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.

David Keller: Creating the Right Chemistry Between Science and Judaism

Imagine if you could coat the windows in your home, or even your car, with a very thin layer of solar cells that could convert the energy of the sun into electricity. Such technology could be ubiquitous and cheap. And it’s being researched at Bar-Ilan with the help of David Keller, a third-year student in chemistry and part of the University’s influential Program for Honors Scholars.

Keller joined Prof. Arie Zaban’s lab working on photo voltaic cells last summer. Zaban, who heads up the Bar-Ilan Institute of Nanotechnology and Advanced Materials, spotted Keller early on in class. “It was immediately clear that he was extremely good,” Zaban says. “He understands quickly and brings his own insights. The best questions were always coming from him.”

Keller’s ambitions in the field of chemistry were set in motion long before he enrolled at BIU. “My grandparents are all Holocaust survivors,” he explains. “They grew up in very difficult conditions with the most basic of problems – how to find food, how to stay alive; their whole focus was on just surviving. They didn’t have the opportunity to ask ‘who do I want to be’ or ‘what do I want to work in?’ They just wanted to build a family and get along financially.”

Keller, who is 25-years-old, says that members of his generation have the opportunity to focus on asking where their contribution will be most influential.

Going into a field that can make a significant environmental difference spoke to Keller. But his desire to shake things up doesn’t stop at the university gates. Keller has been active in a program sponsored by the Tikvah Fund to foster political leadership among promising students. Keller was the only science major there and discovered he had a thirst for “mediating or translating the scientific world to outsiders,” he says.

Coming from a hesder yeshiva, Keller was also one of the only religious students in the Tikvah program, which he’s taken as an opportunity to serve as a bridge between worldviews. For example, he invited his fellow students for Shabbat. “Nearly everyone came,” he says. “For many, it was their first ever experience of Shabbat. We need to know how to speak each other’s language.”

Being selected to join the Program for Honors Scholars and receiving financial aid contributed notably to his decision to enroll at Bar-Ilan. “Being able to focus on your studies and not be so concerned about money is very important,” he says. “The program is also a good business card. It can open a lot of doors. It helped me get into Prof. Zaban’s lab.”

And that’s a door that will undoubtedly lead to even more leadership opportunities – in chemistry, politics, religion and other fields of inquiry – in the lab and out.