Bereshit, Genesis starts, “In the beginning…” but what is a beginning?

We mark many beginnings in time, a number of which happen around now: The start of a school year. The start of a Jewish new year. The start of a fiscal year. And for me this summer and fall also mark something like a new beginning: I spent last semester on sabbatical in Israel, and my re-entry to American, Boston, MIT, Hillel life is very much like a new beginning.

The prayer for daily new beginnings opens with Modeh Ani, “I Thank You…” Similarly, my annual report to this next phase in my MIT tenure therefore begins with “I thank you…” I thank all of our donors who allow us to make Jewish life at MIT thrive. Thank you—you who are reading this annual report and provided the financial support to make us one of the two top Hillels in the world (as we were honored for back in December at Hillel International Global Assembly). I thank my staff who took on added responsibilities, and continued to make MIT Hillel thrive during my absence. I thank our partners at MIT who collaborate with us and prioritize student growth. And I thank our students who seek to grow Jewishly, who make time to celebrate, learn, lead, and explore as part of the Jewish community at MIT.

The lessons of my sabbatical are analogous to what MIT Hillel imparts to our students:

- We talk to our students about shleimut, of being complete, and the need to look out for their complete well-being: study and learn, and rest every so often—use Shabbat and holidays to step away from your p-set load and relax, regroup.

  Hillel free Shabbat dinners provide hundreds of students with weekly breathing space.

- Build a community of friends: one should not be alone. Your college experiences can lead to current fun and lifelong connections.

  Our winter Birthright Israel trip’s spring reunion was a full weekend retreat over Shabbat, with all 40 students participating and even the Israeli bus staff flying back from Israel to attend.

- Build and create in labs and classrooms according to the black and white laws of engineering and science, and remember and reflect about gray areas and hard questions that don’t have simple or singular, or sometimes any, answers.

  Our Jewish Learning Fellowships created a cadre of 17 seniors (in the fall) and 14 sophomores (in the spring) who deeply bonded over weekly discussions as they studied Jewish texts on life issues and big questions with our Senior Jewish Educator.

What is a beginning? I would say it is a fresh perspective. Whether it is solving an engineering challenge, or learning how to manage one’s MIT workload, or improving a relationship, or working as a Hillel team to provide meaningful experiences for our students… stepping back a few steps or 5,500 miles allows us to dig deeper and find new solutions, to do more, and to do better.

I look forward to now returning to creating such growth opportunities as we begin our next new year. Thank you for allowing student growth, my professional growth, and continued growth of the MIT Jewish community to happen.

L’sha’na tova, to another new year.
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“Every dollar makes a difference.
And that’s true whether it’s Warren Buffet’s remarkable $31 billion pledge to the Gates Foundation or my late father’s $25 check to the NAACP.”
— Michael Bloomberg
It's all smiles in The Hillel Center.

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MIT Birthright Extension site visit in Israel.

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Samuel Raymond
Mark and Elizabeth Rockoff
Charles and Miriam Rosenblatt
Massimo and Farla Russo
Dennis and Jeanne Sager
Adin Schmahmann
The large dining room is packed to capacity with an interfaith crowd at MIT Hillel’s Yom HaShoah talk with a local Holocaust survivor.

Having impact on campus: MIT Hillel’s photography exhibit in the Student Center’s first-floor gallery space, with materials made available by Yad Vashem.

Celebrating 50th reunion at the Hillel reception. Classes ending in 3 or 8—please join us next June!
**Highlights of the 2016-17 Academic Year**

- Recognized as “comprehensively excellent” by Hillel International’s Measuring Excellence initiative. MIT and Princeton were the only two Hillels to exceed benchmarks in both breadth and depth of program.

- Launched first year of three-year pilot program with part-time rabbinic intern dedicated to graduate student outreach, including MIT Sloan. This is based on the successful and now established role of our Senior Jewish Educator, who meets students “where they are” both literally on campus and figuratively on their Jewish journeys. Growing this into a full-time position is our long-term goal. The Intern for the 2017-18 academic year has already begun.

- Working in complete partnership, MIT Hillel and Chabad co-sponsored “Shabbat 250”, the largest Shabbat gathering at MIT in recent memory, and possibly ever.

- Invited by MIT Alumni Association as one of early partners in first Giving Day. Our dedicated page generated 123 gifts, of which 45 were first-time gifts to Hillel. Thank you to our anonymous alumni matcher and to all who connected with us on March 14.

