I'm Josh Weisman, a fourth-year rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Newton, and over the past academic year I've had the privilege of being MIT Hillel's part-time Rabbinic Intern for graduate students. MIT Hillel is fairly unique in having a serious focus on facilitating Jewish life for graduate students. Maybe it's because whereas most grad students elsewhere spend their days reading and writing in cafes, libraries, and their own apartments, MIT grad students are usually on campus, in their labs for long hours. When they have time for a break to do something Jewish, it needs to be close at hand and provide an opportunity to meet other Jews they otherwise just pass in the halls. There has long been an MIT Grad Hillel Board made up of students who plan a great series of social and holiday activities – from monthly grad student Shabbat dinners, to a Sukkah Soiree, to Shabbat on Ice. This year, MIT Hillel decided to add me as a part-time staff person to help the Grad Board reach more people and provide Jewish content targeted at a graduate student audience. I've advised a Grad Board made up of entirely new members which – largely on their own initiative – has not only rebuilt the previous Board's admirable slate of programs, but has added its own innovations.

Throughout the year, the core of my work has been having coffee and lunch with Jewish grad students, getting to know them and where they are on their Jewish path, and trying to figure out with them what their next steps could be. Then, I take what I've learned, collate it, and try to create the kind of experiences that will help as many students as possible take the next steps that are right for them. Over the course of the year, that has taken a few forms. First, I found that about a third of the students I met with wanted to do some kind of Jewish learning, but had no idea what they wanted to learn about. With them, I started a monthly learning group where we discuss the classical rabbinic texts on the subject of learning itself! My goal has been to both introduce them to texts that demonstrate the rabbis’ passion for the creative and innovative generation and transmission of knowledge, and to model the kind of questioning and lively discussion that has characterized Jewish learning since the days of the Talmud. I’ve been amazed and gratified by how many fresh insights and unexpected interpretations the students have offered of these classical texts – now I understand what R. Chaninah meant when he said that he had learned from his students most of all! (Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 7a)

Second, I found that most of the students I meet with are facing some kind of stress. In response, I created a mini-retreat and a couple of workshops where I introduced them to Jewish contemplative practices that have helped me and others manage stress. This brought in both some Grad Hillel regulars and more than a few students I had never seen before – secular Israelis, spiritual-but-not-religious students, past Birthright participants who are proud to be Jewish but don’t consider themselves religious. After all, who doesn’t deal with stress, especially as a student, and especially at MIT?

Most recently, I began to find some students who were raised with almost no Jewish community or practice, yet feel a desire to learn about Judaism. For them, prior attempts at joining Jewish community or engaging in Jewish learning had been hampered by a feeling of not knowing what page they were on – literally and figuratively – or having no idea what people were talking about. So I began a small learning group every other week to orient them to the basic concepts and sign-posts of Jewish life, thought, and practice in a way that is intellectually mature while presuming no prior knowledge. Having come from a secular family myself and largely finding my own way to Jewish learning and community (albeit earlier than them), I relish this opportunity to equip them with the fundamental vocabulary and sense of direction they need to start to navigate the rich Jewish landscape on their own as adults.

My year at MIT Hillel winds down at the end of the month, and I am sad that my internship ends so soon – students
here are endlessly fascinating and I feel like we’ve just begun to develop the variety of programs that would speak to the passions of this hugely diverse grad student body. (Fortunately, my friend and colleague Daniel Schaefer will pick up where I left off next Fall.) Most of all, though, I’m grateful to have learned so much by working with such a talented Hillel staff, and to have learned so much from my students!

Reb Josh Weisman
Rabbinic Intern
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Torah from Tech

Our Torah this month is taught by Isaac Silberberg ’16 (XIV, XVII). After graduating, he served as a policy advisor and field organizer on a congressional campaign. If you can’t find him, chances are he’s skiing, cycling, or SCUBA diving. He can be reached at isaacsilberberg@alum.mit.edu

Nobody wants to write a d’var Torah on skin disease. After much reading and re-reading of last week’s Tazria portion, my main takeaway was a note to self: if Rabbi Fisher asks for a future d’var, check the source material before accepting. For those of you who would like to be spared the reading, the Torah painstakingly describes the process through which a kohein, or priest, diagnosed and certified that person had the skin disease tzarat, commonly translated as leprosy. My experience is in campaigns and policy; neither ancient nor modern medicine is my forte. In politics we would call accepting this task bad advance, the equivalent of walking into a vegetarian convention while eating a hamburger.

