



12 Sivan 5780
June 4, 2020



Mazal Tov, Graduates!

- 1) Rabbi Michelle Fisher giving her invocation for Sunday's special Shavuot-friendly commencement ceremonies
- 2) Customized wine glasses that MIT Hillel's programming staff made for graduating students
- 3) Holocaust survivor, Magda Bader, telling her story to students over Zoom during Hillel's *Zikaron B'Salon* event

MIT Hillel Update



Over the past few months of working from and isolating at home, I have found that one day begins to resemble another. It is thus very hard to believe that we have officially completed another academic year. Even as we begin to take steps to re-open society, given our continued social distancing and mostly virtual reality, it is likely that this summer may not feel very different from these last few months of the school year.

Academic classes and the semester may be over, but extended hours at home and online may not change. Thus, unlike the relative programming quiet of most summers on campus, MIT Hillel is continuing to offer our students classes, social gatherings, and 1:1 conversations over the next few months. Whenever and however our students need us, we evolve to meet those needs.

Our Jewish tradition has much to say about the marking of time. Particularly when one period of time feels so like the next, it is worth pausing to mark the fact that we have moved from one time to another. This past weekend's virtual MIT Commencement Exercises honored our seniors and those other students earning degrees as they became MIT graduates. Alumni celebrating milestone reunions also gathered virtually to reflect, reminisce, and celebrate. With another Graduation, freshmen officially became

sophomores, sophomores juniors, and juniors became seniors. Time inexorably moves on.

MIT's Commencement date overlapped Shavuot this past Friday, and MIT offered a special Commencement ceremony two days later, for those religiously observant Jewish students who could not participate during the Jewish holiday. I was asked to give the Invocation at this second event.

These are the words I gave in my Commencement Invocation this past Sunday:

Master of the Universe,
Just a few years ago these graduates first arrived on MIT's campus as new students.

Graduates,
you were ready and excited
to learn, to explore, to create, to grow.
You had dreams
You had ambitions
You probably had anxieties
You may even have had misgivings
You looked out through wide eyes, absorbing it all

In the past years,
You have lived out the teachings of our Jewish tradition.
As *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of Our Ancestors, teaches us
You have made your professors into your mentors and your teachers,
You acquired friends
You fulfilled dreams
You substituted new dreams for old ones
You succeeded, failed, and succeeded again
You saw visions and made them real.

I am certain that you never dreamed of the life and world of the last few months
of this global crisis
None of us did
All our --all your -- dreams and imaginings and hopes have suddenly been revised
Expectations altered.

And, yet,
I am certain that you will dream many dreams in the days, weeks, years ahead.
With the education, the learning, and the experiences you gained at MIT,
Your lives, your careers, your leadership, and your innovations
will propel us forward
Your dreams will alter the future
Your dreams will create new realities.
Your dreams will make the world stronger than before

Whenever we reach a liminal moment in time.
A time of change. A time of opportunity. A time of new beginnings.
Good or bad,
Our tradition says:
We have a responsibility to bless.

Today, we celebrate with you,
We take pride with you in your academic accomplishments.
And so we express gratitude to the Source of All Blessings:
We count our blessings.
We open our eyes to the good.
We acknowledge that all we have has not come from our hands alone.

While we give thanks to God,
We also thank all those who supported you on this journey:
Your family and friends,
Your teachers, administrators, and mentors,
who stood by you, guided you, taught you,

held you when you cried,
and brought you to discovery and joy.

The Jewish tradition provides us with words
when our hearts are so full, that words might fail us.
With gratitude in our hearts,
We join together in the words of the *shehecheyanu* prayer

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam, shehecheyanu, v'kiymanu v'higiyanu la-z'man ha-zeh.

Blessed are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time.

Mazal tov to our graduates. May we all have many seasons of joy. Thank you to all of you – alumni, families, faculty, and many others – who have supported all our students through these times. May we all go from strength to strength, with safety, health, and many more reasons to celebrate.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Michelle H. Fisher SM'97 (V)
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P.S. This was written before Shavuot and Commencement, and with the images of the past days engraved in my head, I realize how much more our graduates, and we, need to and will do to fix this world. While this is all our responsibility, I am sorry you graduates are inheriting a world that needs so much change. I pray for us to come together to address and find adaptive solutions to the deep underlying systemic racial inequalities facing us as Americans.

