel students at MIT from Haifa, Israel.

Hillel students from Haifa's Technion University will be exploring MIT labs and Boston hi-tech, volunteering in Cambridge, and getting to know American Jewish learning, community, and identity during a weeklong *mifgash*/meeting with our MIT Hillel students. Groups of students from both campuses have been studying about the convergence of science and ethics and doing community service in their home cities.

### Tuesday, November 27, 7pm: MIT Basketball against Tufts, MIT Rockwell Cage

MIT and Technion Hillel ConnecTech students invite the entire MIT Hillel community -- students, faculty, alumni, friends -- to enjoy our top ranked Division III basketball team play Tufts at [MIT's Rockwell Cage \(W33\)](#). Root for all our Jewish players (on both teams!) and then schmooze afterwards with a nosh in the [Hillel Center \(W11\)](#).

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## MIT Hillel wishes a hearty "Mazal Tov" to:

Sophie Rapoport '07 and Joshua Barton on their recent wedding on Sunday, November 4 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

David Stiebel '09 and Erin Cooper on their recent wedding on Sunday, November 4.

A lifetime of happiness and joy to both couples.

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Tel: 617.253.2982  
Fax: 617.253.3260  
[mit.edu/hillel](http://mit.edu/hillel)  
Email: [hillel@mit.edu](mailto:hillel@mit.edu)

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MIT Hillel  
40 Massachusetts Ave  
MIT Building W11  
Cambridge, MA 02139  
US

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