Greetings and early happy Passover from MIT to our Alumni, Faculty, Staff, Parents and Friends!

1. Paint Night! Meghan Reisenauer '19 and Zoe Klawans '19
2. George Elbaum '59 speaks at event organized by MIT Hillel Students (see Director's column below)
3. MIT Hillel Director of Birthright and Israel Programs, Shoshana Gibbor, and Rabbi Fisher join student delegates at the Annual Policy Conference for AIPAC in DC. L-R: Jonathan Hurowitz '18, Evan Crane '17, Ellie Neuman (Wellesley '18), Rabbi Fisher, Josh Fishman '19, Shoshana Gibbor, Rogers Epstein '19, Isaac Silberberg '16

March goes in like a lion and out like… well, at least here in Boston, April comes in like a snowstorm. After I shoveled out my car earlier this week, I immediately posted on our MIT Hillel Facebook page a message to our students that our spring holiday of Passover is just around the corner. Hopefully by the end of the month, parsley and other greens and hard-boiled eggs, our seder symbols of spring’s regrowth and rebirth will feel more seasonal.

Even if the weather is not cooperating yet, our Hillel preparations for Passover are well-underway. Close to a dozen seders will be held around campus: at Hillel, in dorms, in fraternities, at Sloan. Student leaders are meeting with Hillel staff to learn and prepare how to bring rich Jewish content to their seders. When I was an undergrad, my Hillel did a chocolate seder as a during-Passover study break; ours was this week — pre-Passover — and will be used to model fun and creative ideas that can enhance the seder experience, both for those who are hosting seders at MIT and for those helping at a family seder. Also, for the second year, Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder, our Senior Jewish Educator, is creating an “MIT haggadah” with commentary focused on our students’ particular interests. (We can send you a copy by PDF, just ask)

Regular programming does not go on hold as we prepare for major holidays like Passover. Weekly Hillel Shabbat dinners are growing in size and popularity; last week we had about 95 students in attendance, who got to enjoy a Jewish/Torah-themed stand-up comedy routine from Max Haubenstock ‘17. We also had a “family style” dorm Shabbat dinner on Burton-3 (see left). Pictured above and to the right was a highly successful “Paint Night”, a night of Jewish culture, exploring depictions of the “Tree of Life” motif in Judaism and allowing students to bring forth their inner artists. Last night, George Elbaum ’59 (Course 16) addressed the MIT community at an event co-sponsored by MIT Hillel and the Chancellor’s Office. George is a Holocaust survivor who often speaks for “Using History and OurSELVES”, teaching a message of personal responsibility, respect, and an appreciation for humanity and for life. Our students appreciated the opportunity to interact directly with a survivor, and a survivor alum; such interactions are becoming more rare. If you are or know any other MIT alumni who are survivors, or are children of survivors (particularly who might be interested in addressing our community in the future!), please let me know.

I will take this chance to wish you all an early “Hag kasher v’sameach” – a happy Passover. May your seders be meaningful and the taste of haroset sweet.

Happy Passover,
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM '97
rabbf@mit.edu
Our Torah this month is taught by Talya (Wasserman) Klein, who graduated from MIT in course 6-3 in 2014. She currently works as a Software Engineer at Oracle. Talya lives in New York with her husband (who helped with writing this Dvar Torah) and son. She can be reached at talya@alum.mit.edu.

As we all know, collaboration is an essential part of the MIT experience. All over campus throughout the semester, students collaborate on p-sets and work on group projects. Working together allows for exploring ideas, asking questions, explaining concepts, and refining understanding in ways that are not otherwise possible.

When learning Torah, we benefit from learning together with others. Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) 4:9 states, “tovim hashnayim min ha’echad – two are better than one.” A later verse (4:12) adds, “v’hachut hameshulash lo vimheira yinateik – and the tripled string will not quickly break.” Midrash Rabbah, a rabbinic collection of commentaries/stories on the Torah, brings many fascinating interpretations of these verses, the first of which describes a pair studying Torah. The Midrash explains, “two are better than one” – because if one person forgets a law, the other will remind him, and ‘the tripled string will not quickly break’ – this refers to the rabbi/teacher who sets right their errors.” Accurate knowledge of Torah law is crucial, and its attainment is among the Torah’s commandments (Maimonides’ Book of Commandments, Positive Commandment 11). Kohelet teaches that learning with a chavruta and teacher promotes correct understanding of Torah.

Beginning after the upcoming holiday of Pesach (Passover), there is a widespread custom to learn one chapter of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) each week on Shabbat afternoons. In Pirkei Avot (3:6, or 3:7 in some editions), Rabbi Chalafta teaches, “When ten people sit and delve into learning Torah together, the shechina (Presence of Hashem) rests among them, as it says ‘G-d stands in the adat (congregation) of G-d’ (Psalms 82:1). From where do we know this is true even for five people?” Rabbi Chalafta then quotes a verse (Amos 9:6) as a source, and continues to cite verses to prove that even three, two, or one person involved in Torah study merits the Divine Presence’s attendance. [Rav Ovadia Bartenura (15th century, Italy) in his classic commentary on the Mishna explains how each verse teaches us about the specified number of people. For example, the word “adaat” refers to ten people based on a cross-reference to Numbers 14:27.]

