Mazal tov to our newest graduates from our Alumni, Faculty, Staff, Parents and Friends!

Graduates and alumni are so inspiring! A personal highlight of each Commencement day is getting to greet all of our students as they process to Killian Court in their caps and gowns -- I feel a bit like a proud parent watching them. I recall this one’s shyness at his first Orientation meal. And, the conversation about the meaning of life I had with that one. And, another’s apology email for forgetting (for the fourth time) an appointment we had scheduled. And, that one’s Hillel leadership growth as a board member. And that one’s ecstatic sharing of his first Israel trip experience. And, that one’s first-ever seder in her dorm… the list of memories is beautiful, if bittersweet.

With so many alumni returning -- completing seven years now as Executive Director means some of “my” alumni are also coming back for Reunions – multiple generations of stories are added to my own personal recollections. Michael Leavit ’86 shared with me meeting his wife at the one Hillel mixer event he attended, and they’ve been happily married ever since. Marc Fogel ’66 and other kosher kitchen alumni compared their food experiences with today’s meal plan offerings at the MIT run kosher servery in Maseeh Hall. Brian Ross ’11 updated me on his studies and work on both coasts, as he also expressed amazement at how much campus life had changed in even five years.

All these stories bind the various generations together. Our Reunions reception honoring our newest alumnigraduates brought everyone side-by-side, and I fully enjoyed the conversations linking Jews from different eras.

Building connections is one of the profoundest joys of my work. Until two days ago, I was in Israel, staffing a delegation of MIT students participating in our year-long ConnecTech program with Technion Hillel. After three havruta/paired study sessions by Skype, seven MIT students spent a week learning about Israeli Jewish life and Jewish identity from their Technion peers. I watched in awe as this year’s groups bonded almost immediately.

Visits to Technion labs, IBM, and Elbit satisfied the scientific interests that binds the two groups of students. And then, an exercise on Jewish identity, in terms of one’s definitions of religious observance, cultural practice, and associations with other Jews, elicited surprised and curious responses, both between and within the two groups. The lag-time while hostel roommates waited to use the shower resulted in deep questions on health care (here and there). While kayaking the Jordan and while visiting different synagogues, the students initiated intense conversations about Jewish weddings (done by the Israeli rabbinate? In Cypress? With a Reform rabbi or Orthodox one?). I saw eyes opened and new ideas taking root, in all the students. As one student related, “Questions on meaning, responsibilities, traditions and more just swirled around. [We] shared so much in common… as if we were living in (semi) parallel universes.” Another noted, “I was genuinely saddened to be saying goodbye to everyone after the closing remarks for the trip until one of the Israeli students reminded me of something... when I started saying goodbye, he seemed confused, and said: ‘It’s not the end! We’re only halfway through.’” That’s the magic and depth of this program compared to many other mifgashim/meet-ups: a great intensity is built up, and its seriousness continues, in a consciously educationally planned and lasting way. The MIT students are already throwing around ideas for what an Israeli student should see of American Jewish and campus life when they host the Israeli peers in Boston in November.

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Mentshn of Mention
Morris Alper ’16
malper@mit.edu

My name is Morris Alper. Originally from Palo Alto, California, I'm now double majoring in linguistics and mathematics here at MIT. I've had a great time here, and had the chance to take advantage of many excellent learning opportunities, including having multiple undergraduate research positions (UROPs) and international internships (MISTI).

MIT was my top choice when I was applying to colleges, and I was thrilled to be accepted. I knew that MIT had excellent programs in both linguistics and mathematics, both of which I knew that I wanted to pursue. I also was interested in being in an area with a larger Jewish community than where I grew up, and I knew that MIT had an active Hillel and kosher food on campus. In hindsight I am glad that I took all of these into consideration, and MIT was a good fit for me.

MIT Hillel has been a home away from home for me in many ways. Since I observe Shabbat, I naturally have been a regular attendee of Hillel's Shabbat dinners and lunches, as well as of the Orthodox prayer services. Seeing my friends every week and enjoying meals and free time together is refreshing, especially as a break from the intense academics at MIT. I have also attended some classes and other events at Hillel during the week, even sometimes just coming to read Jewish books in the Hillel library. The Hillel room is probably one of the places I have frequented most often on campus, and it feels like a safe haven from the usual pressure of MIT life.

I've been quite involved in Jewish life at MIT, even apart from my participation in...
Just before ConnecTech began in Haifa, I spent a day in Tel Aviv with our summer Birthright bus. The Birthright students’ energy was equally high – particularly as I met up with them at a Mayaram workshop. Through this music and dance course, Israelis of many cultural backgrounds create unbelievable art with common (or not so common) household items like buckets, sticks, and swimming flippers. The sound and intensity and (loud) spirit in the room at the HaBima National Theater was amazing. Quite the introduction to Israeli diversity and music for these first time Israeli travelers. As of yesterday, the “regular” Birthright trip had finished, and those MIT students staying to participate in our unique MIT Birthright Extension were beginning to experience the hi-tech side of Start-Up Nation. I am a little jealous of them, for they had the opportunity to take a ride in an autonomous vehicle at Mobileye, a company founded by MIT alum Amnon Shashua PhD’93...

