Tikkun Olam: BIU's Otzmot Program Brings the Concept to Life
Dear Friends,

Bar-Ilan University’s motto is “tradition of excellence.” “Excellence” refers to the fact that Bar-Ilan is one of Israel’s most respected institutions of academic higher learning and research, while “tradition” reminds us of the University’s veneration of our Jewish legacy and heritage, reflected in our Faculty of Jewish Studies – the largest in the world.

This issue of BIU Today is devoted to the Jewish content, values, heritage, traditions and identity studied and explored at Bar-Ilan University. A glance at the Contents clearly reveals the theme of this magazine. Aside from the articles focusing on Jewish studies (Bible, Hasidic traditions, Halakha or Jewish law, and Torah U’Mada) even those on mathematics, medicine, brain science, philosophy, bioengineering, computer-programming and conflict-resolution studies, emphasize, or hint at our Jewish sources. Indeed, our cover story on BIU’s unique program for students with intellectual disabilities, gives poignant meaning to the well-known saying: “The world stands on three things: on Torah study, on the service of God, and on kind deeds.” [Ethics of the Fathers 1:2]. Torah study is represented by Bar-Ilan University’s pursuit of truth, learning and science, while 7ikkun Olam – which is the concept of repairing the world (through kind or healing deeds) – is embodied in our outreach and special education programs.

This BIU Today is the last one in which I will be writing to you as the University’s president. I am happy that this issue is dedicated to a theme so close to my personal beliefs and to which I subscribe so deeply. In the close to 18 years in which I have served as president, Bar-Ilan has made quantum leaps in both its physical and academic growth and expansion, while never forgetting its founding fathers’ goals of creating a Jewish university for the Jewish people. I am proud to have been a part of this lofty goal.

Wishing you all a Shana Tova u’Gmar Hatima Tova.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Prof Moshe Kaveh
President
Otzmot – Innovative Program for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: First-of-its-Kind in Israel

“The Acharonim, or rabbis from the medieval period and onward, ruled that anyone with intellectual disabilities who had the intelligence of at least a six-year-old should be educated to fulfill Jewish commandments,” says Hefziba Lifshitz-Vahav, associate professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences, who, in 2009, corroborated the Rabbis’ ruling among individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID). In that study, she found that adolescents and adults with ID are capable to earn a bachelor’s degree, at the University, but allows those who are capable to earn a bachelor’s degree, as well.

Named Otzmot – “Empowerment” in English – the program is the brainchild of Prof. Lifshitz-Vahav, who also heads the MA track in Intellectual Disabilities at the Department of Special Education at the Ministry of Education. According to Prof. Lifshitz-Vahav, students in the first stage of Otzmot study for four academic hours once a week at the School of Education, taking courses in developmental psychology, self-advocacy, and in how to use the library and computers. The lecturers are regular students in the Master’s track, where teaching in Otzmot is part of the practicum.

In addition to educational objectives, Otzmot’s social goals are to expose students with ID to students with typical development and to empower and strengthen the self-image, confidence, and quality of life of students with ID. During this first stage, Otzmot students mingle with students in the Master’s track in the classroom and during breaks, in coffee shops, and around campus.

“It’s a constructive experience for the Master’s students, as well. They realize that students with ID can learn and they begin to question their notions about the cognitive frontier of individuals with intellectual disabilities,” she says. Prof. Lifshitz-Vahav’s own research in part debunked these notions. She found that people with ID can significantly improve their cognitive abilities through the use of interventions. She also found that chronological age plays an important role in the cognitive abilities of individuals with mental retardation.

“People with ID experience a delay in their mental development during their early years. My research shows that among this population there is compensation in the later years because of greater maturity and cumulative life experience. This compensation enables older people with ID to learn and benefit more from interventions,” Prof. Lifshitz-Vahav says.

The second stage of Otzmot involves the participation of regular students in the BA program. This past year, 12 Otzmot students joined the regular undergraduate seminar, “Learning and Development of Individuals with Disability during Life Span,” to study the psychological capital of people with ID. Positive psychological capital is the positive developmental state of an individual as characterized by high self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resiliency. As part of the seminar, this past year taught by PhD candidate Shoshana Nissim (pictured above: bottom row, left), students with typical development and students with ID studied subjects related to self-advocacy within the framework of peer learning. The students with ID learned about research and completed a mutual research project with the other students.

The third stage, to begin in academic year 2013-2014, will see the enrollment of four or five highly capable students with ID in regular undergraduate courses at the School of Education. They will register through the University as auditing the courses – they can choose whether or not to take the exams – and will be assigned a supervisor to help them in and outside of class. They will take one course at a time and if they take the exams and pass, each course will be counted toward a BA degree. Otzmot, the first program of its kind in Israel, is based on a model in Canada. However, in the Canadian version, students who make it to the third stage work toward a certificate rather than an actual degree. The BIU program goes further.

“I want them to do all the tasks of the regular students. And, if they can, I want them to go on and on until they earn their degree.” Prof. Lifshitz-Vahav says.
Aster joined Bar-Ilan in 2012 and teaches in both the Zalman Shamir Department of Bible and the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology at the University. The aim of all his classes: to make the biblical period come alive by setting it in a broad historical context, then relating that to key issues gripping contemporary Israel.

For example, to understand Isaiah, one must also take into account “what was going on politically in that period, how that created intellectual challenge and tension, and how the ideas that came out of the period are similar to those we find today,” Aster explains.

These include issues that will be familiar to anyone who follows the news: questions of foreign influence, the limits of authority in a global environment, how to relate to controlling other peoples. “You quickly learn that these are not concerns that arose just in the 20th century,” he says.

Aster came to Bar-Ilan from Yeshiva University in New York, where he was an assistant professor of Bible. He has held teaching and research positions at the University of Pennsylvania as well as a number of Israeli institutions: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Haifa University, Hebrew University and Bar-Ilan where he taught in 2002, 2003 and 2006.

Indeed, Aster has been eager to return to Israel on aliyah ever since. When Bar-Ilan offered him the job last year as part of its program to recruit up-and-coming liberal arts scholars who are devoted to Jewish and Zionist values, he and his family jumped at the chance.

Bar-Ilan has a unique perspective on his area of expertise, Aster says. “There is a recognition at the University that the Jewish intellectual tradition is expressed in our geography, in our daily lives, and in an openness to the Jewish people as a whole.” He particularly enjoys teaching in the Helene and Paul Shulman Center for Basic Jewish Studies, where he strives to create “a dialogue among Israelis from very different backgrounds around the Jewish texts that unite us all.” His discussion worksheets encourage students to grapple with the same interpretative and theological challenges that have occupied Jewish thinkers throughout the generations and that are still being debated today.

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Ever the Isaiah expert, Aster is now finishing a book on the prophet entitled God in the Shadow of Empire, which focuses on the reaction of the prophet to Assyrian imperial claims. The Assyrians may be gone today, but the lessons from those turbulent days so long ago continue to stay relevant in the courses of Dr. Shawn Zelig Aster.

Dr. Shawn Zelig Aster: Making the Bible Relevant Today

“ If it’s not necessarily everything we want, should we still be grateful to God?”

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Prof. Zvi Mark:

Mastering the Hasidic Masters
From Rebbe Nahman to Reb Levy Yitzhak

In the early 1980s, Zvi Mark — then a Hesder Yeshiva student — picked up a copy of Sippurei Maasiyot — The Tales of Rabbi Nahman — and was captivated by the imaginative stories. Only after his initial introduction to Rabbi Nahman, the author, did he become acquainted with Rabbi Nahman, the thinker, master and founder of the Bratslav (also Breslov, Breslev) Hasidic movement. “This work and personality intrigued me. I found a fascinating blend of literature and thought. Even his life story (1772-1810) reads like a novel, while posing religious and ideological challenges,” recalls the BIU Hebrew literature professor.

This was prior to the dramatic revival of Bratslav Hasidism, and the mass pilgrimages to Rabbi Nahman’s grave in Uman, in the Ukraine. “Only during MA studies at BIU, did I decide to focus on Hasidism and Rabbi Nahman, thus combining my twin passions – Jewish thought and Modern Hebrew literature,” relates Mark, who holds a PhD from the Hebrew University.

By then, Bratslav Hasidism was on the upswing, with its growing number of adherents — often with long side curls and knitted kippot dancing on Israeli street corners, striving for an intense, joyous relationship with G-d. Bratslav Hasidism “Berdichev – Medzhibozh” (R. Rabbi Nahman’s birthplace and home of his great grandfather — the Ba’al Shem Tov, the first Hasidic leader). He hopes that the seminar — which was organized by Sefer: The Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization and held under BIU’s academic auspices – will become an annual event and facilitate future collaboration in accessing untapped scholarly resources in Eastern Europe.

Probing a more extensive corpus of material than has been researched until now, Mark has exposed several chapters of secret tales of Rabbi Nahman that document many of his revelations. “My textual study of tales formerly withheld by Bratslavian censors offers an analysis of their literary value and their expression of Rabbi Nahman’s spiritual world.” Recently, he was appointed incumbent of BIU’s new Chair for the Study of Hasidism and the Teachings of Rabbi Levy Yitzhak of Berdichev, founded by Levy Yitzhak [a direct descendant of his namesake] and Yehudit Rachmani.

