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

1) Zoe Temco G tries on a vest created at Tikkun Olam Makers during the MIT Birthright Extension

2) The MIT Birthright cohort poses in front of the Kotel (Western Wall)

3) Paige Grody '17 is shown the digging site of the Tel Aviv Light Rail on the Birthright Extension

Rabbi Fisher is on Sabbatical for the Spring, 2017 semester. In her stead the MIT Hillel Staff will be providing updates and insights focused on their roles and activities.

MIT Hillel Update

For most students and Hillel staff, MIT's January IAP, Independent Activities period, is a calmer time on campus. Students are encouraged to set their own educational agendas, develop independent projects, meet with mentors, or pursue many other options not possible during the academic semester. This unique free time also allows space for Hillel staff to think about and plan innovative educational experiments for the semester ahead.

I, however, have not had a quiet IAP. As the Director of Birthright & Israel Engagement, for the last 5 ½ years at MIT Hillel, I have continually felt inspired, passionate and challenged to make a 10-day Birthright-Israel trip the catalyst for strengthening our student’s connections to their Jewish Identity and Israel. I believe that engaging experiences infused with Jewish values serve as evolving foundations for Jewish growth. My role on campus encompasses everything from student outreach, engagement, and leadership development to Israel and Jewish education. Staffing Birthright-Israel and planning and facilitating our unique MIT Birthright Extension is my favorite element of this job. Our Extension trip allows MIT students to spend an additional 5 days exploring Israel through the lens of technology and innovation. Truly a personal and professional highlight for me.

Even though participants and staff alike averaged about 4 hours of sleep a night, the energy emitted on our Winter 2016/17 MIT Birthright trip and MIT Extension was palpable and we have already begun to ignite those sparks into actions back on campus over IAP. In the past three weeks, we have had 3 bus reunions. Several Birthright Alumni grouped together and joined the weekly, Wednesday evening, MIT Israeli Dancing group. Another student from our Winter trip coordinated a group of his peers to participate in the Hummus 101 workshop hosted by Grad Hillel just the other night. Lastly, to end out the week, we had a beautiful Birthright Israel Shabbat with services/song-leading co-led by two students, followed by a dinner in which the community shared meaningful experiences from their trip with their peers.

Through further education about Jewish thought and perspectives on an array of issues in the Jewish Learning Fellowship (JLF) program run by Rabbi Goldfeder or becoming Hillel leaders on our student board—most of our Birthright alumni become more involved with the MIT Jewish community. It is an inspiring transformation. For me, it’s an ongoing commitment to ensure follow up programs are given support while also actively recruiting and preparing for each upcoming Birthright trip.

The successful facilitation of such experiences like Birthright, the MIT Birthright Extension, and follow-up programs back on campus requires intentional, knowledgeable, and trained educators. I am grateful to be a part of the MIT Hillel team and community, where we are always striving to provide the best for our students, through modeling our own personal/professional growth too. In the spirit of IAP, I have been working on acquiring cutting edge frameworks and theories that motivate and ignite the field of experiential Jewish education, and have worked on integrating these learnings into our workplace throughout the last month. I’ve focused and deepened my own understanding of the principles of Machshava and Ma’aseh – Intention and Action – two values whose interplay is at the core of Jewish life. I look forward to a new semester ahead, and working with MIT students, helping them to continue to struggle with,
identify, and strengthen those values that are at the core of their own personal Jewish Journeys.

Best,
Shoshana Gibbor
Director of Birthright & Israel Engagement
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Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Caroline Morganti ’16, (Course VI), she is from Baton Rouge, LA, and is currently working on her M.Eng. She is a past member of the MIT Hillel Undergraduate Student Board and currently serves on the Graduate Hillel Student Board. She can be reached at morganti@mit.edu.

In our yearly Torah-reading cycle, the Israelites have just escaped from Egypt after a lengthy series of plagues, crossed the split Red Sea, and are now in the desert on their way to Eretz Yisrael. In the meantime, order must be kept among the large, diverse group (600,000 men, plus women and children.) In next week’s parshah, we read the story of how Moses is advised by his father-in-law Yitro to set chiefs over smaller groups of the Israelites, in order to decrease Moses’s burden in hearing disputes among the people.

However, Yitro instructs Moses not to choose just any men -- they should have certain qualities. The Torah says that they should be “capable men [‘anshei-chayil]” who fear God, trustworthy men [‘anshei-emet] who spurn ill-gotten gain” (Exodus 18:21). Thirteenth-century commentator Ramban, using other appearances of the word chayil in the Tanakh, says that the application of the term to matters of justice implies one who is wise, energetic, and upright. Rashi, the eleventh century commentator who lived in present-day France, interprets emet (often translated as “truth”) to apply to people whose word is reliable and to whom others will listen.

