Welcome back, Students! Welcome, Freshmen! Wow, it’s a new year!

The main Jewish law code, the Shulchan Aruch, begins with a statement that never ceases to amuse me: “One should strengthen oneself as a lion to get up in the morning…” I’m amused because, clearly, Rabbi Yosef Karo, writing in 1653 in Poland, was a morning person…. Something I can’t necessarily say for most of our MIT students. Nevertheless, I think it’s a great description of the beginning of a new school year. Freshmen arrived on campus just over a week ago with bright eyes, excitement, and overwhelming energy. They are facing the start of their MIT experience with all the power, courage, and force of a lion – and my staff and I are meeting them and matching all their enthusiasm, as we introduce them to Hillel and the many ways we can enhance their Jewish experiences and forward their Jewish explorations, journeys, and growth.

There was a quantum shift from “summer” to “new school year” when Orientation Week arrived. Suddenly the slower, less-structured workdays of July and August were over. One Friday our offices were calm, and just a few hours later, Sunday came, and we fed dozens of first-years and their families at our opening brunch and dinner. Students, within moments of introduction to a fellow freshman or upperclassman, connected over shared interests, geography, and Jewish connections.

At that brunch, at the Orientation Week Activities “Midway” fair, at our first Shabbat dinner, we started gathering student stories, learning who they are and what are their interests. Based on all we learned, already we have students applying for our December Birthright trip. Others are taking on the commitment of our freshmen-specific “Kindle your Judaism” class – we provide a Kindle pre-loaded with Jewish books, and after reading and discussing them all, students keep the device. Still others have some new burgeoning friendships, having been brought together by a Hillel staffer, once we realized they had a shared hobby or background.

It’s a new school year. It’s roaring into existence… with all the potentials of new beginnings! Hillel staff and students are meeting it like lions, and I look forward to keeping you informed throughout the year of all that ensues.

L’shalom & l’shana tova,

Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM ’97
rabbil@mit.edu

P.S. I loved this playful article about playing Tetris on the Tel Aviv City Hall building – with its shoutout to MIT. I remember some of our Hillel students enjoying that Green Building game back in 2012.

Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Tomer Mangoubi ’14. He graduated with bachelors degrees in Math and Neuroscience, and currently resides in New Haven. Tomer does research in developmental economics, working as a research assistant to an economics professor at Yale University. In his free time, Tomer enjoys swimming, hiking, and Jewish studies. Tomer can be contacted at tomerrm@alum.mit.edu

Like many MIT students, I spent my years at MIT studying math and science. Unlike many MIT students, I also spent a lot of time studying an ancient Jewish movement known as Karaite Judaism. I’m a Karaite, and, because today’s Karaites form a very small movement, I’m one of three Karaites to have attended MIT (the other two are my father and
one of my brothers).

Karaite Jews strive to uphold the plain meaning of the biblical text and question the authoritativeness of rabbinic interpretation. Less well known is that the Karaite sages are also steadfast rationalists. Karaite sages are the Mr. Spocks to the Rabbinic Kirks.

See, for example, how the Karaite sage Ya’akov al Kirkisani (10th century) introduces his commentary on the Torah:

“some men from amongst our nation upon hearing that we are involved in logic and the principles of philosophy are trembling in fear from this … and this is because of their foolishness and lack of knowledge, if only their logical faculties were opened they would see that these things are nothing except the Tools of Torah”

Kirkisani goes on to explain that because reason is “based on the science of the senses and of nature,” then anyone “who opposes the use of logic and philosophy opposes everything which is known and felt.” From here we see that the Karaite sages were a big fan of science, especially course 24 (Linguistics and Philosophy) and course 7 (Biology).

Another example. What did the Karaite sage Hakham Bashyatzi (15th century) include in his curriculum for young rabbis? Well, the bible, two religious works, and the rest: formal logic, mathematics, astronomy, natural sciences, music, and grammar. From here we learn that the Karaite sages were also big fans of course 18 (Math), course 12 (Earth, Atmospheric, and Planetary Sciences), and yes, even course 21M (Music and Theater Arts).