The Chair is sponsoring a new course on Rabbi Levy Yitzhak, given by Mark’s PhD student, Rabbi Zeev Kitsis. Its pilot project for amassing and researching tunes and songs attributed to Rabbi Levy Yitzhak, may lead to the creation of an online Hasidic tune archives and academic catalog accessible to the public. Plans are in the offing to compile a volume of scholarly articles on Rabbi Levy Yitzhak [the “Jewish People’s defending advocate”]. This summer Mark and Kitsis lectured to Jewish students in the Ukraine at the School on Hasidism “Berdichev – Medzhibozh” [R. Rabbi Nahman’s birthplace and home of his great grandfather — the Ba’al Shem Tov, the first Hasidic leader]. He hopes that the seminar — which was organized by Sefer: The Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization and held under BIU’s academic auspices – will become an annual event and facilitate future collaboration in accessing untapped scholarly resources in Eastern Europe.

Taking issue with other scholars, Mark offers a radically different understanding of Rabbi Nahman, one that moves him closer to the kabbalistic-Hasidic milieu in which he was raised, and returns him from the radical existentialist mode into which some of his earlier interpreters had thrust him. Wrote one noted critic of his book, Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, “Mark not only goes a long way to balancing the rather one-sided picture painted by earlier scholars, but also provides a very penetrating analysis of the major foundations of Nahman’s faith and practice.”

“Two hundred years since Rabbi Nahman’s demise, his philosophical writings and literary creation remain lively and provocative materials in both Jewish culture and the New Age movement,” observes Mark, who visited Uman four times [three on Rosh Hashana] along with some 30,000 pilgrims, spanning the ages and Jewish spectrum. “It was a powerful experience to see the town transformed with people, who day and night, speak, sing, dance, and learn R. Nahman. It was an opportune time for encountering new Bratslav Hasidic streams and directions.”

While not a Bratslav Hasid, Prof. Zvi Mark says that “Rabbi Nahman is more than a research focus; he is a source of inspiration and one of my Rebbes and teachers.”
Prof. Yair Lorberbaum: Looking at Halakha through Different Prisms

Prof. Yair Lorberbaum is a scholar whose interests lie in the intersection of Halakha, Jewish law, legal theory, and theology. In his work as a member of the faculty at the Law School and also as an expert on Halakha, Jewish thought, and legal theory, he mines the connections between these three fields to shed light on how to better analyze the former.

“Legal theory and theology are prisms through which to study Halakha,” Prof. Lorberbaum says, adding that to approach Jewish law from these two dimensions “nurturesthe way we can better understand halakhic discourse and reasoning.”

An attorney by training as well as a doctor of philosophy (summa cum laude) from the Hebrew University, Prof. Lorberbaum’s academic and philosophical perspectives make him well-suited to measure the impact of legal theory and theology on Halakha.

“Legal theory is how one thinks about a legal system. A legal system talks about specific law or rules—for example, how do you create a contract? The rules tell you what to do and what not to do and whether or not you are liable.

“Legal theory, on the other hand, asks conceptual and philosophical questions about a legal system—for example, what is the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law (i.e., its reasons), a legal obligation and a moral obligation. These types of questions are important because they sometimes impact on how a law is applied,” he says.

Important, too, is the impact of theology on a legal system. Law—in Prof. Lorberbaum’s case Halakha—often derives from religious and theological philosophical conceptions. As an example, he cites his book, Zelem Elokim—Halakhah ve-Aggadah (In God’s Image: Halakha and Aggadah), published in Hebrew in 2004 and winner of the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Book Award for 2007-2010 (the award is bestowed once every three years to the author of the best recent book in the field of thought). In it, he examines how the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud [first through fifth centuries C.E.] understood Zelem Elokim, the idea that humanity was created in God’s image.

“Zelem Elokim is a unique Jewish theological concept that derives from the first chapter of the Bible and became a central theological idea—and also a legal principle—within early rabbinic literature. It is the notion that the Divine Presence resides within humanity,” says Prof. Lorberbaum, who expects the English-language version of his book to be released soon. “I wanted to see how the early rabbis analyzed this idea and applied it in designing parts of Jewish law. To see the weight they assigned to it within their world view.”

To elucidate their thinking, he turned to several areas of practice in their ancient world at large, among them the death penalty and procreation—areas within which the concept of Zelem Elokim impacted upon Halakha.

“In the Roman world, for example, executions tended to crush the body as part of the intention to create a spectacle and to achieve deterrence. However, from the Jewish perspective, because of their notion of Divine Presence within humanity, the rabbis wanted executions to keep the body intact. They wanted no harm to come to the body—no impression left on it.”

Because of Zelem Elokim, the rabbis made strangulation, one of the four halakhically acceptable modes of execution, a main method in death-penalty cases. More important, “in an informal way, they abolished capital punishment altogether, arguing that it harms the Divine image and may be tantamount to decide [‘diminishing the divine image’].” Prof. Lorberbaum explains.

In his book he also examines the early rabbis’ perception of human beings as “images” of the Divine—“their view that God is drawn to His image, which is the human body, thus His presence thereof.” While they placed limitations on executions, in their rulings the rabbis strongly emphasized procreation because of the view that it “increases the Divine image in the world by creating more vehicles in which to embody God’s presence.

“The idea of Zelem Elokim is a theological, not legal, idea. And, yet it has many moral, legal, and halachic implications,” he sums up.

A native and current resident of Jerusalem, Prof. Lorberbaum joined the Faculty of Law at Bar-Ilan in 1996, where he teaches legal theory at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. He has published numerous books and articles on Jewish thought, Jewish law, and political and legal theory, and he is a frequent guest lecturer and visiting professor in the US at institutions including Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, University of Pennsylvania, and New York and Yale universities.

“Legal theory and theology are prisms through which to study Halakha.”
Bioethicists come from a variety of backgrounds and have training in an array of disciplines – medicine, law, philosophy, and political science, for example, making it interdisciplinary in nature.

Miriam Bentwich’s fascination with questions about ethics and morality dates back to her early childhood when her mother used to read her stories from the Bible. Three-year-old Miriam felt perplexed by issues raised in these narratives, especially the story about Joseph and his brothers. “My mother says I kept asking why the brothers sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites and lied to their father, Jacob, about it,” says Dr. Miriam Bentwich, supervisor of the Medical Humanities Program and lecturer in bioethics and medical ethics at Bar-Ilan’s School of Medicine in the Galilee.

Nowadays, Dr. Bentwich wrestles instead with questions pertaining to medical ethics and its fundamental value, “First, do no harm.” A directive from ancient times instructing physicians to care for the health of their patients, in contemporary medical ethics this code of conduct has come to include other directives, as well. Key among them, and also dating back to the biblical/prophetic era, is the principle of social justice.

“Today, caring for a patient’s health and well-being also encompasses a commitment to equity and fairness by making basic medical treatment available to all people without prejudice and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, culture and the like,” Dr. Bentwich says.

She contends, however, that the principle of social justice as it relates to caring for patients must go further still. Pointing to the growing emphasis in recent years to address and accommodate non-Western multicultural perspectives, she says bioethicists now recognize that social justice in the realm of medicine must also encompass consideration of the cultural and religious viewpoints harbored by individuals and groups.

“Along with — and in reaction to — the quantum leaps in contemporary medicine, many religious and ethnic communities developed their own stances with respect to ethical issues. Therefore, from these perspectives, this expanded version of ‘First, do no harm’ must take into account religious, philosophical, and cultural considerations as part of caring for the individual patient’s physical and mental wellbeing,” she says.

It must also take into account considerations for clinical research among multicultural and usually marginalized groups, a new understanding that is leading a growing number of physicians and scientists to partner with such communities — its members and organization representatives — in all aspects of biomedical research from conception to design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and communication of results.

Called Community-Based Participatory Research, or CBPR, Dr. Bentwich says this approach “aims to increase the knowledge and understanding of biomedicine and enhance health and quality of life while respecting these marginalized and multicultural communities’ perspectives and interests.” Her own research at Bar-Ilan will lead to designing CBPR guidelines for communities of Arabs, Bedouins, Druzes, Ultra Orthodox Jews, and others in the Galilee.

“Proper guidelines will offer an enhanced and better baseline for the conduct of future group-wise, ethically sensitive biomedical research in the area, which the Safed-based Bar-Ilan School of Medicine is particularly interested in,” she explains, adding that, “If my teaching and research assist in shaping humane and ethically oriented physicians, as well as contribute to the quality of health services offered to the population in the Galilee, then I’ve done my job.”

Prior to Bar-Ilan, Dr. Bentwich, a former Fulbright visiting scholar at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, and a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Toronto, was a researcher at the Minerva Center for Research on End of Life, Faculty of Health Sciences at Tel-Aviv University. Before that she held positions at Ben-Gurion University and the Hebrew University, the latter where she earned her BA, MA, and PhD degrees in political science with particular training in political philosophy. Her publications, including the recent book, Reclaiming Liberty (Palgrave-MacMillan), revolve around topics in political philosophy and public policy, as well as how they intersect with medical ethics and bioethics.