I wish everyone – alumni, parents, graduates, friends – a wonderful summer. Full of magical moments, deep learning, some relaxation and fun, and deep connections that inspire. “See” you in the fall!

L’shalom,
Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM ’97
rabbi@mit.edu

P.S. It seems really a long time ago, but was just after last month’s enewsletter went out... our annual Yom HaAtzmaut / Israel Independence Day Carnival took over Kresge Oval in early May. With over 500 ballots cast for the best student-created hummus flavor at our 9th Annual Hummus Experience Taste-Off – and even more people passing through for Israeli food, Israeli trivia, face painting, bouncy-bounce games, and even camel rides – we celebrated Israel's 68th birthday's in style.

Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Hunter Guarino. Originally from Anchorage, Alaska, Hunter is graduating with the Class of 2016 in Course 2 (Mechanical Engineering). She will work in industry for several years before attending Harvard Business School through its deferred enrollment program. Hunter loves cooking, traveling, and watching films. She can be reached at bguarino@mit.edu.

In midsummer, we read Shlach Lecha, where God tells the Israelites to send men to scout the Land of Canaan. Twelve men go forth and investigate. Upon returning, they give a report to the whole community. The scouts admit the land is bountiful, yet they lament, “the people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are extremely huge and fortified...” (13:28). Only Caleb (later joined by Joshua) urges his people to take the land; the others insist it is impossible. These verses surprised and confused me when I first read them. At this point in the Torah, the Israelites have experienced many examples of God’s power. They lived through the ten plagues, saw the Red Sea parted, ate manna, witnessed the structure of family for the first time. We wonder if we will be able to adjust to being masters of our own fates.

Anyone accepted to MIT is, by definition, an impressive individual brimming with great promise. MIT students often have numerous accomplishments to their names even before arriving on campus. And yet, I believe I was far from alone when, as a freshman, I felt everything I had achieved previously did not amount to much. I was in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar (but likely brilliant) people, about to embark on the most challenging journey of my young life. In other words, I had to prove I deserved to be at MIT. Most college students also have to live without the comfort and structure of family for the first time. We wonder if we will be able to adjust to being masters of our own fates.

It seems to me that MIT students are not so very different from the Israelite scouts. Who were these twelve men? The Torah tells us: “All of them were men of distinction; they were the heads of the children of Israel” (13:3). This was a select group of individuals, chosen for their virtues to do a daunting task. Just as we students are expected to be leaders in our fields, these men knew they were expected to one day lead their tribes. Yet, what had these scouts, these future leaders known up until this? A life mostly in slavery, and then a little over a year traveling in the desert. Had their experiences prepared them to lead a community of hundreds of thousands? As they stood at the edge of the Promised Land—an unfamiliar location filled with unknown, intimidating responsibilities—perhaps the shadow of self-doubt crept in. After seeing so many miracles performed for them, I think it likely the scouts were sure God could deliver the children of Israel to Canaan. And what then? Were these twelve men wise enough, fair enough, strong enough to govern their people in a new age of freedom? Wouldn’t it be easier to “spread an evil report of the land which they had spied out” (13:32) and to claim they could not succeed, rather than risk failure or looking foolish?

While trying to save face at MIT, how often do we insist we simply cannot learn something? How often do we refrain from raising our hand in lecture when we have an idea of the answer to a question? How many times have we decided not to pursue a job because we think we cannot fulfill every qualification? How often do we avoid or turn down leadership roles? What incredible opportunities do we miss out on due to our fears?

In the end, only Caleb and Joshua reach the Promised Land. Those who let uncertainty cloud their judgment and weaken their resolve were doomed to wander. To me, Shlach Lecha is a warning against letting self-doubt or the fear of the unknown paralyze us. To my fellow graduates, those just starting their journeys at MIT, and everyone in Hillel events. I served as treasurer on Hillel student board, a position which taught me a great deal about how to keep track of an organization’s finances and how to navigate bureaucracy. I also served as president of the Kosher Food Club, a campus organization that holds large events with kosher catering so that students who keep kosher have free food events (which are otherwise common on campus) that they may participate in. I’ve also had some involvement in the student group MIT Friends of Israel, and I often go to events run by Chabad at MIT. I am glad that there has been such a rich Jewish life on campus that I have been able to participate in.

I think that my Jewish involvement has definitely enhanced my overall MIT experience. Hillel provided a great way for me to make friends and share experiences with other MIT students from similar backgrounds. The majority of my friends at MIT are people who I met at Hillel, and I think this is natural since we’ve spent so much time together doing the same activities. Shabbat in particular was for me a great way to take some time out of my otherwise stressful week and spend time with my friends at Hillel. Hillel also exposed me to some Jewish texts and ideas that I had not encountered before, and this helped me as I navigated the challenge of integrating my Judaism with secular life at MIT.

