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## Virginia Tech Hillel Update

by Ivan Goncharenko,  
Israel Fellow at Virginia Tech University Hillel

One year ago I arrived for the first time at Virginia Tech from my lovely and sunny Jerusalem.

Before I came as an Israel Fellow, I knew that this was the place I wanted to be. Sue Kurtz, director of Hillel at Virginia Tech, who interviewed me two weeks before I arrived, convinced me through a Skype conversation that "we will create a great Jewish community at VT!" Well, her passion was sweeping and I wanted to be a part of her team. When I arrived, the first place that Sue showed me was the new Hillel building. It was not yet open and it would not be finished for a couple of months.

A month ago I started my second year at VT, and I can say that our Hillel team has done an unbelievable job since the building was opened. We had a great dedication of the building in March. Hundreds of people from different districts of Virginia were invited. It was amazing to see how the Hillel at VT made Jewish people from different areas connected to each other. All of them came here—to Hillel at Virginia Tech. They did so much to help us build up a Jewish student community on campus. In addition, I, as an Israel Fellow, and an Israeli who had never been to the U.S. before arriving to VT, spent the year trying to connect Jewish students to Israel. We went to the AIPAC conference and celebrated the Independence Day of Israel where we even brought a camel to campus!

Of course, all of these successes and new aspirations would not be possible without the support that we have gotten from other communities. Tidewater supports Hillel at VT more than any other community. First of all, it is unbelievable how deeply the students from Tidewater are educated about Israel and Judaism! One of our students from Virginia Beach, Melissa Eschelbaum has become one of the most active students in Hillel. Melissa is trying to create an AIPAC group on campus. Isabel Shocket was another involved Hillel student from Virginia Beach who is now the newest staff member of Hillel's team. She was one of

the best Hillel presidents at VT (Sue told me this, but, please, this is a secret). Right after graduating, she started as the coordinator of Engagement & Initiatives, where she assumes responsibilities for program planning and oversight, budget management, staff and student management, and campus and community relations all as they specifically relate to Virginia Tech's engagement agenda. This year, Isabel and I will staff the Birthright trip over winter break.

Another person has always helped me since I came to the U.S. She answered all my questions and introduced me to people who can help in creating Israeli programs on campus. She called me when I needed to hear from her and supported without asking for a thing in return. This is Robin Mancoll, who is the director of the Community Relations Council at the United Jewish Federation of Tidewater. I am not sure if we could succeed so much without her help.

This year, more than 150 Jewish students attended our Rosh Hashana dinner. Some of the students we know very well, and for some students it was their first time at the building. Looking at this, Sue said, "I am very excited that now, Jewish students finally have their home at Virginia Tech."

But the year has only begun. We have huge plans for this year. We are making a program for Jewish Cadets about Israel, we have free weekly Shabbat dinners, social meetings and Jewish services every Friday. But in addition, as an Israel Fellow I am very proud to be a part of building up the Jewish life at Virginia Tech together with Hillel. I am proud to be part of an American Jewish community. I am proud to learn from Jewish students and to teach them about Israel. In my opinion, having an Israel Fellow is very important for every Jewish campus. Only through communication and personal friendship, Israelis and American Jews will remember that they are a part of the same nation, who "speaks" the same culture.

—Ivan Goncharenko's position is partially funded by United Jewish Federation of Tidewater's Israel and Overseas allocation.