



[About Hillel](#)

[Jewish Experience](#)

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[Home](#) [History of Hillel](#) (/about) / [News & Views](#) (/about/news-views) / News & Views - Blog

[What is a Local Hillel?](#)

[Hillels Around the World](#)

[Leadership](#)

[News & Views](#)

Hillel Heroes

[Contact Hillel](#)

Alumni on the frontlines of fighting the coronavirus share their stories

[Work at Hillel](#)

by Hillel News | Apr 22, 2020 |

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Many of our Hillel alumni are on the frontlines of fighting the coronavirus. Guided by their Jewish values, these healthcare professionals are committed to *pikuach nefesh*, saving a life. Here are some of their stories:

The Communicator

“As a junior, I went on [Onward Israel](https://onwardisrael.org/) (<https://onwardisrael.org/>) through [UCF Hillel](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-central-florida) (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-central-florida>), which gave me the opportunity to intern at Shaare Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem for an entire summer. The experience prepared me for my role as an RN by teaching me to independently communicate with patients and families of all ages and backgrounds. Some of my patients only spoke Hebrew or Arabic and others couldn’t speak at all. I took care of geriatric patients, who mostly communicated through hand signs. They taught me Hebrew words like *ke’ev*, which means pain, to help us communicate better in the future. Learning to communicate without speaking directly with patients has been a valuable skill in the ICU at Children’s National Hospital. We have an extremely immunocompromised, but resilient population. My job goes well beyond just taking care of my patients’ medical needs; I have the opportunity to take care of their families as well. I get to experience so many aspects of my patients’ lives, like helping them rehabilitate, getting to know their favorite activities and learning about their families. This aligns with all of the Jewish values that I hold dear, especially *chesed* and *tikkun olam*. Knowing that I am doing good in the world helps me love my job.”

Rebecca Coven is a registered nurse in the pediatric cardiac intensive care unit at Children’s National Hospital in Washington, D.C.



The Relationship Builder

“Throughout my time in undergrad, [CSUSM Hillel](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/california-state-university-at-san-marcos) (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/california-state-university-at-san-marcos>) provided me with so many leadership opportunities, like engagement internships and serving as a member of the Hillel International Student Cabinet. I was able to interact and form connections with diverse communities on campus through Hillel, and I use those relationship building skills at work every day.

“As an emergency department technician, my job is to perform a variety of different tasks, like assisting with procedures such as intubations, performing diagnostic testing and prioritizing patient care for every person that walks into my ER. During the scariest times in people’s lives, I’m able to build meaningful relationships and trust with my patients. That’s how I live my Jewish values.

Linking my Jewish values to my career in the medical field has made me so grateful to have the skills to educate and help save lives during this pandemic.”

Sophie Nadler is a emergency department technician at Scripps Health in San Diego, California.

The Healer

“Since early March, the COVID pandemic has torn through my community in New York City. Over 25% of my residents, myself included, have contracted COVID. I am better equipped to handle the daily challenges in the ER because of Hillel. As a junior at Emory University (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/emory-university>), I was part of JHealth, a professional development fellowship through Hillel for pre-med students. We formulated community service projects, met with Jewish leaders in the healthcare field and learned how Jewish ethics relate to public health.

“Now, I’m using what I learned as a chief resident of emergency medicine at Mount Sinai Morningside. Healing the body (*refuat haguf*) and the soul within the body (*refuat hanefesh*) are essential to delivering true, compassionate care as a physician. Those are some of the Jewish values I bring to work with me every day. In the ER, saving life and saying goodbye to life are daily occurrences. While there is inherent happiness in preserving and prolonging life, there is also beauty in peacefully navigating a patient's final moments on this earth. Some of my most meaningful moments of residency were bringing peace to families as their loved ones passed from this reality to another.”

Dr. Jordan Marks is chief resident of emergency medicine at Mount Sinai Morningside in New York City.

The Helper

“In college, Bama Hillel (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-alabama>)’s Jewish values helped me stay grounded as life got crazy. Learning more about values like *tikkun olam* and *kavod* taught me what’s really important, and I still carry those with me today as I help to save lives. A global pandemic is not exactly how I imagined my first year as a nurse. I knew there would be challenges, but never something of this magnitude.

“From the start of my nursing career, my practice has been guided by the Jewish concept of *pikuah nefesh* — the idea that saving a life comes before most all other commandments. Personally, it means putting on my PPE and caring for the sickest of the sick every day at work. Having this core value at heart gives me purpose in what I do.”

Sarah Michel is a nurse in the intensive care unit at MedStar Washington Hospital Center in Washington, D.C.

The Protector



“During the COVID-19 pandemic, I am taking a leave of absence from school to work as an EMT in Colorado at DispatchHealth. The company serves as a mobile urgent care, providing medical assistance in people’s homes. We treat a wide breadth of conditions, including infections, lacerations, dehydration, breathing difficulties and much more. Our goal is to help individuals in the comfort of their own residences to avoid potential disease exposure in hospital emergency rooms and urgent care centers. With increased risk from COVID-19 infection, all teams are required to wear masks for the duration of the shift and upgrade personal protective equipment for each patient contact to keep our patients, partners and ourselves as safe as possible.

