Bar-Ilan’s Program for Honors Scholars, launched in 2008, targets the most promising young scholars – those scoring in the top one percentile in their psychometric and matriculation exams. Currently, more than 90 handpicked students studying in diverse academic fields are being nurtured with free tuition, a monthly stipend, a personal mentor, and attendance at high-level seminars. The Program aims to cultivate cadres of top-notch scientists and academicians who will contribute to Israel’s advancement.

Shira Finson: Helping People Understand Each Other

With the ever-increasing need for Israel to make its actions clear to an often hostile world, Shira Finson decided that being a translator would be an important way to give back to her country while making a respectable living. Being part of Bar-Ilan’s prestigious Program for Honors Scholars has helped Shira pursue her career choice.

“I really love what I’m doing,” she says. “It helps people, it affects people; it can really touch people. If you’re good at it, you can help people truly understand each other,” says Shira, who adds, “that’s something we certainly need more of these days.”

Finson knew early on that she wanted to focus on translation, and her decision to come to Bar-Ilan University (BIU) was entirely logical: it is the only school in Israel that offers a Master’s degree in the subject. She has a BA from BIU in linguistics and a Master’s degree on the way in translation studies.

A key way that Finson says she has benefitted from being a part of the program, which is open to Israel’s highest achievers, “is in the broadening of my horizons. The program makes it easier for students to take courses out of their primary majors,” she explains. “Normally Israeli university studies are very focused on whatever field you happen to be studying, but we had professors from different departments come speak to us about the work they were doing.”

That carries through to the students, too. For example, one of Finson’s classmates was in the brain studies department and turned Finson on to the study of “neuro-linguistics” which focuses on how language is encoded in the brain.

Finson’s career choice is not surprising given her own cross-cultural background. She grew up in Detroit, Michigan until she was 12-years-old, when her parents decided to make aliyah. They landed in the tight-knit community of Hashmonaim. Now 23, newly married and living in Gush Etzion, she is fluent in both English and Hebrew and passionate about bridging gaps between cultures through language and translation.

Dr. Gabi Danon, a BIU lecturer in syntax, says that Finson stands out as an “exceptionally bright student. She is always one step ahead of you, constantly analyzing every aspect of what is being discussed.” Finson is now working as a teaching assistant in Danon’s first-year seminar.

Finson’s national service position enforced her interest in communication. She worked in the “call center” at the Jewish Agency’s Aliyah Department, where “we were the first stop when people called and wanted to know more about immigrating to Israel. I got a chance to talk to people from all over the world,” she says.

Another reason Finson chose the BIU translation Master’s degree program is that the University has an entire lab dedicated to oral interpretation, equipped with microphones, headphones and video monitors. She gets immediate feedback from professors, who monitor the students as they speak.

Finson has translated everything from Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech at the United Nations to a commencement talk by Oprah Winfrey. While the basic technique is the same, “we have to prepare differently,” Finson says. “There is unique terminology to learn, we have to be up on current events. Political, entertainment and diplomatic speeches are all different.”