Celebrating Our Excellence

BIU Provides Lifeline for Brain-Injured IDF Vets (P. 26)
One year into Office, I have the privilege of bringing with me a world view shaped by experiences in the academe, political arena, government and pulpit. This gives me a distinct advantage of being able to look backwards with impartiality at the University’s almost 60 years of significant achievements, while looking forward with unbridled enthusiasm and anticipation at the next quantum leap forward.

The articles in this magazine reflect some of BIU’s remarkable accomplishments and are truly a celebration of the University’s excellence. From our unique programs in music therapy and for the brain-injured, to scientific advances in medical research and engineering, to our special outreach endeavors in every area, along with the achievements of our remarkable scholars and very special students, the underlying desire to improve life for mankind and emphasize our Jewish values underlies every one of Bar-Ilan University’s academic ventures.

Wishing you all a very healthy, happy and peaceful New Year.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz
President
Currently 30 graduate students (including six PhDs) are enrolled in the program, which includes musical and psychological courses. The ability to play piano and at least one other instrument is a unique admission requirement. "We want high quality musicians and improvisation is one of our key tools," says Prof. Dorit Amir, the program’s founding director, who treated the clients quoted above.

Each week, MA candidates study two days on campus and spend two days in supervised field work (e.g., psychiatric institutions, hospitals, centers for children at risk). "We've also established a research tradition," relays Amir, mentioning the dozens of grads who have conducted clinical research as part of their MA and PhD studies. In fact, BIU’s PhD track in music therapy research is Israel’s first. Recent doctoral dissertations examine the impact of music therapy on diverse populations, including Holocaust survivors (music helped to recall and work through memories, pain and hardships), Alzheimer’s patients (singing improved language abilities), victims of combat and terrorist activities (Rhythmic and collaborative drumming facilitated group cohesiveness and ‘drumming out the rage’), youth at risk (music illuminated and developed hidden strengths), and teens from uprooted Gush Katif settlements (improvisations released physical and emotional tension, and playing instruments together strengthened feelings of trust and aided in bonding).

"The international music therapy community is very impressed with what’s going on at BIU," says Amir. "We publish articles in highly regarded professional journals. Our grads are leaders in the field, and many of our staff members and students present at international conferences."

Amir, who plays piano, recorder, drums, and other instruments, first encountered a music therapist while working with children with CP following her IDF service in Intelligence. Drawn to the field, she chose to pursue a master’s degree in music therapy at New York University after completing her BA (special ed and criminology) at BIU and studying at the Israel Conservatory. Upon her return to Israel she established BIU’s Music Therapy Program (“inspired by the vision of Prof. Bathia Churgin, founder of the BIU Department of Music”). She later returned to NYU to obtain a doctorate.

“I love music therapy,” Prof. Dorit Amir enthuses, adding, “I have much nachat from teaching our students to use music as a key communication and expression tool and see the power of music for the individual as well as for the community.”
Brought up on an analytical approach to Talmud study, which he learned from his late grandfather, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the “Rav”) and his father, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, he says, “My academic studies broadened my horizons and utilizing research tools enriched my study.” Part of a cadre of religious Zionist rabbis who advocate combining Torah learning with academic methodology, he opines that “broad knowledge of history, sociology and realia will make Talmud more relevant for the younger generation.”

Born in New York (1964) and raised in Israel, he began at age 14 to make annual visits to the US to learn with his grandfather. Following high school, he spent a year in the Rav’s shiur at YU before enrolling at Yeshivat Har Etzion, where he attended the shiur of his father, the co-Rosh Yeshiva. A Hesder student, he served in the IDF armored corps, later receiving semicha from the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, and his BA (Jewish History) and MA (Talmud) from the Hebrew University.

Pleased to be pursuing a PhD with supervisor Prof. Leib Moskowitz in BIU’s Talmud department with its “focus on content, diverse makeup and respect for tradition,” Lichtenstein is grateful for the Kahana Doctoral Fellowship which enables him to “devote more time to research.”

With plans to fully resume his teaching career upon graduation, “using my Yeshiva and scholarly knowledge to reach a higher understanding of Talmud,” the father of eight is continuing a family tradition.

“I learned most of my Torah from my father and was inspired by his wisdom, and morality,” says Lichtenstein. “My grandfather gave me my passion for Torah and a commitment to joining the chain.”
Halfway through PhD studies in molecular biology, 26-year-old Shoshana Naiman is already making headlines. Chosen twice by the Israeli media as an “up-and-coming woman scientist,” the BIU Doctoral Fellow of Excellence pursues international collaborations on aging and metabolic diseases, which have resulted in extension of lifespan in animal models, and articles in top scientific journals such as Nature. A fellow in the Israeli Centers of Research Excellence (I-CORE), she is a nominee for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting for young scientists.

“Shoshana is the best PhD student I have had,” says her advisor, Prof. Haim Cohen, citing her passion for research and excellent academic record. Collaborating with BIU life scientists Cohen and Dr. Yaniv Kanfi, and Carnegie Mellon computational biologists in designing a search engine for gene expression research, she was an equal first author of the report, which was published in Nature Methods (Oct. 2013).

Born in Chicago, she immigrated to Israel alone, at age 17, with little knowledge of Hebrew. She holds a BSc in biotechnology Magna cum Laude; and an MSc in molecular biology Summa cum Laude from BIU. Recalling the challenges of learning Hebrew, she tutors immigrants and initiated a BIU service to allow foreign students free translations of science exams.

“BIU helps me forge contacts and apply for grants, and sends me to conferences,” relates Naiman, who says that without the doctoral fellowship she wouldn’t be pursuing a PhD. “I hope one day to establish my own research lab, collaborating with others to investigate molecular mechanisms of metabolic disease (e.g. diabetes, obesity). In the meantime, she’s getting an excellent education and has a great lab – Bar-Ilan is one of the best experiences of my life!”

Shoshana Naiman: An “Up-and-Coming Woman Scientist” to Look Out For

“I hope one day to establish my own research lab, collaborating with others to investigate molecular mechanisms of metabolic disease.”
Unique among Israeli universities, Bar-Ilan has, from its inception, sought to acquaint every Jewish student with core Jewish values and tradition. Each year, more than 20,000 BIU students enrich their Jewish literacy, as they delve into Biblical and Talmudic works, examine central tenets of Judaism, and explore key chapters in our people’s history in close to 300 courses offered by the Helene and Paul Shulman School for Basic Jewish Studies. Unique among Israeli universities, Bar-Ilan has, from its inception, sought to acquaint every Jewish student with core Jewish values and tradition, with an eye toward fostering Jewish unity, and commitment to the people and land of Israel.

The Shulman School, recently upgraded from a Center, services the entire University, including the regional and haredi colleges, and special programs. Housed in the striking Jack & Gitta Nagel Family Jewish Heritage Center, the School offers courses (including internet and independent study) in Jewish history, the Bible, Talmud, Jewish thought, Hebrew and Semitic languages, and more. Some 120 distinguished academicians who are also talmidei hachamim, (including 20 full-time faculty members) impart fundamental Jewish knowledge to religious and secular alike, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and intellectual inquiry. Students readily attest to the engaging courses and excellent lecturers in their course evaluations:

• “You taught me to read the Bible in a way that’s more personal and experiential. You are my role model for derech eretz.”

• “The creative way in which you relayed Jewish family law made for a real learning experience. Now I want to deepen my knowledge in the area.”

• “Sitting in class was an energizing and uplifting experience.”

• “You piqued my curiosity, instilling in me a desire to continue to enrich my knowledge about Jewish tradition and customs.”

• “Much to your credit, I have become a devotee of the Bible. For decades, my home library – replete with Biblical books and commentaries – has been gathering dust. Now I am excited to delve into these works and find a world unto itself – the story of the evolution of the Jewish people intrigues me and I study it with passion and awe.”

Contemporary Jewish History Prof. Judy Baumel Schwartz, who heads the School, highlights the importance of BJS courses in addressing widespread ignorance of our deep Jewish roots. “It’s impossible to understand the true depth and beauty of life in the State of Israel without knowing where it all comes from. It’s what epitomizes BIU for our students.” A sought after lecturer on the Holocaust, she stresses: “We teach academic Jewish studies but do not ‘proselytize.’”

