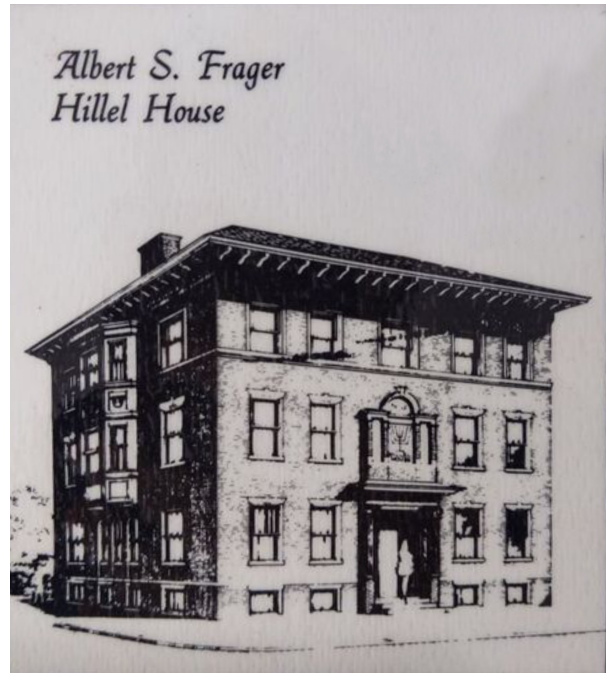


## The History of Northeastern University's Hillel

Northeastern University Hillel (originally known as The Bnai Brith Hillel Counselorship of Northeastern University) was founded in 1962 in Boston, Massachusetts, sanctioned by Hillel International.

In 1978, Hillel moved into a newly renovated building at 456 Parker Street, with a greater focus on Jewish religious and ritual life.

In 2001, Northeastern Hillel moved into its current location—the Albert S. Frager Building, located at 70 Saint Stephen Street. Today it serves a Jewish population of about 1000-1200 students at Northeastern University as well as students at surrounding universities.



Northeastern University Hillel engages Jewish students where they are —spiritually and geographically— creating meaningful Jewish experiences within their existing networks, helping to pave the way to expand and enhance their Jewish journeys.

### 1961-1970

In October 1961, a small group of Jewish Northeastern Alumni was brought together by Mr. Julius Abrams to discuss the possibility and feasibility of sponsoring a Hillel that could be an integral part of the students' lives.

With the guidance and insight of Rabbi Maurice Zigmond, Harvard University Hillel Adviser, and New England Regional Hillel Adviser, the alumni agreed to undertake securing a counselorship to establish Hillel at Northeastern University.

A Hillel Advisory Committee was elected with Mr. Milton Cail being named Chairman, Mr. Morris Silverman as Treasurer, and Mr. Nathan Tucker as Secretary. Rabbi Charles Kroloff, Assistant Rabbi at Temple Israel, expressed his willingness to accept the position of part-time religious adviser to Hillel, and Professor Borah Kreimer of the Graphic Science Department, became the first faculty adviser.

National Hillel Commission recognized the counselorship and formation of Hillel at Northeastern University was on its way.

On March 28th, 1962 in Northeastern's Alumni Auditorium, over 500 people were present in response to invitations mailed to the parents of Jewish students and invited guests for Hillel's official dedication. Mr. Milton Cail was Chairman of the Dedication. Dr. Charles Havice, Northeastern's Dean of Chapel, Rabbi Maurice Zigmund, and Rabbi Charles Kroloff all participated in the ceremonies.

Dr. Asa S. Knowles, the then President of Northeastern University, conveyed the greetings of the University. Dr. Knowles recognized that religion plays an integral part in the academic and intellectual growth of the students, and he was one of the most forceful proponents of the right of students to have religious organizations on campus. Dr. Abram Sachar, President of Brandeis University and Honorary Chairman of B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, was the main speaker of the evening.

During the first year of the counselorship, over 100 students joined Hillel. In September 1962, over 200 students attended the first Hillel Smoker, which indicated to the Advisory Board that Hillel was definitely wanted at Northeastern. In 1964, Rabbi Kroloff resigned as religious adviser and was replaced by Rabbi Harvey Field, also an assistant Rabbi at Temple Israel.

1964 was a very important year for Hillel. Julius Abrams visited Israel that year, and he, at the financial behest of Abraham Poley, Morris Silverman, and Milton Cail purchased a Torah and officially presented it to the Northeastern students, Mr. Abrams dubbed it "our Kosher Torah."

In 1965 Rabbi Norman Mirsky became the religious adviser of Hillel. In the fall of 1967, Rabbi Sanford Seltzer became the religious advisor. In 1968 Rabbi Edward M. Maline became director of NEU Hillel, while also serving as rabbi of Temple Beth Avodah in Newton. Under his guidance, social, civic, and educational programs were instituted, including lectures, films, and other programs. In 1969 the first Yom Kippur services were held at the University Chapel.

In the early 1970s, Nehemia Polen served as the adviser. From 1973-1976 Sharon Strassfeld served as the advisor, spending about five hours a week at Northeastern. Students would go away for weekend Shabbatons, hold bagel brunches, and celebrate some holidays together. Other highlights were a Shlomo Carlebach concert and a class taught by Art Green.

From 1976 to 1983, Rabbi Robert Gelber, a former army chaplain coming from a Lubavitch background, was appointed executive director. Under him, Hillel was able to acquire its first building on Parker St, which included two apartments on the top floor, used at the time by those

who were observant to stay in the area during Yom Tov and Shabbat. Jim Feldman, a faculty advisor at the time, recalled coming up with the idea together with Gelber after by chance meeting each other in the restroom. At the time, Hillel only had a room slightly bigger than a walk-in closet in Ell Hall. At the time, Connie Birnbaum, pictured below, worked there as a secretary. After leaving, she went on to work for the Jewish community, building bridges between different denominations, being a firm believer that "as a community of Jewish people, we have to know each other, respect each other, and love each other." She sadly passed away in 2003.