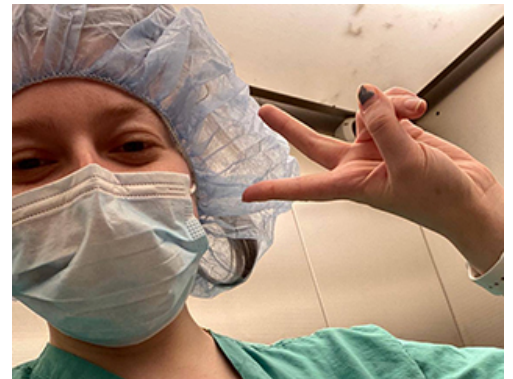


“In the medical environment, I find myself consistently relying on the skills and values I have honed as a part of the community at [Hillel at Stanford](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/stanford-university) (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/stanford-university>). In both my leadership roles at Hillel and patient care responsibilities, I require a high degree of communication, a logical, goal-oriented mindset, critical thinking skills, and most importantly, a sense of empathy. In every healthcare situation, I am guided by the Talmud teaching, “anyone who saves a life is as if he/she saved the entire world” (Sanhedrin 4:5). Each life is sacred, and I am humbled to have a small part in ensuring our society protects as many lives as possible.”

Avi Kaye is an emergency medical technician at DispatchHealth in Denver, Colorado. He will return to Stanford University to obtain his degree in human biology after the coronavirus pandemic.

The Team Player

“My job pushes me out of my comfort zone each and every day. As a nurse working on the frontlines in a hospital in Chicago, I never thought I’d be in this type of situation just one year after graduating from the University of Iowa. I’ve helped the more recent hires acclimate to the current situation by training them to respond to emergency situations and giving advice on caring for patients. Being a committed team player who is eager to help and better our hospital community are some of the most important values I’ve upheld during this pandemic. Those values were strengthened by my involvement with [Iowa Hillel](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-iowa) (<https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/university-of-iowa>), where I spent time cooking Shabbat meals and celebrating Jewish holidays with my friends. Those experiences taught me about our responsibility to care for other members of our community, or *kehilla* in Hebrew. The COVID pandemic has been on the rise in Chicago, and as a hospital community, we have all been learning the ropes as we go. The skills I learned at Hillel have made me a better nurse, and I hope together as a team, we can fight this pandemic.”



Danielle Rozenman is a hospital nurse in Chicago, Illinois.

The Caregiver

“Being a nurse is a fulfilling experience and journey. We are being put to the test to perform our oath of helping the ill under difficult circumstances. There are unforeseen challenges, tiredness and exhaustion, but it is an absolute reward that we are trusted with the lives of others. In a war, the most elite soldiers break through the front door of the enemy, unsure of what to expect on the other side, but are prepared for the challenge that may arise. Nurses are now those elite soldiers fighting the enemy on the frontlines.

“As a Jewish nurse working in critical care transport, I have the ability to use Judaism on a daily basis to explain medical problems to my Jewish patients, all the while treating them with unconditional love and respect. For patients who have lost their appetites because of the coronavirus, I remind them that even if they are ill on Yom Kippur, they are commanded to eat because guarding their

health is of the utmost importance. When I was a nursing student, Rabbi Dov and Shevy Oliver from Hillel of Rockland taught me the true meaning of *Ahavat Yisrael*, the *mitzvah* to love your fellow Jews. They treated each student with unconditional love and respect, no matter their background. The way Rabbi Dov and Shevy cared for each of their students, including myself, stuck with me. I try to bring that same level of care to my patients every day.”

Yanki Fekete is the chief of staff and flight nurse at VitalOne Air Medical Transport and lives in Monsey, New York.



The Spiritual Guide

“After my retirement from [Stony Brook Hillel \(https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/stony-brook-university\)](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/stony-brook-university), I assumed responsibility for chaplaincy duties at the Stony Brook University Medical Center, which includes a 625-bed hospital and 350-bed nursing home for military veterans. My health care chaplaincy has been informed by the Jewish text that teaches of the restorative abilities of Rabbi Yochanan’s ‘healing touch.’ To me, that has always meant that the role of the chaplain is to free the patient from their illness, to the extent that they can, by providing that ‘touch.’ Sometimes the ‘touch’ is literal, other times metaphoric and nowadays covered by gloves, gown and mask. But it is the very presence of the chaplain that matters. Illness is often accompanied by loneliness, fear, and a loss of privacy and dignity. Sometimes the visit by the rabbi is a step toward restoring that loss and making the patient feel whole again.



“The COVID-19 pandemic has restricted chaplains from our normal practice for our own protection as well as that of the patients. Like other non-medical personnel, we can speak with patients by phone or send messages through the nursing staff. In some cases, a patient is in a room with a glass wall facing the corridor, and I can wave to them or speak from an open doorway. I am blessed to be part of a chaplaincy team at both institutions that reflects the very best of humanity and interfaith cooperation.”

Rabbi Joseph Topek is a Jewish chaplain in the Stony Brook University Medical Center in Stony Brook, New York. He formerly served as Hillel director at Virginia Commonwealth University and Stony Brook University.

The Supporter

“Serving as a volunteer EMT on Columbia University’s Emergency Medical Service became increasingly difficult as calls began to come in for possible COVID-19 patients. All the while, I felt the support of the [Columbia/Barnard Hillel \(https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/columbia-university\)](https://www.hillel.org/college-guide/list/record/columbia-university). The conversations I had with various Hillel staff members and friends at Shabbat dinner brought moments of much needed levity to an uncertain situation. I am immensely grateful to Columbia/Barnard Hillel and the Jewish community on campus for the support that enabled me to provide the best level of care to my patients.”

Colman Adams is a volunteer emergency medical technician at the Columbia University Emergency Medical Service. He is studying political science and economics at Columbia University.

To read more stories, visit the [Hillel of San Diego Healthcare Heroes \(http://hillelsd.org/hillels-healthcare-heroes/\)](http://hillelsd.org/hillels-healthcare-heroes/) page.

Compiled by Shana Medel.

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