The Karaite sages went so far as to put logic on equal footing with the text of the Torah. Hakham Yeshua (11th century) ranked that which is derived through reason as the first among all truths. Hakham Shlomo ben Afidah Hakohen (18th century) held that a verse should not be read according to its plain meaning when “[the text] overturns or contradicts that which is observed with the senses or determined through reason.”

What does this all teach us? I think it teaches us that commitment to logic and analysis can be more than just a career choice. It can form the centerpiece of a religious movement. Maybe that explains the enthusiasm with which MIT students pursue math, science, and engineering.

MIT Hillel’s 2016 Annual Fund
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To our current and future supporters,

Recently Rabbi Fisher and I were invited to attend a breakfast for parents of incoming freshmen. The featured speaker was Melissa Nobles, Kenan Sahin Dean of HASS. She spoke about where her school fits in at The ‘Tute, and in particular, how elevating the humanities to its own school at MIT was a purposeful decision in the aftermath of World War II, as MIT grappled with what type of citizens and leaders it needed to produce to make the world a better place. She spoke about some of the school’s top humanities courses, and highlighted MIT’s world-famous economics department.

After her talk, Michelle and I approached her, and shared with her another important WWII-era fact, that MIT had never had quotas against Jews, and the top-notch econ department she cited was a direct result.

It was just a small moment, but one that reminded me that as focused as we are on the present, making sure that today’s students have a meaningful Jewish experience that enriches their MIT studies, challenges them, supports them, and helps shape them as citizens and leaders, and as much as we plan for the future of MIT Hillel… we must also remember and honor the past, and remind ourselves - and others - of our part in shaping the MIT of today and tomorrow.

The very next day, an article in thejewishphilanthropy.com reinforced my takeaway from chatting with the dean. The core idea is that our communal system requires leadership that is visionary, inspirational, and constructive. It is a potent reminder that the work of Hillels on campuses is exactly what is needed in order to ensure that Jewish communities have thoughtful and experienced young adults in the pipeline for leadership.

As we embark on the new academic year and the new Jewish year, let me wish you a Shana Tova - a year of peace effective parenting. If you haven’t yet had the privilege of grabbing coffee with Rabbi G, I hope you do at some point! So I came to MIT not expecting to be involved in Jewish life much at all, but here I am looking back three years later, fortunate to have learned and matured through a wide variety of experiences with Hillel. I found myself leading Passover Seder in a packed Hillel Center freshman year. Throughout sophomore year, I helped with event planning for the undergraduate Jewish community on the MIT Hillel Board of Directors by providing input on decisions like how to reduce fears of anti-Semitism on campus, start new recruiting initiatives, and more.

The main thing that MIT Hillel has taught me over the past few years is the importance of maintaining an open mind. Though my Jewishness wasn't really a top priority coming from high school and I didn’t intend on being involved in the Jewish community at MIT, I now have a network of Jewish friends and mentors at MIT that I will carry for the rest of my life, a number of leadership experiences that pushed me out of my comfort zone, and stronger sense of self. Thanks to MIT Hillel, and thank you for reading.

L’Chaim,
Adam

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Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!
of supporting MIT Hillel? If so, chances are that your gift to Hillel is a small portion of your total MIT giving. Thank you for all you do for the Institute!

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 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

Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT

- **September 9** - [Jeff Karp](mailto:Jeff.Karp@mit.edu): "Stories from Bioinspiration to Innovation"
- **September 19** - [Adam Berinsky in New York](mailto:Adam.Berinsky@mit.edu): "Public Opinion, The 2016 Election, and Beyond"
- **November 4** - [Polina Golland](mailto:Polina.Golland@mit.edu): Associate Director of the Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (CSAIL)
- **December 2** - [Jay Keyser and Nancy Kelly](mailto:Jay.Keyser@mit.edu): "Travels to India"
- **December 4** - [Adam Berinsky in Miami](mailto:Adam.Berinsky@mit.edu): "Public Opinion, The 2016 Election, and Beyond"

MIT Hillel wishes a mazal tov to:

Our Assistant Director Marissa Freed and Jason, her husband, on the birth of their daughter, Lily Elisabeth, on June 21.

Our Administrator Benjamin Flax and Adena, his wife, on their marriage on July 3.

*If you have life-cycle events to share with the MIT Hillel community, please [let us know](mailto:letusknow@hillel.mit.edu).*

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