Mentshn of Mention



My name is Michelle Kornberg. My family is local - we live in Belmont - which is pretty lucky since that means we get to take Commencement pictures in front of the dome for real. Masks on and everything. I've just received my degree in Mechanical and Ocean Engineering and in the past four years I've definitely learned a lot. More important than anything I could learn in a classroom, however, are the people I've met and the communities I've called home.

I grew up in a pretty secular household. Didn't have a bat mitzvah, never went to services except once or twice for the high holidays, and seders were strictly less than a half hour long and always at a friend's house (I think we did a skit one year? The afikomen used to be chocolate-covered? Man, childhood...)

In my first year at MIT I made one of the best decisions of my life: I joined a sorority. It very quickly became my family. AEPi is a historically Jewish sorority, though ironically I don't remember learning about that until afterwards. It's not that I'm a bad Jew - a line of thinking that MIT Hillel's "Bad Jew Brunch" in the beginning of the fall semester was quick to dispel. I just hadn't been a part of a particularly Jewish community until I came to MIT. Some of my best memories from the past four years have been celebrating holidays with my sorority sisters. I've loved teaching my non-Jewish sisters the things I did know, turning to my "little" (a sorority underclassman mentee) for the tunes that I didn't. I baked dozens of loaves of challah for our post-Pesach Bread Bash, dipped apples in dulce de leche with my other little who is also the funny intersection of Latina and Jewish, like me. I was dragged to so many Shabbat dinners and services that eventually I did learn the tunes - and dragged along a few sisters and friends of my own. Even though not every member of AEPi is Jewish, in fact

because of that, we worked hard to bring Jewish values to the everyday sorority context. Community, learning, caring, respect - in helping my non-Jewish sisters connect with Jewish values, I found that I did as well.

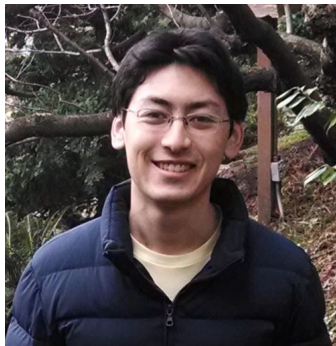
Beyond AEPHi, the Jewish community at MIT is always reaching out, ready to provide support through the firehose of MIT life. I met new friends at a bagel brunch - friends who would months later drag me out of bed early enough to still call it morning with the promise of a good chat over breakfast at Flour. The staff at Hillel were always friendly and helpful, willing to be mentors or advisors, always ready with a list of Kosher restaurants that deliver when my FPOP (MIT's pre-orientation program) student's lunch order got mixed up, or with a long list of good book recommendations (for when I have time to read them).

One of my favorite memories is from Pride Shabbat in my junior year. Though I had helped to organize the event the previous year, just attending as a junior was a delight. I remember walking in (late, oops!) and being struck by not only how many people were in the room, but how many of them I knew, how many of them I wanted to sit with and talk to, how many of them stopped to say hi and chat when I did sit down. Friends from classes, friends I'd met at Shabbat dinners or services, my breakfast buddy, students I'd advised, my AEPHi sisters. Pride Shabbat brought together so many people from different communities to celebrate, discuss, and learn. So often, religion is used to exclude, but in the Jewish community at MIT, I found a place to bring all of my favorite people together.

Knowing my time at MIT has drawn to a close is bittersweet, but I know that I've found my place in a community that will last. Next year, I hope to be building wave turbines in Spain, where there likely won't be very many Jewish people at all. I suppose I'll have to teach my new friends the tunes.

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Hillel Heroes



As the coronavirus crisis gained steam in early March, it seemed like a severe shortage of ventilators would cause patients to die for lack of medical equipment. I felt helpless as I sat in my room trying to work on my research but instead obsessively tracking the number of coronavirus infections. So, when I received an email from my research advisor asking my lab if anyone would be willing to volunteer on a ventilator project, I jumped at the opportunity. The email came on the morning of March 16th, two short months ago that have felt like two years.

Although the MIT E-Vent team was cobbled together in days from an unlikely assortment of MIT students, alumni, and staff from at least five different departments, we all happened to have perfectly complementary talents that enabled us to rapidly prototype and rigorously test ventilator designs while also incorporating clinical feedback. We have reported [our findings](#), and you can also read [an MIT News article](#) with more details. Our designs and learnings have directly influenced many soon-to-be-released commercial designs all over the country and the world, from Boston to New York City to Chicago, and from India to Ireland to Chile (an article on our New York partner is [here](#)). Although the success of social distancing has averted a ventilator shortage in the US, we hope that our design will be useful in developing countries with very few ventilators.