While kvetching with a friend about my dilemma, he led me to what appeared to be a technicality. It seemed that a kohein always had the final say on whether someone had tzarat or not. A kohein might be mentally unstable or particularly poor at diagnosing skin diseases, but they were still responsible for doing so. Some research revealed there was already commentary on just this subject. The Sifra (a midrash, or commentary) on Tazria says that even a kohein who is shothah (insane) can proclaim that someone has tzarat. Such a proclamation would be made by consulting with a non-kohein to determine if the blemish was tzarat, but the kohein was needed to actually declare the person infected and impure. In fact, such aides were utilized by kohanim who were neither mentally ill nor incapacitated, but simply unfamiliar with the finer nuances of skin disease.

Why is this of interest? I work in politics and government, where people are tasked with making decisions on subjects they may have little expertise in every day (jokes about the sanity of politicians has been left as an exercise for the reader). Regardless of our field, we need to be prepared for the unpredictable and the inconvenient in our lives. Someone elected for their ability to jumpstart the economy may find themselves faced with international crises or tasked with responding to military threats. In order to make decisions and be forces for good in their communities, our leaders must listen to experts to address the problems our society faces, just as kohanim consulted with experts to diagnose skin disease. Likewise, all the experts in the world will fail to achieve the desired result if they cannot work in conjunction with the decision maker.

Despite our most fastidious planning and cautious action, we live in a volatile world in which nobody has all the answers. Today, we see an erosion and vilification of expertise that I find both disheartening and dangerous. At MIT, I learned very quickly that there was no shame in asking for help, but I fear that our society is losing the ability to seek, listen to, and maintain a conversation with experts. As we progress in our lives, I can only hope that we can make the world a little bit more like MIT: ambitious enough to improve the world but humble enough to ask questions and seek guidance. After all, the kohanim relied on experts for tasks as routine as identifying skin disease.

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

To our current and future supporters,

Gone are the days when all I needed to do to drop a few pounds was to skip lunch for a few days. Whereas I used to be able to do pretty well and even leverage occasional good habits, over the years I’ve learned that I can only achieve and maintain my healthiest self only when I maintain consistently good habits over the long run. Suffice to say, it’s a rare day when I feel I’m at my healthiest!

So, too, for organizations. MIT Hillel is blessed with an unbelievably loyal donor base. I’ve written before that 25% of our supporters have been with us as far back as our records go (1990). In this regard we are exceptional on campus, such that recently the Alumni Association reached out to me to learn what exactly we do to keep our community close. Of course, we benefit from thousands of years of culture and community building!

At the same time, our donor base includes many occasional supporters, people who give to us every few years, perhaps rotating their gifts among their campus or other philanthropic interests. That same figure, about 25% per year, represents our donors who gave last year but not this (and often next). Simply renewing your annual gift adds a consistency to our base that improves our budgeting and enables our growth.

Our spring mail appeal will arrive in your mailbox (or email inbox) soon, and I ask you to help us achieve a balanced budget / good health – it’s looking like a close call this year. Every year I think that this year’s letter couldn’t possibly be as good as last year’s, and every year I am proven wrong. The personal narratives of this year’s two graduating seniors makes me especially proud to support the work of MIT Hillel on campus, and I hope you will be equally inspired by them.

As always, thank you!

NOTES

Reunion Year classes: MIT Hillel hosts a reception on commencement / reunion weekend. If you’ll be on campus, please do stop by W11 on the afternoon of Friday, June 9. And, please RSVP more formally to the Hillel office if you plan to join us for Shabbat dinner that night. In the past we’ve been told that reception details are hard to find in the group of friends for a Seder funded by Hillel. It was delicious and made me feel like I was back at home, having a Seder with my family. This semester I also joined one of Rabbi Goldfeder’s discussion groups on love in Judaism. I love interpreting Jewish text in a modern context and being able to discuss it with my peers while eating lots of pizza.

MIT is a crazy and stressful place but Hillel makes it feel like a fun and loving family. It is always nice knowing that no matter what, I can come to Shabbat dinners, join one of Rabbi’s G classes, or just hang out in the Hillel building. Hillel has made it so much easier to deal with MIT and I know it will keep doing so for the next two years.

Thank you for supporting MIT Hillel!

Your generous support allows us to help keep Jewish life vibrant on the MIT campus!
schedule, so please take note now.

Class of 1999 - 2005: our Passover cleaning unearthed a box of MIT Techiya CD’s. We have two dozen copies of the a cappella group’s 2002 “Half-Life” recording – please let us know if you’d like to have one. We will mail to you now and we’ll have leftovers out at the reunion reception. The cover art, of a shofar, makes it a true “blast from the past.”

L'Shalom,
Marla Choslovsky SM ’88,
MIT Hillel Director of Development
marla360@mit.edu

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 (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

- May 12 – Daniel Jackson, CSAIL Professor
- June 9 – Tech Reunion Reception and Shabbat Dinner

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