# TAU REVIEW

Tel Aviv University | **2020**

# How COVID-19 Sparked a Learning Revolution

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Dear Friends,

The 2020-21 academic year has rolled out under the shadow of the ongoing corona crisis, but this situation hasn't held back the University, its marvelous people and its remarkable innovations in the service of Israel and the world.

In this, the inaugural issue of a revamped ***TAU Review***, we share with you exciting developments on campus. Leveraging TAU's ability to get bright minds from different fields working together, we launched several interdisciplinary initiatives such as the Center for Combating Pandemics (a global first); the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for the Humanities in STEM; and a cross-cultural Entrepreneurship Accelerator. Two new projects, the Shmunis School of Biomedicine and Cancer Research and the Taube-Koret Global Collaboration in Neurodegenerative Diseases, both further top goals of boosting academic, industry and international research ties. At the same time, the University is breaking down gender stereotypes, for example with prominent women scholars in Talmud Studies.

And of course there are the students–our great pride and the nation's promise. Both last spring and this year, our students have had to brave COVID-19 restrictions and remote learning. One response we've made is to dramatically rethink online education and pave the way toward more effective digital learning. Another response has been to recognize the severe financial distress that many of our students are experiencing, and to harness TAU and donor funds toward helping them continue with their studies.

During these challenging days, I have drawn strength and inspiration from the TAU leadership and community, and especially from TAU's global circle of friends and supporters. Their dedication is heartwarming.

Regards,

A. Porat

Prof. Ariel Porat
President, Tel Aviv University

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Issued by the Strategic Communications Dept.
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# Academic First Responders

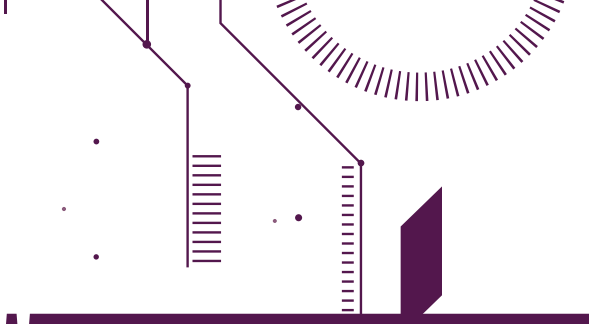
## How TAU spearheaded a learning revolution in the wake of COVID-19

By **Idit Nirel**

When COVID-19 broke in Israel in mid-March and the country shut down, Tel Aviv University decided to continue teaching all courses online—almost overnight.

While many professors and students struggled to adapt, Prof. Guy Mundlak was ready.

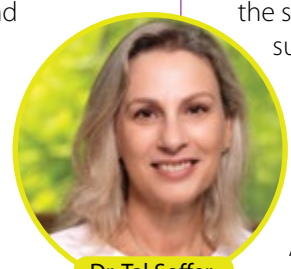
Mundlak, who teaches both at the Buchmann Faculty of Law and the Department of Labor Studies at the Gordon Faculty of Social Sciences, made the change to online teaching four years ago. His course, "Labor Law," is a hybrid course. This means that students study theoretical materials on their own through online videos of his lectures, and the in-person sessions are dedicated to discussions and analyzing the latest case studies. Mundlak's motivation to go digital preceded COVID-19, and arose for completely different reasons: "Teaching this course for over 20 years, I couldn't reinvent the wheel and find new ways to teach the same material every time," he says. So he decided to make the course



***The coronavirus crisis profoundly disrupted higher education and forced it to make the transition to the digital world—this is exactly the kind of disruption that was needed.***

digital as a way to refresh it. This is why, for Mundlak, online learning is not a constraint, but rather it opens up new opportunities: "The format allows students to learn the general concepts at their own pace, and I can focus my classroom lessons on what interests us here and now, without worrying if I've covered all the material in the classroom in time for the exam," he explains. "This approach leaves me more room for spontaneity, for dealing with matters of the hour, and for diving deep into topics with the students. As a result, I don't just lecture to my students; I engage and involve them in issues that touch their everyday lives—which is actually the best way to learn."