“Bioethicists come from a variety of backgrounds and have training in an array of disciplines — medicine, law, philosophy, and political science, for example, making it interdisciplinary in nature,” she says, noting that Bar-Ilan specifically wanted someone with her kind of background to head its Medical Humanities Program.

The move to Bar-Ilan brings the Rehovot native back to an area of the country she first encountered while serving in the IDF as a teacher/commander. And, although some might call her a pioneer for relocating to the north, she demurs. “It’s simply a privilege to be part of the fresh, vibrant, enthusiastic and collaborative team of researchers that comprise the Bar-Ilan School of Medicine.”
Prof. Avi Sagi:

Developing New Interpretations of What it Means to be Human

…and Jewish

Can morality exist without God? What happens when a Jewish convert becomes non-observer? Can Judaism function without a clear definition of the divine? And what does Jewish tradition have to offer in the debate over military ethics? These are questions that occupy the ever-active mind—and many of the nearly 40 books written by—Bar-Ilan University Philosophy Prof. Avi Sagi.

Sagi’s answers may surprise and, in some cases, even shock you. The professor, who has spent his entire 35-year career at Bar-Ilan, including receiving his BA, MA, and PhD degrees from the University, consistently challenges traditional religious assumptions.

Take God and morality, for example. While many might argue that morality necessarily stems from the existence of a Creator, Sagi contends exactly the opposite: morality is entirely autonomous, he says; a precondition, in fact, to being in a covenant with God. Sagi’s reasoning is complex—and it’s the basis for a book he wrote together with Prof. Daniel Statman—Religion and Morality—which has been translated into English. But, as he attempts to summarize it, “morality is on the first floor, Jewish law and ritual are only on the second.” And you have to enter through the front door.

Sagi takes a similarly contrarian approach in his insistence that the desire to “define” God is inherently misguided. In his book Prayer After the Death of God, Sagi claims that Judaism can be understood perfectly well without any theoretical construct of the supernatural. “The question is not whether God is there or not,” he explains. “The question is whether the Jewish religion depends on having a developed theory about what is God. And I believe it does not. Faith should not be emphasized over practice.”

Sagi’s thoughtful approach reached its most tangible application through his role on the team that rewrote the IDF’s Code of Ethics—“the Spirit of the IDF”—to replace the previous work by Tel Aviv University Prof. Asa Kasher. Starting in the mid-1990’s, Sagi helped create guidelines that address moral questions in war: how to deal with terrorists who hide among a civilian population; what should be the relationship between men and women serving together.

Sagi’s formulations on morality and the challenges of modernity play a clear role in his work for the IDF and in his role as academic director of the Military Ethics Research Project at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, another hat that the busy 60-year-old wears.

His conclusion—once again surprising: “Leave the rabbis out of it. Jewish tradition really doesn’t give good answers to the new kinds of situations we find ourselves in,” he says. “We have the biblical tradition, yes, but I hope no one wants to live by this! Even the great rabbis of the Talmud didn’t accept it.” Sagi’s formulations on morality and modernity play a clear role in his work for the IDF and in his role as academic director of the Military Ethics Research Project at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, another hat that the busy 60-year-old wears.

“Human society is dependent on the creative act of interpretation itself. It’s what we humans tell about ourselves,” Sagi says. The holistic, interdisciplinary approach of the program, he adds, is the only one of its type in the world. “I receive questions from other universities all the time, who want to learn our model of teaching.”

Sagi is nothing if not prolific. His many books cover an expansive philosophical range. Together with Bar-Ilan Prof. Yedidia Stern, the former head of the University’s law faculty, Sagi also edits a journal called “Democratic Culture.” Somewhere, he finds time to teach as well. This year, his classes include “Identity, Selfhood and Culture,” and “Basic Ontological Concepts of Existence in the Existential Tradition.” Whether in the classroom or on the battlefield, Prof. Avi Sagi is undoubtedly working on his next creative interpretation melding Jewish tradition, hermeneutics, classic philosophy, and the challenges of modernity. We’ll all come out more enriched because of it.
Seeking Peace and Pursuing it

Bar-Ilan University Professor of Conflict Resolution Jay Rothman recalls with a grin how at his wedding, years ago, his new father-in-law publically proclaimed, “I am so lucky, I now have a son-in-law who will never be out of work - he aims to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict!” Rothman hasn’t given up yet and, in the meantime, arriving at mutually agreeable outcomes in seemingly intractable situations has become the professor’s specialty. He has contributed to inter-communal cooperation within Israel and has had international success in many other unlikely spots around the world over a 25-year career in academia and through the ARIA Group, a conflict resolution and collaborative planning firm he established and led.

Now, Bar-Ilan is the recipient of Rothman’s extensive theoretical and practical experience. He immigrated to Israel last year to teach in the University’s Interdisciplinary Graduate Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation, becoming the first full-time professor dedicated entirely to the program in its 13-year history. “This dignifies the field as not being just a derivative of other disciplines,” he explains. “And for me personally, it is the fulfillment of a dream, a life-long professional aspiration and the closing of a circle.”

That circle began almost four decades ago when Rothman was just 17-years-old and came to Israel to visit a childhood friend. “I didn’t identify with Israel or Judaism. But I got the bug right away and was drawn into the story of the Jewish people and the challenges of Israel.”

His new affinity to Jewish particularism created a tension with his universalistic, secular Jewish background. He was both troubled and fascinated by “the deep conflicts in Israel between different communities: Jewish and Arab, religious and secular, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, Israeli and the Diaspora.”

Learning about these conflicts as well as the history and theology of the Jewish people inspired Rothman to “seek peace and pursue it.” In college he became a student of modern Jewish philosophy, identifying deeply with the philosophy of Martin Buber who “emphasized the space of authentic encounter between people, fostering deep recognition and connection with others while not minimizing fundamental differences and disagreements between them.”

“Engaging different voices and values is core to Jewish ways of learning, life and creative imagination,” Rothman suggests. “Like an orchestra, made up of separate instruments and musical identities, each with its own section and sound, that comes together as an integrated whole.”

Rothman went on to study international relations and conflict resolution at the University of Maryland with a view towards contributing to the peaceful growth of Israeli society. To that end, he researched and wrote much of his dissertation in Israel in 1987 on ways towards contributing to the peaceful growth of Israeli society. To that end, he researched and wrote much of his dissertation in Israel in 1987 on ways to improve relations and cooperation between Jews and Arabs in Israel. He subsequently founded and ran the Conflict Resolution Program at the Leonard Davis Institute of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem from 1989-1994.

Rothman returned to the U.S. to head the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges, making frequent and extended visits back to Israel, including a Fulbright Fellowship to teach at Israel’s Jezreel College in 2006. Rothman has written tens of articles and four books many themed around his work in Israel. His latest, From Identity-Based Conflict to Identity-Based Cooperation, was published earlier this year by Springer Publications.

His biggest conflict resolution intervention came in 2001 when he got a chance to try out his “orchestra” approach in a ground-breaking case in Cincinnati. Police in the city had shot and killed an African American youth, resulting in wide spread riots. Rothman was hired to mediate. He put together a massive “task force” with 3,500 participants who were divided into eight different “identity communities.” Each group was asked to envision their idea of a peaceful future. Representatives from the different communities then agreed upon goals for the entire city. These were used to create a plan to transform police-community relations. Eleven years later, this process, and Rothman’s contribution to it, is still hailed as transformative.

Rothman is now educating the next generation of conflict resolution professionals at Bar-Ilan. Currently, some 120 students take courses in the graduate conflict studies program.

Rothman left his business practice and deep roots in the U.S. to join Bar-Ilan. But he has no regrets. “It feels tremendously gratifying to be back,” he says. “The University has been very supportive and encouraging. I hope that contributing to further developing this program will be the fulfillment of my career.”

And, he adds as a cautious footnote, “I hope that more peace will arrive while I’m here this time. We’ve never tried to build peace from the bottom up, in a participatory, value-driven way that marks the core of what I teach and practice,” says Rothman.

If peace does come, Prof. Jay Rothman and Bar-Ilan University, as well as the students he will be mentoring in the years ahead, may very well play an important role.
Gaza border. Okun says that the urgency of his research makes the long commute—an hour-and-a-half each way—worth it. “There is currently no cure for neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s, and medical science can only identify such conditions behaviorally—through the symptoms that indicate that brain tissue has already been destroyed,” he explains. “Our challenge is to find the clues in molecular biology and biochemistry of the brain that would indicate there’s a problem, and would also give us possible targets for early drug intervention.”

The Mishna of Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) lays out a series of lifetime milestones, and defines our sixth decade as the point at which we should be looked up to, and honored as “elderly.” But in medical terms, some 15% of people aged sixty-plus get more than added respect. Indeed, according to a recent study, the “prevalence of dementia among community-dwelling elderly in Israel is estimated to be about 20%!”