During their undergrad studies, students take seven year-long BJS courses (Jewish studies majors take fewer). MA candidates take 1-2 courses. Students must also pass an exam in basic Jewish concepts. Popular courses include Halakha and Medicine, Contemporary Issues, Holidays, and the Jewish

Home (when a student learned about the pidyon haben – redemption of a first-born son – the staff organized the ceremony he never had). The School regularly hosts guest lectures on topics ranging from the Rabbinical Courts to organ transplants in the light of halakha.

Over the years, the program has sought to adapt to changing needs, providing courses in Russian and French for the influx of immigrant students. Currently, the School offers two yearly courses each in English and in easy Hebrew.

The Shulman School for Basic Jewish Studies is clearly making its mark, ensuring that each and every BIU grad has core Jewish knowledge. As the students note:

“Having grown up on a left-wing, secular kibbutz, I thank you for enabling me to redress my ignorance of Jewish tradition. This was an important beginning for me and I hope to continue throughout my life, without any connection to becoming religious.”

“As a secular Jew who is far from tradition, I didn’t expect much from BJS, but after I began taking courses, a profound world unfolded before me, leaving a deep impression and bringing me closer to the traditional world.”

Finally, a Parisian-born IDF Intelligence officer, who attended his first Jewish studies course ever at BIU, was amazed to “learn so many things about Judaism from Megillat Ruth. Although the semester hasn’t come to a close, I already feel my outlook has changed significantly.”
When a patient is diagnosed with lung cancer, doctors typically examine murky X-ray or CT images to characterize its subtype. But what if it were possible to stratify lung cancer through the crystal clear means of mathematics? This was one question posed by the IMPROVER Diagnostics Signature Challenge, an international competition designed to assess computational approaches to classifying clinical samples. With some 50 teams in the running, top honors went to BIU Dr. Sol Efroni and his PhD student, Rotem Ben-Hamo, for their method of deriving clinically-significant information from gene expression data.

“Doctors need imaging to direct cancer surgery, but molecular methods are becoming ever more important for determining post-operative treatment,” says Efroni. “Our goal in this competition was to establish predictive ‘signatures’ based on unlabeled gene expression data from tissue samples, and to link a particular computational outcome with a specific tumor type and prognosis.”

Efroni’s approach focused on a gene which, expressed at different levels, is associated with tumor type. Crediting his doctoral student Ben-Hamo with being the first to study this gene as a mediating factor in lung cancer progression, Efroni also points out that this prize-winning observation differs from the network-based studies that are his lab’s primary research focus.

“In systems biomedicine, we study not only the genes, but the networks of gene-regulated activity that drives disease,” he says. “We want to see how gene expression forms the basis of connected biological pathways that result in a particular outcome. These pathways, in turn, can point the way toward targeted therapy.”

With the publisher Landes Bioscience, Efroni, has recently launched Systems Biomedicine – a journal focusing on how the emerging field of systems biology can yield clinically relevant results.
Networks are essential, but they create problems of privacy. Namely, how can we ensure that every component in the network learns the information it needs, without unnecessarily exposing secret data to unauthorized parties? The solution is to define mathematical rules such that every computation gives you exactly the data you need, but no more.

Hazay describes a scenario in which sharing – and mutual suspicion – go hand in hand. “Let’s say that the CIA and FBI have two lists of suspects that they want to compare,” she says, “while keeping information not common to both lists hidden.”

Hazay explains that this show-some-but-not-all dynamic is what’s needed in a wide range of distributed networks – from people placing bids on Internet auction sites to scientists combing through NIH’s online ‘libraries’ of sequenced genes. Genetic analysis done on a particular patient may hold the key to a new approach for fighting a particular disease, but there’s no need for a search to expose the hospital file including that patient’s social security number,” Hazay states. “Secure protocols, properly executed, can keep this kind of information from falling into the wrong hands.”

Hazay’s approach can be applied to the basic design of a distributed computer system, rendering it more secure before it begins functioning. But because it is based on software rather than hardware, it can also come to the rescue – adding a layer of security on top of an existing network, and “mopping up” problems as they are discovered. Still, Hazay says, as new technologies emerge, new challenges follow.

“One of the hottest areas of research relates to data-protection protocols for distributed components linked by an arrangement known as ‘the cloud’ – in which computationally weak devices can lease computing and storage services on demand from external servers, rather than maintaining their own infrastructure,” says Hazay. “These servers are powerful, but untrusted; if all your data is ‘in the cloud’ how can you know the answers you’re getting are correct? In my current research I’m designing new tools for secure computation in the cloud environment.”
They are drawn to Bar-Ilan due to the friendly and welcoming atmosphere and the many programs and activities offered by the University – both in English and Hebrew.

Rachel Yeger, a second-year student in Bar-Ilan University's English-language Interdisciplinary Social Sciences program who hails from Teaneck, NJ, explains: “They are drawn to Bar-Ilan due to the friendly and welcoming atmosphere and the many programs and activities offered by the University – both in English and Hebrew,” explains Rachel. From the Model Student UN, to the School of Communication's English radio station, to the University's unique test translation services and the willingness of most instructors to permit submitting papers in English, ‘Anglo’ students from both observant and secular backgrounds enjoy the general feeling of acceptance and warmth they receive from BIU faculty members.

The English-language programs are another reason for Anglo students to feel comfortable at Bar-Ilan. “BIU provides English-language degree programs in Communications, Economics, and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences, as well as offering support services for students from abroad who are able to study in Hebrew,” elucidates Daniel Schuval, Director of International Programs.

The close-meshed Bar-Ilan University Anglo community has even drawn the attention of Nefesh B’Nefesh, the organization that provides olim with employment resources, assistance with governmental absorption, community-based guidance and support and need-based financial aid in order to make each individual’s aliya as successful as possible.

“Due to the strong BIU Anglo community and offerings, Nefesh B’Nefesh is encouraging young singles and families to make aliya to the neighborhood surrounding Bar-Ilan,” says Benji Davis, Advisor and Program Coordinator for the Nefesh B’Nefesh Post Aliyah Department. "We definitely see Bar-Ilan University and its environs as an attractive target for new olim," he adds.

The BIU student community has many plans on the drawing board, such as establishing student welcoming and chesed committees to organize volunteer activities.

“It’s great to live in a place with so many people who share a common background as me,” says Shai Steiman, originally from Toronto, Canada. “With the studies being as hard as they are, it’s fantastic to know that the BIU community is there to support you.”

The Jewish Agency partnered with BIU for a first-time “happening” on campus in March to offer innovative ways to enhance Jewish and Zionist informal education to over 750 college-age students representing 30 countries and 13 Zionist youth movements through lectures, entertainment, group discussions, TED style lectures and other activities.

Improving the Lives of New Olim Students on and about the Campus

Welcome to the Bar-Ilan University main campus, which has become a magnet for over 700 English-speaking new olim students – even those not studying at the University! Indeed, according to Rachel Yeger, a second-year student in BIU's English-language Interdisciplinary Social Sciences program who hails from Teaneck, NJ, even students registered at other universities prefer to live in the BIU neighborhood because of the multitude of services the University provides to new olim.

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In addition, the BIU ‘Agudat Hastudentim’ (Student Union) goes out of its way to organize English-language activities for olim, such as open mike night, karaoke night, Zionist trivia night, Shabbatonim – even a traditional Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings! Anglo students also keep in touch through “Camp Bar-Ilan” – their very own Facebook page, and have now, at their request, been assigned their own rabbi, Ari Yablok, thanks to the Office of the Dean of Overseas Students and the Office of the Campus Rabbi!

“In my role as Rabbi of the Anglo student community of Bar-Ilan,” says Rabbi Yablok, “I give weekly Torah classes in English and answer any halakhic questions that students from the University or from the surrounding neighborhood of Givat Shmuel may have.”

Rabbi Yablok, who is also the campus director for “The Israel Experience,” BIU’s one-year program for overseas students helps organize programs and events together with students and administrators that take place throughout the year. “I also offer one-on-one learning opportunities, individual counseling sessions, and my wife, Ayelet, and I love hosting students for Shabbat meals all the time,” says the young rabbi.