Last summer I interned in Israel with a startup called VoiceIt, which is creating automated speech recognition technology for people with speech disabilities. This was an amazing opportunity, made possible by MIT’s MISTI summer international internship program, and I have decided to continue working for VoiceIt after graduation. I had an excellent MISTI experience, and I would highly recommend MISTI! Israel to all students, and especially those who feel some connection to Israel whether it be for Jewish, cultural, or academic reasons (or any combination of these). I am really excited to be making aliyah and continuing to work for VoiceIt, a company which I believe is doing great things, and I know and am extremely grateful that this was made possible by MIT.

Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!
MIT Hillel’s 2016 Annual Fund

Add to Jewish life @ MIT!

To our current and future supporters,

I recently read the non-fiction bestseller, “The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults” by Frances E. Jensen MD. I was motivated to read it because some of the young people I know are going through difficult times – a niece on one side of the family, a cousin on the other side, and a child of one of my dearest friends. And with my own “children” being 23, 22, and 16, I figured I would learn something useful. Unfortunately, my own far-from-teenage brain cannot remember where I put my carefully marked-up volume, so instead of referencing direct quotes as I had intended to do, I’ll talk generally about my take-aways and why this is relevant to MIT Hillel.

While the book is serious, I did laugh a few times. Anyone who has spent time with a teenager (or whose memory and self-awareness are good enough to recall yourself at that stage of life) will recognize much of the described behavior. OK, so now I understand that the reason my 16-year-old son does his homework but neglects to turn in the completed assignment – every week! - is because that type of behavior is a perfectly likely outcome given the developmental stage of his brain. And why my 22-year-old son and his four college housemates thought they could host a graduation BBQ for their families and friends without planning for furniture, eating utensils, an actual barbeque to cook the raw meat, drinks, and head count!

As I read, I was surprised that my thoughts turned not to my own kids as much as to my work setting on campus. It is precisely because the brain is still developing that teenagers need lots of responsible adults around. I thought of my colleagues who deal directly with students – rabbis Michelle and Gavriel, Marissa, and Shoshana, and what I’ve observed of each of them meeting with students. This positive impression was borne out by the beautiful end-of-year-appeal letter written by seniors Noam and Emily, in which they describe in detail how Hillel professionals contributed to their personal growth over the past four years.

The end of the book was the most striking part for me, as the author described more recent research that shows the brain keeps developing in our 20’s. Further, the field is evolving to consider the 20’s to be another developmental stage unto itself. This theory certainly supports MIT Hillel’s special programming for graduating seniors, and its upcoming increased investment in outreach to grad students.

So, while what Hillel does may be the outgrowth of our traditions, of Jewish values, of communal hopes for the future, the mission is now reinforced by scientific evidence that shows the value of our work. Providing opportunities to discuss ethics, building communities that reinforce value systems, helping individual students on their journeys – it turns out to be exactly what the teenage and 20-something brain needs.

As our year draws to a close, I ask you to renew – or begin, as the case may be - your support of MIT Hillel. Our fiscal year ends June 30, and we are still striving to meet our budget. You may respond to our mailing, or participate on line. Thank you for sharing in this responsibility.

Attention San Diego and Los Angeles readers! Rabbi Fisher will be in your area next week, and your local alumni clubs have kindly arranged lunches. Please plan on joining us for casual conversation about Jewish life on campus, Religious Life at MIT more broadly, recent commencement, and any other MIT schmooze-able topics. Click on the respective club link to sign up.

- Monday, June 6, San Diego, Noon at Elijah’s Café.
- Tuesday, June 7, Los Angeles, Century City, Lunch at The Stand.

We are already preparing for next year, a few announcements:

- Attention New Yorkers: mark your calendars for lunch at The Harmonie Club on Monday, September 19, generously hosted again by Martin ’51 and Madge Miller. Featured speaker will be Professor Adam Berinsky – seven weeks before the presidential election, an expert on political polling will no doubt have some interesting things to say!
- Floridians – you too will get to hear Professor Berinsky in a post-election talk. Stay tuned for details about December 4th event in your area.
- Boston locals: we have our fall line-up for Leading Jewish Minds:
  - September 9 – Jeff Karp, “Stories from Bioinspiration to Innovation”
  - November 4 – Polina Golland
  - December 2 – Jay Keyser and Nancy Kelly

To all of the parents of graduating seniors and newly awarded Masters and PhD’s – I wish you a hearty MAZAL TOV on having reached this milestone. May the transition go smoothly for all.

Thank you,
Marla Choslovsky SM’88, MIT Hillel Director of Development
marla360@mit.edu
Add your name to MIT Hillel’s 2016 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 Katharina 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

Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT: Fall preview

- September 9 – Jeff Karp, “Stories from Bioinspiration to Innovation”
- November 4 – Polina Golland
- December 2 – Jay Keyser and Nancy Kelly

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