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

1) For the second year in a row, MIT had a snow day around Pi Day... our students seem to have admitted a snowman to the class of 2022 -- at least it's wearing an MIT in Hebrew T-shirt!

2) Passover at AEPI. One of the many seders held on campus, despite it being Spring Break.

3) Josh Fishman ’18 loads up the new “Snacks Corner” of the Hillel Center lounge. More and more students are hanging out at Hillel to work on problem sets, relax, play guitar, and just schmooze with friends. If you feed (and “coffee” them, they will come!)

MIT Hillel Update

Passover has come and gone, but Spring hasn’t quite made it to Cambridge yet. We had an MIT snow day right before Pi Day last month, and (while it didn’t stick,) we had more snow during Passover (twice in fact!). Temperatures are also remaining cold.

So we’re creating our own warm conditions on campus. Passover seders fell during the final weekend of Spring Break, and yet dozens of students celebrated the holiday at “Do It Yourself” Hillel seders; some students so wanted to extend their experiences of freedom, that they had a seder mid-week with all their campus friends once Break ended, as they brought family traditions back to their dorms and living groups. Throughout the Passover week, we also had many a high school junior warmly greeted by Hillel students as they passed through on their college tours. This coming weekend we’ll extend further warmth to students admitted to the Class of 2022. Yes, already, it’s Campus Preview Weekend! We eagerly await meeting these soon-to-be college freshmen.

When I greet these prospective students, I feel a palpable sense of anticipation. For many of them, MIT is the “Promised Land” that they have dreamed about reaching for years. In speaking with the students and their parents who come to campus to check out MIT, it is clear to me, though, that (like the Israelites leaving Egypt) they are coming to realize that this is not the end of their road, but a new start. Their journeys as college students begin as they choose to accept an admissions offer and enroll. It is with humility that I, as Hillel’s Executive Director, accept responsibility for enhancing the Jewish part of that journey. I know from experience that I cannot envision what the next four years will bring each of them, and I know that my staff and I are ready to mentor, hold, guide, teach, inspire, and encourage each of them along their way.

Spring may not be as warm in Cambridge as in Los Angeles (90 deg as I write this) or Jerusalem (high of 64 F), but our spirits are high. We have friendship, community, and dreams that motivate us and keep us moving with and for our students.

Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM ’97
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Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Ben Niewood ’15 (Mechanical Engineering). After graduating, Ben moved to San Francisco and worked at Nest on the Nest Cam IQ. He is very happy to have since returned to the East Coast, and now lives in Manhattan with his wife, Aliza, and dog, Magellan. He works at Bowery Farming, an indoor agriculture company, designing the next generation of indoor farming technologies. He can be reached at bniewood@alum.mit.edu.

Mentshn of Mention

Carrie Watkins G
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Hello! I’m Carrie Watkins, and I am currently pursuing a Master’s Degree in City Planning from the School of Architecture and Planning. After studying as an undergraduate at Brandeis University, I spent a few years working in outreach and management for an energy efficiency and solar start up in Boston. While I lived just down the road from MIT, it felt like a world away. Returning to Cambridge after a year abroad (more on that in the next paragraph), it has been a real privilege to gain access to everything MIT and MIT Hillel has to offer.

I took what I call a belated gap year last year. I studied at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, and I worked the two summers as Head of Outdoor Climbing at the Jewish adventure camp Ramah in the Rockies.

After such an immersive year of studying, teaching, and living Jewishly, transitioning back to life in Cambridge and at MIT has posed some challenges. I often have to stop myself before accidentally using Hebrew or Yiddish phrases with my classmates. In an ethics class last semester, I struggled to decide if bringing a pasuk (verse) from Genesis would qualify as an appropriate prooftext. I have had to decline many social and professional opportunities because they conflict with Shabbat.
We are, right now, in the midst of counting the Omer, the 49 day period between Pesach and Shavuot. The commandment to count these days is written in Leviticus, Chapter 23: 15-16. (15) And from...the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: (16) you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days. There is no explanation given for why we have to count, or why this holiday grouping is different from all the others. We don’t count from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur, or from Succoth to Pesach etc. This counting, then, begs the question, what is special about these two holidays that we have to enumerate the space between them?

