To all of our Supporters,

I would like to welcome you all to our inaugural newsletter. Our Hillel is dependent on the support of students, their parents, and our local Beth Israel community. I strongly believe that our Hillel embodies the phrase, “Small and Mighty.” Friday night Shabbat meals have had fantastic attendance, a product of the home-style cooking of our members. Although Shabbat dinners are our main event, we have been more active than ever this year: we had at least 10 members participate in High Holiday services at Beth Israel, we celebrated Sukkot under our very own Sukkah, we lit Hannukah Candles all eight nights, had a potluck Tu B’shevat Seder with Beth Israel, and Purim was a festive success. Apart from our holiday activities, we’ve begun Hillel wide discussions concerning Israel and we continue to engage those in need of our help through Mitzvah days. I know that I have found a second home in our Hillel, a sentiment that I wish to spread this coming semester.

Sincerely,

Ben Zurkow ‘15
Social Chair
Rabbi Isaacs’ Corner

A little over two months ago, a member of Beth Israel Congregation needed a minyan (prayer quorum) to say kaddish for her father. Since the congregation is so small, we often worry about fulfilling this basic requirement. However, none of us had to worry this particular Shabbat. Thirty minutes before the end of the service, we all heard the footsteps of Colby students walking down the ramp of the synagogue social hall to complete the minyan. They had left Shabbat dinner at Colby early to comfort one of our mourners, and to elevate the spirits of our small congregation. When I heard them walking toward the community, my heart was filled with deep joy, gratitude, and pride. These students had stepped up as Jewish adults, fulfilling their obligations to the Jewish people.

Whether it is the Colby student who is tutoring a local Jewish boy for his bar mitzvah, the seven students who read Torah and Haftarah for the High Holidays, the board inviting Waterville teens up to their weekly Shabbat dinners, or the entire organization raising hundreds of dollars for the local homeless shelter, the students of Colby College Hillel time and again have exhibited their deep commitment to the Jewish people and fulfilling their promise. At Colby Hillel, we are not only nourishing the souls of Jewish students on campus, but also ushering students toward maturity and Jewish adulthood. It is my deep pleasure and honor to teach, support, and encourage Colby students as they explore their heritage, and heed the call of our prophets to live sanctified lives.

B’vraham (With blessings),
Rabbi Rachel Isaacs

Birthright Reflections
By Cole Yaverbaum

The most significant thing I did while in Israel was spend five of my days with eight Israeli soldiers: four men and four women. For half of our trip, we did everything with these soldiers: sit on the bus, eat meals, share hotel rooms, and overall experience Israel together. I think this part of the trip affected me the most profoundly because these people represented, so purely and honestly, what Israel is like.

The most tragic part, for me, was the realization that so many countries view Israel as a hostile, turbulent, belligerent nation. But if the eight soldiers I got to know and love in such a brief time in Israel accurately represent the older population of Israel (which makes sense as every young adult is required to serve), then how could that be? I left Israel feeling like I was leaving a place over brimming with such genuinely good-hearted, peace-seeking people.
Alumni Reflections
Hannah Shapiro ’12

While interning with WWF in India, I have been lucky to get to spend some time with the Jewish community of the Mumbai area. There is a thriving Jewish population of about 5000 Jews currently living in India. Ralphy, the President of the Tiphereth Israel Synagogue, and my ambassador to the Jewish community, traces his family’s residence in India back to the 15th century. I visited four synagogues in Mumbai, and a synagogue in a rural village called Alibag. It was a pretty incredible experience meeting the Hazzan of the Alibag synagogue, and realizing that there are Jews still living completely rural village lifestyles. Before entering this synagogue, I had to remove my shoes—a sign of how Hindu traditions have influenced Judaism in India. I was also able to attend a Jewish Indian wedding while in Mumbai, and that was a blast! Before the wedding, there was a Mehindi ceremony. In this event co-opted from Hinduism, the bride and groom have separate ceremonies where their ring fingers are decorated with henna. At the wedding ceremony, the bride received a necklace with the Jewish emblem of the groom’s family, and their rings were placed in a glass of wine to be blessed. The party had about 1200 guests, all of whom joined together for the largest Hora I have ever participated in. Just like Colby Hillel and Beth Israel, the Jewish community here is warm, welcoming, and eager to help newcomers and visitors feel at home with the familiarity of shared traditions. Only difference is the Shabbat potluck is a bit spicier here, though no less delicious.

Shtick and Sympathy
Andrew Fabricant ’13

This JanPlan, I took Rabbi Isaacs’ course Shtick and Sympathy: Jewish Humor from Bible to Present. Each class we explored the various religious and historical roots of so-called ‘Jewish humor’, as popularized in mainstream American and Israeli media by contemporary Jewish comics such as Woody Allen, Joan Rivers, Jerry Seinfeld, and Sarah Silverman. From the Book of Esther and the anecdotes of Sholom Aleichem, to the monologues of Philip Roth and the escapades of Larry David in Curb Your Enthusiasm, we followed the transition of ‘Jewish humor’ as a coping mechanism for religious and socioeconomic oppression to a means of satirizing tensions between religious and secular Jews and non-Jews. Needless to say, it was a riot. Not only did Rabbi Isaacs make JanPlan class hilarious, but intellectually engaging as well. Through discussions inside and outside of class, as well as our own performances, we discovered new ways to experience and enjoy Jewish humor, as it exists in its various forms. Not a bad way to spend my last January at Colby College!
Hi everyone! My name is Solon Arguello, and I am one of the two presidents of Colby College Hillel. I am originally from Miami, FL, and am a Government major with a minor in Jewish Studies. Our Hillel has grown exponentially since my freshman year. Thinking back, I remember the feelings of comfort, and belonging that I experienced at my first Shabbat dinner with my Jewish, and non-Jewish peers. We have been able to replicate that every week, as Hillel has become the most active religious group on campus, gathering students for everything from Saturday morning services, to intimate talks on Israel, to discussions on the place of Jewish life on our campus. Hillel has grown, and will continue to grow. Student participation is strong because we seek to continue the already established connections students have with the Jewish people. We are only a stepping-stone for present, and future participation ranging from the US, Israel, and everywhere in between.

We at the Colby Hillel are continually looking for new ways to reach out to new members and connect with existing members. We hope that you have enjoyed this glance into our Jewish life at Colby College. All comments on this newsletter can be directed to Ben Zurkow at bezurkow@colby.edu. We welcome your opinions as a way for us to improve our communication with you in the future. If you would like to support our Hillel, please contact Rabbi Isaacs at risaacs@colby.edu. Thanks for reading!