



11 Sh'vat 5780
February 6, 2020



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

- 1) Students learning how to make homemade hummus during the annual Hummus 101 class, taught by MIT alumnus, George Kirby '79
- 2) Rabbi Michelle Fisher unexpectedly running into MIT alumnus, Stephen Parkoff '59, while in Israel
- 3) MIT Hillel students posing at the top of Masada while on the winter Birthright trip

MIT Hillel Update



It's now back to regularly scheduled programming... Spring semester began earlier this week. I know that our students greatly appreciate the long break from regular classes afforded by winter vacation and MIT's IAP (Independent Activities Period). It is a time to regroup and refresh; to step back, think about, and absorb larger questions; and to put back in the forefront to-do items and wish list activities that got buried in the busy-ness of the term. I gain all of the same from this extended outside-the-academic-calendar time. Since late-December, I traveled to Israel, attended my annual

[Wexner Alumni Conference](#), and made a site visit with Marissa, our Assistant Director, to Princeton to visit another thriving Hillel.

One session from my conference was about "Rethinking Jewish Literacy". It has deep

resonance for our Hillel work on campus. About a year ago, both [Peter Beinart](#) and [Danny Gordis](#) – Jewish thinkers who usually find themselves diverging or opposed on many topics – found a point of agreement, claiming from a shared stage that Jewish knowledge in the US is pathetically low. Beinart: “American Jews are conducting a kind of mass experiment in what happens in a society when radical ignorance meets radical acceptance... [The American Jewish community is] the most ignorant world Jewish community maybe that’s ever existed.” Gordis: “[I agree with your point about the evisceration of Jewish knowledge in this country.” Our room of diverse Jewish leaders dug into and critiqued these opinions, beginning with examining what Jewish literacy is.

I reflected upon our education initiatives at MIT Hillel as an outgrowth of that conference conversation. We have created a breadth of opportunities for our students to gain deep knowledge of Jewish texts, traditions, and ideas, and to incorporate them to produce their own Jewish content as they live Jewish lives, here at MIT and after graduation. We offer multiple Jewish Learning Fellowships: ten-week non-credit classes, for undergraduates and graduate students, for exploring life’s big questions. Our Jew-It-Yourself Shabbat meal opportunities begin with a 1:1 staff/student conversation about the “why” of Shabbat for the student and prepare each student for becoming a host in Jewish holiday space and owning and creating their own holiday practices. Graduate student “Torah on Tap” evenings center on fun and serious, meaningful study – for example, in December, a sociological and ethnomusicological look at how the meaning of Chanukah has changed since the time of the Maccabees, in both time and place, and how the customs we choose to observe today reflect (or not) themes that were important to our ancestors.

Our students want to engage with our Jewish culture and tradition. They vote with their time and presence (while living an MIT-level busy calendar) that they want to learn and do more. Beinart’s and Gordis’ words ring false for me at Hillel. I experience regularly the growing literacy and knowledge base of our campus Jews, and see our students creating meaning and producing their own Jewish content through a myriad of opportunities. It is inspiring and energizing to be a part of.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Michelle H. Fisher
Executive Director
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Mentshn of Mention

Greetings from 36,000 feet above the earth somewhere between Johannesburg and London! My name is Alex Evenchik, and I am a junior here at MIT studying materials science and engineering with an interest in how biology and materials science can be paired together to impact public health (hence the fact that I am currently flying back from an MIT Class in South Africa focused on learning about the HIV epidemic and the intense complexity involved with trying to solve it). I grew up 2 red-line train stops away from MIT in Porter Square, and really love Boston and Cambridge and the ability to walk anywhere and get lost within their streets. Outside of academics, I love acting or helping with lights for MIT’s Shakespeare Ensemble,

teaching and taking classes in the Glassblowing Lab, and being a part of Theta Chi, my fraternity and living community.

At some point last spring, I began to ask myself questions about why Jewish traditions and practices have endured for so many years, as well as examine why I continue my Jewish practices for reasons beyond that it was what my dad did and taught me, which he learned from his dad, who learned it from his, and so on. It was because of this that I began to consider Birthright, and at the beginning of January’s Independent Activities Period (IAP) I

had the opportunity to go with MIT Hillel to Israel. Our group was composed of a mix of MIT students, undergraduates from other universities, and Israelis either serving in or recently out of the IDF. The trip was incredible in many ways, but our time visiting the Western Wall, and what I realized while there, helped to provide the beginning of an answer to the question I had asked myself in the spring.

It was our second-to-last day in Israel, and a rainy, slightly chilly Shabbat in Jerusalem. As Shabbat was coming to an end, we wove our way through the worn, narrow streets of the Old City and found ourselves overlooking the Western Wall. Before approaching, I was staring at the Wall, unsure how this area, which is so imbued with religious meaning, fit with my personal connection to Judaism. One of our MIT guides, Shoshana Gibbor, of Hillel, stopped us there and, seemingly reading my thoughts, soothed my flurry of emotions. She described her first time visiting the Wall, how she also wasn't sure whether or not she was meant to have a religious experience while there, but how in the end she realized that the Wall has so much more meaning than only as a religious location. She reminded us that when we face towards Jerusalem during services, we are pointing towards where we currently stood. Regardless of how one views this area in a religious context, the fact that this site acts as a central, unifying place for Jews across the world gives it additional meanings. As a place of historical importance, cultural unity, and religious groundings, it draws all those who identify as Jewish together, and that has helped to hold together our diverse and dispersed community.

