

A virus changed virtually everything

Spring semester 2020 began as usual: Students returned from winter break eager to get back to campus, catch up with friends and resume classes. Seniors, in particular, were excited for their final push toward graduation.

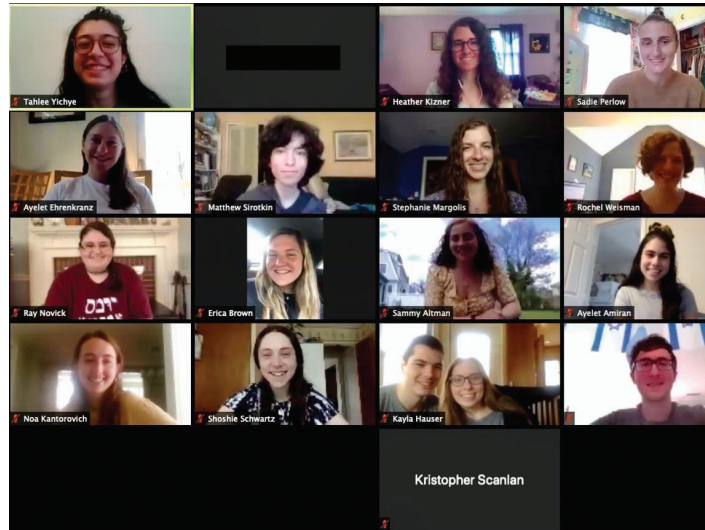
But in the middle of March, everything changed when the coronavirus became a pandemic.

One week we were hosting a boisterous b'nai mitzvah party of more than 100 students, joyfully singing, dancing and eating together. The next, those students were quickly vacating their dorms, fearful of a vast world of uncertainty.

By the first signs of spring, campus completely closed down and our usually bustling Hillel building became empty. It was clear that the virus would change student life in much, much bigger ways than anyone originally thought.

We quickly sent out a survey trying to get a sense of how our community was holding up and how we could support them, and we heard back from more than a hundred students! The short answer was: not well. The longer answer included darker emotions: stressed, anxious, hopeless, unmotivated, restless, and lonely. Of that group, almost 60 percent said that they were worried about their mental health.

Our work connecting students to each other and



“This is not how I expected Senior Ceremony to go,” said Carmela Dobrusin, about how the Coronavirus completely changed the final year at UMass Hillel for the Class of 2020.

to Jewish community and ritual felt more urgent than ever.

The Hillel staff, led by Rabbi Aaron Fine and Rebekah Steinfeld, quickly pivoted to cultivate a vibrant online Jewish community. Under the guidance of the Student Life staff -- Emerson Finkle, Emily Kopka, Ashley Nalven, Israel Fellow Assaf Elroy and our OU-JLIC educators Raffi and Ariella Leicht -- many of our student groups continued to meet virtually and forged ahead planning events they'd been excited about all year remotely. Intensive cohort programs like our Jewish Learning Fellowship continued to provide community virtually.

Our Orthodox student

group Degel continued its regular weekly events, singing niggunim (tunes) on Thursday nights via Zoom and getting ready for Shabbat together over Instagram Live. Co-president Chava Whittum ('22) recalls the energy of those gatherings: “The Instagram Lives were honestly my favorite of the ways we tried to keep connected because people would be commenting throughout the stream and it felt the closest to us all being back together at the Leicht’s house doing our normal thing.”

Mishelanu, our group for Israeli students, adapted by adding some Netflix Party nights to their regular lineup. It wasn't just about the events, though. “With Mishelanu, it felt nice to

have a group of friends to talk to,” said co-president Dvir Blander ('21). “It’s pretty isolating to be remote, and it’s always nice to have a group to talk about serious issues or to send memes to. It definitely felt better than being alone.”

Despite the unusual circumstances and distance, Hillel was still able to engage more than 1,200 students last academic year, either in person or virtually, providing support not only on their Jewish journeys but also simply as caring mentors when it was needed most.

As the school year came to a close, we couldn't miss celebrating the immense achievements of our graduating seniors. Our very first Senior Ceremony on Zoom honored 24 fabulous students as they finished up their time at UMass. The celebration included underclassmen and alumni who all shared heartfelt words of gratitude and congratulations to the seniors. There were laughs, tears, and even a skit and an original song!

In her remarks, senior Carmela Dobrusin ('20) encapsulated the whole strange year in her reaction to the occasion: “This is not how I expected Senior Ceremony to go. But I just want to thank everyone for making us feel like things aren't the way they are, and also for just making a great Jewish home for us at UMass.”