The Midrasha

Growing in Torah & Academic Scholarship

The Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies
The Midrasha: Growing with Torah in a University Setting

The Midrasha at Bar-Ilan University is a place for serious Jewish learning, halakhic enrichment and empowerment of women, BUT it seeks to do so in a way that is different from the conventional model of Jewish women’s seminaries.

It uniquely encourages growth in Torah knowledge and in-depth study of the sources for both religious and secular students in a university setting which allows for the cross-fertilization of ideas between the worlds of Judaism, Torah and academia.

Torah for All

The Midrasha has a student body that is richly diverse in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic background, Torah background and demographics. Its students come from all over the country – from Tel Aviv and Kiryat Shmona to Jerusalem and Beer-Sheva. The Midrasha’s bold vision goes outside the box and encourages both women and men to come together to study the Jewish sources and Torah. The hallmark of the Midrasha: finding creative ways to integrate Israeli identity with Jewish identity, creating an inviting environment not only for those with a traditional observant background, but also for those who are not religious but wish to better understand their Jewish roots and re-engage with traditional Jewish texts.

Jewish Studies and Torah Learning Continuum

The extraordinarily high academic level of students – all pursuing their undergraduate and graduate degrees alongside their Jewish and Torah studies – enables the Midrasha to provide a unique opportunity for a continuum of Jewish studies and Torah learning. Midrasha students are able to study continuously for up to ten years and beyond – through the BA, MA, PhD degrees and postdoctoral studies in every one of the university’s 37 departments. This significant stretch of time and synergetic interaction between academe and Torah provides an arsenal of skills for critical thinking which has heretofore not been available to the serious female Torah scholar.

The Midrasha provides an inclusive environment, a multitude of Jewish and Torah learning experiences to whomever wishes to learn, irrespective of their background. Students enter at their own individual level, progress at their own pace, and continue their Torah scholarship in myriad frameworks.
The striking new Ohel Sara Beit Midrash, named in memory of the late Sara (Susy) Wengrowsky, is at the heart of Midrasha life. Covering close to 2000 sq. ft. / 180 sq. m., the Beit Midrash has a designated area for paired and small group study, thus facilitating the Midrasha’s shift from frontal lectures to havruta learning. Indeed, from morning to evening, dozens of havrotot pour over Biblical and Talmudic texts, commentaries and responsa spanning the centuries, Hassidic works and more. On a weekly basis, hundreds of people, both students and local residents, men and women, convene in this vibrant learning hub to study Torah. With its soaring arched roof, walls lined with bookshelves and tall windows that enable the free flow of natural light, Ohel Sara serves as an inspiring “tent of learning.” Also equipped to serve as a Bet Knesset, the Beit Midrash will prominently feature a striking Aron Hakodesh (Holy Ark) in memory of the late Jerome Stern, set against a blue stained-glass backdrop, which gives the illusion that the Aron “hovers” above ground.
Academic Programs

Undergraduate

The Basic Program comprises 14 courses designed by the Midrasha educational team (e.g., Bible, Gemara, Halakha, Midrash, Hassidic thought) taken in conjunction with the student’s three years of BA/BSc degree studies.

Metivta is an intensive, advanced learning program designed for undergraduates with a strong religious educational background. Currently 65 young women are enrolled in the program.

Reshit: Jewish Learning for All

The Norman and Johanne Sternthal Reshit Program gives an opportunity to undergraduate and graduate men and women without a background in religious studies to combine their academic studies with a Jewish learning experience.

Graduate

The Safra Program, Beit Midrash for Oral Law Study, is geared for students with a strong background in this area. The program includes in-depth learning in Gemara and Halakha, via havrutot, sedarim, and shiurim.

The Hassidut Beit Midrash Program is geared towards MA/MSc and doctoral students who want to broaden their knowledge of the Hassidic world in a Beit Midrash atmosphere of shiurim and havrutot. Topics include: the Tanya, Sefat Emet, and teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and the Ba’al Shem Tov.

Hotam offers intensive Biblical and halakhic analysis to MA students; guest lectures by leading scholarly figures; and a rich array of workshops on personal empowerment, social involvement, and community leadership.

The Monique C. and Mordecai D. Katz Graduate Fellowship Program is tailored to the backgrounds and areas of interest of each of the some 20 women pursuing a PhD at BIU in such diverse subjects as nanotechnology, engineering, psychology, education, communication, business administration, and Jewish studies. These outstanding women dedicate time to in-depth study of the Talmud, from the halakhic and textual perspectives, in addition to their regular graduate studies.