When I later approached the Wall, felt its imposing height and weight, and observed those around me from all areas of the world, I felt as though I now had new ways to explore and express my Judaism. From this experience and the overall trip, I now more easily can view Judaism as any combination of its religious, traditional, cultural, and historical elements. By drawing upon these foundations, I can begin to reflect on and develop my own Jewish identity. How I define my Jewish identity is still evolving, but I'm excited that as I continue at MIT, I now feel better equipped to explore it and all the ways it can connect me to the MIT community.

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Torah from Tech



Robin Ganek, MBA '15, recently returned to Cambridge to take on the role of Director of People Operations at Formlabs, a [3D printing](#) technology developer and manufacturer, founded in 2011 by three [MIT Media Lab](#) students. Previously, Robin delivered HR programs at Google and Amazon. She and her husband Nathaniel Jones, PhD '17, just welcomed their first child, Gideon, in June.

Forays into the unknown can be scary. In this week's portion, Beshalach, the recently freed Israelites take their first steps out of Egypt into the wilderness, and fear accompanies them. The Torah tells us that as they reach the Red Sea with the Egyptians in pursuit, the Israelites ask Moshe why this particular foray was worth it: is dying in the wilderness better than living in slavery in Egypt?

But on the banks of the Red Sea, the Talmud tells us a story of bravery. Though none of the Israelites wanted to be the first to go into the sea, Nachshon of the tribe of Judah, leapt forward and dove in. God parted the waters and the Israelites safely crossed while the Egyptians were swallowed up by the closing sea. And Nachshon? His descendents, who included King David, went on to be heroes of Israel, and it is said that the Messiah will come from his line. Great risk can garner great reward.

What does taking this plunge into the uncertain look like today? In business, it is designing products to address everyday problems. In technology, it is developing tools, materials, and designs to change the way we work, play, and live. And it is hard. It is easy to stand on the banks of the conventional; it is hard to dive into the new and innovative. Like Nachshon, we are gambling with our money, our reputation, and our time. But without innovation, we see only a life of slavery in Egypt; and without bravery, we die on the banks of the Red Sea, arguing about whether or not we should dive in. Like Nachshon, for ourselves and our communities, we must be willing to dive in.

It is meaningful to me to write this drash on this parsha as I personally step into the unknown. After many years working in middle management of large companies, I am taking a larger role in a smaller one, trying to establish itself in its industry. There are moments when the vastness of this change, feels like the vastness of the Red Sea. There are moments when the predictability and stability of my past work feel like a shore I would be happy to stay on. But I am committed to working toward what I believe is right for the future, not what's comfortable in the present.

The first step is only the first step. Exodus is also a reminder that even once you have leapt, you may still have a 40-year journey. But it is through bravery and innovation - of technology, of ideas, and of ourselves - that we begin the journey.

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MIT Hillel's 2020 Annual Fund

Add to Jewish life @ MIT!



To Our Current and Future Supporters,

For the first time, recently I made gave money to political candidates... and the experience was not positive. In the first case, I gave to gain access to an event to hear a candidate in person, whereas in the second case I gave simply because I like nearly everything that comes out of the candidate's mouth, both in substance and in style.

However, the aftermath has given me mixed feelings – about the candidates, the political process, and even fundraising. No sooner was each campaign contribution made, than the next request for funds followed, the beginning of an infinite automated stream of repeat asks by both email and text. One of the campaigns asks for more money every few *hours*! On the plus side, that candidate, as differentiated from the other, also asks me to read some info and make calls to voters in Iowa before the caucus, inviting my participation and connection.

Overall, rather than inspiring me to give more, this barrage makes me want to disengage. What a great lesson for me at work. And a motivating force as our team personally signed 300 thank-you letters from end-of-calendar-year gifts that came in December. Please know that at MIT Hillel, thank you means thank you.

THANK YOU to our donors who started off our fiscal and Jewish new years July – October.

THANK YOU to our donors who sent end-of-year gifts Nov-Dec.

THANK YOU to our constituents who stay connected and care about our success, even if your philanthropic priorities lie elsewhere this year.

THANK YOU to our donors who plan to participate in MIT's Giving Day on March 12 (note: neither Pi Day nor Shabbat). And THANK YOU to our three alumni who are providing the matching funds.

THANK YOU to our donors who help us meet our goal by end of fiscal year in June.

Most of all, we know that many people who give to a Hillel also support other Jewish organizations, and that many people who support their alma maters also support other major institutions. Thank you for including MIT Hillel in your giving.

Marla Choslovsky SM '88
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[Add your name](#) to MIT Hillel's 2020 Donor Roll! Scroll down to MIT Hillel to give.

Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!

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.

From the Archives!

For this month's "From the Archives!" we found an invitation to the presentation of the Ark, Torah Scrolls, and Ceremonial Objects.

This event dates all the way back to 1956 and took place at the MIT Chapel, which Hillel students still use today for services!



On the Calendar

Mark your calendars for one more Leading Jewish Minds seminar this semester:

- [Friday, February 14, 2020: Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT featuring Jeffrey Hoffman](#)
 - [Friday, March 13, 2020: Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT featuring David Autor](#)
 - [Friday, May 15, 2020: Leading Jewish Minds @ MIT featuring Rainer Weiss](#)
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Mazal Tov!

- Mazal tov to MIT alumni Rochel Levy '20 and Ari Green '17 MNG '18 on their marriage on January 25!
- Mazal tov to MIT student Ronit Langer '20 on her engagement to Andrew Katz!
- Mazal tov to MIT alumni Robin Ganek MBA '15 and Nathaniel Jones, PhD '17 on the birth of their baby, Gideon!

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

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