Philip Fischer, a student president when Hillel first acquired the building, shared that it was a fun spot on campus, frequently used for parties, as well as services and other events. With a limited budget, students had to be very resourceful, even using reeds and grasses at the nearby Muddy River to build a Sucah for the Sukkah.

From 1983-1990 Rabbi Paul Levenson was the executive director. He launched the Jewish Studies program at Northeastern, served as the Jewish chaplain of the university, and also volunteered as the lacrosse team adviser. He went on to be a Rabbi at a synagogue in Easton, Mass.

From 1990-1993, Martin Federman followed in the position. Matthew Schlager, a student leader at the time, shares that at the time there were weekly Shabbat dinners cooked by a student, a variety of programming, and a total staff of three. Due to fundraising difficulties, he was asked to leave by the board. A decade later, Federman joined a radical left organization and even wrote in support of extreme anti-Israel groups. At one point he was arrested for a disruptive protest at an area synagogue.

A few years before passing away, Martin Federman shared on his blog about his time at Hillel and his philosophy: "When I was still part of the Hillel family perhaps the number one reason for pushing students towards the Hillel House [certainly among the parents of Jewish students] was to gain an edge in the fight against inter-marriage. As in most parts of the Jewish community, we focused significantly on getting Jewish students to interact more with other Jews in order to protect them from the temptations of exotic non-Jewish potential mates. Our emphasis was on creating more attractive – and admittedly Jewish – programming. There was, of course, nothing wrong in enticing students to come to the Hillel House on Friday evenings for a good Shabbos dinner and enjoyable program. What we often overlooked, however, was the reality that, as our third and fourth-generation Jews had become more and more successful in assimilating into the "American" culture the historic ties were being broken down. Perhaps the one saving grace was a re-focusing on the historical Jewish commitment to social justice, "Tikkun Olam" if you will."

In 1994, Sam Mendales executive director of Hillel Councils of New England asked Anne Meiowitz if she would leave Harvard Hillel, and take on this position. She immediately set out to rent the top floors to students, brought back Shabbat dinners, which she cooked together with

students, rebuilt the previously neglected relationships with donors, and launched a Judaism 101 course. Anne continued as director through 1996.

From August 1996 to June 2010, Beth Meltzer Whitman served as the executive director, overseeing Hillel during a period of rapid growth at Northeastern. In June 1998, a new Torah was dedicated by the Lipman family.

At this time, Hillel received much support from Bernard "Bunny" Solomon, from the class of '46. Beth oversaw the move to the current Saint Stephen Street location in 2001, the 40th-anniversary celebrations in 2003, and lobbying successfully for Kosher dining. At 13 years and 11 months, she is the longest serving Northeastern Hillel director. Beth was known for being hands-on, from cooking Shabbat dinners to playing her guitar, and expanding on interfaith work. Under Beth, Nathan Ciccolo and then Jason Pressberg were the IACTs. Since this time, Birthright Israel recruitment at NU has pretty consistently been the highest per capita in New England, according to CJP's report.

Beth was followed by Rabbi Karen (Byer) Silberman (Reb K) from 2010-2012. She oversaw the first round of renovations of the Hillel house at 70 St. Stephen St., grew Shabbat dinners, and oversaw the dedication of the library. Reb K also served as the Jewish Chaplain for Northeastern University. During this time there was a surge of anti-semitism at Northeastern, which Reb K helped navigate, supporting students and bringing increased awareness to these challenges.

In 2013 Sheldon Goldman became chairman of NU Hillel. From 2012-2017 when Arinne Braverman served as Executive Director of Northeastern Hillel, NU Hillel's budget and students' participation more than quadrupled, the building was renovated and redecorated, a highly-rated first-year orientation for Jewish students and student board leadership training was created, a thriving student peer engagement internship was launched, for-credit Co-op opportunities in Israel were expanded, and students' efforts to defeat BDS on campus were successfully coordinated.

During this period, NU Hillel staff played a leadership role in providing training and consultation for local, national, and international Jewish and pro-Israel organizations. For instance, Arinne served on Hillel International's Director's Cabinet beginning in 2016 and trained new staff at Hillel International's New Directors' Institute for two years. NU Hillel presented their Alternative Spring Break trip in Israel as a model for other campuses at the White House's Interfaith Summit in 2016. NU Hillel was recognized by the Israel Campus Roundtable with the Campus Transformation Award in 2015. NU Hillel's Israel Fellow, Or Elmaliah, was recognized with an Israel Education Award from Hillel International in 2016. Arinne received the Exemplar of

Excellence Award from Hillel International (2014), Torchbearer Award from Synagogue Council (2016), and Israel Educator Award from the Consul General of Israel to New England (2016).

In September of 2017, Gilad Skolnick took on the role of Executive Director. During this time, participation in Birthright trips grew, and the Freshfest orientation program was expanded to be a week long.

In December 2019 NEU Hillel won an Excellence in Breadth Award from Hillel International, for engaging a large number of unique students and expanding the staff to a total of six. Over the past two decades, Hillel has continued to grow and thrive. Recent events covered by various sources:

*Northeastern Hillel aspires to collect the history of Jewish life at Northeastern and to share these stories with you here. If you would like to contribute to our history project, contact us at [director@northeasternhillel.org](mailto:director@northeasternhillel.org)*