Rabbi Ari Yablok (center, seated) and a group of new olim students.
"Through making the legal world more aware of behavioral considerations, we can hopefully improve society as a whole, by promoting legal policies that deal with people as they really are."

The purpose of public policy is to set expectations for good behavior – and consequences for bad behavior – in a way that encourages individuals to follow the path of rational self-interest. But according to Prof. Yuval Feldman, of the BIU Faculty of Law, there’s a catch: while policy makers typically assume that rationality plays a central role in human decision-making, most people are neither that “smart” nor that “bad.”

“Traditional law rests on the idea that people will obey laws if they are awarded for compliance and punished for infractions,” says Feldman, a BIU alumnus who earned his PhD in jurisprudence and social policy from UC Berkeley and recently returned to Israel after serving as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University’s Social Cognition Lab and its Center for Ethics. “There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the behavioral sciences – from psychology to economics to the study of the brain – can help administrative agencies design policies that accommodate how people really act, not how they are assumed to behave. In my work, I examine how people respond to different legal formulations under different circumstances. The better we understand this dynamic, the better prepared we will be to create laws that are effective not just on paper, but in the real world.”

Exploring both conscious and non-conscious processes of decision-making in legal context, Feldman’s experimental research shines a light on the limitations – as well as the moral ambiguity – of systems predicated on classic models of crime and enforcement. “Policy makers tend to assume that every ethical decision made in response to a particular law is deliberate, and dole out punishments accordingly,” he says. “However, there are both situational and cognitive factors that affect personal decision-making of which we are entirely unaware. These factors can diminish the effectiveness of a law, but can also point toward strategies for improvement.”

To illustrate this point, Feldman describes a recent study he co-authored, in which subjects were asked to interpret ambiguous contracts. “One group of participants received a financial award for every correct answer. A second group was offered no positive incentive, and instead lost money every time they made a mistake,” he recalls. “We discovered that this second group was far more aggressive in promoting their self-serving interpretation of the contract, even though both groups faced the same economic situation.”

The decision to obey a law depends on many factors – from the law’s wording, to people’s varying motivations and cognitive abilities to absorb relevant information, to the physical environment in which decisions are being made. Despite the complexity, however, Feldman asserts that policy makers will be better equipped to create laws that really work if they take behavioral factors into account.

“There’s an erroneous assumption that when trying to regulate a particular issue – one policy fits all. What’s more, traditional legislation is predicated on the idea that breaking the law is always a deliberate act,” Feldman says. “But we now know that much decision-making is rooted in automatic, sub-conscious processes. As we gain more knowledge about these processes, it will be possible to frame laws pro-actively, in a way that reduces resistance and promotes voluntary compliance. Governments the world over are taking these issues into account as they formulate public policy, and Israel – as a leader in behavioral research – should too.”

In the future, Feldman is hoping to establish a cross-departmental, interdiscplinary infrastructure for field studies – something that he says will help speed integration of his findings into practical initiatives. “There is no question that properly constructed laws can improve the behavior of individuals,” he says. “Through making the legal world more aware of behavioral considerations, we can hopefully improve society as a whole, by promoting legal policies that deal with people as they really are.”
Cancer patients want effective medical care, and they want it now. But when it comes to cancer of the breast, there’s a problem: the initial diagnosis sometimes marks the beginning of a long process, in which doctors struggle to identify the best therapeutic approach. BIU Prof. Bilha Fischer is facing this problem with a new biotechnological solution – a fluorescent probe that shines a light on individual tumors’ hidden characteristics.

“In our lab, we’re diagnosing breast cancer, which is not a single condition, but rather a family of diseases, each characterized by the presence of specific molecular markers,” says Fischer, an expert in medicinal chemistry who holds eleven patents, has published more than 90 papers, and today chairs BIU’s Chemistry Department. “To ensure effective treatment, we need a molecular-level diagnosis of each tumor. This would allow doctors to choose the personalized strategy of chemotherapy, radiation or surgery that is most likely to work.”

According to Fischer, the key to tumor “fingerprinting” lies in small pieces of genetic information called messenger RNA, which are involved in transforming genes into the biologically active proteins. “We’ve created novel fluorescent probes that identify the specific mRNA markers present in cancer cell extracts,” she explains. “When the probes meet up with their targets, the double strands of the DNA probes unzip, triggering a bright fluorescent signal that provides molecular-level proof of the tumor’s genetic profile.”

Fischer’s system could potentially be used for early cancer detection, for defining the treatment course, and for enabling post-operative monitoring of patients. “Today, doctors identify breast cancer with a combination of ultrasound and histochemistry, but have no means of defining the individual tumor type,” she says. “Our method – which is simple, fast, cost-effective and very sensitive – could make the treatment of breast cancer more scientific, and save lives.”

In another area of her research, Fischer is developing drug candidates for the treatment of glaucoma – including one promising compound being explored within the framework of an early-stage incubator, sponsored by Israel’s Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor.

“In our lab, we’ve synthesized a compound that lowers intra-ocular pressure by 45% – that’s almost 30 percent higher than the best drugs currently on the market,” Fischer says. “Our approach also offers an alternative for medications contraindicated for patients suffering from cardiovascular problems, diabetes or asthma. The incubator will help move this project along, so hopefully it can someday become a real treatment option.”

A scientist who has developed drugs for other diseases, including diabetes and Alzheimer’s, Fischer has yet to receive FDA approval for any of her discoveries. This is because the FDA process typically takes 20 years, longer than she has been working in biomedical research. Still, Fischer remains optimistic, and committed to helping others.

“Drug development is a marathon, not a sprint,” she says, “and patience is definitely part of the prescription. But when you compare our frustration to the suffering of the people who have these diseases, it gives you perspective. The difficulties we face are really very small.”

Towards Personalized Medicine:
Prof. Bilha Fischer and the Molecular ID of Breast Cancer Tumors
Each year, some 250 men attend the Beit Midrash, engaging in hevruta (paired) learning and shiurim. Most are enrolled in the Gemara Program, with the “Learn-When-You-Can” project targeting majors in time-intensive fields such as the sciences. Some 18 lectures in philosophy, Hasidism, and the history of halakha are also given annually.

The Halakha Program prepares aspiring community and municipal rabbis for the Israeli Chief Rabbinate exams while the Rakowitz Center for the Community Rabbinate in Israel provides a two-year practical training course for a group of 16 ordained rabbis and their wives (mostly qualified lawyers and PhD candidates), with the aim of creating a cadre of proactive community Rabbis/professionals.

The PhD Program enables 15 BIU Doctoral Fellows of Excellence to explore and publish in a specific Talmudic area. A Torah and Science elective course, on topics such as genetics and life and death issues, made its debut in spring 2014 in the Mina & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences.

The Johanne and Norman Sternthal Reshit Program equips 70 students from secular backgrounds with a deeper understanding of Jewish values and tradition through study of Bible, Talmud and Jewish philosophy, while the “Ask the Rabbi” free service provides answers to religious questions via email, fax or mail.

Beit Midrash community outreach includes the popular Friday Kollel and a “Yeshiva” for retired judges, bank managers and others during the week.

The Nitzotzot forum regularly convenes scientists, rabbinical scholars and PhD candidates to explore how research breakthroughs impact upon Torah and vice versa. Nitzotzot Shachar, the year-long seminar for outstanding PhD candidates from all Israeli universities, grants fellowships to some 22 students to examine cutting-edge research from a Jewish perspective.

The Metivta program is designed for guided study of Jewish Law or Talmud in pairs (havrutot), while in the Reshit program, students from secular backgrounds focus on Jewish identity through familiarity with Jewish texts.

The Doctoral Program is for outstanding students who dedicate time to studying Talmud in addition to their regular graduate studies. Two unique courses offer law students the opportunity to examine the halakhic background of cases presently being argued before Israel’s rabbinical courts in depth. A prestigious Tikvah Fellowship workshop for exceptional students addresses core issues on the Israeli public agenda through the prism of Jewish sources, building an elite cadre of Jewish leaders of the future.

Approximately 80 overseas students who come to study at BIU for a semester or a year through “The Israel Experience” program, participate in the Midrasha in specially-designed classes taught in English.

