Greetings and Happy Chanukah from MIT to our Alumni, Faculty, Staff, Parents and Friends!

Evelyn Florentine ’18, Evan Crane ’17, and Evan Olin ’16 celebrate Chanukah MIT-style in Prof Hazel Sive’s lab

Executive Director’s Update

Chanukah is coming! As always, we celebrate MIT-style – from Bunsen burner menorahs pictured above to our annual Test Tube Menorah lighting to dorm candle-lightings in almost every dorm and living group (cute Next House advertising, no?), Hillel helps bring light to students as they wind up the term and head into finals. We are excited to continue our almost 40-year-old tradition of a public lighting of the MIT test tube menorah on Tuesday night at 7pm in the Student Center. If you are local, please join us!

I love telling stories of our students, so here are a few vignettes from the last month. Scene one: Shabbat dinner, Rabbi Gavriel sitting at a table reserved for any students interested in discussing ISIS over the meal – a theme requested by a couple less-regular-Shabbat attendees. An intense and engaging conversation gets enhanced by a walk-by guest, MIT’s Muslim chaplain, Hoda Elsharkawi, who was passing through just saying hello. For long after Grace after Meals, the students, Rabbi G, and Hoda talk about what individuals can do when there is a global crisis. Scene two: just the week before, the local/global scales and the roles and responsibilities of each person was also a Shabbat dinner theme, as students and I passionately discussed fossil fuels and MIT’s actions (or “inactions” as some submitted), as a whole institution and as members within the MIT community. In both instances, Jewish values and texts played an illustrative and foundational role.

Our student board is taking an active role in continuing to introduce Jewish students to each other. Small group mixers – low-key coffee gatherings for students from different class years and living groups – have become a popular success. A number of our students running in the upcoming student board elections have been involved in organizing and participating these – meeting their fellow Jews from around campus in this casual, social way. The Hillel staff is happy to give our student leaders the opportunity to also consume multiple cups of coffee, beyond our own many coffee dates!

Mentshn of Mention

Tamar Grey ’19
tgray@mit.edu

Hi, I’m Tamar Grey, from the suburbs of Chicago. Right now, my intended major is Computational Biology (Course VI-VII), but I have yet to actually take a biology or computer science course at MIT, so that answer may be slightly different by the end of this year. For all I know, it could be very different; I am open to change.

I have been very involved with Hillel, going to Friday night services and dinner, waking up just too late for services but just in time for Saturday lunch (my specialty), and attending a number of freshman events (tie-dye and pizza, Taboo and other board games, and the Thanksgiving frosh-soph event). I also joined the Kosher Food Club board as a programming VP, played on my floor’s intramural soccer team, and spent a lot of time in the community that is the Experimental

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As the term completes, we are always excited for our students who will be experiencing Israel for the first time. Our Birthright bus leaves right after finals for its 10-day Journey. Illustrating how influential the Birthright experience can be, a new initiative through the David Project has Birthright alum Ory Tasman ’16 traveling with two students from the Black Student Union on Israel Uncovered over winter break where they will engage with the dynamism and complexity of Israel, and then bring back their personal Israel narratives to their peers next term. 

Best wishes to all for a happy, bright Chanukah!

L'shalom, 
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM ’97
rabbif@mit.edu

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**Torah from Tech**

*Our Torah this month is taught by Arthur Silverman ’61 (Course VIA, XV). After graduating Tech, Arthur attended Columbia University Law School and clerked at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit. He has been a full-time lawyer for 50 years and is still going strong. Arthur married his high school sweetheart; they have 2 sons and 8 grandchildren, 3 of whom next year will be college students or in Israel on a gap year. He can be reached at ASilverman@duanemorris.com.

Over 55 years ago, I graduated Tech in VI-A and XV. I had been reasonably active in Hillel which then was a shadow of what it is today. The Kosher kitchen was just getting established as simply a room in Walker to heat and eat one meal a day in the form of a frozen kosher, aluminum-foil wrapped “airplane meal.” I am grateful to Rabbi Fisher, to all who assist her, and to all of the students, present and past, and alumni and alumnae who have led in the development of Hillel at M.I.T to what it is today.

I originally intended to submit an essay covering two subjects. The first was: What does the Torah tell us about how many able bodied Levites it took to carry all the very heavy and large parts of the Tabernacle (Mishkan) through the extraordinary mountainous wilderness of Sinai, assemble the Mishkan, disassemble it to move from place to place, and tend to the needs of the Tabernacle during the Israelites’ 2,000,000 strong, 40 years in the wilderness (“midbar” does not mean “desert” which is an inaccurate definition, but rather “wilderness”—indeed, a severe, mountainous wilderness)? Can you imagine moving the entire population of Manhattan through a mountainous wilderness for 40 years? (Mayor deBlasio, if you think you’ve got problems, meet Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher. Oy!)

