End of Chanukah Greetings
to Alumni, Parents, and Friends in Cambridge and Beyond...

Pictured Above:
Thanksgivukkah dreidel hack atop Building 10, View from Killian Court

Executive Director's Update

As the end of our eighth day approaches: Happy Chanukah! I hope this year was particularly joyous and thankful with the overlapping Thanksgiving holiday. From the banner above and the close-up picture right, our student hackers took full advantage of the Thanksgivukkah celebration to put a turkey dreidel on top of MIT. If you look closely, they even chose the Israeli letters for the dreidel – nes gadol haya po, a great miracle happened here. Now whether that was the miracle at Plymouth Rock or the miracle that the semester ends within a few weeks is up for debate...

Once students returned from the long Thanksgiving weekend, Chanukah was marked in many ways across campus. From the annual test tube menorah lighting in Lobby 7 – this year with metal salts coloring the flames (see below) – to parties in dorms, fraternities, and sororities, Jewish students spread light throughout the MIT community.

The celebration of Chanukah marks the ancient struggle between Greek and Jewish society. It was the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers who created a dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, between science and religion, and even science and ethics, that continues to the modern day. Perhaps continuing the Maccabean rebellion, our students inherit this mantle of thinking and ask for more than this one answer. As part of our past month’s activities, Physics Professor Jeremy England gave part two of a TechTalk series entitled "Chanukah Miracles and Scientific Method," which looked at the philosophy of science, uncovering of Truth, and biblical texts. Many of our students desire more conversation about truth, ethics, and morals. MIT Hillel Board of Directors student director Greg Kravit ’15 wrote an op-ed in the Tech requesting more ethics education as part of his undergraduate experience.

Personally, I also explored all these issues off-campus, as I participated in a gathering...
of a select group of twenty clergy, scientists, and journalists this past week. Gathered by CLAL (National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership), those of us participating in Sinai and Synapses looked at ways to move beyond simplistic views of science and religion, to create new tools and language in the conversation surrounding science and religion. We began our day discussing how science has changed, impacted, or influenced our views on religion, and how religion has changed, impacted, or influenced our views on science. I will be bringing these discussions into more Hillel -- and MIT -- activities as we move ahead.

Over the next couple weeks, we lead up to exams. Students have time to learn and relax in a number of Jewish ways: our monthly women's Rosh Hodesh group; a cappella group Techiya's fall concert; a Birthright alumni learning session on Reconstructionist and Humanist Judaism; MITkablim ("accepted")'s LGBTQ Shabbat dinner; weekly $4 Shabbat dinners; and text studies with Senior Jewish Educator, Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder. As the month then ends, our next Birthright bus explores Israel. Never a dull (or unenlightened) moment.

I have no doubt that long beyond the burning of any of our menorahs, these conversations will continue. I am excited to be leading, challenging -- and being challenged by -- our students as we all grow.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM97
rabbif@mit.edu

Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Naomi Stein. Naomi has an SM ('10) in Civil Engineering and a dual masters in Transportation and City Planning ('13). She is fascinated by planning processes and multi-actor decision-making in the transportation and planning worlds. She lives in Somerville, works in Boston, paints, and swims. She can be reached at negstein@alum.mit.edu.

This time of year brings to us an interesting convergence of three narratives. This week's Torah portion, Vayigash, describes the climactic conclusion of the Joseph story. The long-lost brother reveals himself, embraces his brothers, and brings his entire family into the land of Egypt. Joseph somehow finds a common place for his two identities: a son of Jacob, and a powerful Egyptian ruler.

Also at this time we are celebrating the festival of Chanukah -- a story of rebellion against the forces of assimilation. The Chanukah narrative glorifies the decision of a few to stand up and remain different.

And finally, as our full refrigerators and perhaps yet full bellies remind us, this year added another holiday to the trifecta: Thanksgiving. That the historical events of Thanksgiving provide cause for celebration can be seen as a troubling claim. Some even take it as an opportunity to point to our past and to ask if we have really learned how to deal with difference. I see Thanksgiving as a day that developed its own narrative of significance, not in place of, but in addition to the uncomfortable historical origins: Thanksgiving is for thankfulness and remembered shared history, and a reminder to reconnect and to belong to our family and to our community.

Each of these stories has an uneasy balance between the maintenance of a unique identity and the ability to become part of or be influenced by something new.

In the Vayigash narrative, Joseph explains how his rise to power in Egypt and full integration into the Egyptian community is a means to an end: saving his family from famine. Still, I can't help but be made uncomfortable by the full extent of Joseph's actions with that power. He uses the threat of starvation to obtain all farmland from the residents of Egypt and then returns it to them under conditions of serfdom. True, his wisdom saves their lives and augments the wealth of the land of Egypt. But does Joseph perhaps absorb too much of the autocratic ways of the Egyptian elite?

And Chanukah: it's a story of victory, the righteous few vanquishing the morally corrupt many. The battle has clear sides, clear moral imperatives, and clear victors. But the social reality of the Jewish community was more complicated. Were the Hellenist Jews entirely wrong in seeking knowledge in the wider Greek world? And was Mattiyahu's public killing of a Jew who sacrificed to Greek gods the appropriate response to internal religious conflict?

And Thanksgiving: how does a community or country choose to be proud to share in collective history and identity, while also not denying past wrongs and the challenges of cultural conflict?
I have been thinking a lot lately about how our daily environment shapes our perceptions, understanding, and actions. I recently graduated from MIT after seven wonderful (and of course tiring) years. As you all very well know, MIT is a unique place. The experience is for most of us an odd mix of flying and drowning. The years are spent in a process of both identity development and of subsuming our identities to a collective pursuit of knowledge and change in the world.

Leaving MIT has brought this into sharp focus for me. My new job is showing me blind spots in my education and awareness. It’s pointing out particular worldviews that may not be shared by all of my clients, and that merit informed debate. At the same time, I am wary of losing some of the idealism or stubborn values that MIT helped define within me. This conflict between the inside and outside, the self and the other, the new and the old is something that comes up over and over again in stories about individuals within communities, or about smaller communities within wider national and global contexts. I don’t have “answers.” I just think we had better pay attention to how we are influencing, and being influenced by, both.

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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 Rabbi Fisher, rabbif@mit.edu.

On the Calendar

It was amazing to take Leading Jewish Minds... On the Road to NYC at the end of November. Professor Robert Langer ScD '74 captivated us with a discussion of “Biomaterials and Biotechnology.” In presenting his research and the medical applications for drug delivery, he showed us why we are so proud of Hillel's Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT. A special thanks to Jerry Appelstein ’80 for hosting a warm and spirited gathering.

Spring Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT line-up:

- February 14: Neri Oxman, Assistant Professor of Media Arts and Sciences at the MIT Media Lab
- April 25: Scott Aronson, Associate Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science

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