



*Rabbi Michelle Fisher SM'97 began as the new Executive Director of MIT Hillel this past July. She earned her Masters in Chemistry from MIT in 1997, then switched gears to attend the Jewish Theological Seminary in NYC. After her ordination in 2002, she served for seven years as a pulpit rabbi, before finding her way back to MIT and to Hillel. To welcome back Rabbi Fisher, we sat her down for an interview, and asked her to share her journey to and vision for MIT Hillel.*

Hillel: You probably get asked this question pretty often. Chemist to rabbi? What were the factors in that improbable career shift?

Rabbi Fisher: “Improbable”? Doesn’t everyone go directly from MIT into the rabbinate? [Laughter.] The shortest version is that I realized while in graduate school that even if I stumbled upon the next cure for cancer, I would never know the people whose lives I had changed.

Hillel: And the longer answer?

Rabbi Fisher: It actually started the spring of my freshman year at Princeton when my Assistant Hillel Director suggested that I'd make a great rabbi. I laughed – a lot – and then told her all the reasons I shouldn't go that route, how and why I was a scientist. She never mentioned it again. But apparently she planted a seed. As I was applying to grad schools three years later, the thought "what about JTS?" popped into my head; sure I had been gabbai [coordinator] of the Conservative minyan for 4 years and Hillel president, but the idea still took me by surprise.

Hillel: Yet, you didn't apply to the Seminary then. You still applied to MIT...

Rabbi Fisher: Yes. I deferred MIT for a year, and studied at Pardes [Institute, a co-ed yeshiva in Jerusalem], where I told everyone my goal was to decide whether to pursue chem or the rabbinate. After realizing that every rabbi we studied, until the modern period, was a rabbi and a farmer, a merchant, a doctor, etc, I decided, “So I won't have the title ‘rabbi,’ but I will be a very educated lay leader and will make my mark through chemistry.”

Hillel: Okay, so what happened when you got here? MIT isn't necessarily known as a feeder school for seminaries.

Rabbi Fisher: In grad school at MIT, I was missing the Jewish learning and teaching I had done in Jerusalem, and had the nagging thought I mentioned before about directly connecting with people. When I finally made the decision at the beginning of my second year, my lab mates begged me not to tell my advisor until after Oral Exams. I took their advice, and after learning I had passed my Orals, I waited 24 hours and sheepishly told him I was going to take

my Masters so I could go to rabbinical school. I will never forget the look on his face as he responded, "You just said rabbinical school, right, not medical school? I'm really not sure what to do with that." [Laughter.]

Hillel: Do you find any parallels between your chemistry studies and Jewish studies? Do you use your chemistry at all?

Rabbi Fisher: Talmud study is very much like natural product synthesis: you have some compound in nature (some large Talmudic *sugya*/passage) that you break down into component parts (Talmudic arguments) and then rebuild into a drug (or a meaning for life). I think the similar thinking patterns is why I love Talmud study so much.

I also found that being a scientist opened a lot of doors when I was a congregational rabbi -- people wanted to discuss science and religion. One of my proudest moments was when a parent called me up to...

Hillel: [Interrupting politely, and with a big smile] Briefly, what was your post-JTS work like?

Rabbi Fisher: I had wanted to enter Hillel work after JTS, but the campus opportunities that year were not the right match. So, instead I looked at congregational work, and took a position at Har Shalom in Potomac, MD as their associate rabbi. I was there for 5 years, then took on my own pulpit, Congregation B'nai Shalom in Walnut Creek, CA. Seeking to return East, I was looking for a pulpit when I learned of the MIT Hillel position, and it sounded too good to be true. Getting to do the campus work I had originally sought, and at my own alma mater!

Hillel: What are your dreams for MIT Hillel?

Rabbi Fisher: My goal is to have Hillel touch every Jewish student on campus. My staff and I are regularly out eating ice cream and drinking coffee -- I've finally learned to appreciate decaf -- and having conversations with students about who they are and the activities that energize them, the dreams that animate them.

The next step is to share Jewish components that speak to those interests --robotics, gaming, biking, Israel, music, you name it -- and to facilitate networks and micro-communities of Jewish students, faculty, and staff in those pursuits.

I want every Jew connected to MIT to know that Judaism can be a deep and powerful guide in their lives and life choices. That the work they will do or will go on to do -- in the sciences, business world, politics -- can be filtered through a Jewish lens to better this world. It's not about "doing Jewish" at specific times, but living, thinking, and creating "Jewishly" at all times.

Hillel: What are the biggest challenges?

Rabbi Fisher: There is so much opportunity here! It can be overwhelming: where to start? And as we all know, MIT is an intense place. Finding the ways that MIT students and faculty will want to connect, network, and spend their time -- Jewishly -- is a fun challenge; it's why I became a rabbi, and why I took this job. To be able to show people that our thousands of years old tradition has something meaningful to say about their lives and the world. That Judaism is relevant and necessary to their work and interests.

Hillel: What role do alumni/ae have at MIT Hillel?

Rabbi Fisher: A different challenge I'm embracing is trying to reach out to alumni -- bring them back into MIT Hillel. It is something we haven't really attempted before. There's lots of opportunity out there to bring together new and more experienced alumni for mentorship and community. I'm seeking to find avenues for all those connections.

Hillel: Overall, how are you feeling being back at MIT?

Rabbi Fisher: I truly believe it is the mothership having called me home. It feels *b'sheret* [destined] that I should be returning here with the energy and excitement and scientific and personal questing that occurs throughout these corridors. It's great to be back.

