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**Greetings from MIT Hillel to Alumni, Parents, and Friends in Cambridge and Beyond...**

1. Sienna Ramos '18 at the Senior House shakshuka making.
2. Ethan Sokol G, Kristine Fong G, Brenda Stern '17 share home-baked Challah for Hunger, sold to raise tzedakah funds.
3. David Goldfinger G and Max Dunitz '14 G explore the Genesis story of Rebecca at Grad Hillel Torah and Tonics

**Executive Director's Update**



While the holidays feel like ancient history already, Sukkot was such a wonderful time for bringing together students, that I want to share just a few "snapshots" you could have seen in the MIT sukkah on Kresge Oval. They clearly illustrate the diversity of activity and pluralism of communal identification on campus. One evening a group of Theta sorority women who had been on Birthright together organized a potluck reunion dinner. Similarly, a group of Israelis in the [MIT Mishelanu](#) (for Israeli-Jewish Americans) group also enjoyed the unseasonably warm Boston weather and joined together for a program discussion. Our Reform Chavurah planned a havdalah ceremony and program on Saturday night. Graduate Hillel students hung out to enjoy klezmer music and each other's



company during their annual Sukkah soiree. And, despite it being a long Columbus Day weekend, with many students traveling or heading home, over 50 students still attended Shabbat dinner in the sukkah. (Thanks to alum Steve Tavan '72 for the sukkah photo to the right.)

Sukkot was also the beginning of regular Hillel classes. Each week options for deep learning, often with a fun twist, abound. *Love Game of Thrones?* We've got the most thought-provoking conversation this side of Westeros; from ethics to the supernatural, students engage with Jewish themes inspired by the HBO show. Think intellectual argumentation is only found through an official college class? Hillel offers two Talmud classes and an advanced level Jewish wisdom on modern problems class weekly. Pre-meds and others also explore Jewish medical ethics in a class that brings in guest Jewish doctors and professors for "real world" perspectives after they have grappled with traditional and modern texts on specific medical subjects.



Following this summer's conflict in Israel and Gaza, even on the usually politically quiet MIT campus, Israel discussions and lectures are on the upswing, with views across the ideological spectrum being expressed. Our [Friends of Israel](#) students are creating Israel-centric cultural events like a "Night of Blue and White;" organizing Israel 101 learning spaces and lectures like "Mental Health in the Army and Israeli Society" (co-sponsored with [MIT's Active Minds group](#)); and attending talks and responding as pro-Israel advocates in appropriate forums. As continues to be our goal, Hillel is helping our students form positive connections to Israel, as they explore the richness and complexities of the Jewish State.



Building strong connections with Israel is particularly effective when one knows and relates to Israelis. Our annual [ConnecTech](#) delegation of students from the Hillel at the Technion in Haifa just arrived yesterday. Both our current MIT ConnecTech student ambassadors and the wider Hillel community will be engaging with and encountering each other over the course of this week, learning how each understands and connects to Jewish peoplehood and Jewish



**Mentshn of Mention**



Elana Ben-Akiva '15  
Course 20 (Biological Engineering)  
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I didn't stray very far from home to go to MIT. I am from Brookline, MA, which is about a 15-minute drive from campus (and that's with traffic on the BU bridge). I am a senior majoring in biological engineering. MIT has been an amazing experience for me academically and socially, and I'm already sad at the thought of leaving at the end of the year.

Before I came to MIT, my involvement in the Jewish community was not something I needed to seek out, as it was more or less determined for me. I went to a Jewish day school from kindergarten to eighth grade, belonged to a temple, and went to a Jewish sleepaway camp. Beginning in 9th grade, while attending my town's public high school, I also attended Prozdor (a Hebrew school for high-schoolers) to continue my Jewish education. Despite all this Jewish background, I didn't really think about having any involvement with Hillel when I first came to MIT. A chance encounter with a former classmate from my Jewish day school (shoutout to Inbar Yamin '15) led me to follow her to a Shabbat dinner early in our freshman year.

Since then, Hillel has been a major part of my social and extracurricular life at MIT. I have met a lot of my closest friends through Hillel, and I have had the opportunity to play a leadership role by serving on Hillel's student board. In this capacity, I

identity.

Socializing. Learning. Israel activity and education. We have this and more. Activity, energy, and growth are all over campus. I am often amazed that I get paid to do this inspiring work!

L'shalom,  
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM'97  
[rabbif@mit.edu](mailto:rabbif@mit.edu)

## Torah from Tech



Our Torah this month is taught by [Steve Tannenbaum](#), a faculty member in the Departments of Biological Engineering and of Chemistry. He came to MIT as a Freshman in 1954, and except for a Sabbatical in Israel in 1973 (yes, through the Yom Kippur War) has been there ever since. For many years his research has been on the role of inflammation in disease, and is now focused mainly on neuropathologies and Inflammatory Bowel Disease.

### Jacob and the Mandrakes. A Case of Sexual Adventure

I have long been fascinated by the story in Genesis of mandrakes and sexual intrigue involving Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. As a scientist, my inclination is to look at the story through the lens of a course I teach at MIT, Mechanisms of Drug Action (20.201), that explores drugs and pharmacology. It can be rewarding to combine science and tradition.

We are taught two things about the entire early biblical narrative. First, that everything retained in the consolidation of the Torah in Rabbinic times was critical to the development of the theme of how the Jewish people became a nation. In Genesis, it is the story of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and the birth of the sons whose offspring became the Tribes of Israel. Second, that the Bible is not a police report, so not everything is to be taken literally.

