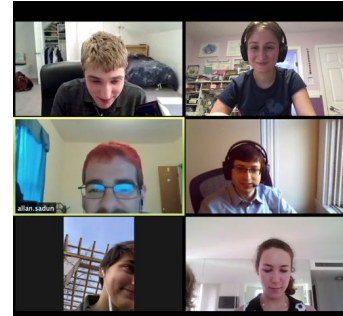




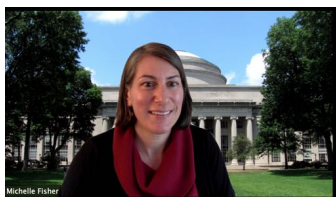
9 Nisan 5780
April 3, 2020



Shalom from MIT Hillel to our Alumni, Faculty, Staff, Parents and Friends!

- 1) Undergraduate students partaking in JLF (Jewish Learning Fellowship) with Hillel's Assistant Director, Marissa Freed, and Director of Birthright & Israel Engagement, Shoshana Gibbor. Director of Graduate Student Engagement, Natalie Yosipovitch, has been continuing her GradHillel JLF class by Zoom as well.
- 2) Rabbi Michelle Fisher, with her MIT background, in the middle of the "Leading Jewish Minds @ Home" Zoom seminar that was held yesterday
- 3) MCM (MIT Conservative Minyan) students having their own Zoom Kabbalat Shabbat

MIT Hillel Update



The past month has been... a dislocating whirlwind. I have felt like a sailor experiencing heavy seas without Dramamine. The world has somehow turned upside down. And we now have some strange, crazy, ever-shifting new normal.

Time has felt like each hour is a day and each day is a year. In early March, I struggled with the question, "should we cancel this Leading Jewish Minds faculty luncheon for 80 people, most of whom are over the age of 60?" on a Monday, only to reflect on the following Thursday morning that the answer, less than three days later, was a no-brainer. I have helped students absorb on a Thursday night that they are packing to go home for the term – by Sunday, and then informed them that the final Shabbat services of the term were now canceled and that Shabbat dinner was going to be take-out only – to be picked up in a 10 minute windows to reduce the amount of social contact. I have given advice to students on how to be back home, living with their parents, under their parents' roof again. I coordinated with MIT to send a follow-up letter to all observant graduating students that their now-virtual Commencement (which falls on Shavuot) would have a special streaming ceremony just for them later in the weekend. I

coordinated with my staff to get them situated in work environments at home – taking into account childcare (or really lack thereof) and relocating one team member back to her parents' home so she wouldn't have to live solo in an apartment for the weeks to come. My leadership lessons have come fast and furious.

And, through it all, MIT Hillel's staff has risen to the occasion. They used text messages, Facebook messages, Discord conversations, phone calls, emails to connect to and stay connected with hundreds of students, one-on-one checking in and asking after their needs. Within days, online classes were organized. Two Jewish Learning Fellowships, one for undergrads and one for grad students, seemingly seamlessly moved from in-person to Zoom rooms. Friday night minyan and Shabbat gatherings were organized. We're giving students resources to run or help run their own seders. We are hosting online cooking classes, including one helping our students use up their hametz by learning to make pita chips. We are creating an online Afikomen puzzle, with prizes to those who complete it, that is for those who "find" the Afikomen. We are being "present" in as many creative ways as we can.

Even for our alumni and broader stakeholder community, we have creatively adjusted. Yesterday we offered a Leading Jewish Minds session online, allowing us for the first-time ever to welcome our constituents from all over the world to this uniquely MIT and Jewish program. What is regularly on campus is now making broader connections (and re-connections) for and between MIT alumni, faculty, and staff in multiple time zones and locations.

Hillel is about relationships. Hillel is about community. Hillel is about learning and practice. None of our core visions or values have changed. We are still living them all, albeit in a changing/changed new world and through lots of new media.

As Passover begins next week, my blessing for our students - and for all of you – is that we celebrate in ways that enable us to see both the grand ancient miracles of the Exodus as well as the little miracles of how we support each other today. Next year may we all be free.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Michelle H. Fisher
Executive Director
rabbif@mit.edu

Mentshn of Mention



I entered MIT four years ago alongside the Class of 2020. While they will be moving on to bigger, better things come June, I'll remain here a while longer. As a PhD student in computer science ("course six," so the undergrads tell me), I have at least another year or two to go.

To understand my life story, you need only look to Rabbi Fisher. I grew up in Rockville, Maryland and attended Congregation Har Shalom, where the future MIT Hillel director was then Associate Rabbi. I earned my BSE and MSE in computer science at Princeton (her alma mater) and, after a year fellowship at Georgetown Law, started my PhD at MIT (her other alma mater and current post). Sadly, this streak will soon end: I don't see JTS as a likely next destination unless they're hiring machine learning faculty.

While graduate students may seem less visible around campus (because we're hiding in our

labs), we actually outnumber undergraduates nearly two to one. MIT has a thriving Graduate Hillel community led by a student board and Natalie Yosipovitch, our newly arrived Director of Graduate Student Engagement. Together, they run a monthly Shabbat dinner and a variety of other social events catering to grad students of all ages and life stages. For many of us, Graduate Hillel is an important Jewish home within Cambridge's vibrant young professional Jewish scene.