Rabbeinu Yoah (d. 1263, Spain) asks: If even one person learning Torah alone receives a reward, isn’t it obvious that groups of people studying together will also be rewarded? Why do we need the Mishna to tell us each case and bring a proof-text for each number of people? He answers that the Mishna is showing us that each member of the group is rewarded according to the group’s size. The larger the group, the greater the reward.

Avot D’Rabi Natan (8:4) teaches us another quality of a group’s Torah study: the members of the group become connected to each other. Instead of being individuals learning Torah, they become one unified group.

Learning Torah with others is qualitatively different from learning alone, whether one is attending a shiur (Torah lecture), studying in a yeshiva, or learning with a chavruta (study partner). When we collaborate in Torah study, we gain more clarity in G-d’s teachings and create lasting friendships.

---

I just started watching “House of Cards”, starring Kevin Spacey as Frank Underwood, the Democratic Majority Whip in the US House of Representatives (at least at the beginning, as political ambitions are obvious). I am completely hooked, and the only reason I didn’t binge watch it in a single week is because I’ve constrained myself to only watching while on the exercise bike – talk about an incentive to work out!

Now Frank is pretty evil, so when he turns to the camera in episode 7 and says “Generosity is its own form of power”, it makes me stop pedalling. How does that quote jibe with my own giving, and with my work for MIT Hillel? In every realm, I think of generosity as a positive trait, and here is a character who makes it feel downright scary, as only Kevin Spacey can.

I had this in mind when I taught a class on philanthropy to our seniors earlier this week. My initial motivation was to encourage Hillel students to participate in their senior class gift, and to consider allocating part of their gift to Hillel. My job, after all, is to build our base of support, and make sure that Michelle has the resources she needs to run all aspects of MIT Hillel. While partnering with Marissa Freed, our Assistant Director, the purpose of my talk grew and the format changed. With Marissa’s guidance, this became more of a discussion than a lecture, and helped students envision themselves as future philanthropists who set deliberate goals and allocate according to a personal plan, and who see potential for personal growth over their lifetime. My slide of a simple machine illustrated that philanthropy is a way to leverage oneself in the world and accomplish more.

The key difference is that Frank Underwood expects future payback for his “generosity”, which isn’t philanthropy at all. His simple machine is more of a pulley than a lever. Or maybe a screw, since that is how his “beneficiaries” ultimately end up feeling.

In the class, our students understood the difference between giving to accomplish something meaningful versus “giving” to manipulate. And they were surprising savvy about the defined roles of profession leadership, board members, and donors in terms of an organization’s budget process. But they were a bit skeptical about their impact, voicing doubt that their $5 gifts matter to MIT and/or MIT Hillel. By the end, they understood that people who name buildings would never bother to do so unless there was a broad-based community already in place to benefit from the investment, and that their first gift matters much more than the dollar amount alone might indicate.

A few quick notes:

- We are merging our Hillel database into MIT’s system. The benefits to us will ultimately be great, and in the
short run there will no doubt be glitches. Apology in advance if you receive any communication from us with errors, especially in names and salutations. Our end-of-year mail appeal will be the first major initiative that relies on the merged data, and we’re a bit nervous that there are many points in the process where the data could get corrupted. Please bear with us, and we will very much appreciate when you report any errors right away to Ben Flax at hillelrvsp@mit.edu.

- MIT has also updated its giving website: https://giving.mit.edu. It should be easy to allocate your gift to Hillel or your other campus interests. Do let us know if you have any difficulty, and we will make sure your intentions are met.

- How ironic! Our May 13 Leading Jewish Minds will feature Eran Ben Joseph from SAP speaking on “The Design and Culture of Parking”. Every year we have people who choose not to attend because of parking hassles in this area of Cambridge, or worse, someone who drives here and then misses the event due to difficulty parking. Suffice to say, this topic should be of special interest to our “regulars” and others who hope to achieve that status. Locals, please do join us for this final lunch session of the year.

- I bumped into Hillel supporter Miriam Nadel ’80 at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Stamford CT. Given the nature of the activity, I doubt we were the only two MIT people. Would love to know if you were there or plan to be there next year? (It takes place on a Saturday, so it’s not for the Shomer Shabbat crowd.)

- Mazel Tov on the milestone if it’s your reunion year. You come to campus, please do stop by the Hillel reception on the afternoon of Friday, June 3. If you are already planning on doing so, please help Ben ensure we order enough lox.

If you’ve gotten this far, thank you for reading to the end! 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.

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 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.

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

Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT

- May 13, Eran Ben-Joseph, Head, Department of Urban Studies and Planning: “ReThinking a Lot: The Design and Culture of Parking”

Mazel Tov to...

Yael Schein ’13 on her engagement to Kenny Anhalt. They will celebrate under the huppah at the end of May.