Here is a synopsis of the story. In Genesis 30:14-16, Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob and Leah finds mandrakes (in Hebrew, *dudaim*) in a field. Rachel, Jacob's infertile second wife and Leah's sister, is desirous of them and barter with Leah for them. The trade offered by Rachel is for Leah to spend that night in Jacob's bed in exchange for Leah's dudaim. Leah gives away the plants to her barren sister, but soon after this (Genesis 30:17-22), Leah, who had previously had four sons but had not conceived for a long while, became pregnant once more and in time gave birth to two more sons, Issachar and Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Only thirteen years after this episode of her asking for the mandrakes did Rachel manage to become pregnant.

Here are the facts. Mandrakes are plants that grow in the wild throughout the Middle East and surrounding areas. They are described in Egyptian papyruses ranging from 1600 to 1300 BCE as having hypnotic and psychedelic properties, and that era would be contemporaneous with the story of Jacob. Mandrakes are loaded with psychoactive drugs (*vide infra*). It is of interest, too, that in Hebrew, the name dudaim comes from the same root (shoresh) as "love," so the term means "love plant." I find this use of the word odd but significant, because in every other biblical context of which I am aware, the term refers more to a type of spiritual, than feral love. In the Genesis story it has the intent of suggesting an aphrodisiac or fertility property to the plant or its extracts. Rachel wanted the plants to enhance her ability to get pregnant, but since she was Jacob's favorite she didn't need them to entice him to her bed. One more point about Rachel, is that later in Genesis (31:19), when Jacob and his tribe are returning to Canaan, she steals her father Laban's idols and hides them in her belongings. So, Rachel is guilty of secretly retaining her idolatry and belief in mystical potions.

There is a scientific basis to the belief that Dudaim had psychotropic properties. They belong to the plant class Solanaceae and have significant concentrations of the solanaceous alkaloids, including hyoscyamine, scopolamine, and atropine. Hyoscyamine and atropine increase cardiac output and heart rate, lower blood pressure, and dilate the pupils. Scopolamine in high doses is hallucinogenic, and may cause adverse effects in pregnancy, so its action may be counter to the idea it could enhance pregnancy. On the whole, it fits into the idea that there was a type of medicinal drug culture at the time of the matriarchs.

What about the theological context of this story? Why was it retained in the Torah? I think it is now generally accepted as an anti-idolatry parable. The giving of children is in the province of God, not in magical potions. Rachel got the Dudaim, but Leah gave birth to three more children before Rachel conceived Joseph. It repeats the theme that there is but one God, and "there are no other gods before me," the central tenet of Judaism.

## MIT Hillel's 2015 Annual Fund Add to Jewish life @ MIT!



To our current and future supporters:

Thank you to [our 2014 Donors](#), everyone who helped us to meet our goal in FY14! Together our 789 donors fully supported our mission and our financial goals. A highlight was that we had 70 first-time donors: alumni, parents, and friends who now include Hillel among their MIT giving priorities. We invite you to [join us again this year](#) in supporting Jewish life on campus.

Here is an [overview of our needs](#) this year.

We are always happy to meet with donors in person, to learn why MIT Hillel is important to you and to talk about why your support makes all the difference.

On a personal note, I've especially appreciated the warm welcome, and it is hard for me to believe that my first year here is almost complete. It is an honor to join with you in maintaining and building a strong Jewish presence at MIT.

student board in this capacity, I have organized programming ranging from Latke-Hamentaschen Debate to a Yom Ha'atzmaut carnival to a Matzah Pizza making event. I have also organized various special Shabbat dinners, including Faculty Shabbat and Bring-a-Friend Shabbat. I regularly attend and look forward to Shabbat dinner at Hillel at the end of each week, as it enables me to take a contemplative pause from all the academic stress, and spend time within a community in which I am comfortable. I love that Hillel has a small, close-knit Jewish community but is, at the same time, welcoming to everyone, and one of my goals as a board member has been to extend the reach of Hillel to even more students.

One of the things I love about MIT is that students have so many opportunities to travel to places around the world as part of various programs. I spent the summer following my freshman year working in a biomechanics lab in Singapore through the Singapore-MIT Alliance. I also spent last IAP (Independent Activities Period in January) living and working in a rural village in Zambia as part of D-Lab, which works to design and disseminate technologies to improve the lives of people in the developing world. I have also had the opportunity to make three trips to Israel for various programs. I traveled to Israel on MIT Birthright the summer following my sophomore year, on Hillel's ConnetTech (an exchange program with students from the Technion in Israel) this past summer, and will be teaching entrepreneurship and leadership to high school students in Israel this IAP as part of MISTI's Global Teaching Labs. Despite being half-Israeli and having traveled to Israel many times in the past, it has been very rewarding to travel to Israel with my peers on these kinds of programs and to connect with Israeli students.

I honestly had not expected Hillel and the Jewish community to be a significant aspect of my MIT experience, but it has enhanced my time here in so many ways. In fact, I cannot imagine my MIT experience without Hillel and all of the friendships I've made there.

## Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

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



Thank you,  
Marla Choslovsky SM'88,  
MIT Hillel Director of Development  
[marla360@mit.edu](mailto:marla360@mit.edu)

[Add your name](#) to MIT Hillel's 2015 Donor Roll!

### Tamid Initiative - Planned Giving @ MIT Hillel

Endowment and planned gifts truly sustain and build an organization. MIT Hillel is excited to help you create your personal Jewish legacy 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 MIT Hillel Director of Development, Marla Choslovsky, [marla360@mit.edu](mailto:marla360@mit.edu).

### On the Calendar

#### Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT Fall line-up

- **Friday, November 21:** Andrew Viterbi '56, SM '57, "Two Perspectives on the Digital Age: Broad and Narrow"
- **Friday, December 12:** Evan Ziporyn, Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor

More details to follow...



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