“As we age, there’s a normal decline of cognitive function, but by age 65, about one sixth of the population exhibits the creeping dementia associated with Alzheimer’s—a rate that, by 85, increases to around 50%,” says Dr. Eitan Okun, a Senior Lecturer in both the Leslie and Susan Gonda (Goldschmied) Multidisciplinary Brain Research Center and the Mina and Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences. “In our lab we use multi-disciplinary techniques to pursue two goals: to identify the neural mechanisms associated with mild cognitive impairment, and, at the same time, to look for signposts that would allow physicians to identify at-risk patients, so they can receive preventative treatment for dementia before it’s too late.”

Bar-Ilan alumnus Okun, 34, is an expert on neuroimmunology, learning and memory, who recently completed a post-doctoral fellowship at the National Institutes of Health in Baltimore, Maryland. His strong Zionist convictions led this native of Petach Tikva to relocate together with his wife and 4 small daughters to Kibbutz Alumim, near the Gaza border. Okun says that the urgency of his research makes the long commute—an hour-and-a-half each way—worth it.

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To understand the gradual loss of cognitive function, scientists need to closely examine brain tissues—something that, for ethical reasons, cannot be studied in living human patients. To overcome this challenge, Okun turns to a mammalian model—mice that have been genetically programmed to develop neurodegeneration.

Okun does not study only neurodegeneration, however—he also examines factors that encourage the growth of new nerve cells in the mature brain. “Scientists have long known that physical exercise promotes the growth of neurons in a part of the brain involved in learning and memory,” he says. “So one of our projects involves examining how it might be possible to prevent cognitive decline by teaming up physical exercise with other types of intervention.”

Although he has been studying the brain for many years, Okun recently gained a personal perspective on the importance of neurodegeneration research. “Last year, my father was diagnosed with dementia because we noticed a decline in his motor and cognitive function,” he says. “By the time the changes became apparent, the brain tissues were already lost. It is my hope that, by gaining a fuller understanding of what happens to our brains as we age, we will be able to help more people live a fuller, more cognitively healthy life (thus fulfilling the mitzvah of honoring the elderly—our parents)– ad meah v’esrim (til 120).”

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Sipping on coffee and munching on pastry, a group of Bar-Ilan University students and workers and adults from the neighboring community convene weekly at Greg’s Café on campus to explore existential issues from a Jewish perspective. Sitting in a circle, the two dozen participants of varied ages and backgrounds examine texts guided by the guest lecturer and engage freely in discussion. Since the inception of this novel, open Beit Midrash in winter 2011/2012, the topics have run the gamut: “The Search for Meaning,” “Is Hinduism Pagan Worship?” as well as “Newton and Solomon’s Temple,” “Human and Divine Attributes,” “Prayer,” “The Divine in Hebrew Language” and “The Search for God in Man and Nature.”

The lecturers are chiefly BIU scientists and scholars from diverse disciplines: Rabbi Prof. Daniel Sperber, President of the Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies, Prof. Yuval Garini (Nanotechnology), Dr. Moshe Hellinger (Political Studies), Dr. Isaac Hershkowitz (Philosophy), Dr. Israel Belfer (Science, Technology and Society), and Rabbi Dr. Michael Abraham (Midrasha), to name just a few. A prominent Israeli journalist and literary critic has also addressed the forum, which was founded at the initiative of students and with the assistance of the Campus Rabbi’s Office. Greg’s offers the venue as well as the complementary coffee and light refreshments.

The forum is extracurricular, and hence, no academic credit is given, yet participants say they gain a great deal from this pluralistic Beit Midrash, which is designed for secular students as well as traditional and religious adults.

“I feel enriched every time I attend,” enthuses Tali, an MA grad in philosophy, who will soon be starting her PhD. “I like the format, that everyone shares their thoughts. People do not hesitate to ask questions and talk freely.”

A clinical social worker who recently retired from BIU’s Maria & Joel Finkle Student Counselling Center, Clo eagerly returns to campus each week for “spiritual enrichment.” The forum, she says, is “multigenerational, with people in different stages of their lives, and from differing walks of life.” Defining herself as traditional-minded, she enjoys examining her Jewish roots and “the in-depth study of subjects that I never read about, such as the Jewish concepts of freedom and liberty, and Sir Isaac Newton, the noted English physicist and mathematician, who wrote extensively about the Temple of Solomon.”

Applauding the level of tolerance and understanding that characterizes BIU’s open Beit Midrash, she relays, “I’ve been looking for this kind of open dialogue, where there is no coercion.”

A law undergrad and former yeshiva student, Noam finds the lectures intriguing and refreshing, and enjoys the diverse blend of people and outlooks, not to mention the free coffee and danish. He was particularly impressed with the sessions on “Free Will” and “Kaddish,” which, like the other subjects, are geared for an Israeli academic audience. “The lecturing scholars know their audience, and how to best present their topics.”

Truly a Beit Midrash for all, the forum creates an open learning community for people of all ages and backgrounds. How apropos it convenes on the variegated BIU campus, where students motivated to pursue their existential quest and further their Jewish knowledge may additionally avail themselves of Bar-Ilan’s broad repertoire of Jewish heritage courses.

For more info, contact: hacholpatuach@gmail.com
In all probability, most readers of this article will be familiar with the fact that Maimonides – one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars and physicians of the Middle Ages – had a strong background in mathematics. But according to Prof. Ely Merzbach, an expert in probability theory who has also conducted extensive research on how the rabbis viewed mathematics, this is only part of a larger story.

“There are many great rabbis who were also excellent mathematicians,” says Merzbach, a member and former chair of the Mathematics Department. “Gersonides – a Talmudist who lived in the south of France during the 13th century – wrote entire mathematical treatises, and defined a concept that would become famous as Pascal’s Triangle. Gersonides preceded Pascal’s ‘discovery’ by 300 years!”

In addition to looking back in time at the rabbis’ mathematical achievements, Merzbach looks forward – an activity made easy, and astoundingly accurate, thanks to a mathematics-based creation known as the Jewish calendar.

“Until the fourth century, the Hebrew calendar was mediated by the Sanhedrin, who pronounced the Jewish holy days based on witnesses’ reports on the movement of heavenly bodies in the sky,” Merzbach explains. “Then, in the fourth century, Hillel the Second instituted a ‘fixed’ calendar designed to unify Jewish ritual practices all over the world. Mathematical projections show that this 1,600-year-old system will remain accurate, requiring no adjustment for the next 3,000 years. But,” he adds, “by that time, the Moshiach will be here, anyway.”

After studying similar calendars from around the world, Merzbach says that the Jewish calendar – while not perfect – is the best ever devised. “There are at least ten different lunar/solar calendars in India alone, each corresponding to a different language, culture, or religious tradition,” he says. “Not one of these come close to the Jewish calendar in terms of accuracy over the long term.”

As a theoretical mathematician, the bulk of Merzbach’s research focuses on the analysis of “stochastic” processes – processes that occur randomly, but depend on events tied to time and/or place. But alongside with his fascination with the modeling of unpredictable events, he has maintained his admiration for the steady predictability of the Jewish calendar.

“For me, this is important because it underlies the synergy between mathematics, science, and the Torah,” he says. “The Jewish calendar is so well designed that – if you were lost on a desert island – you could construct it for yourself and stay connected to Jews around the world. The mathematical expertise of our sages – just like their halachic teachings – will continue to guide the Jewish People forever.”

Prof. Ely Merzbach

Constructing a Calendar for an Eternal People

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Judaism emphasizes education for self-reliance, whether it’s learning a trade, or teaching children to swim. But in the teaching lab being developed by Prof. Aryeh Weiss, self-reliance is built from the bottom up, as students “get their feet wet” while burnishing the employability bona-fides. Under Weiss’ tutelage, students will be challenged to move the state-of-the-art forward by constructing — and even improving — the instrumentation that makes scientific discovery possible.

“I want students to experience what they’re learning about,” says Weiss, a Chicago-born, MIT-trained expert on imaging and microscopy who is a faculty member both at the School of Engineering and in the Bar-Ilan Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA). “So instead of just using the tools, they get into the nuts and bolts of the machines themselves. Not only does this provide the basis for new research, it produces students who understand the process of instrument design.”

Instrument design has long been a passion for Weiss, a self-defined “enabler” who regularly collaborates with biological researchers, establishing protocols that make it possible to achieve useable scientific data using existing imaging technology. And if the technology’s not up to snuff, Weiss doesn’t hesitate to check under the hood.

“An exciting and novel tool in biology is the Atomic Force Microscope,” Weiss says. “I bought our AFM as a kit, and built it myself. Not only does this save money, it provides an opportunity to fully understand the instrument, and enables us to design the course so that this understanding is passed on to our students. This is the kind of hands-on expertise that our students require.”

True to his roots, Weiss’ teaching lab is patterned after a similar lab at MIT, but adapted to meet the needs of the Bar-Ilan program. The lab is designed for students completing a concentration in bio-engineering, as part of a four-year electrical engineering degree. In addition to improving the “marketability” of graduates for Israel’s growing biotech sector, Weiss says that the range of skills required to do this type of work has educational value of its own.

