Hillel Honors Student Leaders

The “Hit the Ground Running” award honors a first year student who has jumped into Hillel with enthusiasm, devoting their time and energy to improving Hillel immediately. This year’s award went to Phoenix freshman Zach Schawelson.

There are few higher Jewish compliments to pay someone than to call them a mensch. A mensch is a person who can be relied on to act with honor and integrity. But the Yiddish term means more than that: it also suggests someone who is kind and considerate. The “Mensch” award honors someone who has proven themselves to be a mensch through their words and actions which this year went to freshman Elijah Greenfield.

Hineni means “Here I Am.” This award is given to someone who shows up for Hillel and who, whenever we ask for student volunteers, steps up. We recognize a student who is always looking to take on new roles within Hillel, and this year’s Hineni award went to junior and Hillel board member Lisa Friedman.

The Ben Gurion Award is to recognize those who support, advocate and educate about Israel. We are recognizing a student who during their time at the UA combined leadership, motivation and professionalism within the pro-Israel community. This is even more impressive considering that they have not yet traveled to Israel. This year’s awardee is Addie Lavis, the chair of Catpac and a member of the Israel team.
Dear Friends, Students, and Partners:

Looking back on the 2019-20 year, we remember fondly the traditions we enjoyed in person – Israelpalooza, Challah Bake and Takes, Shabbat services and dinners, High Holidays, Tu B’shvat plantings, and other social events. We recognize new forms of engagement that grew out of the coronavirus crisis that closed the UA and shut down our world. Utilizing Zoom and Facebook Live, we broadcast: the 29th Annual Holocaust Vigil, Shabbat services, hangouts, Israel Learning Fellowship, Hillel@Home programs, and more.

We strive to maintain the unique chutzpah that makes Hillel special while adapting to new student needs and leadership. With your support, hundreds of Jewish students at the University of Arizona joined us for High Holidays and Passover, baked challah, learned about Jewish traditions, advocated for Israel, and made lifelong friends.

Please join us in celebrating this year’s College Youth Award recipient, Maya Griswold. Maya became involved with Shabbat programming almost as soon as she arrived at the UA, including leading services for two years. Her welcoming way of being warmed hearts and brought joy to our activities. The most meaningful program which Maya has chaired for three years is the multi-cultural Shabbat. Even this year, when we had to be online, she presented a lovely and welcoming Facebook experience. We wish her well in graduate school and we are excited that she will soon be engaging with her new community at the Kansas Hillel.

We want to ensure that every Jewish student at the UA who wants to explore his or her Jewish journey feels supported, welcomed, and challenged to grow into the involved and informed Jewish young adults we know they can become. Whether we are in person, on the phone, on Zoom, or on Facebook, we are here for our students. Your support and involvement make all this possible. We are grateful for and thank you for your generous support throughout the year.

L’shalom,

Thomas Sayler-Brown
Board Chair

Michelle Blumenberg
Executive Director
Pre-Covid Life at Hillel

Fall at Hillel began with lots of energy and excitement, as well as two new staff members, Assistant Director Abbii Cook and Israel Fellow Nirit Gelfer. Our student leaders have a passion for tikkun olam, healing and repairing of the world. This led to the creation of Hillel Helps, which is the umbrella for all the community service opportunities we offer students. This year’s events included cleaning the grounds of Mansfeld Middle School with the UA softball team, packing meals at the community-wide interfaith Pack-a-Thon (where we helped pack 50,000 meals), volunteering at the Z Mansion Soup Kitchen, and participating in the Midbar project (local Jewish community farm).

This past October, Hillel held our annual Israelpalooza with over 200 students, faculty, and staff in attendance. Our pro-Israel groups, including Catpac, Wildcats for Israel, ZOA, JNF, Christians United for Israel, and Mishelanu, planned and implemented the Mall event with Nirit. In addition, Nirit hosted the Israel Learning Fellowship for about 20 students over the course of the year, all of whom not only learned more about Israel but they also implemented a program for other students about a topic of interest to them.

Coke Shabbat was a partnership between our Hillel and Coca Cola. The UA Coke Brand Ambassador, Brennen Feder, worked closely with our student leaders to prepare this outside the box Shabbat experience. The night began with a Coke Happy Hour where students could sample new Coke flavors while enjoying a spirited song session. Following services, we raffled off awesome Coke branded prizes during dinner.
Post-Covid Life at Hillel

As with the world, we were faced with the question of how to engage students once the UA campus closed due to the coronavirus. Immediately we began to evaluate every program on our calendar and determined which ones we could offer virtually. Hillel has presented almost 30 online programs since mid-March, with twelve of them led by student leaders. They have led cooking sessions, a painting party, a Health Relationship Workshop, weekly Hillel Hang Outs, community service opportunities, and community Shabbat experiences.

The first pivot we had to make was for our 29th Annual Holocaust Vigil. Traditionally this is an event that takes place on the UA Mall for 24 hours when hundreds of students take part in the reading of names of Holocaust victims and experience the museum pods. The Vigil took place on March 25, slightly over a week after the campus was shut down. Co-chairs Sam Felderman and Zach Schawelson immediately began planning for the virtual event. The vigil moved from a 24 hour event to six hours, with readers logging into Zoom and broadcasting on Facebook Live. The video is still available on Facebook and has had 944 views.

The Capitol Steps

PC (pre-covid), Hillel hosted Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi and RBG, all of whom graced the Fox Tucson stage for the annual benefit. The Capitol Steps performed to an almost sold-out audience and entertained with a hilarious and irreverent satirical program which was much needed in this polarizing days. Thanks to all who participated and supported Hillel!
“Through my involvement in Hillel, I have had endless opportunities to further develop my leadership skills and make a difference on campus. I am so thankful to be able to call Hillel my home away from home.”
- Berkley Selvin ’21

“This would have been my third year going to Passover Seder at Hillel. Unfortunately, we are going through really tough times right now, with the COVID-19 global pandemic, and a seder was not feasible this year. When Hillel found out that my brother and I were going to be staying in Tucson for the rest of the semester, the staff immediately offered to help us in any way they could. Thanks to the generous support of Hillel staff, donors, and alumni, my brother and I were able to receive a Passover meal and have our own seder. It is in trying times that I am most proud to be Jewish and a Wildcat.”
- Kaylah Scharf ’21

“Hillel has helped me grow professionally by providing me opportunities to be a leader. This has come in many different forms, from preparing and leading a Passover seder to working directly with Michelle to plan and implement Shabbat services, including the service itself and all the other moving parts such as welcoming everyone and dinner. Most of all, Hillel has taught me how to work in a professional environment.”
- Maya Griswold ’20

“Whether it was giving a drash after Shabbat services, making announcements, or leading a Passover seder, I learned to speak up about the things I care about most. Through my involvement with Hillel, peer leadership has become an invaluable skill I use almost daily. I am so thankful to have spent 4 years being involved in Hillel, and I know the lessons it has taught me will remain with me throughout my professional career.”
- Michaela Davenport ’20

“Hillel is the strongest community I have found at the UA. It is also the most open and welcoming community.”
- Jordy Brooks, ’22

“Hillel is like my home at college. It’s given me a place to study, relax, talk, and even nap! Hillel and all of its programs have helped the transition from home to college be much smoother. I’ve made so many new friends at Hillel, and I love that I can reach out to anyone at Hillel for help with my life.”
- Zachary “Schwally” Schawelson ’23
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Foster relationships

Cultivate Jewish learning

Promote religious pluralism

with one’s self, Judaism, and Israel, among other Jews and within the broader community.