Commentators also differ as to how this system was set up among the Israelites. Sforno, who lived in sixteenth-century Italy, says that the court system would have different levels: groups of 1000, 100, 50, and 10, in order to handle affairs of the entire Israelite body politic efficiently.

Of course, our system of government does not work quite like the Israelites’ did as they were leaving Egypt. But I think that the takeaway for us is clear: because no one person can possibly handle all of the details of running our society, we have a system of representatives and judges at various levels of government, as well individuals who offer counsel to elected officials and the public. But it is critical that these individuals have competence and expertise necessary to offer guidance.

I believe that all of us have an immense contribution -- as capable, energetic scientists and engineers guided by the Jewish tradition -- that we can give our country and the world. And as students and alumni of one of the greatest centers of science and technology in the world, our opinions carry increased weight on such matters, making people more likely to listen. While our research is important lashma [for its own sake], we also should contribute the insights and truths we gain from it (direct or not) to the public sphere, in the hopes of improving our society. Doing so is not only in the spirit of our Torah, but also has the potential to be a kiddush Hashem for those around us.

Additionally, per Sforno, we see that even if we are only offering our abilities and insights to our local community, we still have the power to effect change in the larger world. Individuals with the qualities described by Yitro are vital even among the smallest communities -- our neighborhoods, workplaces, universities -- since these groups also interact with one another and compose society as a whole.

In the last couple of weeks, those of us on campus have seen something of a political awakening for MIT students. A recent executive order, which many of us saw as an affront to our values and which was denounced by President Reif, had the added effect of causing at least two of our classmates difficulties in returning to campus for the spring semester. I was among at least 200 students who marched together, across the Charles River to Copley Square, to protest in their honor. I was proud to see more than a few students with signs referencing their Jewish identities and family histories as personal inspiration for their action. I hope that they, and others of us in the MIT Jewish community, can build from that moment and continue to contribute our voices, informed by both Judaic and scientific insights, to offer guidance and pursue justice for our classmates and all people who live among us.

MIT Hillel’s 2017 Annual Fund
Add to Jewish life @ MIT!

To our current and future supporters,

If you’ve gotten to my column at the end of the newsletter, you already know that Rabbi Fisher is on sabbatical this semester. What does that mean for you, our supporters? After all, as I wrote in the last issue, philanthropy is a way of supporting leaders who you believe can and will do good things. So what happens when the leader is not present for an extended period of time?

At MIT Hillel, it means that you can gain a new appreciation for the strength of Michelle’s leadership. She planned for an entire year, documenting and thinking through every task large or small, and in the process made each of us more aware, thoughtful, and focused about our work and how to prioritize it. I suppose that each of us is channeling a little bit of Michelle with the things we are covering for her. And on a weekly basis we might ask “Can this wait until Michelle comes back?” or “Is this issue big enough to disturb Michelle on her sabbatical?” Overall, as individuals and as a team, we are realizing just how much Michelle has taught and of the 10 attending MIT students. For the chemical engineer, there was a trip to the main factory of Teva. For a grad student in civil engineering, there was a tour of the build site for Tel Aviv’s subway system. Personally, I’m interested in Artificial Intelligence, so I enjoyed the presentation by Mobileye on their progress creating self-driving cars. But what I found most exciting was an army base with some real-life demonstrations of explosives terrorists have used against Israel.

In the future, I plan to keep in touch with as many as possible of the friends from Birthright. They better come to Shabbat 250!

Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!
empowered us, and how enduring our culture is.

I was trying to think of a biblical example, but what came first to mind was the people building the golden calf during Moses’s absence: neither the idea I was going for, nor what is actually happening here. Somewhat stymied about how to bring this idea to a close, I queried one of Michelle’s favorite colleagues, Rabbi Google, with the search criteria “torah leader away” and found an article entitled “Seven Principles of Jewish Leadership”. Leadership is teamsmanship, it is vision-driven, it requires learning and believing in the people you lead, and it is stressful and emotionally demanding. Yes, in addition to a deeper analysis of Moses’s leadership than I could provide, the principles outlined in this article perfectly describe our own Executive Director.

We thank you for supporting Jewish life at MIT, and for supporting Michelle’s leadership on campus.

L’Shalom,

Marla Choslovsky SM ’88,
MIT Hillel Director of Development
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Add your name to MIT Hillel’s 2017 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 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

• Feb 24 – Linda Rabieh, Concourse Lecturer and President of the MIT Hillel Board
• March 17 – Arnold Barnett, George Eastman Professor of Management Science, Sloan
• May 12 – Daniel Jackson, CSAIL Professor

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

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