“Along with the single AFM I’ve built — ideally, our lab should have two — and our conventional microscopes, the lab will include a system for studying dynamic processes in DNA,” he says. “So I designed one. Not only will we save money, but the students will have the opportunity to set up each part of the instrument from scratch. This is a crucial component of their education.”

“Drugs discovery, to cancer therapeutics, to the characterization of fluorescent materials, and he recently developed a technique that enables computers to quantify nanoparticle uptake in living cells, using time-lapse microscopy. But no matter what the challenge, the common denominator is Weiss’ can-do attitude.

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“Our students study with faculty members who themselves are designing new research tools, biomedical devices and computational techniques. The bio-engineering track allows the students to acquire a broad education, which includes topics not found in the tightly focused programs of most science degrees,” Weiss declares. “That’s called being educated.”

With a capacity of 12, time-sharing in Weiss’ teaching lab is at a premium, and more students join the program each year. But alongside hopes for expansion — something that will require significant financial investment — Weiss stays focused by staying practical. To take a page from the Hollywood playbook, if he builds it, they will come.
It’s an often-repeated axiom by supporters of the Jewish State that the Israel Defense Forces is the world’s most moral army, acting with extreme ethical care in highly difficult conditions on a rapidly changing modern battlefield. Journalist, best-selling author and Bar-Ilan University alumnus Yaakov Katz not only concurs, he has seen it all, first-hand. Katz is the military correspondent and defense analyst for The Jerusalem Post and the Israel correspondent for Jane’s Defense Weekly. Katz has been embedded with the IDF on multiple occasions and has covered all of the country’s biggest operations in the last ten years — Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, the Second Lebanon War and the Gaza Disengagement. He also did his own four years of army service.

Through much of this, Katz was also a student at Bar-Ilan where he completed a law degree in 2007. He never practiced or took the bar, though. While working on his degree, the then newly-married immigrant from Chicago landed a part time job at the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, ostensibly “to pay the bills.” He quickly discovered, however, that he not only liked writing, he was good at it. He began moving up the journalistic hand.

Katz is currently in Boston on sabbatical for a year after winning a prestigious Nieman Fellowship for journalistic excellence at Harvard University. One of only 24 journalists from around the world (and the only Israeli), he is researching the use of censorship in the digital age to determine whether it is relevant and consistent with democratic values and if it can be applied differently, especially in coverage of Israel and the Middle East.

Here he turns his lens inward towards the Israeli censor, which he says is still operating as if there was no Internet. The censor, he says, absurdly prevents Israeli journalists from covering sensitive topics — such as the recent “Prisoner X” story — even after their counterparts overseas have already broken the story and it’s available for all to read.

Katz has some suggestions. “First, the censor and news outlets in Israel have to come to an agreement that there are certain topics you either don’t write about or you submit them to the censor. These would include Israel’s purported nuclear program or troop deployments during war, which could be a direct threat to security.”

But other issues, he continues, “for example, if Israel is selling a billion dollars in arms to an Asian country — needn’t go to the censor at all! Israelis should know who their country is doing business with, after all!” If such guidelines are created carefully, they will be able to cover future scenarios not yet anticipated.

Katz had his own run-ins with the Israeli censor while writing the book, Israel vs. Iran — The Shadow War. It was published in 2011 in English and Hebrew and became a best seller in the latter. The book describes how Israel has kept the Iranian nuclear program at bay through a combination of covert activities including assassinations and cyber warfare. The book was also the first to provide details of the bombing of a nuclear reactor in Syria. Katz said that, due to censorship issues in Israel, he was forced to rely primarily on U.S. sources for that chapter.

Katz, 33, made aliyah with his family when he was 15. He says he’s enjoying his year in Boston, but is looking forward to coming home at the end of the summer and getting back to work. “There’s nothing like reporting,” he confides.

And in Israel, there is never a shortage of topics for this enterprising Bar-Ilan graduate to bring to the public’s attention — censor or not.

Katz believes that the sensitivity displayed by the IDF in the moral dilemmas it faces on a daily basis is a clear outgrowth of Jewish ethical teachings, which require treating even enemy combatants with compassion and humanity. He gives an example from an assignment that saw him accompanying IDF troops on a 2:00 a.m. raid in an Arab village.

“We were working on intelligence to capture a terror suspect,” he says. “We went to a particular house and started banging on the doors. The whole family got up — parents, children, grandparents. We found the person we were supposed to arrest. He was just a kid, only 18.”

Katz continues: “The soldiers took him out to the jeep and handcuffed him. His mother followed and started yelling. Now, the commander could have just ignored her and driven away. But he didn’t. He stopped, took the suspect over to his mother and let the two embrace one last time. The woman then said to the soldier, ‘thank you.’ This really stood out for me. It’s so different than the way the Israeli army is perceived by the world, which thinks soldiers just come in the middle of the night and rip up homes.”

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Bar-Ilan Alumnus Yaakov Katz:

How Judaism has Created the World’s Most Moral Army

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Cultivating Female Torah U’Mada Leadership at the Midrasha

Each year, a select group of women scholars combine their advanced academic training with in-depth Talmudic studies at a Beit Midrash for outstanding female PhD students. Organized and run by the Midrasha for Women—which is part of BIU’s Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies—the Beit Midrash cultivates elite cadres of female leadership who are highly proficient in both Torah and science.

All participants are BIU Doctoral Fellows of Excellence who have backgrounds in Jewish learning. Not all have prior Talmud experience.

Convening twice weekly, students spend three hours pouring over Talmudic texts with their hevruta (study partner), followed by a summary session led by the Beit Midrash head, Rabbi Dr. Michael Abraham, a former Yeshiva teacher and a theoretical physicist who holds a PhD from BIU.

Modeled after the finest Yeshivot, the Beit Midrash provides access to Torah Judaism’s core—the Talmud, its commentators and poskim (Jewish legal decision-makers). The women develop expertise in advanced independent Talmudic study. Delving into halakhic issues, they become acquainted with the logic and thought processes and sharpen their reasoning powers. At the end of the year, students submit a research project on a Talmudic subject.

Since its founding in 2002, the Beit Midrash has garnered favorable feedback, with students reporting marked progress in their learning and a positive impact on their homes and surroundings. Many are motivated to continue their Talmudic studies and teach. In fact, several Midrasha lecturers are program graduates.

“To the best of my knowledge there are few, if any, comparable frameworks that provide elite cadres of talented women with intellectual and Torah challenges,” observes Rabbi Dr. Abraham. “This is a unique Beit Midrash that plays a key role in creating female Torah leadership, which is a big step toward empowering women and strengthening Torah.”

“I am gaining extensive knowledge in Talmud along with tools to learn a da’at on my own,” says Nevenzal. “Gemara learning is a mind-opener and even outside class, I now analyze issues differently. But above all, Gemara energizes me for the entire week.”

Drawn to the Beit Midrash because she “loves to learn,” Hadas Wernib says the shiurim “are fascinating and on a higher level than I have encountered elsewhere.” The electrical engineering student, who’s pregnant with her fourth child, enthuses: “It’s a great, intellectually challenging program.” In her “spare time” she offers guidance and explains the significance of Jewish marriage to secular couples, on behalf of the Tzohar organization.

Enrolled in the Beit Midrash for the past three years, neuroscience student Haya Brama is pleased to be “learning Gemara in a comprehensive manner,” while “making friends with women who are very similar to me.” Married with three young children, Brama is grateful for the generous stipend, since Doctoral Fellows of Excellence are precluded from working. “Torah is an important part of my life, soul, and discourse with my family.”

“I believe in the importance of Torah study and its impact on my life.”

“I believe in the importance of Torah study and its impact on my life,” says Hadas Nevenzal, a PhD life sciences candidate, who is specializing in nanotechnology. “I have always been my life,” says Hadas Nevenzal, a PhD life sciences candidate, who is specializing in nanotechnology. “I believe in the importance of Torah study and its impact on my life. Torah is an important part of my life, soul, and discourse with my family.”

Midrasha Fast Facts

600 students • 30 lecturers • 80 courses in Bible, Halakhah, Gemara, Midrash, Philosophy

“A lecturer at the Midrasha and the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, Dr. Meirav Tubul Kahana is a product of the Beit Midrash from a decade ago.

“I learned Torah on my own for many years, and wanted to gain greater expertise,” she relates. “The program was excellent and gave me tools, knowledge and motivation to continue onward, to learn Gemara independently and also to transmit to others.” She began teaching Talmud at Matan Raanana, Orot College and the Midrasha, in both the regular and intensive Metivta tracks.

“At the Beit Midrash, we had an outstanding, cohesive group, and we’re still in contact today. Some are prominent educators who also teach at the Midrasha and are role models for our students,” she says, relating that in the past decade the Midrasha has made a conscious effort to bolster its ranks with more women teachers.

The Beit Midrash, she says, fills a critical role “in drawing women to in-depth Oral Law study. In our generation, women who complete their PhDs and gain prominence in their fields must also be conversant with Halakhah and Gemara and able to influence the public discourse on marriage, divorce and other issues.”

Dr. Tubul Kahana hopes to pursue her academic research on mishnaic Hebrew as well as to create women’s writings in Gemara and Halakhah—traditionally male areas. “We don’t hear from the myriads of educated women because they don’t publish Torah articles. Writing is very significant, it often creates public repercussions.”