The Maaminot V’Hokrot workshop is geared towards researchers in various fields. Its goal is to create an encounter between learning and creative thought, which combines research and religious discourse, and enriches methodology and the tools needed for learning via havruta, discussions, presentations and professional writing.
“The Midrasha reaches out to a variety of individuals and seeks to meet each one’s unique needs and aspirations in an open, inclusive intellectual and spiritual environment – a place where everyone feels welcome. Jewish learning in the Midrasha at Bar-Ilan University is a singular experience. Torah study is intensified and cross-fertilized by the academic setting.”

Dr. Tova Ganzel, Director of the Midrasha
“Bar-Ilan University and the Midrasha are unique in dealing with Jewish heritage. The Reshit courses broaden our knowledge of Judaism and give us an opportunity to learn about leading rabbinical figures and the classic Biblical commentators – all of which will stay with me for years to come. ”

Nofar Leviticus

At the outset of her undergraduate studies in Biotechnology, Nofar Leviticus has also embarked on a fascinating Jewish learning experience in the Midrasha’s Norman and Johanne Sternthal Reshit Program. Growing up with traditions but not observance, she says, “I’m pleased to engage in interactive Jewish study – examining and discussing texts and sources in an intimate setting with ten other students.”

Each week she attends four intriguing courses: Women and Family in the Bible; the Book of Samuel; Vegetarianism, Kehrut and Sustainability; and Every Person has a Story (e.g., the sages Hillel and Shamai, and contemporary parallels). “I enjoy seeing different perspectives, hearing my fellow students share their experiences and opinions, and understanding that which was previously incomprehensible.”

Nofar, a native of Kfar Saba who served in the IDF Signal Corps, maintains that she would “definitely recommend the Reshit program to others because the classes are really interesting, the Midrasha atmosphere is family-like, and the hevra (camaraderie) is terrific.”

Morag Karadi

“At the Midrasha, I am encountering an exciting approach to Torah learning,” says Morag Karadi, an MA student in Special Education in BIU’s Churgin School of Education, who is enrolled in both the Hotam and Hassidut programs. For the first time, the Netanya Ulpanit graduate is learning Talmud intensively, delving deeply into the philosophy of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, and pouring through pages of commentaries and Midrashic sources, as part of her Hotam studies. She’s also exploring the interface between Halakha and science and becoming acquainted with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s The Lonely Man of Faith.

Morag eagerly awaits Tuesdays, when she immerses herself in Hassidic teachings from morning through evening. “I try to see where Hassidut applies to my daily life,” says the former IDF Intelligence soldier. “Torah study influences the soul and those close to me say it has affected me in a good way. I want to express my deepest thanks for the opportunity to learn at the Midrasha.”

“The Midrasha exposes me to new worlds of knowledge and to a more positive and in-depth way of thinking. I feel endowed with new energies, light, and happiness throughout the week.”
The Midrasha at Bar-Ilan University has blazed the path for the creation of a cadre of Talmud sages who are women — female “gedolei Torah” — who use their Jewish and Torah knowledge, together with their academic scholarship and experience, to help find innovative solutions to challenges facing the Jewish world.
Summer, Pre- and Post-Academic & Communal Programs

- The Beit Midrash for Women brings dozens of local residents to the Midrasha for a morning of in-depth study on philosophical and ethical issues in the Midrash, halakhic and Zionist ideological foundations, and the inspirational wisdom of King David.

- The Co-ed Beit Midrash Evenings, wildly popular with both men and women, draw large mixed crowds on Sundays for the English-language “Torah and Cholent” (havruta learning followed by a guest lecturer), on Tuesdays for D’Rabbanan (havruta learning, shiur, discussion), and on Wednesdays for Beit Midrash B’GO, which features special guest lecturers on a variety of spiritual topics.

- Isha al Ha’eda is a unique program which trains women to be religious community leaders. The 12 participants (all learned women) explore their professional and Jewish identity in order to strengthen their leadership skills. The curriculum provides hands-on training in the art of public speaking and classes in psychology.

- A prestigious Tikvah Fellowship Workshop for exceptional male and female students (both religious and secular) addresses core issues on the Israeli public agenda through the prism of Jewish sources, building an elite cadre of Jewish leaders of the future.

- The Etnahta Program enables young women who have completed their military or national service to engage in a year of Jewish learning while they prepare for academic studies.

- The Midrasha’s special Hiburim (getting together) enrichment program, initiated together with the ORT organization, brings high school boys and girls of secular backgrounds from the development town of Lod to BIU to explore science via the Jewish worldview. They attend lectures by university experts and learn Torah in havrutot at the Midrasha.

- The Gap-Year Program for overseas students between high school and university provides for a half day of study at the Midrasha in specially-designed classes taught in English.

- The popular Elul Program offers 17 days of study leading up to the Jewish New Year. The program is open to Midrasha students and non-students, young adults who’ve completed military or national service, and the public-at-large. Participants enrolled in the course may earn credits.