With the pandemic and lockdown crushing the economy, Mundlak's course became especially relevant to his students. He dedicated his classes—taught via Zoom—to employment issues that emerged during the Corona pandemic, such as the ramifications of layoffs and furloughs. Because most of his students had been working as waiters or in other hourly jobs to finance their studies, these subjects were not just academic theory, but reality for many of them.



Dr. Tal Soffer

Providing Prof. Mundlak with digital tools for online teaching was Dr. Tal Soffer, Director of Virtual TAU, the unit responsible for enhancing the University's digital teaching environment and resources. According to her, "online courses or integrating digital methods into other courses allow for more personalized learning that is customized to students' needs." At the same time, "online learning can provide students with skills for lifelong learning, which are crucial for success in today's labor market—such as time management and the ability to learn independently."

## COVID-19 Pushes Learning Online

As the coronavirus spread in Israel and lockdown appeared imminent, Soffer and her team were already working around the clock to facilitate the shift to online studies. It was a success. More than 90,000 live online lessons took place over the spring semester, and thousands of lessons were recorded, to allow students to study on their own time. All in all, online learning during the first lockdown accounted for more than 50,000 hours and 10 terabits in digital volume.

Soffer and her team set up a technical support hotline for online learning; they received as many as 700 calls per day. In addition to assisting professors in overcoming the technicalities of online teaching, the team also created more than 50 video guides showing lecturers how to use online learning tools to make lessons more engaging. These included splitting the class into virtual workgroups, using shared documents or creating classroom quizzes to spur discussions.

They also conducted large-scale surveys to evaluate how students learn online and to assess satisfaction. According to these surveys, which reached 7,000 students and 750 faculty members, the vast majority of students said they would like to incorporate online learning into their studies in the future.

Like other universities around the world, TAU also faced the new challenge of conducting online exams and evaluations. While spring semester exams were conducted from home with supervisors overseeing students through Zoom, TAU is now introducing a pilot computerized authentication system for online exams. The new technology will secure online exams by verifying students' identity and monitoring their presence and activities during the exam. Although this is a big step forward, Soffer is aware that in the long run adopting more and more of these technologies may be intrusive and make students feel as if "big brother" is watching. "We need to maintain a balance between technology and ensuring the students' privacy." Rather than relying on anti-cheating applications, Soffer says, in the future the University should also encourage alternative evaluation methods. These include essays, collaborative student projects, or open-book exams that require students to reflect on the topics learned, minimizing the need for digital exams as the main determinant of success in the course.

"The coronavirus crisis profoundly disrupted higher education and forced it to make the transition to the digital world—and, in a way, I believe this is exactly the kind of disruption that was needed," Soffer says. "The question is, how do we move forward from here?"

Yuval Shreibman, Director of TAU Online–Innovative Learning Center,

agrees that the pandemic accelerated digital innovation in education because the situation forced people and institutions to step out of their comfort zones. He should know; TAU Online has been producing online courses since long before the corona crisis, among other initiatives, to make academia more accessible through technology.


Prof. Guy Mundlak

"Universities all around the world understood a long time ago that they have to transform learning and enhance their online and digital tools," says Shreibman. "COVID-19 caused us to leap forward and address problems that we could previously overlook. At the same time, it shows us that we need to rethink complementary classroom learning to make it more active and engaging."

## Innovating on All Levels

Given the volatile reality and constantly changing regulations, TAU prepared for all possible scenarios for the new academic year. The University had intended to offer first-year students—who are taking their first steps in the academic world—the option to physically attend classes. However, as of press time (November 2020) with Israel still imposing strict measures to curb infection, studies will be conducted online for all students, at least for the first semester. To address this challenge, Virtual TAU has launched an unprecedented effort to arm lecturers with versatile presentation tools and introduce additional fully online courses. Among the new courses produced are a multidisciplinary course on climate change and a comprehensive math course for engineering students.