The urgency of the crisis forged us into a tight-knit team and Passover happened to fall right during the peak of our work. Because there were many Jewish people on the team, we celebrated a lab Passover, and as I ate matzah, I couldn't help but relate it to our own project. We eat matzah because our ancestors could not wait for the bread



to rise as they fled Egypt. Similarly, the goal of our team was to design the simplest, most basic ventilator possible so that it could be made available faster than conventional ventilators. We dipped vegetables in salt to remind us of the bitter tears of



our ancestors and, later, dipped the maror/bitter herbs in charoset to remind us of the sweetening of our burden. Although the pandemic has caused a tremendous amount of bitter tears, I hope that we can all find things that have made our lives sweeter during this difficult time. Personally, I will always be grateful for the friendships and memories I have made through this project.

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Torah from Tech



Gerald "Jerry" Appelstein was involved in the oil business for 34 years since his graduation from MIT where he majored in chemical engineering with minors in English literature and economics. Jerry retired in December 2014 and is now President of Applehouse LLC, an angel investor and venture capital funding platform, while also financially supporting and volunteering for various educational and philanthropic organizations. He is a recipient of a Bronze Beaver for his decades of service to MIT in areas including club and class organization, fund-raising, educational counseling, and governance.

I know that MIT Hillel started their "Leading Jewish Minds @ Home" virtual faculty talk series in early April with [a presentation](#) on mental health and resilience by MIT Professor Daniel Jackson. I am glad this topic was among the first chosen for this new medium. Talking about these issues reduces stigma and judgment.

Nothing quite brings out judgment more than the issue of suicide. Unsurprisingly, the concept of judgment is pervasive in the Torah, and it is clear from its teachings that the responsibility of a judge, and exercising judgment, comes from and belongs to God. (Deut. 1:17) In the mortal realm, there is some minor allowance for judgment, but it is relegated to humans of high standing, at the level of Kings, and only once they have been anointed to the position, not a moment before. Clearly the Bible is on to something, and who among us does not know the famous expression, "Judge not, lest ye be judged," a particularly important wisdom from, albeit, the Christian Scriptures, it is also similar to Rabbi Hillel's dictum, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow."

Judgment is such a broad term, but the portion of it that resonates most with me is tied to the fault of trying to discern what is in another's heart, since we almost always lack several critical pieces of information and even more noteworthy: context. The broader adverse societal impact is the development of systemic prejudices that deter connections between groups, and stigmas that sharply inhibit growth.

Growing up Jewish was my earliest introduction to prejudice, but it was only until my son took his own life that I came to realize how society can also use stigma as an altogether different but equally effective battering ram to the human spirit.

I am not lacking in understanding that when society sees something as incomprehensible as the loss of a child by suicide, there is a natural curiosity to wonder what was going on between parent and child behind closed doors. In my path through grief and into healing from the loss, I have yet to come in contact with any surviving parent who didn't leave behind them a trail of tears, which represents love, for those lost from this tragic path to end of life.

The simple desire for “benign” judgmental closure by those outside the suicidal loop is by its very nature unconstructive and harmful.

In truth, my relationship with my son was perhaps the best I’ve had with anyone, sharing in unusual activities as rock climbing and scuba diving, and the bonding between men as my son began to explore the novel social interactions that accompany the “coming of age”.

That’s the context, but even in the best of connections, the shame and stigma of mental illness and in many suicide cases, drug and/or alcohol addiction and other adverse life events often results in a suicidal mystery, where the tragic end of life surprises everyone on the relationship pyramid, from the closest best friends, to siblings and lastly to parents and perhaps others.

The conventional wisdom, espoused by wonderful organizations such as the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, is to bring suicide out of the darkness and into the light. The inhibitions to communications created by societal stigmas tied to mental illness, death by suicide, and survivors of this excruciating loss do nothing to help solve this terrible scourge. We can and must do better.

I feel blessed that my genetic make-up, and perhaps the resiliency learned from my amazing MIT educational experience, have allowed me to stand tall in efforts to raise awareness. As we diminish stigma, we expand the capacity for those in deep distress to reach out for readily available assistance, thereby helping to save lives.