The Torah gave us the dimensions of structural elements of the Mishkan, its floor plans, and specifications for materials (such as only using acacia wood—a subject in itself) and assembly. Through calculations and rational, fact-based, assumptions one can reach conclusions, one of which is that the effort involved was enormous, almost beyond imagination, and another of which is that the census count of able bodied Levites, as stated in the Torah, is itself a provably rational view of how many Levites were required.

The second subject was to describe the construction management, general contractor, subcontractor, and architectural design genius of King Solomon as “visionary developer” (today’s jargon), and the brilliance, creativity, and craftsmanship of his logistics engineers, riggers, movers, site engineers, stone cutters, masons, craftsmen, project managers, foremen, and huge number of skilled and unskilled laborers, artists, artisans, and needle and leather tradespersons involved in building the First Temple. I was driven to all of this and had made quite a study of the subject because I emerged, after M.I.T., as a building construction lawyer who had been counsel for a quarter century to one of the nation’s largest construction companies and who has for the past decades been responsible on the owner/developer side of the table, for the construction and design contracts of many of New York City’s most important projects. What fascinated me was that all of the elements of construction and construction management and sustainable design, now studied in many engineering and architectural disciplines, are found in the ancient books of Tanakh, the acronym describing the books of Torah, Nevi’im (Prophets, Kings, Judges, etc.), and Ketuvim (Psalms, Proverbs, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations).

That essay will just have to wait. In Synagogue last Shabbat (November 28) I decided to shelve my drafts and instead address a particular set of questions and answers said every single day of the year right after the morning blessings, questions which are also asked multiple times on Yom Kippur. I will then relate that prayer to the recent murder in Israel of young Ezra Schwartz, z”l, of Sharon, Massachusetts who was in his ”gap year” studying in Israel when he and two others were murdered and five were seriously injured by an Uzi-armed Palestinian.

After the morning obligatory blessings, there is the following series of beautifully poetic and deeply philosophic questions requiring a great deal of introspection. (Translation is amalgamated from the ArtScroll and Koren Siddurs.)

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Another part of why my transition to college has gone so smoothly is my floor in Burton Conner, the dorm where I live. During Campus Preview Weekend last spring, I stayed in one of the kosher suites on Burton Two, and that is where I live now. Burton Two houses the kosher suites, a fair number of other members of the Jewish community, as well as other amazingly supportive non-Jewish students. Being able to live together helps the community stay tight knit, and I cannot imagine living anywhere else.

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Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!
"What are we?  What are our lives?  What is our kindness?  What is our righteousness?  What is our salvation?"

"What is our strength?  What is our might?  What shall we say before You, G-d?"

"Are not all the mighty like nothing before You?  The famous as if they had never existed?  The wise as if devoid of wisdom?  The perceptible as if devoid of intelligence?"

"For their many works are pointless--in vain, and the days of their lives are empty before You."

"The pre-eminence of man over beast is nothing, for all is but a fleeting breath."

The answer that follows in the Siddur was, for the longest time quite unsatisfactory to me. Its plain meaning seemed simplistic, irrelevant, ignored many realities and infirmities of the male subjects of the answer, and most of the time, I felt it was no answer at all. Using the Koren translation, the answer was: "Yet, we are Your people, the children of your covenant." OK. That didn't seem like much of an answer to me unless one has perfect faith and assurance beyond reason which is not so easy for an M.I.T engineer to take. Surely an answer to such a serious question needed more. The answer goes on. "We are the children of Abraham, Your beloved, to whom you made a promise at Mount Moriah: the offspring of Isaac, his only one who was bound on the altar; the congregation of Jacob Your firstborn son whom—because of the love with which You loved him and the joy with which You rejoiced with him, You called Yisrael and Yeshurun.” Where are the women in this answer? Isn't it the fact that they (at least Sarah and Rebecca) made all the critical decisions that related to who would carry the lineage and history of the Jewish People?

And that's the entire answer. Or maybe I should punctuate it, "And that's the entire answer?" What kind of an answer is that?

I eventually became satisfied when I treated the paragraph as a short-cut version of something like: "Yet we are the Jewish People who have survived all odds and all crises and every effort to destroy us through death and assimilation over a period in excess of 3,000 years, with our religious and moral roots going back to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel." We live our lives not by a rigid view of a fossilized Torah, but rather by a view of a living Torah shaped in ways, always well sourced, that have both expanded the words or severely limited them or their application -- the result of the analyses and debates over thousands of years by brilliant, learned and wise scholars and are still being so shaped today. We cannot read the Torah simplistically or literally as one might be tempted to do in a literature class. The commentaries of the Sages of all the ages are integral to understanding. When so read and interpreted, and viewing the totality of thousands of years of history, one confirms that the Jewish people are indeed in a unique category with consequent unique responsibilities that set us apart from others. That is the answer to the question.

The prayer continues: "Therefore it is our duty to thank You" and to "praise and sanctify You" which is what much of the rest of the morning (Shacharit) service will be all about.