Admissions to the University are also going online, with a new admissions track based on participation and success in specific online courses chosen by each faculty. The new track is currently intended for candidates who, as a result of COVID-19, could not take standardized university admissions tests. Yet, it also provides greater access to the University for young Israelis from disadvantaged backgrounds or outlying communities, who otherwise might not be able to study at TAU.

TAU is also setting out to launch a new, fully online international MBA program, the first of its kind to be offered by an Israeli university. Now in advanced stages of planning and approval, the program is due to launch in Autumn 2021. It is pre-designed for optimal online learning and will combine video courses that students will study on their own, along with personal guidance from the program's teaching staff, online study forums and demanding student projects throughout the degree. Based on the same high entrance requirements as the regular MBA programs led by the Coller School of Management—recently ranked as the 13th school in the world for producing VC-backed entrepreneurs—the program is expected to attract ambitious students from across the globe.

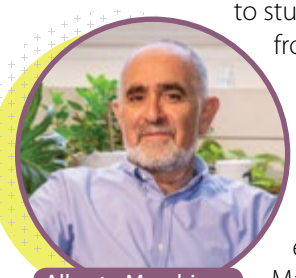
COVID-19 underlined the importance of online learning at TAU so much that President Ariel Porat created a new position to oversee it; Prof. Liat Kishon-Rabin became Dean of Innovation in Learning and Teaching in July. "TAU has always prided itself


Student Michal Ferenz and Archaeology Prof. Erez Ben-Yosef

on being a leader in educational innovation, but the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the need to focus on this field even more," says Prof. Porat. "I trust that Prof. Kishon-Rabin will build on our existing achievements and lead us through the post-corona era with vision and success."

## Providing Critical Support during Online Learning

Despite the positive insights gleaned about online learning, TAU must take into account students who struggle with studying remotely. Alberto Meschiany, head of the Psychological Services Unit at TAU's Student Services Division, says that at the beginning of the crisis, his unit experienced a 15% rise in requests for psychological support. "For many students, the anxiety resulting from the pandemic itself and its economic implications was coupled with the stress of having to study and take exams from home," he says. "For students who live in the dorms or come from lower socio-economic levels, this was exceptionally difficult. Many of them don't have a quiet place to study. Some live in remote towns that don't have the Internet network to support continuous online studies."


Alberto Meschiany

Yet, according to Meschiany, it isn't only the logistical and technological barriers that make the shift to online learning difficult for many TAU students. "Distance from other students can create feelings of alienation and loneliness. All the technology in the world cannot replace the support that students get from their peers," he says. "In addition, the lack of a personal lecturer-student relationship has a negative effect on academic development. The ability to knock on a lecturer's door and ask a question or discuss a topic spontaneously is lost in the context of online learning."

Meschiany believes that as the University adopts more and more online learning methods, it should make an effort to tailor them to accommodate students with various difficulties. These include students from underprivileged communities who don't have the proper conditions to study online; students who suffer from anxiety in general; or others who feel lonely and vulnerable without a live support network. "They will need our active help," he says.

## The Student Viewpoint

Looking back at lessons learned from the "first wave" of online learning, there is no question that TAU can learn the most from its students. Jonathan Berkheim, a master's student in chemistry and spokesperson for TAU's Student Union when the pandemic started, experienced the lockdown and its aftermath from several perspectives.

As a senior member of the Student Union, he fielded numerous calls from students who struggled to study within the new framework. Even students who fared well felt shortchanged, according to Berkheim. "The social interaction, class discussions and campus life are a crucial part of the package that students expect from university studies."

At the same time, Berkheim says that the unusual circumstances broke traditional, hierarchical barriers between students and professors. They found themselves communicating directly on WhatsApp groups, saw each other's homes during Zoom sessions, and shared similar experiences of life during the lockdown. "I hope that the University will embrace this new paradigm for student-professor relations in the future."