- Our largest Birthright trip ever; the first time we had a dedicated MIT-Wellesley bus, 37 students total. We also filled our MIT Birthright Extension trip for MIT students to connect with the high tech side of Israel.

- Offered a wide variety of topical learning, with creative new classes each semester. First year of Jewish Learning Fellowship attracted 17 seniors first semester, and 14 sophomores second semester.

- Hillel staff supported decentralized Jewish life on campus. Do-It-Yourself Shabbat activities engaged more, and often new-to-Hillel, students.

- Presented campus-wide Yom Hashoah programming relevant to current issues. Our annual discussion, widely publicized and entitled “What Can Marginalized Communities Today Learn from a Holocaust Survivor?”, drew a standing-room-only crowd that represented a diverse crosscut of the MIT population. We also mounted a photography exhibit in the Student Center, with materials made available by Yad Vashem.
Campus personalities make the annual Latke-Hamentaschen debate a fun-filled evening. Thank you to our professors and moderator.

Craig and Carole Marin
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Do-It-Yourself Shabbat.

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In honor of Jonathan J Surick

Daniel Gordis (right) meets here with some Hillel supporters, and subsequently with Hillel students.

Eat-It-Yourself challah!
“The MIT Birthright Extension [is] one of the most meaningful and inspiring experiences I’ve ever had… I really developed a new relationship with Israel; perhaps it was because I was able to make the connection between the country I so love and the science and engineering I so love, or maybe it was from meeting really amazing people so connected to Israel, like the MIT alumni now living in Haifa, or the soldiers working in the chemical lab at the army base… It opened my eyes to so much… I hope that someday I, too, can inspire others to find and follow their passions and connections to Judaism and Israel…”

— ALLIE SHEPARD ’19
(Allie was inspired to spend her summer at Weizmann Institute)
Students explore their identities in Israel, here sporting sorority hand symbols.

Latke-Hamentaschen debate a much tougher call than the Mayweather vs. McGregor contest.
Do-It-Yourself Shabbat

DIY Shabbat (and holidays) gives students the opportunity to do Shabbat their way with their friends. This extends the joy and community of Shabbat well beyond the walls of the Religious Activities Center and conveys to students—hosts and attendees alike—that they can take ownership of their own Jewish lives. MIT Hillel provides coaching and financial support; students plan the menu (let’s make my grandma’s brisket recipe!), set the atmosphere, and guide the conversation toward something personally important.

One Shabbat Report

On Friday December 9, 28 people joined me at my home to learn about some of my traditions, culture and share in a Shabbat dinner. It was a really special night that was enjoyed by all, and it was an especially positive experience for me to get to share a part of my identity with people I care about.

Guests enjoyed pizza and a wide assortment of delicious Trader Joe’s snacks. We played a variety of fun board games, and decorated our own Kiddush cups to facilitate relaxing, meeting new people and having fun before finals.

I introduced Shabbat to my guests by discussing a bit about what the Sabbath is. I talked about how, as a Reform Jew, I can incorporate Shabbat into my week. I talked about the value of bringing loved ones together and making time to celebrate one another’s company in the face of the chaos of school/life. To me, a large part of Shabbat is reflecting on the week behind me and looking to the week ahead of me. To engage the group, we all shared something that we accomplished over the past week, as well as a challenge facing us in the upcoming week.

I think this was an effective way of engaging everyone and making the concepts behind Shabbat accessible to all. At MIT students often don’t take the time to be “in the moment”, and I was really happy that the Shabbat dinner I hosted helped my friends achieve this important sense of appreciation.

Ultimately, I was very happy with how the Shabbat dinner went. It was a fantastic experience to share my culture with my friends, and it was special to bring groups of people from all over campus together through such a simple evening. I am looking forward to hopefully hosting Shabbat again soon! Thank you for allowing me this incredible experience!

DIY SHABBAT 2016
12 Locations
16 hosts
200+ participants

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Samuel and Lauren Zurier

We already miss the Class of ’17, and we hope you will stay in touch.

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Anybody who has been seriously engaged in scientific work of any kind realizes that over the entrance to the gates of the temple of science are written the words: ‘Ye must have faith.’ It is a quality which the scientist cannot dispense with.

Max Planck