Then comes the word "Ashreinu" which means "Happy are we" according to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks; and "Fortunate are we" according to the Artscroll Prayer Book. And then, "How good is our portion, how lovely our fate, how beautiful our heritage," followed by the Sh'ma.

That word "Ashreinu" has recently stuck in my mind because in his gap year between high school and college, Ezra Schwartz, z"l (abbreviation for "Zichrono Liv'racha," "May his memory be blessed") was studying at Yeshivat Ashreinu in Bet Shemesh, Israel. He was murdered when he and others decided to deliver Thanksgiving "treats" to Lone Soldiers, most of whom are Americans who have no parents or family in Israel, but have volunteered to serve in the Israel Defense Forces to defend the Jewish Homeland. These yeshiva students had delivered the packages and were on their way back to their yeshivot to continue their studies when they were murdered. Ezra Schwartz was a normal kid. He had been a high school student at the famous Maimonides High School in Boston. He was an ardent fan of the Boston Patriots.

So how does one say "Ashreinu"? “Happy are we?” In these times? The paradigm is set for us by Sarah Techiya Litman. Her 40 year old father and 18 year old brother were recently murdered by terrorists just a couple of days before her long-planned wedding. She and the groom-to-be postponed their wedding for the number of days necessary for her to sit the full seven days of the shiva mourning period. She and the groom-to-be changed the situs of their wedding to the Jerusalem Convention Center, and invited literally “everyone” to come and celebrate. Thousands came. Twelve flew in from Canada. Despite the intense pain of losing her father and brother, she was determined that life would go on and there would be joy. All those present said "Ashreinu. Happy are we. We have purpose, we have heritage, the Jewish people again has a homeland after thousands of years."

There are fabulous Jewish students at M.I.T. and at the Technion and in many others of the great universities around the world. Hillel at M.I.T is better than ever. We count blessings, and, despite all, we look up and say "Ashreinu" every day.

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This essay is dedicated to my close friend, Captain Jules Lassner, z"l, and to those who were under his command. Captain Lassner was a World War II enlistee in the United States Marines. He saw intense and sustained duty in the Pacific. During one amphibious landing, he and those he commanded came under continuing machine gun fire and had to remain in their foxholes for two days. At the end of the
bombardment, he survived. Everything he had with him in his knapsack was destroyed except for his siddur/prayer book and tefillin which he used every day. Those to his immediate right and immediate left did not make it. Captain Lassner became a leader in New York's famous synagogues Orach Chaim and Kehilath Jeshurun, on Manhattan's Upper East Side and, with his wife Danielle, in the Ramaz School community in which she served as head of the foreign language department and as Director of Admissions. Captain Lassner died just before Shabbat, November 27. His funeral was Sunday, November 29. May his memory be an everlasting blessing.

MIT Hillel's 2016 Annual Fund
Add to Jewish life @ MIT!

“I had forgotten how much MIT and MIT Hillel mean to me.” I was so touched when I heard these words, spoken by Martin Miller ’51 as he welcomed people to our recent Leading Jewish Minds event in New York City, which he and his wife Madge hosted. The best part of my job is helping people do what is important to them.

Each week, a member of the Hillel staff writes a brief “Spirituality Post” for our students to see on Facebook. The gist is that there are many ways, big and small, to stay in touch with who you are, to replenish yourself for the heavy workload at MIT, and to appreciate your place in the world. As the year end approaches, I offer a “Spirituality Post” to complement our Chanukah appeal letter coming soon to your mailbox. I appeal to you to pause as you make your year-end gifts, to focus not solely on the amount and crossing your donations off your to-do list, but on how you first connected to a particular cause. You may be surprised to realize how long you’ve stayed affiliated, how much the organizations have accomplished, how many others share your interests, how much of an impact your philanthropy has made when summed over the years. I hope that taking a brief moment to do this helps to make your gift giving as meaningful to you as it is to us, and ultimately to the students we serve.

As always, it is an honor to join with you in maintaining and building a strong Jewish presence at MIT. I thank you for your support of MIT Hillel’s mission and Rabbi Fisher’s leadership.

Wishing you a Happy Chanukah!

Thank you,
Marla Choslovsky SM’88,
MIT Hillel Director of Development
marla360@mit.edu

Add your name to MIT Hillel’s 2016 Donor Roll!

Tamid Initiative - Planned Giving @ MIT Hillel

We invite alumni and friends who care deeply about Jewish life at MIT to consider joining the Institute’s Katherine 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.

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. To inform us that you have already planned such a gift, please contact us directly or let us know in writing.

On the Calendar

Annual Test Tube Menorah Lighting: Tuesday, Dec 8, 7pm, Student Center Lobby

Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT: Fall Line-up

- December 11, Deborah Ancona, Seley Distinguished Professor of Management, a Professor of Organization Studies, and the Director of the MIT Leadership Center at the MIT Sloan School of Management