I'm also an active member of MIT's conservative minyan, where I've served in various roles over the years as undergraduate involvement has waxed and waned. As any professor will tell you, few things are more fun than working with MIT undergraduates. The combination of energy and talent is exhilarating, and I'm grateful to have made such incredible friends over the years.

In that capacity, my current role is that of institutional memory. I've only been here four years, and I don't think 27 is *that* old, but the undergraduates beg to differ. Occasionally, they ascribe a degree of wisdom to someone so advanced in years. And when that happens, I can usually cobble together useful advice of one kind or another.

But what do you say to students abruptly torn away from their on-campus homes with only a few days' notice? Especially on account of a threat unprecedented in living memory. Seniors whose last hurrah has been replaced by watching online lectures in their childhood bedrooms. Upperclassmen who expected to have a few weeks longer to say goodbye to their dorm before it closes (effectively) forever. Underclassmen who were *finally* hitting their stride, only to learn that spring is over and there may not be a fall term. Students for whom the "home" to which they return is not a refuge. Nor am I immune: the independent life I have labored to create in the shadow of perpetual studenthood has been replaced by my parents' basement. All of us fearing the possibility that devastation might await friends, family, and the larger MIT community.

My glimmer of hope is that, unlike our war-torn forebears in the 1940s, technology affords us the chance to stay connected. Something that, even ten years ago, might have been impossible. Classes will go on. If we take the initiative, we will still hear each other's voices and see each other's faces. And our determined Hillel staff will continue to "satisfy the spiritual, intellectual, and personal needs of all Jewish students," holding us together no matter how far-flung and pandemic-scattered we may be. With extraordinary technology that MIT helped to create, I have faith that our community will endure until we meet again – however long that may take.

Jonathan Frankle
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Torah from Tech



Aviva Benson holds a BS in Math from MIT and has taught mathematics to students from pre-K through undergrad. She is currently a full-time mother and part-time afterschool math teacher. She still lives in Cambridge and stays involved with the MIT community by teaching figure skating lessons for DAPER.

Much has been made in the past days of the “Zoom seder”, and I will be participating in one myself. I identify as Reform and am very comfortable with the idea of a virtual seder (in fact, there are some Orthodox rabbis who have found creative ways to allow videoconferencing for the seder this year). However, I do not believe that it is appropriate for every seder gathering, and I think that we should be more intentional about how we modify our seder plans in response to the pandemic.

I will be attending a seder through Zoom on the first night of Pesach, hosted by a family whose seder I have attended for several years. My parents will also join us. Each participating household is already comfortable with Zoom (I have taught classes through Zoom, my parents have read books to my daughter through Zoom, the seder leader has led a weeknight minyan through Zoom), so I do not anticipate technical problems. That is a relief. We plan to start the video feed before candle-lighting, around 6pm, and continue it (changing hosts every 40 minutes) through nirtzah/conclusion. We will each have our own seder plates, our own haggadot, and our own food, but we will otherwise try to maintain the traditions of past years as much as possible. So we will take turns reading sections of the haggadah, rotating through the video participants instead of around the table. Our seder leader will say the same blessings, wash his hands for all of us at urchatz, and include the same mix of Hebrew and English. However, as much as we will try to maintain the traditions of previous seders as we sit at our own tables, I know that this seder will feel strange. It is difficult to specify how - all of the traditional rituals and prayers will be the same, and I expect that much of our discussion will include the same questions and answers as in past years - so why do I feel that the virtual seder will not be as satisfying.

Here is one (inadequate) answer: We will not hug each other as we arrive, then take off our shoes, before we walk into the sitting room for candle-lighting. I won't have a whispered side-conversation with my mother, or be distracted from a conversation with our hosts by my cranky, over-tired daughter. I will miss those physical markers of being in community. The virtual seder will be more efficient - I can put my daughter to bed at her normal bedtime, other video participants won't hear my side conversations, I don't have to drive home after we wrap up. But somehow the increased efficiency does not feel like an improvement.

I am more looking forward to my second night seder. It will be just my own household - myself, my husband, and our daughter (who will be going to bed around 7:30). This evening will not be technology-free: I will have a video call with my parents beforehand, while we set the table and light candles and give each other well-wishes for the evening. I also plan to share food with my parents; they live nearby, so we can cook beforehand and drop off food on each other's front porches. This way, we will be sharing a meal without being in the same space. (A suggestion for those who cannot do this: cook the same recipe as someone who would otherwise be sharing a seder with you!) My mother and I may also co-write a brief haggadah supplement that we will use at each of our seders. And we might come up with more ways to be together in spirit before Pesach starts!