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“I learned Torah on my own for many years, and wanted to gain greater expertise,” she relates. “The program was excellent and gave me tools, knowledge and motivation to continue onward, to learn Gemara independently and also to transmit to others.” She began teaching Talmud at Matan Raanana, Orot College and the Midrasha, in both the regular and intense Metivta tracks.

“At the Beit Midrash, we had an outstanding, cohesive group, and we’re still in contact today. Some are prominent educators who also teach at the Midrasha and are role models for our students,” she says, relating that in the past decade the Midrasha has made a conscious effort to bolster its ranks with more women teachers.

The Beit Midrash, she says, fills a critical role “in drawing women to in-depth Oral Law study. In our generation, women who complete their PhDs and gain prominence in their fields must also be conversant with Halakhah and Gemara and able to influence the public discourse on marriage, divorce and other issues.”

Dr. Tubul Kahana hopes to pursue her academic research on mishnaic Hebrew as well as to create women’s writings in Gemara and Halakhah—traditionally male areas. “We don’t hear from the myriads of educated women because they don’t publish Torah articles. Writing is very significant, it often creates public repercussions.”
An electro-optics photonics expert in the School of Engineering, Dr. Dror Fixler is a man who sees God in the nanoparticles of life. Also an ordained rabbi with a congregation in Ganei Tikvah – and who has written three books about Maimonides’ commentary on the Mishna – his work in the religious realm informs and enhances his endeavors in the scientific one.

And, vice versa.

“I compare what I’m doing at Bar-Ilan University with a person who believes that God exists in the small things,” says Dr. Fixler, whose research, in part, has improved conventional microscopy with a method known as “super-resolution.” Due to the diffraction limit of light, the resolution of conventional light microscopy is limited. Dr. Fixler’s work allows scientists to scan areas smaller than half a wavelength in size, enabling them to observe single-cell activity in biological processes.

“Working with details so small, it’s impossible to see single molecule movement by conventional imaging systems. However, if I use an optical microscope to record a series of images over time, I can prove it by creating a movie-like collection of changing pictures that reveal a composite ‘portrait’ of the previously invisible target under my microscope.”

Dr. Fixler likens this process to the behavior of those who believe in God.

“One may not fully understand what God does on a daily basis – may not see the minute changes and understand the links between things. But, proof for the believer comes when you bind all the images together and a portrait emerges. Things become clearer,” he explained.

The quintessential Torah U’Mada man, Dr. Fixler earned his undergraduate, master’s, and doctorate degrees from Bar-Ilan, where combining Torah knowledge and secular wisdom frames the University’s teaching philosophy. A returning scientist from South China Normal University in Guangzhou, he is a member of the Nano Photonics Center at the Bar-Ilan Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA). His research includes the emission, transmission, detection, and sensing of light for biomedical properties. His primary foci are developing new technologies for super-resolution microscopy, medical testing, and light tissue interaction.

Beyond the walls of the University, Dr. Fixler is an expert in the use of electricity on Shabbat, an area carefully circumscribed by Jewish law. Recently, he sparked debate in Israel when he publically suggested that driving thought-controlled cars and other devices that integrate the mind with machinery might be permitted on Shabbat. Although he stresses that he does not personally think such activity should be allowed, he says his aim was to prod Jewish theologians and intellectuals to start thinking about the impact of technology on Jewish religious observance.

“Electricity is part of our life—smart homes, automatic detectors, sensors. The challenge for this generation of poskim [Jewish law decisors] is to define what actions are allowed and what are not. In order to do that, they need a deep knowledge of things such as LED operation and induction cooking. My work is trying to establish the new way.”

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Dick Francis was a British steeplechase jockey and novelist who published more than 40 international best sellers in his lifetime. His wife, Mary, collaborated extensively in his fiction as his researcher and editor, and some suggest even wrote the books, herself. While proof of her authorship may never be conclusive, new evidence gathered by Prof. Moshe Koppel, of the Department of Computer Science at Bar-Ilan University, indicates it’s likely she did.

Prof. Koppel specializes in text categorization, an area of research in part concerned with authorship attribution – the use of automated methods to figure out who authored a document or text. His contribution to the field includes innovative profiling techniques that, when short of making an actual identification, determine an unknown fiction or nonfiction author’s gender, age, native language, and personality type using only statistical properties of the author’s written work.

“We have a huge data base of writing by thousands of authors. So, first, we make sure we’re comparing our document to other documents of similar genres or topics,” explains Prof. Koppel, who uses a computer application he and his team at Bar-Ilan developed to look for clues that appear across the writing in question. For instance, they discovered that women authors generally use more personal pronouns than do men in their writing; men favor particular words more than women do, such as “these,” “those,” and “the;” men use more adjectives; men and women use the same number of prepositions overall but not the same ones – women use “for” and “with” more frequently.

“We don’t have any preconceived theories. We feed in lots of data and let the computer figure out the differences. Either it will come up with a match from the data base or it will produce a likely author profile,” Prof. Koppel says. In either case, the computer is correct more than 90 percent of the time, odds that make text categorization a valuable tool in commercial, legal, and security applications.

One of the more interesting projects Prof. Koppel has undertaken in this vein was to analyze various books of the Bible to try to identify different stylistic threads. In one effort, he merged the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel into a single artificial book to see whether the computer could separate them based on stylistic differences. It did, proving that the method was reliable for biblical analysis. When used on actual books of the Bible, the method reproduced many of the results obtained by Bible scholars in recent centuries.

“With regard to the Chumash, where it is controversial to talk about multiple authorship, we find that we can identify different threads that show distinct stylistic characteristics, but that doesn’t tell us anything about whether it was God-given,” he says.

Prof. Koppel joined the Bar-Ilan faculty in 1980 after earning his PhD at New York University and doing post-doctoral work at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. In addition to his research on text categorization, his studies at Bar-Ilan include image processing, speaker recognition, and automated game playing. In recent years, he has taken an interest in public policy, co-authoring a proposed constitution for Israel. This work has led him to a new area of research called social choice theory – a theoretical framework for aggregating individual preferences and interests to reach a collective decision.

In addition, he is the author of two books and many articles on Rabbinic literature, with special emphasis on logic and probability in the Talmud. He cofounded and coedited the journal Higayon, which is devoted to these topics.

“With regard to the Chumash, where it is controversial to talk about multiple authorship, we find that we can identify different threads that show distinct stylistic characteristics, but that doesn’t tell us anything about whether it was God-given.”
“I’d rather live with a good question than a bad answer.”

Rabbi Prof. Aryeh Frimer: Using Science to Plumb the Depths of Torah

“I’d rather live with a good question than a bad answer” is a popular maxim widely attributed by Google to Aryeh Frimer, the Ethel and David Resnick Professor of Active Oxygen Chemistry and former Chemistry Department chairman at Bar-Ilan. But, while author Elie Wiesel actually said it — and he was paraphrasing Maimonides — nevertheless, the quote embodies a guiding principle in Prof. Frimer’s work. He is a scientist and a rabbi who tries to understand the universe from the perspective of both.

Also a faculty member at the Nano Medicine Center of the Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINNA), Prof. Frimer completed his PhD at Harvard and became a post-doctoral fellow at the Weizmann Institute of Science before joining the Bar-Ilan faculty in 1975. From 1990 to 2004, he also served as a Senior Research Fellow at NASA’s Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio. He has published 135 scientific articles, reviews, and books on active oxygen chemistry, an area that focuses on ways of activating oxygen to react quickly.

In his rabbinic life, Rabbi Frimer has lectured on Judaism, Zionism, and Jewish identity for officer training courses of the Israel Defense Forces. He has published 50 Torah articles and lectured internationally on various aspects of Jewish tradition and Halakhah, most notably on Religious Zionism and the status of women in Jewish Law.

“I have always had a double love: religious and secular studies,” says Rabbi Prof. Frimer, for whom these seemingly disparate realms fit together seamlessly. Taking his cue from Maimonides, who also said that any Jew who has an opportunity to study science should do so, he employs one to elucidate the other.

“Maimonides believed that science fosters a profound appreciation for the wonders of God’s universe. I feel that intimately. I find that my scientific training gives me a sense of wonder about the universe that the average person lacks, and that it allows me to understand Torah on a level that other people don’t,” he says.

As an example, he points to the story of Creation. “Light is one of the most fundamental forms of energy. So, when the Torah talks about ‘separating’ light and darkness, it’s talking about fixing the wave nature of light so that there could be constructive and destructive interaction between the waves.”

However, the Torah is not a science book, he is quick to point out. “Science takes into consideration only those things that are measurable, and God is not measurable.” Rather, he says the Torah teaches that God works as much as possible within the rules of nature, which He created. This gives wide berth to understanding miracles and other events in the Bible that may not seem understandable.

Still, there are many questions that need answers.

“But, that’s okay,” he says. “At the Passover Seder, we learn that Judaism teaches us to ask questions. It also teaches us to live with questions in the absence of good answers. And, as Elie Wiesel put it, I’d rather live with a good question than a bad answer.”
Bar-Ilan University hosts a multitude of conferences and events. On these pages: a sampling from recent months.