Jonathan Berkheim

In addition, as a teaching assistant, he

### Brain + Learning = Minducate

Minducate is an innovation and learning center that brings together outstanding young researchers at TAU to explore the science of learning and create a bridge between education, academia, and industry. The center is a joint endeavor of the Sagol School of Neuroscience and TAU Online–Innovative Learning Center.

A yearly cohort of fellows lead novel, technology-based research combining fields such as neuroscience and psychology to enhance our understanding of learning and teaching. The 2020 fellows focus on the future of learning. For example, Dr. Konstantin Sonkin, of the Sagol School of Neuroscience, is creating a robot to enhance the motor and cognitive learning of special-needs children. Doctoral candidate Yael Shavit, also of the Sagol School, researches the neuro-mechanisms that drive brain activity in order to improve language-acquisition skills. Tomer Gal, a doctoral candidate at the Constantiner School of Education, is studying how using automated instructions during a learning exercise can provide students with personalized feedback.

Minducate receives support from the Dr. Garry Rayant and Dr. Kathy Fields-Rayant Minducate Learning Innovation Research Fund and the Walanpatrias Foundation, and is managed by Dr. Michal Shevach.

experienced distance learning from the other side of the virtual podium: "To hold regular classes on Zoom is not an ideal solution," he says. "Something gets lost in translation. Students get distracted more easily. It was hard for me to know if they really understood what I was teaching."

Finally, as a student himself, he found that watching recorded lessons at his own pace was convenient. "Face-to-face learning in the classroom is crucial, but combining it with independent online studies is the way to go and will have great benefits for students," Berkheim concludes.

As the 2020-21 academic year unfolds, it is clear that life with COVID-19 has become the new normal. All players involved in online learning understand that TAU must embrace the advantages moving forward.

"Until recently, when I was presenting my own field of research—which deals with future trends in the labor market and predicts that people would increasingly shift to working from home—people would tell me that it sounded too futuristic," says Prof. Mundlak. "Now it is has become a reality. The future is here."

## Building Community during Crisis

When COVID-19 broke, hundreds of students who participated in "TAU Impact," the University's flagship community leadership program, were forced to abruptly terminate their field work.

In response, the TAU Impact team, working under the Dean of Students, transformed their roster of community service programs from hands-on to virtual "overnight," according to TAU Impact Director Rachel Warshawsky. This involved guiding schoolchildren who were learning remotely, as well as online and phone work with the elderly, blind, mentally ill and other groups, among other activities. The popular TAU program offers accredited courses integrating academic knowledge with community service and will soon be a requirement for all undergraduate students.


Ravid Yehezkely

Ravid Yehezkely, a medicine and life sciences student, had been teaching a movement class for physically disabled adults for her TAU Impact course when the pandemic started. With her original placement canceled, she was immediately recruited by Warshawsky's team to tutor high school students. In addition to assisting them with schoolwork, she helped them cope with the hardships of the lockdown.

In another successful TAU Impact project, students in the course "Ethics of Big Data in Smart Cities" created an app called TAU-Walks, which helps the blind and visually impaired navigate TAU's campus.

"We succeeded in carrying out meaningful social projects which helped many people in the community—even if from a distance—as well as the students themselves, who were gratified that they could contribute to society during this difficult time," concludes Warshawsky.

Profs. Motti Gerlic (left) and Ariel Munitz

# Global First: Center for Combating Pandemics

## TAU is combining interdisciplinary expertise with Israeli ingenuity to fight COVID-19 and future epidemics

By **Rava Eleasari**

Despite tens of millions of cases worldwide, SARS-Cov-2, the new coronavirus also referred to as COVID-19, remains largely misunderstood. The scientific and medical communities still do not know the causes—or long-term effects—of the killer virus's wide range of symptoms.

As more and more countries, including Israel, experience a second wave of COVID-19, with rising death rates and devastating economic consequences, it is more urgent than ever to crack the virus and secure a more certain future for all.