A special program is available for training pre-marital coaches. Etnahta is a new program catering to students who have completed their military or national service but are not yet registered at the University, introducing them to Jewish learning and helping them decide which framework best suits their desire to continue their Torah studies.

In addition to programs offered to students, the Midrasha organizes seminars, lectures, and other public forums open to the community at-large prior to Jewish holidays, thus serving as a magnet for women, both on and off campus, who wish to further their Jewish knowledge and strengthen their Jewish identity.

“The Midrasha,” says its director Dr. Tova Ganzel, “aims to educate future women leaders who will be able to figure prominently in the public Jewish discourse, both in Israel and worldwide.”
“I try to understand the theology and ideology behind the Bible, and expose its key messages, which are as relevant today as they were in antiquity.”

Prof. Elie Assis:

Man of the Book

With a passion for the Bible, Prof. Elie Assis seeks to convey the beauty and spirit of the “Book of Books” around the globe. The English-born dean of BIU’s premier Faculty of Jewish Studies has lectured to hundreds of students in Israel as well as to audiences from Korea to Japan to Belgium. Chairing Bible studies at the Israeli Ministry of Education, he implements innovative school curricula which delve into Biblical text and recurring motifs. “The Bible is the root of our history, religion, and the formation of our People,” stresses the former head of the Zalman Shamir Bible Department, who has published eight books and over 40 articles.

“I try to understand the theology and ideology behind the Bible, and expose its key messages, which are as relevant today as they were in antiquity,” relays the Hesder yeshiva grad, who served in the IDF infantry, and was a pulpit rabbi in London. A 1999 Schupf fellow, Assis, then married and the father of two, says “the Fellowship gave me a big push to finish my PhD.”

A visiting professor at the Universities of Shandong (China) and St. Petersburg (Russia), he notes that over 20 students from the Far East study Bible at BIU. “While little ancient material culture remains, our forefathers’ spiritual legacy still fascinates millions.”

Assis believes that the Bible can unite most Jewish streams and, in fact, the Faculty’s new “Open Bible” lectures draw hundreds. “The Bible’s aim is to educate and shape Jewish and religious identity. Although it’s an exemplary literary work, it was not written for creativity’s sake but rather to transmit values and ideology.”

Today, the Faculty Dean reiterates the Bible’s appeal. “The beauty is that the prophets’ words resonate in our ears, even after thousands of years. We read ancient texts about inheriting the land which have become even more relevant with the modern Zionist revival.”
The BIU campus is home to close to 750 Arab students from Moslem, Beduin, Druse, Christian, and Circassian backgrounds, who hail from towns and villages the length and breadth of Israel.

"Arab students are particularly drawn to BIU, rather than at colleges closer to their homes because they are attracted to the University’s location in the center of the country, along with its one-of-a-kind courses and programs," claims Rifat Sweidan, the Academic Advisor for Arab Students within the Office of the Dean of Students, adding that they prefer Bar-Ilan University because “their families are happy with its traditional respectful character and serene learning atmosphere.”

Sweidan, born in the Beduin village of Aramsha in northern Israel, began his academic career at Bar-Ilan (after serving as an officer in the IDF) 13 years ago, obtaining both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work, then going on to complete his BA, MA (and is now working on his PhD) in political science. Before obtaining his present position he volunteered in the BIU Student Union assisting the Arab sector.

“Popular courses of study at Bar-Ilan that appeal to Arab students are the University’s unique degree programs in Radiology and Imaging and in Optometry,” says Sweidan. “Our numbers are increasing annually, with 120 new students enrolling this year alone!” he adds, revealing that close to 70% of the BA, MA and PhD Arab students are women. Most students dorm in rented apartments nearby.

Along with concentrating on their studies, BIU Arab students are involved in a host of activities. Outings to the theater, movies, stand-up comedy, musical evenings and yearly trips to various parts of the country are all organized by Sweidan, along with counseling, translation services, scholarship assistance, extra courses in Hebrew and English, the BIU Arab-language website, and an intensive summer three-week-long university orientation program.

Finally, in a bid to enhance tolerance and awareness of all cultures on the Bar-Ilan campus, a special Musical Dialogue program joins Arab students along with their Jewish counterparts, promoting mutual understanding and appreciation through music.
For hundreds of severely wounded IDF combat vets and their families, Jaffa’s Rehabilitation Center for Veterans after Traumatic Brain-Injury has served as a lifeline. Since its founding 40 years ago by BIU’s Department of Psychology and Israel’s Ministry of Defense, this model project has enabled patients to lead as normal a life as possible considering their challenging disabilities which preclude a return to the mainstream. Since its founding 40 years ago by BIU’s Department of Psychology and Israel’s Ministry of Defense, this model project has enabled patients to lead as normal a life as possible considering their challenging disabilities which preclude a return to the mainstream. What started as a sheltered workshop has expanded over the years to include a broad range of work, social and enrichment activities. Patients come from 8:30 am – 2 pm, moving from one “station” to the next – carpentry, ceramics, silk painting, greenhouse – each according to his capabilities and attention span. They receive art, music, and occupational therapies and meet regularly with a social caseworker and psychiatrist, if needed.

“There’s nothing much like this anywhere else in the world,” elucidates BIU clinical neuropsychologist Prof. Eli Vakil, who directs the center, which is administered by BIU’s Research Authority. Currently there are 50 patients and 20 staff members – “an unbelievable ratio,” says Vakil, noting that “Israel is a leader in the rehabilitation of head trauma patients.”

It was only natural that BIU, which pioneered Israel’s first rehabilitation psychology program, should join forces with the Defense Ministry. “We have the expertise,” relates Vakil, who heads the Memory and Amnesia Research Laboratory at BIU’s Leslie and Susan Gonda (Goldschmied) Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center. Vakil served as the Jaffa center’s clinical advisor for nearly two decades before succeeding founding director BIU Prof. Solly Katz seven years ago.

Patients, known as “Haverim,” range in age from 25 until 70, and include Yom Kippur War vets as well as those wounded more recently. They elect their own social committee, which decides on funding leisure activities from income from the sale of their products. “We want to give them the feeling that they are in charge. We call it the ‘therapeutic milieu’, and it gives them a sense of dignity and pride.” “Haverim” are especially proud of their choir, which this past July held a special concert in Jaffa to mark the debut of their third professional disk.

“We find part-time jobs for those capable of functioning outside, and provide training, support and supervision,” he says, noting that one patient is a tailor, another restores old furniture, and a third specializes in silk painting.

“The family’s involvement in rehabilitation is a key predictor of success,” emphasizes Vakil. “We educate and support the family through every crisis, and invite them to events and outings with patients.”

With a BA from BIU and a PhD from City University of New York, Vakil cites the advantages of associating a head trauma rehabilitation program with academia: “Knowledge is amassed in a very systematic way and enables us to develop better diagnostic tools.” A BIU-Sheba Medical Center joint study indicates that through developing cognitive abilities, the brain becomes more resilient to dementia. Individuals with traumatic brain-injury (TBI) who are highly educated tend to fare better than those who are not, although the “cognitive reserve” is less likely to kick in with the more severely injured. Current research evaluates the benefits of cognitive intervention, and a large-scale study is assessing the long-term effects of memory in older TBI patients.

“I’m privileged that I can merge research with academic and clinical activities and see results in such an immediate and concrete way,” relays Vakil, crediting BIU for its pioneering community outreach. “I am proud to be part of such a university.”

Demonstrating BIU’s social commitment, the Jaffa center offers TBI Israeli combat vets with a new lease on life. “Many of our patients felt lost before they came to us. We make sure they are happy and fulfilled,” he says, adding that some patients marry and have children and the center guides them along the way.

“The fact that they get up in the morning and go to work at the center enables them and their families to conduct a relatively normal life. It would be devastating if they stayed home all day.” Affirms BIU Prof. Eli Vakil: “This is a real life-saving venture.”

Model Rehab Center: Lifeline for Brain-Injured IDF Vets

"Many of our patients felt lost before they came to us. We make sure patients are happy and fulfilled."
It is well known that, if scratched, the rash associated with chicken pox can leave scars on the skin. Less well known is something else this disease can leave behind – a viral infection that, after many years, can reactivate in the form of Herpes Zoster, or shingles.