- The Pre-Marital Coaching Program trains professional coaches for brides-to-be.
The Midrasha staff includes a growing number of prominent women scholars as well as noted rabbinical figures and educators drawn from a broad spectrum of Jewish scholarship and religious orientations.

Rabbi Prof. Daniel Sperber
President of the Ludwig and Erica Jesselson Institute for Advanced Torah Studies
Israel Prize Laureate in Jewish Studies

The Midrasha: At the Helm

Dr. Tova Ganzel, Director of the Midrasha
Dr. Tova Ganzel is the Director of the Midrasha at Bar-Ilan University, and is one of Israel’s first trained women’s halakhic advisors (Yo’atzot Halakha). She received her PhD from Bar-Ilan’s Zalman Shmir Bible Department and is a renowned figure in the world of women’s Jewish learning.

Dr. Ayelet Seidler, Deputy Director
Dr. Ayelet Seidler is the Deputy Director of the Midrasha and a lecturer in the Helene and Paul Shulman School for Basic Jewish Studies at Bar-Ilan University. She completed her PhD in BIU’s Zalman Shamir Bible Department, and has published several articles in Jewish Biblical medieval exegesis and Biblical Narrative.

Dr. Meirav Tubul Kahana, Head of the Metivta Program
Dr. Meirav Tubul Kahana lectures at the Midrasha and pursues academic research on Mishnaic Hebrew. She is a product of the Beit Midrash, having studied there while pursuing her MA and PhD degrees in the Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages.

Select Members of the Midrasha Team

Rabbi Israel Samet,
Founding Head of the Johanne and Norman Sternthal Reshist Program
Rabbi Israel Samet studied at the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, served as Rabbin/teacher in the Or Etzion Hesder Yeshiva, and as the Rabbi of the “Garin Torani” in the city of Lod. Rabbi Samet is an active member in the Rabbinical Council of Tzohar.

Rabbi Dr. Michael Abraham,
Head of the Monique C. and Mordecai D. Katz Graduate Fellowship Program
With a PhD in Physics, Rabbi Michael Abraham’s research focuses on Halakhic logic, philosophy, and issues in Torah and science. He is the author of numerous books and scientific articles on Halakha and related issues.

Rabbi Matanya Yadid,
Founding Head of the Hotam Program for MA students
Rabbi Matanya Yadid teaches Bible, Talmud, and Jewish Thought in the Midrasha and other educational institutions around the country. An alumnus of the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, he holds an MA from the Herzog Institute and co-founded the Hesder Yeshiva and the “Garin Torani” in the city of Karmiel. He established the Bnei Akiva Alumni Movement and mentors young groups on campuses across the country.

Rabbi Adv. David Bas,
Lawyer and Dayan in Conversion Court
Rabbi Yuval Cherlow,
Head of Orot Shaul Hesder Yeshiva in Raanana, Founding Member of the Tzohar Rabbinical Association
Dr. Hana Hendler,
Head of Hassidut Program, Member of Ministry of Education Committee on Teaching Literature
Rabbi Aharon Katz,
Acting Chief Rabbi of Ramat Gan
Dr. Naama Sat,
Head of Safra Program, Lecturer in Faculty of Law, Pre-Martial Coach
Rabbanit Naomi Shapira,
Student Advisor for Metivta Program, Sought after Speaker on Jewish Marriage and Sanctity
Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Zoldan,
Editor of Drisha Journal; National Advisor for Ministry of Education regarding Talmud and Oral Law Studies in Religious Schools
The Midrasha: Impacting the Future

Founded in 1976 with 40 female students, the Midrasha today is a vibrant institution with close to 900 women.

**Impacting personal lives**

the Midrasha enables students from all backgrounds to develop their spiritual identities by acquiring a solid foundation of knowledge in all areas of Torah study – all this within the setting of one of Israel’s top research universities which is defined by its unique distinction of synthesizing Jewish and academic studies.

**Impacting the Jewish world**

the Midrasha educates women leaders who are not only experts in their chosen academic disciplines, but who have also acquired profound Jewish knowledge that enables them to figure prominently in public discourse and Torah leadership, both in Israel and worldwide.

Surrounded by seven municipalities, Bar-Ilan’s central location, along with its smart-city agenda and open-campus initiative, provides exciting opportunities for the Midrasha to open its doors to area residents, and expand on its programs to strengthen cooperation with local high schools and institutions. It also aspires to become the “go-to” learning institute for post-doctoral students and BIU faculty members who seek the special and thought-provoking Midrasha experience which only BIU can provide to academics and scholars. With both practical and academic implications, the Midrasha aims to play an integral role in fulfilling the university’s Jewish and Zionist mission.
Torah & Leadership

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