The simple explanation is that these holidays are connected chronologically. The Jews left Egypt on Pesach. They did not truly become a people, however, until they travelled for 49 days to Mount Sinai and received the Torah on Shavuot. Commentators, like the Ohr HaChaim and the Arizal, say that the Jews had to count these 49 days because when they left Egypt they were in the depths of spiritual impurity, signified by 49 ‘gates’. They needed to count 49 days because that is how long it would take them to climb up through the gates and reach a spiritually pure state where they were able to receive the Torah. They counted to make sure enough time had passed and that they were ready. We count today, then, to commemorate this.

Still, there is one problem with this explanation. Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch points out that the Jews did not actually receive the Torah on Shavuot. They counted 49 days from the Exodus, spent the 50th day readying themselves to receive the Torah and they received it on the 51st day. Why, then, does Shavuot start on the 50th day? This, according to Rav Hirsch, shows us that Shavuot commemorates the preparation for receiving the Torah, not actually receiving the Torah itself. This idea is driven home by the name of the holiday. Shavuot, which means weeks. The holiday is named not for receiving the Torah but for the weeks leading up to receiving the Torah which the Jews spent preparing. This is a very important idea and can be rephrased to the popular saying, it’s about the journey not the destination.

This idea reminds me a lot of my MIT education. I started off as a freshman with very little idea what was going on at MIT. I found guides and friends through Hillel, AEPI, and my classes and slowly worked my way through my 4 years. I certainly did plenty of counting in my classes, not to mention counting my credits each semester to make sure I was on track to graduate. Then, after the 8 semesters were over I walked at commencement and received my degree. Commencement, however, was not really the point of MIT for me. I did not spend 4 years in college just to get a piece of paper. While the paper is important, what’s more important is what’s behind it; the 4 years of hard work that I needed to put in before I was ready to receive the degree. Like Shavuot, my destination at MIT was important, but I do not celebrate or remember the destination as much as I remember the time I spent getting there.

MIT Hillel’s 2018 Annual Fund
Add to Jewish life @ MIT!

To our Current and Future Supporters:

Thank you to all who made Giving Day a success! Once again the MIT Hillel page set aggressive goals and met them: we had three alumni provide matches to help motivate participation, we surpassed our target of 104 donors, and we raised more than $30,000 on that day. 21 alumni were first-time donors to Hillel!

We are grateful to MIT. Last year Hillel was among the first invites to launch this program. This year they went from 12 to 40 partner pages on the platform, and at the same time the tech support for our page seemed to increase.

I’ll be looking to identify people to provide a match again next year. If this is the type of thing that interests you, let me know, especially if I haven’t met you yet and may not have you in mind. It’s a lot of fun to be part of this, and especially helpful to inspire the next generation. L’or v’dor.

Relatedly, also last month, I taught my now annual “Philanthropy 101” class to our graduating seniors. Marissa Freed, MIT Hillel’s Assistant Director, has created a workshop component, to help our students start to think about their priorities, their approach to giving, the impact they want to have, and of course Jewish traditions around giving. Our students ask thoughtful questions, and the conversation on this topic can be lively. The picture here is one of our favorites from the slide show, it definitely gets their attention. We may even be part of Division of Student Life’s “How To Adult” series next year!

We’re in the homestretch now, the final quarter of the fiscal year. We are 60% of the way toward our annual fundraising goal of $700,000 to balance the budget and keep our program strong. Please help us meet our target.

Marla Choslovsky SM ’88,
MIT Hillel Director of Development
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Add your name to MIT Hillel’s 2018 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 (1946) Society (KOMS) 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
On the Calendar

**Boston:**

- April 27 -- Peter Temin: The Vanishing Middle Class: Prejudice and Power in a Dual Economy
- June 8 - Hillel Reception at Commencement / Reunion weekend immediately after Graduation Exercises