Shingles is a painful rash that usually lasts two to four weeks. However, in one-third of cases, this is followed by debilitating pain that lasts for months or even years.

VZV, the virus that causes shingles, only grows well in human nerve cells, making it difficult for scientists to study in the lab. To overcome this challenge, Prof. Ron Goldstein, a past president of the Israel Stem Cell Society, has developed a new system.

“Stem cells can be turned into any cell in the human body,” explains Goldstein, the first researcher to successfully coax human embryonic stem cells (hESCs) into generating human peripheral sensory neurons. “Together with my colleagues, we are looking at how the VZV virus interacts with the human nerve cells we generate.”

Goldstein notes that, thanks to a new vaccine, shingles incidence is down by about 50% in the US. However, that still leaves over half a million new shingles sufferers in the US alone each year. “Our goal is to reveal targets for new drugs that would help patients unable to benefit from the vaccine,” he says. “Over the past two years we’ve made great strides – and this is particularly good news for vulnerable populations whose resistance is compromised.”
With her bubbly, upbeat personality, it’s hard to imagine that BIU undergrad Sivan Abravaya has had to contend with major adversity during her 23 years. Born in Bulgaria, she spent the first four years of her life in an orphanage in Sofia before her adoptive Israeli parents brought her “home” to Ramat Gan. In school, she persevered to learn “the three Rs” undeterred by learning disabilities. Four years ago while serving as an IDF medic, she contracted a rare virus that left her visually impaired. But that didn’t stop her from completing her army service and enrolling last year in BIU’s Interdisciplinary Program in Neuroscience (Israel’s first and only one to grant a BSc in the field). Combining brain science with linguistics, she was drawn to BIU because of its high academic standards, cutting-edge research and Sybil Wigdor Social Involvement Unit, which she says “goes out of its way to help, with a magnifying machine and mentors to read texts and assist me in preparing for tests.”

Abravaya, who is not from a traditional background, also attends the “Reshit” basic Jewish learning program at the Midrasha, which is part of the Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies. “My Talmud, Bible, Prayer and Jewish Thought courses are stimulating and our teachers are always willing to answer questions.”

She opines that BIU is in a league of its own in terms of empathy and social atmosphere. “We help each other, study together for tests, and eat together during breaks,” says Abravaya, who often meets up with her parents – “students” in BIU’s Brookdale Enrichment Program for the Golden Aged.

This year, engaged in volunteer initiatives “I’ve always wanted to do,” she helps high risk children with their homework, visits an elderly woman, and is spearheading a project for high schoolers to visit third agers in assisted-living facilities.

Not one to be limited by disability, she asserts, “I want to obtain my BSc and MSc, pursue an academic or research career, and find better ways for people with learning challenges to study, and change attitudes via education with real emphasis on morals and ethics.”

“I see the world differently, using my other senses and intuitiveness,” she says, relating that she’s a great guesser. Once she even beat her boyfriend (a Technion grad in space and aeronautics) at Ping Pong. “He was amazed that I was able to follow his motions and figure out which way the ball was coming.”

Sivan Abravaya says she enjoys running – “and so what if I fall, I will get up and continue on!” That seems to be the BIU undergrad’s life motto as she cheerfully pursues her goals, with seeing-eye Labrador, “Happy” at her side.
Two New Law Clinics
Make their Case
in the Clinical
Legal Education Program
for Social Justice

Bar-Ilan University’s law clinics program is unique in Israel. While the other universities offer their students the option to enroll in a legal aid clinic, at Bar-Ilan all law students are required to participate in one before graduating. This is due to the University’s ethic of encouraging social responsibility in its students.

An indication of the importance BIU places in its law clinics is the fact that it has hired a full-time professor to run the program. “This is my dream job,” enthuses Dr. Shiri Regev-Messalem, BIU’s new Academic Director of the Clinical Legal Education Program for Social Justice. “It combines my interest in academia, research and teaching with my desire to provide legal help to the disadvantaged. Bar-Ilan has invested a lot of resources into these clinics,” she adds.

Indeed, this year the Faculty of Law has added two new clinics to its roster, making a total of 10 clinics for some 200 students to choose from, a ratio of 20 students per clinic. While the eight existing clinics concentrate on issues of social concern, the main goal of the two new clinics is to expose law students to the internal legal processes within the Department of Justice and the State Attorney’s Office and to educate future lawyers to be agents of change in the public sector. The objective is to ultimately get future lawyers to impact society on a policy level as well as on a case-by-case basis — in order to truly influence social improvements.

The Criminal Justice Prosecution Clinic of the State Attorney’s Office is divided into two parts. The practical clinic takes place in Jerusalem where students go weekly to work with prosecutors and help them prepare their cases. The academic aspects of the course comprise classes held on campus that include joint courses with BIU’s Dr. David Weiner Criminal Law Clinic. Aimed at developing critical thinking, classes incorporate role-playing in which students assume opposite roles in order to gain understanding and compassion for the other side.

The Counseling and Legislation Clinic, headed by Dr. Ittai Bar-Siman-Tov and Dr. Assaf Harel, Advisor to the Attorney General, also involves a weekly visit to Jerusalem where students work with representatives of the Counseling and Legislation Unit at the Ministry of Justice on forming legislation. This is complemented by class work in which the legislative process is explored in depth. The clinic (the only one of its kind offered in Israel) gives students a unique opportunity to see how legislation works from the inside, in addition to the prestige of working with some of the top public lawyers in the country.
Israel defines itself as both Jewish and democratic. But while the definition of democracy is generally agreed upon, Judaism is variously seen as a religion, as a nation, and as a culture. Researchers at Bar-Ilan University are deeply involved in bridging the gap between Western democratic values and Judaism – in all its forms. And as Prof. Yedidia Stern explains, such ideological bridge-building is vital not only for ensuring Israel’s physical survival, but also for strengthening Jewish identity, national resilience, and support for the Jewish State around the world.

“Every year I visit Brandeis University, where I teach a seminar to a group of professors – including participants from America, India and even Egypt – who then go back to their home institutions to launch Israel studies programs,” says Stern, an expert on issues of religion and state who is a former Dean of the Law Faculty and currently serves as Vice President for Research at the Israel Democracy Institute. “Seminar participants gain a deeper understanding of how Israel is striving to harmonize liberal Western values and Judaism – a process that is continuously shaping public consciousness, and – if ultimately successful – will create a new, global model for the revitalization of Jewish identity, pride and commitment.”

According to Stern, BIU’s leadership in this area of research stems from a strategic decision related to recruitment. “In the Law School, it was decided that at least one third of the faculty should be working on questions related to the Jewish character of the State,” he says, adding that such academic activities draw upon Jewish law and philosophy to provide guidance on “hot button” issues in Israeli society such as minority and women’s rights, and also to elucidate basic legal issues such as contracts, torts and property law from the Jewish perspective.

At the same time, BIU legal experts foster dialogue that plays an important role in formulating much-needed constitutional norms. “For thousands of years, Judaism had no national component – something radically different from today’s experience of Jewish sovereignty,” Stern explains. “Through our research, the University is helping to give voice to Jewish tradition within our modern, democratic world.”

Stern stresses that the University’s contribution is not limited to the realm of law. “Academics from the BIU Jewish Studies and Humanities Faculties are involved in the preservation and advancement of Jewish language, literature and the creative arts. The Faculty of Social Sciences is helping to understand human behavior, and define policies for a just society rooted in Jewish ethical values,” he says. “The main job of the Israeli university – and Bar-Ilan in particular – is to sift these influences together in order to create a coherent Israeli identity. This is the key to building a society that will not only survive, but will have a sense of meaning and purpose.”

