My name is Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder, and I have the pleasure of serving as Senior Jewish Educator at MIT Hillel. My job is an always-wonderful (and sometimes tense) combination of facilitating both formal and informal learning experiences to the widest variety of Jewish students on campus.

In all the situations in which I find myself facilitating a learning experience, I have a not-so-secret aspiration that students will be learning on more than one level. So, when people think they are “only” learning text, I hope that they will also learn about themselves and their assumptions, and that they will be exposed to a variety of methodologies and approaches to textual learning. And, on the other hand, when people think they are “only” getting together with me to talk about Jewish ideas from afar, I hope to also create an encounter with the wisdom of our tradition. Perhaps they will let go of their assumptions about those irrelevant, dusty old texts and the power they may or may not contain.

So, whether I am teaching the kinds of classes you’d expect an Orthodox rabbi to provide - Talmud, Jewish Law, Parsha (the weekly Torah reading) - or sitting with a student to talk about how to go on a first date or their Jewish choices after graduation, my underlying goal is that people will become aware of themselves and cognizant of the wonderful resource their heritage can offer them as they move through their lives.

But that’s just the beginning. The holy grail, as it were, is to support students in bringing their substantial intelligence to bear on the ongoing conversation between our ancient tradition of knowledge and the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. The story of our people is still being written, and MIT students should have something to say about how it goes.

Occasionally, we identify students who are not only participating in that conversation, but they want to bring their friends along as well. We have created several ways in which students can become leaders by curating experiences for their friends and communities. Most recently, we have been supporting students in creating their own Do It Yourself Shabbat experience. They get whatever support they need plus a certain amount of money per anticipated guest in order to produce a Shabbat experiences that expresses their own approach to Shabbat, with friends and good food.

We’ve already had several hundred dinners served through this program, with more to come. And along those lines twenty students have taken us up on our offer to provide a Do It Yourself Passover Seder alongside our Hillel-hosted Seders.

To try to sum it up, my work takes me far and wide on MIT campus to meet students wherever they are on their Jewish journey and to help them move to the next step. On any given day, I get to talk about the widest variety of topics with the widest variety of people - one on one, small group, big group, classroom. For some I am the first rabbi they’ve ever talked to. For others, I am one in a long series of rabbis they will know throughout their lives. Some I see daily. Some, once a semester. With some, we open a book. With others, we take a walk or drink coffee. With all of them, it is great honor to do what I do and to be a part of these wonderful students’ lives.

Chag Sameach!

Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder
Senior Jewish Educator
heyrabbi@mit.edu
Our Torah this month is taught by Michael Leavitt ’66 (XVII). He received a Ph.D. in political science from Northwestern University and much more recently, an M.A. in Jewish Studies from the Baltimore Hebrew University. He has taught Jewish history, philosophy and mysticism at adult education programs at a variety of locations in the Baltimore-Washington area, including several all-day classes at the Smithsonian Institution. Mike retired from the Central Intelligence Agency as a Senior Intelligence Officer. Prior to his government service, he worked at the Brookings Institution and taught political science at the University of Wisconsin. He can be reached at michael.leavitt@gmail.com.

The older I get, the more difficulty I understand the meaning of “meaning.” I can listen to music that once meant something to me (Dylan’s “Positively 4th Street”), and now … not so much. Have I grown up? Does the meaning of things change? I can remember what the song meant to me, so it’s not a matter of an old man’s memory failing. And then there are the works that once didn’t mean much, but now keep me up nights pondering them (“Swan Lake” performed by the Mariinsky Ballet).

What makes something meaningful? I suspect that it needs to penetrate one’s day-to-day understanding of an idea. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards classic, The Meaning of Meaning, helps explain meaning in the context of language, but that is only a part of what I am trying to understand. Their linkage of thought, external symbols, and aspects of the real world as a way of understanding meaning is useful in any context. If songs, poetry, and ballet change their meaning to me over time, I suspect that it is my thoughts that have evolved rather than the symbols in the works of art, or their referents in the world.