Against this backdrop, Tel Aviv University recently launched the Center for Combating Pandemics, the first of its kind in Israel and possibly the world. Building on TAU's innovation record, interdisciplinary culture, and strong links with hospitals, industry and government, the Center has three main foci. It will strive to improve frontline containment of infection, bolster biomedical knowledge for developing vaccines and treatments, and strengthen the nation's capacity to ensure social and economic resilience. It will coordinate among the 100 groups researching the coronavirus across campus, as well as provide master's and doctoral fellowships, upgrade labs and equipment, host visiting professors, run conferences and workshops, and facilitate international collaborations.

Seed funding for the Center has been generously provided by founding donor and TAU Honorary Doctor Frank Lowy, TAU Governors Dr. Kathy Fields-Rayant and Dr. Garry Rayant, the Yuri Milner Foundation, and Yad Hanadiv. The Center was inaugurated in an online ceremony and webinar on October 18.

"In the past 15 years, the world

has seen a string of viral pathogens infect large numbers of people, among them SARS, MERS, swine flu and avian flu. Clearly, we are not safe from dangerous emerging diseases," says Center Head Prof. Itai Benhar of TAU's Shmunis School of Biomedicine and Cancer Research. "We must look ahead."


Prof. Itai Benhar

## Improving Frontline Performance

To ensure that Israel—and other countries—are better prepared, the Center will establish a Frontline Response Program. To this end, the Center will assemble groups of experts from fields such as preventive and emergency medicine, epidemiology, disaster management, psychology, social work and the health professions, along with data science, environmental studies and engineering. These teams will fine-tune tools and protocols for halting transmission.

Examples include a recent project, funded by Google, at TAU's AI and Data Science Center for employing AI techniques and advanced statistical methods to improve COVID-19 public health measures. Using government data, the researchers are building a model of the spread of the pandemic to assist in planning and testing various methods for stopping infection.

In another project, a team led by Prof. Motti Gerlic and Prof. Ariel Munitz, both of TAU's Sackler Faculty of Medicine, has developed a robotic blood test for antibodies against the coronavirus and is working with the Israel Defense Forces to test the method on soldiers.


Prof. Sigal Alon

## Developing Vaccines and Therapies

Along with improving the emergency response to the pandemic, the Center will establish a Biomedical Solutions Task Force aimed both at deepening understanding of the basic mechanisms underlying the virus and at developing up-to-the-minute, precision drugs and technologies to diagnose, treat and prevent it. Dozens of TAU scientists are already making widely reported breakthroughs, often with colleagues at TAU-affiliated hospitals.

One particularly promising direction is the vaccine research of Prof. Jonathan Gershoni of the Shmunis School of Biomedicine and Cancer Research. His vaccine candidate, which targets a vulnerability in the coronavirus's well-known "spike" protein, was awarded a U.S. patent along with major funding from the 3M corporation. Other projects include repurposing a melanoma "nano-vaccine" to fight COVID-19 and the development of an antibody cocktail, which is expected to treat and temporarily prevent the virus.

## Supporting Fact-Based Policymaking

The Center will mobilize scholars from non-biomedical fields including economics, law, public policy, management and education in a Social and Economic Resilience Think Tank aimed at informing national policy. Their goal will be to objectively look at what's happening today, ask hard questions, and recommend solutions.

Questions could include: How do we as a society provide equitable access to medical services and resources to all those in need? How do we care for our elderly, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups? How do we strike the right balance between individual rights and public welfare?

### Must History Repeat Itself?

"It was one of the worst outbreaks, killing 100,000 in just seven months. All public entertainment was banned and victims were forcibly shut into their homes to prevent the spread of disease."

*–Account of the bubonic plague epidemic in London, 1665*

"The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that you can't separate the medical crisis from the socioeconomic crisis," says Prof. Sigal Alon of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, who studies employment. "The Center for Combating Pandemics will boost my ability to incorporate different perspectives in my recommendations to decision-makers to improve the job market in the coronavirus era."