In one of his current projects, he is examining how Judaism’s foundational legal texts might be “advanced” to reflect on the changing circumstances brought about by Zionism’s success. “Jewish law pre-dates the emergence of the democratic process, and this is one of the reasons that it is difficult to apply halakhic concepts to the modern state of Israel,” Stern states. “But the State is the most important Jewish phenomenon to occur in a thousand years. In my upcoming book, I ask: is there such a thing as Zionist halakha? Can a legal code that is rooted in the Jewish past – and is geared toward defining proper behavior for individuals – help the Jewish nation grapple with present-day challenges in the public sphere? If we can answer these questions, we’ll be one step closer to calming the ideological competition, and freeing up the energies needed to create a vital, unified Jewish society in Israel and abroad.”
Member of Knesset
Dr. Aliza Lavie

"My BIU education in gender and communication has equipped me with knowledge and tools to push through legislation and run committees."

From politics to prayer, from media to academia, BIU’s Dr. Aliza Lavie is making her mark in Israel and the Jewish world. A new member of Knesset (MK), she chairs the Knesset’s Committee on the Status of Women, sits on the Finance Committee and spearheads legislation to advance women’s rights and gender equality, and boost the number of women reps on key decision-making bodies, such as the judicial appointments and health basket committees. "When Yair Lapid asked me to join his party, I was excited to have an opportunity to impact," says Lavie.

The former BIU Schupf scholar – whose PhD thesis focused on radio and gender in Israel – is an Israeli radio and TV program host, and member of the Council of the 2nd Authority for TV & Radio. Her best selling A Jewish Woman’s Prayer Book won a National Jewish Book Award. She also chairs a women’s Beit Midrash, promotes religious-secular discourse in Tel Aviv, and is on the directorate of a treatment center for young drug addicts.

Formally on leave from the University to serve in the 19th Knesset, the senior lecturer in the BIU School of Communication was instrumental in creating its Center for Media and Religion. Recently, she joined the School’s public diplomacy delegation, “Israel Up-Close 2014,” for a 10-day sweep of the US.

“The Schupf Fellowship has helped me pursue professional training, advance in academia and realize my career goals,” relays the mother of four, who was an IDF teacher soldier and Bnei Akiva emissary (with her husband) in Durban, South Africa. “My BIU education in gender and communication has equipped me with knowledge and tools to push through legislation and run committees.” A Brandeis U. research fellow after completing all three BIU degrees in 2002, Lavie wants to “encourage other women to advance in academia.” A role model for many, the MK professes that “Bar-Ilan University – with its commitment to Torah and worldly pursuits, and its plethora of talented scholars – is uniquely positioned to impact on Israel’s public sphere.”

Schupf Fellow
In addition, the Center has influenced public policy by running more than 300 symposia for defense, military industry, intelligence and foreign policy specialists, diplomats, ambassadors, businessmen, academics and politicians on security challenges in Asia, India, Europe, Germany, and Turkey.

Prof. Inbar relates that the BESA Center has pioneered a number of "firsts" – it was the first strategic studies center to identify Turkey as distancing itself from Israel – and the West; the first to identify the Oslo process as problematic when it was not politically correct to do so; and the first to deal with the implications of the proliferation of missiles by Israel’s enemies.

“We also hold closed dialogue-format workshops with other think tanks abroad,” adds Inbar. “We share regular dialogues with India, Singapore and other far-reaching places, as well as being very present on the North American continent. Much of our travelling (and hosting) is organized in coordination with Israeli government agencies.”

Among the Center’s highlights, Prof. Inbar notes that Benjamin Netanyahu has chosen the BESA podium as the venue from which to elucidate his key diplomatic policies eight times over the past 20 years, both as Opposition Leader and Prime Minister, most recently at the Center’s 20th anniversary international conference on “Israel Towards 2020: Perils and Prospects.”

Looking ahead to challenges the Center is addressing, Prof. Inbar cites that it is at the forefront of the fight against the ongoing anti-Israel BDS campaign. One thing is certain. In the years to come the BESA Center will continue to be committed to advancing a realist, conservative, and Zionist agenda in the search for security and peace for Israel.

Contributing to the Public Debate:
Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Celebrates Two Decades of Achievements

This year the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies was again ranked one of the top ten think tanks in the Middle East and North Africa by the prestigious Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. The distinction is not surprising. Since its founding 20 years ago, the Bar-Ilan University think tank has garnered impressive global recognition. It has partnered with the best global think tanks; published in top academic journals; been consulted by defense and foreign affairs ministries worldwide; and its researchers have been quoted in the leading newspapers, including The Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Time magazine, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post, as well as in the media in Australia, Canada, China, England, France, Greece, India, Spain, and Turkey.

“I sense that our contribution to public debate is tangible,” states BESA Center Director Prof. Efraim Inbar. “BESA Center publications and policy recommendations are being discussed by senior Israeli decision-makers in military and civilian life, the defense and foreign affairs establishments in Israel and abroad, the diplomatic corps, the press, the academic community, leaders of Jewish communities around the world, and the educated public.”

Over the past 20 years, the BESA Center has produced over 250 original policy papers on cyber warfare, the diplomatic process with the Palestinians, Egyptian revolution, French-Israeli security cooperation, Hezbollah, IDF force structure and budget, Iranian nuclear weapons, Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi-Israeli relations, South Korea’s Mideast policy, the Syrian civil war and chemical weapons, Turkish-Israel relations, and more. It has published 25 best selling books, including the recent The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security (Yediot Ahronot Books and Routledge Press, 2013).
Bar-Ilan University’s Faculty of Jewish Studies and each of its departments is the largest and most comprehensive of its kind in the world. Bar-Ilan is the only university that covers all areas of Jewish study, among them: Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Literature, Rabbinic Literature, Medieval Literature, Kabbala and Hasidism, Modern and Contemporary History, Jewish Intellectual History, Jewish Philosophy, Archaeology and Land of Israel Studies, and Jewish Art. The Faculty strongly emphasizes research into Hebrew language, as well as Ladino and Yiddish, the study of Semitic languages and Near Eastern studies.

Exemplary Scholarly Reputation

Jewish Studies faculty members are internationally-renowned and respected for their scholarly research, appearing regularly at international conferences and venues. With a number of its scholars winners of the coveted Israel Prize, every year dozens of books and articles are published in the most highly regarded journals of Jewish research. Major works include the Biblical Dictionary edited by the late Prof. Menachem Zvi Kaddari, A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods by Prof. Michael Sokoloff, and the latest publication of Mikra’ot Gedolot based on the unique Aleppo Codex manuscript, a project led by Prof. Menachem Cohen, all internationally acclaimed as the gold standard for works of this nature.

Making an Impact on Jewish Education in the Jewish State

The Faculty of Jewish Studies plays an integral role in designing Jewish studies educational programs and curricula for the school system of the State of Israel. A number of senior faculty members work hand-in-hand with educators in the Ministry of Education and with textbook publishers, playing a key role in shaping Jewish education both in the religious and secular classroom in such subjects as Bible, Jewish history, Hebrew language and Talmud, among others. In addition, the Faculty trains the largest number of Jewish studies teachers in the country.

International Influence

The Faculty of Jewish Studies is a magnet for international students, especially those from the U.S. and the Far East (China and Korea, in particular), who are drawn to the Faculty by virtue its high level of scholarship and the singular advantage of Bar-Ilan having all the disciplines of Jewish study readily available “under one roof.” “Our main goal is to expand our international influence even more,” says the new Faculty Dean, Prof. Elie Assis. “We want to create a major international school that will attract people from all over the world to the Faculty of Jewish Studies at Bar-Ilan University.”
Prof. Shamma Friedman, Israel Prize Laureate for Talmud Research

Prof. Shamma Friedman, of BIU’s Naftal-Yaffe Department of Talmud, is the recipient of this year’s Israel Prize for Research in Talmud for his “enormous and varied study of Talmudic literature, which has earned him an international reputation as a leading speaker on the study of the Mishna and Tosefta [supplement to the Mishna], and questions of literary structure and formation of the Talmud text,” according to the Prize selection committee.

Prof. Friedman is considered one of the outstanding scholars of rabbinic literature of our time. His online Talmud Text Databank website encompasses an extraordinary collection of virtually all primary textual witnesses of the Babylonian Talmud, including all full surviving manuscripts of Oriental, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and Yemenite provenance; complete manuscripts and first printed editions of tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, and over one thousand fragments from the Cairo and European archives—many as both texts and digital images.