As an adolescent, I found meaning in obvious novelty; nothing subtle about Bob Dylan. But I hadn’t seen enough dance or heard enough Tchaikovsky to appreciate, much less find meaning, in classical ballet. So I’ve grown up—so what? Why, I ask myself, are some stories and songs meaningful over long periods of time, even as their meaning changes?

Passover has always been meaningful to me. As a child it was an annual experience with my aunt and uncle, while he, in his knowledgeable and genial way, did what he was supposed to do and explained the meaning of the holiday and its symbols to the eight-year-old me. And I got it: my people were badly treated and Gd took them away from their tormentors and gave them freedom. (Not that I remember what freedom meant to me, but it was a very important symbol.) As a young adult, I could grasp the idea of the Exodus from Egypt as several symbols simultaneously: the seminal event in the formation of the Jewish people; the ultimate statement of the appropriate societal response to the horror of slavery, and thinking of Mitzravim (Egypt) as “the narrow place” from which we must emerge as individuals to become fully realized human beings. The meaning of Pesach had evolved, become complex, and paralleled my own developing capacity to comprehend symbols at many levels.

It was while I was at MIT—whether through my classes, maturation, or the intense social interactions that I still recall fifty years later—that I learned to appreciate the meaning of meaning. And I’ve been struggling with it to this very day.

MIT Hillel’s 2017 Annual Fund
Add to Jewish life @ MIT!

To our current and future supporters,

Thank you for the incredible response to the Hillel page on MIT’s first Giving Day last month! MIT Hillel was honored to be among the first campus partners, and the day was a success for MIT overall, and for MIT Hillel in particular:

- 123 gifts to MIT Hillel. There was some padding, for example from households that split into more than one donor, and from MIT boosters who made a small gift on every page of the platform. Even net of any of those extra gifts, we met and exceeded our goal of 50 donors that day.
- 45 were first time gifts to MIT Hillel, and one quarter of those were first-time donors to MIT.
- 15 gifts were from young alumni Classes 2011 – 2016, of which half fell into the first-time gift category.

These numbers tell a very positive story for us, that we are growing our donor base and that updated modes of outreach help us reach new people. Maintaining relationships with our young alumni today will ensure that MIT Hillel has the support it needs in the future. Giving Day was an incredible motivator, and not just for donors. In the days leading up to March 14, our staff personally connected with 30 young alumni – catching up, encouraging their support, and building community.

A special thank-you to our anonymous alumni “matcher” who provided the participation incentive for MIT Hillel. Our team noticed that the Sloan School page revealed additional matches throughout the day, as interim goals were met. I would love to hear from any of you who are interested in helping us do the same next year.

And on the subject of building community and connecting to the next generation, please accept my wishes for a festive and meaningful Passover celebration. More than any other holiday, this one connects us to history, and makes us feel that our choices today shape our future. Thank you for making MIT Hillel part of that future.

NOTES

Reunion Year classes: MIT Hillel hosts a reception on commencement / reunion weekend. If you’ll be on campus, please do stop by W11 on the afternoon of Friday, June 9. In the past we’ve been told that reception details are hard to find in the schedule, so please take note now.

Class of 1999 - 2005: our Passover cleaning unearthed a box of MIT Techiya CD’s. We have two dozen copies of the a cappella group’s 2002 “Half-Life” recording – please let us know if you’d like to have one. We will mail to you now and we’ll have leftovers at the reunion reception. The cover art, of a shofar, makes it a true “blast from the past.”

Mazel Tov to Rabbi Goldfeder on his recent article in ejewishphilanthropy.
L'Shalom,

Marla Choslovsky SM '88,  
MIT Hillel Director of Development  
marla360@mit.edu

Add your name to MIT Hillel's 2017 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

- May 12 – Daniel Jackson, CSAIL Professor

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