Despite all of these attempts to remain in community with my family (with whom I would be having a seder in normal circumstances), I will be leading my own seder at home. This is a challenge, because I have never led a seder before! I have attended a variety of seders as a child and as an adult, and I will take from, and leave out, aspects of each. My seder will not go on for 5 hours, but it will take more than 30 minutes to get to the meal. It will hopefully include joyous, off-key singing. I plan to deeply engage with some, but not all, of the 15 steps, by reading passages from one or more Haggadot, asking questions about the historical context of the rituals, and thinking seriously about how they relate to our lives today. Another goal for this year's seder is to start a new tradition with my husband, so that he can feel some ownership of the seder himself (he did not grow up with it, and has felt like a bit of an outsider at previous seders). The intimacy of our two-person seder should help to

increase his confidence as well as mine.

Although he and I will be doing this together, and I hope to ask questions that he finds compelling, he will be humoring me for most of the seder, so its primary purpose will be to inspire and teach myself! I see that as an opportunity to make the seder meaningful to me. I will explore several haggadot, choose different parts to read from different sources, and add questions for each step. After the seder, I will make notes about what I liked, so that next year when we (hopefully) return to having a larger family seder, I can add something new and positive to our family traditions.

This is a strange, scary time, and it can be tempting to try to maintain as much normalcy as possible. But that is not always the best response. Sometimes, major external events can be an excuse to reflect on past practice and to try something new. We may find a new equilibrium that is more stable than the old equilibrium!

I have read many documents and articles to prepare for Pesach this year, and found these particularly helpful:

[Seder Tips for Passover in the Coronavirus Era \(Jonathan Leener\)](#)

[A Different Pesach: Ideas for the Solo Seder \(a collaboration\)](#)

Stay safe and healthy,

Aviva (Siegel) Benson '13 (XVIII)

avivas@mit.edu

MIT Hillel's 2020 Annual Fund

Add to Jewish life @ MIT!



Dear Friends,

How do we think about our philanthropy when the world shifts in many ways? When our personal fortunes are subject to a roller-coaster ride in the financial markets? When our family's future may depend more on our reserves than on continued income? When there are new or increased needs in our communities and the world for food, health care, medical research?

Philanthropy is more than generosity, it is priorities. In a world where priorities not only shift, but do so suddenly, givers need time to think. The government stimulus was enacted quickly and is unprecedented. The one thing I know for certain is that the philanthropic response in our communities – local, national, worldwide – will also be unprecedented. Thank you for all you do.

We are grateful that MIT went ahead with Giving Day. Final numbers are not in yet, and will be delayed further; nonetheless we know we met our first participation goal of 100 and approached our aggressive total of 154, pretty good considering overall traffic to the website was down as people were already preoccupied by the seismic changes being announced. March 12 was exactly three weeks ago, and feels much more distant -- a special thank you to everyone who even opened an appeal email that day.

For MIT Hillel as well as many other Jewish and secular organizations, there is a full quarter remaining in the fiscal year, plenty of time to assess and respond to a changed world. Regardless of whether you maintain, increase, or drop to a token gift level this year, your annual gift signals your interest in an organization's long-term ability to fulfill its mission and

demonstrates the breadth and strength of that organization's community.

Most of us are familiar with the Maimonides teaching, (paraphrasing here) about whether it is better to give \$1,000 to one person or \$1 to each of 1,000 people. The first has the potential to transform the recipient's life, whereas the second creates a habit that transforms the giver. Like the Rambam, my wish for each of you is that your generous nature not be eroded by the pandemic. Stay connected to the organizations you care about, as much to ground yourself in turbulent times as for their sakes.

Wishing you a meaningful Passover celebration.

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

[Add your name](#) to MIT Hillel's 2020 Donor Roll! Scroll down to MIT Hillel to give.

Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

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

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.

From the Archives!

Since Yom HaShoah is later this month, for "From the Archives!" we found a poster publicizing Yom HaShoah events in 1999, including a candle vigil and a talk from Professor Daniel Jonah Goldhagen.

MIT Hillel Holocaust Commemoration

Tuesday, April 13, 1999
Memorial Candle Vigil
9:00-2:00 pm
Lobby 7

Wednesday, April 14, 1999 at 5:00 pm
Harvard History Professor Daniel Jonah Goldhagen
will speak on his book
**Hitler's Willing Executioners:
Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust**
Building VV-1 | Main Dining Room
Holocaust memorial service precedes talk at 4:45 pm

Sponsored by MIT Hillel Foundation's
William Abrahamson Memorial Lecture
and the Office of the Dean of Students
and Undergraduate Education. For further
information, please call MIT Hillel
at (617) 253-2982.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen is Associate Professor of Government and Social Studies at
Harvard University. His book, Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the
Holocaust, has been translated into numerous languages. The New York Times calls the
book "masterly... One of those rare new works that merit the appellation "land-
mark." He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University.

On the Calendar



Leading Jewish Minds went virtual as Professor Daniel Jackson reprised his “[Portraits of Resilience](#)” talk, a unique mix of art, MIT culture, and the importance of community, with added lessons for our situation today. Rabbi Michelle Fisher made it a Hillel event by providing a Jewish framework for the secular talk. More than 130 people joined; feedback was overwhelmingly positive. We hope to make the recording available, pending review.

Keep your eyes peeled to your inboxes. We hope to have more "Leading Jewish Minds @ Home" presentations over the coming months!

Mazal Tov!

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

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