Prof. Friedman was born in the United States in 1937. He was ordained as a rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1964 and received his doctorate there in 1966. He has taught Talmud and rabbinics at Harvard University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Tel Aviv University, the Hebrew University, and the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, and has taught and supervised students of Talmud at BIU for two decades. A member of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, in 2010 he received the prestigious Landau Prize in Rabbinic Literature and Talmud.

Jewish Studies in Action

Jewish Studies Facts & Figures

- 1500 courses and programs
- 150 staff members
- 9 academic departments
- 23 centers and research institutes
- 30 endowed chairs
- 2,500 undergraduate and graduate students of whom 400 are doctoral candidates
- 4,000 students in the Helena and Paul Shulman School of Basic Jewish Studies
Dr. Ronit Irshai is fueling an Orthodox feminist revolution. One of a select cadre of scholars exploring the “dynamite combination” of halakha and feminist thought, she is a sought-after speaker, author of an innovative work on fertility and Jewish law, and activist in the Orthodox Jewish feminist organization Kolech. “My firm commitment to halakha, human dignity and equality inspires me to find ways to increase women’s involvement in synagogue and other rituals,” stresses Irshai, a former Doctoral Fellow of Excellence and recipient of a Schupf post-doctorate scholarship. “This is Tikkun Olam!”

After hearing Prof. Tamar Ross’s “fascinating lectures” on Judaism and feminism, she enrolled in BIU’s nascent gender studies program, learning with its founder, the late Prof. Dafna Izraeli, with Ross and Prof. Noam Zohar as advisors. “My doctoral fellowship afforded me with a great opportunity and crucial support,” recalls Irshai, who was then expecting her fifth child. Now the program’s academic advisor and a lecturer, she was a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School – “a dream experience” for Irshai, the first in her family to obtain a PhD.

“BIU is the only university that deals in depth with the connection between Judaism and feminism – an oxymoron for many secular feminists,” she says. “Fostering a feminist approach to the philosophy of Jewish law is still a challenging task both within academia and in the Modern Orthodox community. However slowly, but surely, we see progress.”

Charting a bold path with her hybrid commitment to both halakha and feminism, Irshai, who dons a tallit and reads the Torah in her synagogue (from the women’s section) advocates “consulting the books to find ways to enable women to enlarge their part. I see it as a spiritual revolution to bring women closer to holiness.”
Established in 2011, the new Bar-Ilan School of Medicine in the Galilee is expected to improve both the local medical infrastructure and access to patient care. But the most dramatic, long-term change may come from the School’s educational philosophy, which provides students with a thorough grounding in the “translational” scientific research upon which all clinical advances depend. By recruiting faculty members from front lines of basic science, the School helps students understand the mechanics of the maladies against which they, as professional clinicians, will do battle.

Hepatitis C – and the Cancer Connection
Dr. Meital Gal-Tanamy recently returned to Israel from the University of Texas. Her work relates to Hepatitis C, an infectious disease linked to cancer onset.

“Hepatitis C is a major cause of both chronic liver disease and liver cancer,” Gal-Tanamy says. “In our lab, we’re examining how the human immune system responds to Hepatitis C infection. This may eventually help us design a new vaccine that could save lives.”

In another project, Gal-Tanamy is examining the three-way balance – between the viral genome, the liver cell genome, and the immune response – that “tips” the liver toward malignancy, adding that liver cancer – which cannot be treated effectively with either chemotherapy or radiation – is the third most common cause of cancer mortality. “The better we understand this dynamic, the closer we will be to finding a way to turn it around.”

Personalized Medicine
Cancer is also the focus of Prof. Izhak Haviv, who recently returned to Israel from a senior research position in Australia. According to Haviv, successful treatment for cancer depends on the drug – and the patient.

“Effective chemotherapy depends on a number of factors, including patient-specific DNA mutations. In our lab, we examine cancer tissue samples to identify biomarkers linked to particular treatment outcomes. This gives a molecular ‘mugshot’ that will someday allow doctors to pre-screen their patients, and select the treatment – or combination of treatments – that is most appropriate. This approach may also generate renewed interest in existing medications that failed clinical trials in the past, but may be effective in certain cases.”

The Genetics of Aging
Muscle and bone-related ailments are also being examined. Dr. David Karasik – an expert in the genetics of aging who taught at Tel Aviv University, Boston University and Harvard Medical School – analyzes patients’ pre-disposition for developing inherited conditions such as muscular dystrophy, osteoporosis and osteoarthritis.

Now directing the School’s Musculoskeletal Genetics Lab, Karasik takes a systems-level approach to identifying genetic patterns that govern disease symptoms. He is also involved in international research groups that pool their data in order to create large-scale analyses of healthy and diseased individuals. “The goal of this type of research is to create a ‘roadmap’ for preventative medicine – something that will help us all lead healthier and longer lives.”

From the Lab to the Clinic
By linking practical training to an exposure to advanced translational research, the Medical School is creating a cadre of deeply knowledgeable doctors who are equipped to promote health in the north – and throughout the country.
The idea was to help young children overcome their fear of doctors,” explains Prof. Andrew Luder, Vice Dean of the Medical School’s four-year program. “Our mission is to be accountable to society, reaching out to children, the elderly, or anyone in between.”

The Medical School clinical curriculum requires first-year students to conduct a study within a health-related community institution. Under the supervision of faculty mentors, students evaluate the institution’s structure, its needs, and its effectiveness, and – at a special end-of-year program open to the entire faculty – present suggestions for improvement.

Another program is the Chronic Pain Project, in which each student “adopts” a patient suffering from a chronic condition such as diabetes or osteoarthritis. Visiting patients in their homes and accompanying them on doctor visits and hospitalizations, students gain empathy and interpersonal skills that will serve them well with future patients.

The Medical School also presents health-related “open days” and lectures, including an explanation of the government’s campaign to vaccinate the public against a recent outbreak of polio.

According to Luder, this model community outreach is innovative in Israel. “Just like our emphasis on translational research, our goal is to have a positive impact on the community,” he says. “This means being in touch, on all levels.”
**September 2013**
- Israel National Research Center for Electrochemical Propulsion (INREP) Annual Meeting [Department of Chemistry]
- An Evening of Science, with the Minister of Science, Technology and Space, Yaakov Pen [Research Authority]
- Magic & the Brain [Leslie & Susan Gonda (Goldsmiths) Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center]

**October 2013**
- Ziv Medical Center’s Conference for Midwives and Gynecology [School of Medicine in the Galilee]
- 20th String Processing and Information Retrieval Symposium (SPIRE) [Department of Computer Science]
- BESA Center 20th Anniversary Conference – Israel Towards 2020: Perils and Prospects, with address by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies] (See article on p. …]

**Law, Society and Economics in a Changing Country: Symposium honoring the publication of Supreme Court Justice Daphne Barak-Erez’s two new books** [Faculty of Law]
- Israel Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (ISPARA) Conference [Louis & Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work]
- Humanists at Work. Do Research Riddles and the Pleasures of Pursuing Them [Faculty of Humanities]

**And the Earth Will Tremble** – Research and Academic Conference Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Yom Kippur War [Department of Middle Eastern Studies]

**November 2013**
- Sport and Media [School of Communication]
- The 21st Marathon for Ladino Research Marking the Tenth Anniversary of the Ladino Center [Naime & Yehoshua Salti Center for Ladino Studies]
- Nutrition, Feeding and Development in Early Childhood from Research to Practice [Baker Center for the Study of Development Disorders in Infants and Young Children]
- The Biblical Crops Society of Israel [Mina & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]

**December 2013**
- The 8th Conference on Juvenile Diabetes [School of Medicine in the Galilee]
- Broadening Geographical Horizons – The 54th Conference of the Israel Geographical Association [Department of Geography and Environment]
- TED Talks at the University
- International Academic Conference of the Raymond Ackerman Family Chair in Israeli Corporate Governance [The Graduate School of Business Administration]
- International Conference on All-Oxide Photovoltaics [Department of Chemistry]
- International Conference: Democratization of Risk Governance [Faculty of Law]