As for me and those left behind to pick up the broken pieces, our quality of life would also improve if you gave us the benefit of the doubt, leaving the judgment of all things in God’s more than capable hands.

Resources are readily available if you yourself are having issues from the challenging times we are living in. Please reach out to the asfp.org for vital assistance.

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MIT Hillel's 2020 Annual Fund

Add to Jewish life @ MIT!



To Our Current and Future Supporters,

There is a LOT of counting going on these days...

I write this a few days before Shavuot, while we are nearing the end of counting the omer, a seven-week period that started on the second day of Passover when our ancestors left Egypt and leads us to the commemoration of when they / we received the Torah at Sinai.

Commercials on TV encourage people to answer the US Census, explaining that being counted helps direct funds for schools, roads, and services to your state.

News coverage about the pandemic has a heavy emphasis on counting – how many new and total cases, how many new and total deaths, how many tests administered, and how many of those return positive for the virus or for showing antibodies.

Counting is harder than it looks. Defining what to count and how to count it can impact policy making and people’s lives. Accuracy can be difficult to achieve - capturing everything you want to count and excluding things that don’t fit the criteria pose different challenges. In the Jewish world, sometimes we endeavor to count without actually counting out the numbers.

I recently heard someone say that whoever does the counting has power. The examples above provide differing degrees of empowerment. The Covid counts leave us feeling powerless – we are passive, and probably not counted unless we fall victim in some way. The omer gives us some agency – after all, the days do not count themselves, although they will pass and we will move through time regardless of whether any one of us performs this mitzvah. But the census, that count requires our active and collective role, and even rewards us for it. When we see ourselves as taking part in being counted, it can inspire us to do or to think or to be different.

In the Book of Numbers, which we are currently reading in the annual Torah cycle, the census is for people to identify by name and by group as a contributor to the project of the nascent Jewish people. This biblical census was originally to assess military might by counting males age 20 years old and up. We learn that counting can be dangerous – too high a count might make us overconfident of our strength, whereas too low might make us fearful to assert what strength we do have. The very act of counting is a sort of feedback system that leads us to alter our behavior, thereby affecting future counts.

As a community, we want strength in numbers, and at the same time no one of us should be reduced to a mere number, the reason many traditional minyanim assess if they have a quorum of ten by pseudo-counting “not one, not two, not three....”

In my role at MIT Hillel, I see parallels to development. Our strength comes from our numbers – how many donors and how many dollars? As a donor, are you motivated to support your organizations over years to ensure long-strength, or motivated more by crises and interested in providing one-time gifts where most needed right now? Perhaps the better question is how do you allocate between those options? Do you prefer to be a named donor, counted publicly, or anonymous, where you know you were counted but others don't? In times of crisis and heightened needs, do you tend toward pessimism with lower giving, or toward optimism with continued or even increased response, impacting the dollar count? Do we adequately communicate our gratitude for how you contributed to our numbers?

As June 30 approaches, the end of the fiscal year for many non-profits, I encourage you – and ask you - to take the empowering census role and act to be counted. Make your gift(s) at the variety of organizations you care about, at our campus home of MIT, and of course at MIT Hillel.

For all you do, let me close this year with a final THANK YOU!

Marla Choslovsky SM'88 (XV)
MIT Hillel Director of Development
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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!

If you are planning to make a gift by check or via a donor-advised fund by June 30, [please let us know!](#) The slowed mail and gift processing during the shutdown means that gifts sent in late June might not get credited in the current fiscal year. Alerting us enables us to work with MIT's Recording Secretary to make sure your gift is *counted* this year. Gifts made electronically should have no problem.

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!

This month's "From the Archives" is a picture of the Mitzvah Pledge from 1982!

Some mitzvot on this board include giving up smoking, increasing your gift to charity, putting up a mezzuzah, and giving up cheeseburgers. All of these mitzvot are things that we can all aim to accomplish today!



On the Calendar

Leading Jewish Minds @ Home!

Click [here](#) to access the recordings from Professor Daniel Jackson's talk on "Portraits of Resilience", as well as Professor Ezra Zuckerman Sivan's talk on "Inventing The Seven-Day Week: Millennia-old Lessons for our Self-Quarantine World."

Mazal Tov!

- Mazal tov to Alan Deckelbaum '09 PhD'14 and Beth Zweig on the birth of their son David on March 2, 2020
- Mazal tov to Talia Khan '20 on receiving a Fulbright Scholarship

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

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