January
- The Vision of Maimonides [The Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies]
- Israel and Asia Relations [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies]
- Cognitive Education, Change, Learning, the Brain, and Everything in Between [Louis & Gabi Westfeld School of Social Work]
- International Conference on Violence and Politics in Germany: Origins and Consequences of Nazism [Department of General History]
- Israel’s Present Political and Security Challenges [Department of Middle Eastern Studies]
- Tenth Annual Convention of Women’s Affairs, Family, and Everything in Between [The Ruth and Emanuel Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women]
- Condensed Matter Seminar [Department of Physics]
- International Conference: The European Neighbor Policy and Israel: Achievements and Prospects for the Future [Faculty of Law]
- Solar Energy Solutions (SES) Conference [Bar-Ilan Institute for Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA)]
- The Miracle Democracy. A series of discussions between students and key figures in the field of democracy, featuring former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert [Faculty of Law]

February
- Third Winter School of Cryptology, Bilinear Pairings [Department of Computer Science]
- Ninth Annual Conference of Advanced Energy Sources [Joint Conference with Tel Aviv University’s INREP Center] [Department of Chemistry, INREP Center]
- Returning the Focus to the Center: The Research of Mid-Sized Cities in Israel [Department of Geography and Planning]
- Stages of Knowledge, Spaces of Faith: Allegory, New Science and Baroque Theatre [Science, Technology, and Society Program]

March
- 10th Conference of the (New) Israeli Philosophy Association [Department of General Philosophy]
- International Conference: Korean Religions [Faculty of Humanities]
- The 26th Biology Olympics [Mena & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]
- The Moscow Purim – in Memory of Those Killed in the Kingdom: The Creators of Yiddish in the Soviet Union [Rena Costa Center for Yiddish Studies]
- The 26th Biology Olympics [Mena & Everard Goodman Faculty of Life Sciences]
- “TED Style” Intellectual Stage [Nine Professors, different subjects, 18 minutes each] [Vice Rector’s Office, External Relations Division]

April
- New Findings in the Research of Yemenite Jewry [The Aharon and Rachel Dahan Center for Culture, Society and Education in the Sephardic Heritage]
- Bridging Academic Research with Parliamentary Work. The Role of the Israeli Association for Feminist & Gender Studies (with MKs Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), Michal Rozin (Meretz), and Merav Michaeli (Labor) [Israel Association for Feminist & Gender Studies, Gender Studies Program]
- National Science Day: “Mada Ba’am [Science of the Nation]” [Division of External Relations]
- A Multi-Disciplinary Look at Aging [Interdisciplinary Department of Social Sciences]
- “Bikurim Migmatic” [First Fruits/Seedlings of Gender] Conference Commemorating Prof. Dafna Izraeli, the Founder of the BIU Gender Studies Program
- The External and Security Challenges of the New Government [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies]
- To Be an Active Community Leader [Louis & Gabi Westfeld School of Social Work]
- Reading Comprehension Seminar: From Theory to Practice [Hadad Center, Pinkhos Churgin School of Education]
- “Robocup Junior” Competition [School of Engineering]

May
- Ingeborg Rennert, founder of the Ingeborg Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies, awards the Guardian of Zion medal to James S. Snyder, Director of the Israeli Museum, as Rennert Center Director Prof. Joshua Schwartz looks on.
- An Austrian Homage to Contemporary Yiddish Writing [Rena Costa Center for Yiddish Studies]
- Human Rights in Childbirth [School of Medicine, Israel Michaeli Association, Israel Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Nashim Korot Lade'ot]
- Success and Failure in Conflict Management [Conflict Management and Negotiation Graduate Program]
- The Bible Department’s Seventh Annual International Conference [Zalman Shmueli Bible Department]
- Jewish Religion in Light of New Inscriptions and Papyri [Jeselsohn Epigraphic Center for Jewish History]
- The Process of Repentance – Religious, Psychosocial, and International Aspects [Department of Psychology, Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies]
- Undergraduate Entrepreneurship. On IP, Culture and Innovation Environments [Faculty of Law, Penn Law, Center for technology, Innovation and Competition]
- European and the Middle East [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies]
- Bulgaria and the Jews [The Arnold and Leona Finker Institute of Holocaust Research]
- To Be an Active Community Leader [Louis & Gabi Westfeld School of Social Work]
- Reading Comprehension Seminar: From Theory to Practice [Hadad Center, Pinkhos Churgin School of Education]
- “Robocup Junior” Competition [School of Engineering]

June
- Economic History of the Jews throughout the Ages: Sources, Methodologies, Narratives [Faculty of Jewish Studies]
- International Law and Israel: Reexamining the Questions of Sovereignty, Occupation and Settlement [Faculty of Law]
- The Psychological and Religious Implications of the Changes in Israeli and World Society [Department of Psychology, Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies]
- Who am I? An Israeli Song [Department of Music]
- International Conference on Geometric, Combinatorial and Dynamics Aspects of Semigroup and Group Theory [Department of Mathematics, Emmy Noether Research Institute, National Science Foundation]
- The Annual Conference of Israelurochemistry [Department of Chemistry, Israel National Research Center for Electrochemical Propulsion]
- Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory: Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture [Department of Classical Studies, BSL, Department of General History]
- Talmud, Halakha, and Law [Department of Talmud and Jewish Oral Law]
- The 2013 Bar-Ilan Symposium on the Frontiers of Artificial Intelligence (BSFIA) [Department of Computer Science]

July
- Dr. Sharon Aronson-Lehavi, of the Department of Comparative Literature, was chosen for membership in the Young Researchers’ Forum of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.
- Prof. Israel Amirav, the School of Medicine in the Galilee and a pediatric pulmonologist at the Ziv Medical Center in Safed, was awarded the top prize for research at the CIP International Congress on Pediatric Pulmonology in Bangkok, Thailand.
- Prof. Doron Aubach, of the Department of Chemistry and the Bar-Ilan Institute for Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA) received the Electrochemical Society (ECS) Battery Division Research Award for his work in the field of electrochemistry. Prof. Aubach also received the Kofler Prize for Most Outstanding Chemist Outside the Technion.
- Dr. Raz Chen-Morris, of the Program for Science, Technology and Society, won the Selma V. Farkas Prize for the best article published in thejournal of science History of ideas, for his article “Baroque Optics and the Disappearance of the Observer: From Kepler’s optics to Descartes’ Double”.
- Prof. Aharon Gedanken, of the Department of Chemistry, won the Israel Chemistry Society Award.
- Prof. Dror Hacohen, of the Martin (Szusz) Center of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology, received the Itzhak Ben-Zvi Prize for his book, Children at the Front: Youth Aliyah Enterprise, 1923–1948.
- Prof. Hanneli Makk, of the Department of Chemistry and the Bar-Ilan Institute for Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA) received the prestigious Prize for Most Outstanding Chemist Outside the Technion.
- Prof. Dror Hacohen, of the Martin (Szusz) Center of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology and Director of the Tel Es-Safi Excavation, was appointed Corresponding Member of the German Archaeological Institute.
- Prof. Amikam Nachmani, Chairman of the Department of Political Science, has been awarded the 2018 Minos Nomkes Prize for Security Research Excellence from the Greek Research Institute for European American Studies (RIEAS).
- Prof. Peretz Perl, of the English Department, was appointed as member of the New Center for Humanities Innovation at the University of Durham in England.

August
- “Happening” for Children of the Oncology Department at Tel Hashomer Hospital [Student Union]
- Annual Conference: Researching the Human Factor in Car Accidents [Faculty of Social Sciences]
- The 3rd Meeting of the Israel Forum for Cytoskeleton and Motility (IFCM) [Mina and Evan Goodensohn Faculty of Life Sciences]
- International Conference: Turkey - Where to? [Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies]
- Activism in Corporate Governance in Israel [Graduate School of Business Administration]
EU Academic Delegation Comes to BIU

BIU hosted a delegation representing European universities who are connected with Erasmus Mundus Action 2 – a program that fosters institutional cooperation in the field of higher education between the European Union and non-EU countries. EDEN (Erasmus Mundus Academic Network) is a four-year project financed through the Erasmus Mundus Action 2 program. This year BIU partners with top universities in Spain, Romania, Germany and France for the first time.

Members of the delegation are greeted by Vice President for External Affairs Judith Haimoff (standing, far left), Vice Rector Prof. Miriam Faust (standing, 3rd from right), and Director of the Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People Prof. Shlomo Shpiro (standing, 2nd from right).

Danish and Swedish Diplomats and Business & Research Delegation Seek Applied Research Opportunities at BIU

The Swedish and Danish Business and Research delegation during a tour of the Leslie and Susan Gonda (Goldschmied) Nanotechnology Complex.

Prof. Benjamin Ehrenberg, Vice President for Research (far right) and Orli Ton, CEO of the Bar-Ilan Research & Development Company (2nd from right), welcome the delegation.

H.E. Pjer Simunovic, Ambassador of Croatia

H.E. Pjer Simunovic, Ambassador of Croatia, meets with Prof. Shlomo Shpiro, on a visit to campus to explore collaborative research and education opportunities.