**January 2014**
- Challenging Hegemonic Culture: Jewish and Non-Jewish Voices in the Debates on Conversions and Assimilation in Germany before World War I [Israel & Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry]
- International Workshop on Trauma and the Family: A Life Span Perspective [Louis & Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work]
- Research Workshop of the Israel Science Foundation and the Research Institute for Econometrics [Department of Economics]
- White Coat Ceremony [School of Medicine in the Galilee]
- International Workshop on Thermal Analysis for Energy & Materials Applications [Department of Chemistry]
- International Winter Workshop on Symmetrical Cryptography [Department of Computer Science]

**February 2014**
- International Research Workshop on Focus Sensitive Expressions from a Cross Linguistic Perspective [Lechter Institute for Literary Research and the Lewis Family Foundation for Interdisciplinary Studies, The Program in Jewish Art, Faculty of Humanities]
- My Bible is Open – A Series of Lectures on the Bible [Zalman Shamir Bible Department]
- The Lifelong Bond of Siblings: Conference on the Siblings of Adults with Intellectual Disabilities [Louis & Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work]
- Concert #5: Gustav Mahler [Department of Music]

**March 2014**
- The 8th Annual Psychology Conference for Students [Department of Psychology]
- The Jews of Georgia: History and Culture [Aharon & Rachel Dahan Center for Culture, Society and Education in the Sephardic Heritage]
- Capability Enhancement through Performance Feedback Learning [Graduate School of Business Administration, the Economics Department, and the Management Department]
- Macro Economics Forum [Department of Economics, Aharon Meir Center for Banking, Azrieli Center for Economic Policy]
- The New Jewess: Gertrud Kolmar’s Critique of German Liberalism [Department of Comparative Literature – World Literature]
- Not That Safe, Yet Held: The Joint Effect of Need for Closure and Risk Aversion on Investment Decisions [Graduate School of Business Administration]
- In Vivo RNA Screening for Novel Therapeutic Cancer Targets [Mina & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]
- Book Launch: Synagogues in Lithuania [Program in Jewish Art, Faculty of Jewish Studies]
- The 2nd International Conference on Agunot [Faculty of Law]
- The 3rd Annual Conference on Genomics in Israel [Department of Computer Science]
- Closing Ceremony of the 52nd Biology Olympics [Mina & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]
- "Hakol Pituach": Open Beit Midrash for All - A series of lectures on Religion, Science and Philosophy. A Commentary on Humanity based on Pirkei Avot
- Lecture by Actress Lea Koenig at Brookdale Enrichment Program
- The 10th Ambassadors’ Forum – Putin’s Russia Re-Enters the Middle East: Analysis and Implications [Division of External Relations]
- Conference commemorating Dr. Matti Dagon z”l: Challenges in Managing the Religious Education System in Israel [Churgin School of Education]
- International Conference on the Biology of Aging [Mina & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]
- Negotiation with Palestinians: Dead End or Window of Opportunity? [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies, Security Council of Israel]
- Conference honoring Prof. Ella Belfer on History, Politics, Literature - Jewish Political Tradition: Individualism vs. Universalism [Department of General History]
- Robocup Junior 2014 National Competition [School of Engineering]
**Awards and Prizes**

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<th>Prize</th>
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<tr>
<td>Prof. Doron Aurbach, of the Department of Chemistry and Director of the Nano CleanTech Center at the Bar-Ilan Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA), was awarded the International Battery Association (IBA) Yeager Award for his work in advancing battery technology.</td>
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<td>Dr. Ido Bachelet, of the Mina &amp; Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences, was awarded the Leon and Maria Taubblatt Prize for Excellence in Medical Research for 2012/2013 for his research on biological &amp; biomedical applications of DNA-based molecular robots.</td>
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<td>Prof. Sereshon Bacon, of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, together with Dr. Mirjam Rajner, of the Program for Jewish Art, won an ISF grant for an international research workshop to investigate the Holocaust in Yugoslavia. The workshop is partly sponsored by Yad Vashem.</td>
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<td>Dr. Yael Bloch-Elkon, of the School of Communication, was honored with the prestigious Bruce E. Gronbeck Political Communication Research Award.</td>
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<td>Dr. Yossef Charvit, of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, received the 2013 Gaon Prize for Research and Contribution to the Legacy of North African Jewry.</td>
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<td>Dr. Hadar Dancig-Rosenberg, of the Faculty of Law, won the prestigious Gershon Shaked Award for his research.</td>
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<td>Prof. Shamma Friedman, of the Naftali-Tzafit Department of Talmud, is the recipient of the prestigious Israel Prize for Talmud research.</td>
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<td>Prof. Yair Goldreich, of the Department of Geography and Environment, won the Luke Howard Award, offered annually by the International Association for Urban Climate.</td>
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<td>Prof. (Emeritus) Shlomo Havlin, of the Department of Physics, won the Rothschild Award for Chemistry and Physics for 2014, for his exceptional contribution in the field of statistical physics of complex systems and its substantive effect on such fields as mathematics, computer sciences and biology.</td>
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<td>Prof. Gal Kaminka, of the Department of Computer Science, won the 2013 Landau Prize in Sciences and Research in the robotics category from Mifal HaPayis.</td>
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<td>Dr. Ommg Koren, of the School of Medicine in the Galilee, was awarded the prestigious Alon Fellowship.</td>
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<td>Prof. Sam Lehman-Wilzig, Vice Head of School of Communication, was appointed to a new council started by the Minister of Communication, “Public Council for Regulation of the Future of Commercial Broadcasts”</td>
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<td>Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, member of BIU’s Board of Trustees and Council of Founders, who serves as dean of the Har Etzion Yeshiva and is widely regarded as a leader of Modern Orthodoxy, is the recipient of this year’s Israel Prize for his contribution to “Jewish Religious Literature”</td>
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<td>Prof. Yehuda Lindell, of the Department of Computer Science, was awarded an ERC research grant.</td>
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<td>Prof. Amikam Nachmani, past Chairman of the Department of Political Science, has been awarded the 2013 Minas Nomokos Prize for Security Research Excellence from the Greek Research Institute for European American Studies (HIEAS).</td>
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<td>Prof. Gideon Parchomovsky, of the Faculty of Law, is the recipient of the Zeltner Prize for senior researchers.</td>
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<td>The Roth and Emanuel Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women in the Faculty of Law has received the Gorn Prize from the Israeli Association of Public Law for its noteworthy activities in promoting human rights.</td>
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<td>Prof. Gerald Steinberg, of the Department of Political Studies and Founder and President of NGO Monitor, received the 2013 Menachem Begin Award on behalf of the organization.</td>
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<td>Dr. Galia Yanovskvy, of the Department of French Language and Culture, received an Order of Chivalry (Chevalier dans l’Ordre des Palmes académiques) from the French Ministry of Education.</td>
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**Changing of the Guard and New Appointments**

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<tr>
<td>Prof. Kimmy Caplan, of the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry, was appointed a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association for Jewish Studies (AJS).</td>
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<td>Dr. Tova Ganzel, of the Zalman Shazar Department of Bible and the Midrasha, is the new Director of the Midrasha, in the Ludwig &amp; Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies.</td>
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<td>Prof. Yuval Ganeli, of the Department of Physics, is the new Director of the Bar-Ilan Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA).</td>
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<td>Dr. Eli Even is the new Director of the Bar-Ilan Research Authority.</td>
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<td>Prof. Aren Maier, of the Martin (Sussuz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, was appointed Associate Editor of Israel Exploration Journal.</td>
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<td>Prof. Shulamit Michaeli, of the Mina &amp; Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences, was appointed its Dean.</td>
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<td>Prof. Louis Rowen, of the Department of Mathematics, was named Fellow of the American Mathematical Society (AMS).</td>
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<td>Prof. Susan Rothstein, of the Department of English Literature and Linguistics, was appointed a member of the Academia Europaea.</td>
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<td>Prof. Halka Schaps, of the Department of Mathematics, is the new Dean of the Faculty of Exact Sciences.</td>
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<td>Prof. Eliezer Schlossberg, of the Department of Arabic, was appointed Chairman of the Arabic and the Arab Islamic World Advisory Committee of the Israel Ministry of Education.</td>
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<td>Prof. Shlomo Shpiro, of the Department of Political Studies, is its new Chairman.</td>
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<td>Prof. Yarda Soskelne, of the Louis &amp; Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work, was appointed Chairman of the Social Work Council.</td>
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