MIT Hillel Update

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

Elana Ben-Akiva '15 and Inbar Yamin '16, Israel Independence Day organizers, hang out in one of the bouncy-bounce inflatables

Tomer Mangoubi '14, David Wyrobnik '15, Bitsy Flamholz '16 at the Israel Independence Day carnival on Kresge Oval

Executive Director’s Update

I love certain surprises! In my Passover greetings just before the holiday, I announced that over 100 students would be participating in seders around campus. With estimates drawn from publicity and surveys, we expected 50-60 students to join the first night seder at Hillel. It was amazing—and nicely chaotic and slightly overwhelming—when over 100 showed up just that first night. Kudos and yashar koach (literally: may your strength [ever] increase) to Jesse Kirkpatrick ’15 and Adam Slatker ’17 for leading an unbelievably lively seder to a crowd twice that anticipated! (And, yes, with some last minute preparations, we had enough food... all who were hungry, ate.) Second night, two large seders each served over 50 students: one at Delta Tau Delta led by (and cooked by) Josh Zeidman ’14, Zev Bimstein ’15, and Brad Gross ’15 and one organized by/for graduate students. More intimate, smaller seders were also hosted around campus. Clearly MIT students desire celebrating freedom festively with their friends and community.

Passover begins a season of holidays. On Yom haShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, Hillel students remembered and contemplated after hearing from Dr. Julian Bussgang SM’51, a survivor who returned to Poland as a member of the Polish Free Army before coming to the U.S. and MIT. Dave Rosen G and Prof Jeremy England (see also his Torah from Tech column) rounded out a panel with a discussion on scientific ethics and a talk about what communication factors led to different outcomes for Haman in the Book of Esther vs Hitler during the Holocaust.

Yom ha’Atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day, provided a wonderful “excuse” for a carnival on Kresge Oval. Bouncy-bounce inflatables, an Israeli food truck, and a radio blaring modern Israeli music helped entertain and educate the entire MIT campus, with undergraduate students, alumni, graduate students and their families all having fun. Quote of the afternoon from student president Noam Buckman ’16 as he left one bouncy house maze full of laughing children: “I refuse to go back in there. Every time I do I almost kill a kid. They hide in the cracks...” The fun at the party creates some early anticipation for many students -- and strength to get through final projects and exams -- as nearly forty Jewish MIT students head to Israel this summer on Birthright and Interfaith Dialogue.
the MIT Birthright Extension, ConnecTech, and MISTI-Israel. I look forward to connecting
with many of them in July as I spend time studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, having
received a Hartman Fellowship for Campus Professionals.

Also adding to the month's fun, MIT's Jewish fraternity, AEPi, is in the midst of a creative
fundraiser to raise money for Save A Child's Heart, an organization that pays for children in
developing countries to come to Israel for heart surgery.

Thirty-one student leaders, Jewish and non-Jewish, from around campus have volunteered to be "pied," that is, have a
whipped cream pie tossed in their face. Every $10 donated "to" a student leader is another second of whipped cream
added to the pie. Even President Reif got in on the fun by pie-
ing AEPi brother, Jesse Kirkpatrick '15. Watch the video, and then check out the rankings, and help out the cause! (Before
noon on Friday, May 9). Jewish leaders brave enough to participate include: Caroline Aronoff '15, Zev Bimstein
'15, Noam Buckman '16, Harry Lubowe '17, Ben Niewood '15, and Azaria Zornberg '17.

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

Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Prof Jeremy England, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Physics. He has written and lectured on understanding epistemology and philosophy of science through the lens of Torah. He can be reached at england@mit.edu.

In Parshat Behar (Leviticus 25:25-26) we read of the "sabbatical year" of shmita: every seven years, the Torah commands us to refrain from farming and let the Land of Israel lie fallow. For those of us used to living in a modern industrialized society, it is easy to miss what a difficult mitzva shmita really is to observe. Every seven years, you don't harvest new crops and you don't add to your stores of grain. The natural question in this case is: where is the food supposed to come from? Indeed, the Torah itself puts a very sharp point on this concern, since the prescribed time period of seven years evokes the story of Joseph in Egypt, which centers around a famine that lasted exactly that long. In a world where one dry season could mean mass starvation, limiting the amount that one works on getting sustenance seems impractical, almost to the point of insanity.

There are, in fact, many reasons to keep shmita, not least of which being that it functions politically as a kind of "fire drill" for drought to help people avoid the mass-enslavement that Joseph's famine leads to in Egypt. But here I'd like to focus instead on another comment the Torah makes about the sabbatical year. In Parshat Behukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27), the Children of Israel are warned that if they spurn their covenant with God that they will be flung out of the land that He promised them, and during their exile the land will rest for all the sabbaticals they did not keep while they were living in it. Somehow, puzzlingly, shmita helps us hold onto our land.