Representative of Uruguay’s Ministry of Industry, Energy and Mining

Alan Schneider, Director of the B’nai Brith World Center in Jerusalem, and Prof. Maria Virginia Echinoque Canales, from the Ministry of Industry, Energy and Mining of Uruguay, tour the Bar-Ilan Institute for Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials (BINA).

Ambassador of Slovenia Visits BIU

Ambassador of Slovenia Comes to BIU Campus


2. Prof. Aren Maier, Director of BIU’s Tel es-Safi/ Gath Archaeological Project, shares some of his findings with H.E. Alenka Suhadolnik.

Ninth Ambassadors’ Forum

The BIU Ninth Ambassadors’ Forum featured Zvi Yehezkeli, Arab Affairs correspondent and Head of the Arab Desk at Israel’s Channel 10 TV News, who briefed the gathering of ambassadors and senior diplomats on “Democracy, Religion, and Fanaticism.”

A panel was moderated by Prof. Gerald Steinberg, of the Department of Political Studies, founder of the Conflict Management and Negotiation Program and a member of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies. The panel included Dr. Michael Ehrlich, of the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Prof. Ariel Bendor, of the Faculty of Law, and Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, of the Faculty of Law and Director of the Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women.

1. Zvi Yehezkeli addresses the Ambassadors

2. Prof. Ruth Halperin-Kaddari with Zvi Yehezkeli following the panel discussion.

H.E. Malte Talvet-Mustonen, Ambassador of Estonia (2nd from left), meets with Prof. Benjamin Ehrenberg, Vice President for Research, Ruth Cohen, Director of VIP Visits & Events, and Dr. Eli Even, Director of the Research Authority.

Ambassador of Estonia Visits BIU


2. Prof. Aren Maier, Director of BIU’s Tel es-Safi/ Gath Archaeological Project, shares some of his findings with H.E. Alenka Suhadolnik.
As incumbent president Prof. Moshe Kaveh moves toward concluding a remarkable 18-year term the Board elected Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz to take up the presidential mantle in his wake. On the opening day of the Meetings, after participating in a full schedule of legislative reports and elections, as well as informative presentations and panels, Board members, friends and senior University administration later enjoyed a welcome dinner at the Hilton.

The next day started with the unveiling of a plaque in memory of the late Jim Joseph Foundation Trustee Jack Slomovic and the dedication of the Propp Family Brain Research Floor. That evening, after a festive garden dinner for friends and honorary doctoral recipients and their guests, the gala Honorary Doctoral Ceremony was held. Among the impressive roster of new honorary doctors was the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, which later captivated the audience with a virtuoso performance of Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture.

The week concluded with the moving dedication of the Jan and Susanne Czuker Lobby and Main Auditorium in the Jim Joseph Education Building, and a meeting between Peter and Aliki Rzepka and their inspiring Exodus Fund students under the newly erected Tent representing the "ingathering of the exiles" in the Rzepka Twelve Tribes Plaza.
Unveiling of plaque in memory of Jack Slomovic commemorating his exceptional role in the establishment of the Jim Joseph Education Building

Susanne Czuker and granddaughter Miriam Frank view the plaque together with Prof. Moshe Kaveh, Samantha, and Ron Solomon (far right).

Executive Director of the West Coast Region AFBIU Ron Solomon chairs the event.

(left-right) Howard Charish, Dr. Mordecai D. Katz, Susanne Czuker, Prof. Ya’alla Zilbershats, Judith Haimoff and Associate Director of the West Coast Region AFBIU Karen Paul Reuven.

Dedication of the Jan and Susanne Czuker Lobby and Main Auditorium in the Jim Joseph Education Building

Susanne Czuker and Board Member Alice Schoenfeld at the Main Lobby plaque.

Karen Paul Reuven chairs the event.

Susanne Czuker and her granddaughter Samantha sharing an emotional moment while viewing the film about Susanne’s and Jan’s life.

Meeting with students of the Peter and Aliki Rzepka Exodus Scholarship Fund under the tent for the “Ingathering of the Exiles” in the Rzepka 12 Tribes Plaza

National Director of Development of American Friends Howard Charish chairs the event.

The Rzepkas posing with “their” students.

Surprise! One of the Rzepka students presents Peter with a cake in honor of his birthday.

Susanne Czuker addresses the audience – in the backdrop – a picture of Jan and Susanne.

Susanne Czuker views the plaque together with Prof. Moshe Kaveh, Samantha, and Ron Solomon (far right).
Lecture by Efraim Halevy on “The Greater the Threats, the More the Opportunities for Israel: the Middle East Revisited in 2013”

Ambassadors to Israel are among the riveted guests
Efraim Halevy briefs the audience on current events in the Middle East

Master Class by Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer on “The Stage of My Life”

Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer explains his acting techniques to Dr. Yaniv Goldberg of the Rena Costa Center for Yiddish Studies
Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer at the podium

Chairman of the Canadian Friends Gabi Weisfeld introduces Efraim Halevy

Lecture by Mario Moshe Levy on “Bio-Organic Agriculture: Realizing the Vision”

1. Mario Moshe Levy elucidates the audience on organic agriculture
2. Mario Moshe Levy flanked by Prof. Elisha Haas (left) and Vice President for Research Prof. Benjamin Ehrenberg

Lecture by Prof. Dan Shechtman on “Quasi-Periodic Materials – Crystal Redefined”

Prof. Dan Shechtman explains quasi-periodic materials to the audience

Lecture by Prof. Edward C. Prescott on “How to Restore U.S. Prosperity”

Prof. Edward Prescott (2nd from left) is greeted by left-right Prof. Warren Young of the Department of Economics, Prof. Haim Taitelbaum, Chairman of the Department of Economics Prof. Joseph Deutsch, Prof. Elise Brezis of the Department of Economics, and Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences Prof. Zemira Mevarech

Prof. Edward C. Prescott relaxes before delivering his presentation

Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer wows a fascinated audience

Prof. Edward Prescott flanked by Prof. Elisha Haas (left) and Vice President for Research Prof. Benjamin Ehrenberg

Board of Trustees 2013

Symphony of Academic Excellence

Lectures by 2013 Honorary Doctorate Recipients

Chairman of the Canadian Friends Gabi Weisfeld introduces Efraim Halevy

Board of Trustees 2013

Symphony of Academic Excellence

Lectures by 2013 Honorary Doctorate Recipients
Board of Trustees 2013

Honorary Doctorate Dinner and Ceremony

[Left-right] President Prof. Moshe Kaveh, honorary doctor Morris Kahn and former Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman enjoying the moment.

Renee and Eli Rubinstein with honorary doctor Susanne Czuker and her granddaughter Samantha.


Karin Singer of the Israel Desk, honorary doctor Yehoshua Selim Salti and Dr. Merav Galili, Director of the Global Resources Division.

Honorary doctor Moshe Levi and guests.

Conrad and Ruth Morris, dedicated BIU friends and supporters (UK/Israel).

David and Susan Gradel, devoted members of our British Friends, enjoying the outdoor venue.

Honorary doctor Efraim Halevy (far left) and guests.

Yehudit Rachmani and honorary doctor Atzmon-Wircer deep in conversation.

Dina Berniker, Prof. Yaffa Zilbershats, and Dr. Mordecai D. Katz.

Two Nobel Prize recipients and honorary doctors meet: Prof. Dan Shechtman (left) and Prof. Edward C. Prescott.

Renee and Eli Rubinstein with honorary doctor Susanne Czuker and her granddaughter Samantha.
The End of an Era

Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Aharon Dahan made his first gift to Bar-Ilan University. With that first gift of a scholarship for immigrant students, Aharon and his wife Rachel sowed the seeds for the future of Bar-Ilan University and its students.

In every corner of the campus, the name Dahan is clearly visible. Through their support of such vital projects as the Center for Sephardic Studies, the Doctoral Fellowships of Excellence Program, the Exodus Classroom Building, the Nanotechnology Invariant Zone, the Unity Park, the Electronic Technology Building and the School of Medicine in the Galilee, the Dahans have played a major role in the growth and development of the University.

Aharon’s demise this winter has left a deep void in the hearts of the entire Bar-Ilan family. As a member of the Board of Trustees and later as the Chairman of the Global Board and then as Lifetime Honorary Chairman of the Board, Aharon took a keen interest and active role in the University – and more importantly in promoting and advancing education. The University, the Dahan Center and the current Dahan scholarship students all paid tribute to Mr. Dahan at a recent memorial held on campus. Eli Dahan memorialized his father on behalf of the family. Dr. Shimon Ohayon MK, former Director of the Dahan Center, and BIU President Prof. Moshe Kaveh were among the featured speakers.

Pirkei Avot teaches us “Be of the disciples of Aharon – a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, one who loves his fellow being.” Like his biblical namesake, Aharon Dahan loved his fellow being; his life was dedicated to helping others and enabling them to reach their potential. Many things can be said about Aharon Dahan, but perhaps the most accurate of all is that he was a true mensch and a devoted friend.

יהי זכרו ברוך

The Bar-Ilan University Magazine