At MIT, many if not most of us incline in the practical direction, planning our futures based on rational calculations and reasoned models of how the world works. Thinking in such terms, we are going to find it difficult to explain this link that the Torah posits between keeping shmita and staying in the Promised Land. I would argue, however, that this is precisely the point. Israel sits at the crossroads of three continents, and throughout its history has been continually threatened (and often dominated) by imperial overlords of all stripes: Roman and Babylonian, Christian and Muslim, Arab and British. The Jewish imperative to maintain sovereignty and religious freedom in the Holy Land has always been "insane" from a rational standpoint; and there will never be a shortage of arguments in favor of scrapping the whole project.

Viewed in this light, I think the law of shmita carries with it a very important lesson that pertains to the recent holiday of Yom ha'Atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day: whether keeping shabbat, observing shmita, or trying to defend the borders of a tiny country against foes vastly more numerous and murderous, Judaism (and particularly Zionism) can easily give the impression of being a losing battle. The empirical facts, however, point the opposite way, as over and over again, the Jewish people have defied the "odds." persisted, and prevailed in impossible circumstances; indeed, even since 1948 the State of Israel has had so many unexpected triumphs over the threat of annihilation that one starts to lose count. So in one sense, we might say that whatever odds we have been setting for the success of judaism, it seems like we have been using the wrong models to compute studying Jewish history. I'll never forget sitting down next to our Hillel Rabbi at the time, Sam Seice, in the grand Lobby 10, and telling him I'd just finished Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's Jewish Wisdom. He asked me what I thought of it. "It was great!" I said. "No, no! I want to know what you disagreed with!" he shot back. It was good preparation for the courses in Middle Eastern Studies I took this past year at the Harvard Kennedy School. I work with an Egyptian-American political scientist there, and, in the same way, he encourages all his students to be thoughtfully critical of what they read.

This past summer, I accompanied fellow Hillel students on the ConnecTech trip: a cultural exchange between MIT students and Jewish Israelis studying at the Technion. I had never left North America before, and was a bit apprehensive. Our student hosts picked us up at Ben Gurion airport. We immediately shared our love for technology, while I tried my first 'Bamba' Israeli snack (Sorry, Bamba-lovers, I think it tastes like a cross between peanut butter and styrofoam!) Also, at our own pace, we shared our philosophical and political views. I got a big window into a few Israelis' worldview, and a few of them had major 'ah-ha!' moments about American Jewish perspectives.

I then stayed in Jerusalem for an additional month to teach computer science to gifted Israeli and Palestinian high school students in a program called MEET, started by MIT students and inspired by the way that the MIT mind-and-hand approach helps people come together to solve technical challenges. We kept confusing the names of two students, one Israeli and one Palestinian. They ended up calling each other their 'twin.' I am also very conscious of how my students' lives can diverge based on what religious box was checked when they were born, and the city they were born in. I appreciate the sentiment expressed by Sayed Kashua, a writer who lives in Jerusalem: "I don't like identity... We make them holy. But what does identity
them. Put another way, when ha’KadoshBarukhHu/the Holy One tells us to attempt the impossible, He also promises to help us achieve it, and even warns that a more conservative strategy is doomed to fail if it is based on ignoring His commands. May the Jewish people take this lesson to heart, and may God bless us with a thousand more Independence Days in the land of our inheritance.

| MIT Hillel’s 2014 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 MIT’s Jewish community.

Thank you to our 2013 Annual Fund donors!

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 2014 Donor Roll! Our fiscal year ends June 30.

| 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 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.

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.

| On the Calendar |

May 19-23: MIT Exam Week

Tuesday night, June 3-Thursday, June 5: Shavuot

Friday, June 6: Commencement/Tech Reunions/Jewish Community Reception

- Alumni Reception: 1:30-4pm, Building W11 Have a nosh, visit and celebrate with fellow Jewish alumni and say mazal tov to our newest alumni, the Class of 2014
- Shabbat @ Hillel: 6 pm, Services; 7 pm, Dinner, both in W11; RSVP to hillelsvp@mit.edu

MIT Hillel wishes a hearty "Mazal Tov" to:

Marissa Feinman, Hillel Director of Student Life and Programming, on her engagement to Jason Freed.

Talya Wasserman ‘14 on her upcoming wedding to Sender Klein.

If you have life-cycle events to share with the MIT Hillel community, please let us know!

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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!

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