Center Head Prof. Benhar concludes: "Over the longer term, we envision the Center not only contributing to global efforts to combat and contain the current crisis, but also building the scientific and professional foundations to enable us to successfully cope with the next one."

# Accelerating Jewish-Arab Entrepreneurship

## TAU's jumpTAU program helps bicultural teams found start-ups and friendships

By **Lindsey Zemler**

"If you put a law student, a medical student, a social sciences student and an engineer in a room–it's not the start of a joke. It's the start of a creative idea," says Yair Sakov, Managing Director of TAU's Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center and its accelerator program, jumpTAU. The four-month program provides a framework for teams of TAU students and recent alumni to develop a business or social venture. In 2020, the Center, which promotes the integration of diverse communities into Israel's entrepreneurial ecosystem, focused on bringing together Arab and Jewish students.

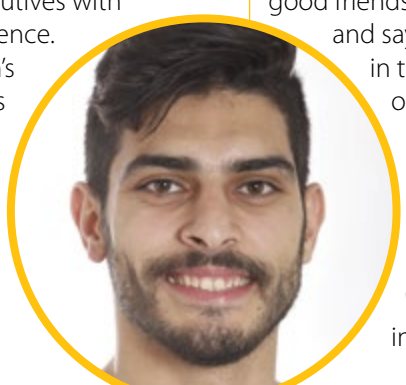
Although Arab citizens constitute more than 20% of Israel's population, relations between Arab and Jewish Israelis are often characterized by ignorance, prejudice and fear. The same is true on Israeli campuses: "Connections between Jews and Arabs are happening in the workplace," Sakov says, "but in academia we don't see it enough."

According to jumpTAU participant Lena Polevoi, a Jewish biomedical engineering student, having Jews and Arabs working together gave her team unique insights into developing a product. She acted as CEO of a student group developing a digital platform called Chatty, which aims to reduce loneliness among the elderly. "We discovered that loneliness is less prevalent among Arab seniors because they generally live with their families, while Jewish seniors do not," she says.

Polevoi adds that she entered the program ready to learn as much as possible before graduating, especially in the field of digital marketing.

Similarly, Arab-Israeli Osaid Watted, a second-year mechanical engineering student, applied to jumpTAU to cultivate his entrepreneurial skills. He also wished to forge connections to the Jewish business world. Watted was part of the team that launched Game On, an online social platform for amateur athletes to find sports games to compete in. The team members' different fields of study enhanced the business development process, he says.

The jumpTAU novice entrepreneurs received guidance from industry veterans and executives with decades of experience. All of the program's volunteer mentors are TAU alumni. Most important, the mentors provided an entry point into the business world, which was a major advantage, especially for the Arab students; finding a job, for example, says Watted, would otherwise be very difficult for someone like him, who has no experience or contacts in Israel's business community.



Osaid Watted

In addition to networking opportunities, the program, funded by the U.S. Embassy and USAID's Conflict Mitigation and Management (CMM) Program, provided additional benefits to participants, says Sakov.

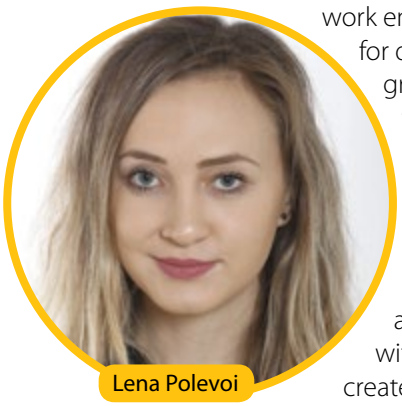
Jewish students gained a rare window into the Arab market through their Arab peers, a huge market opportunity locally and globally, he says.

Polevoi says she emerged from the program with new knowledge and skills and a refined direction in life. The experience led her to take a job in a solar energy venture upon graduation from TAU. She also became good friends with her Arab teammate and says that participation in the accelerator was an opportunity to get to know a new culture first-hand.

For Watted, the experience provided enormous personal and professional benefits; "the entrepreneurial sense in me grew, and I became

> *Connections between Jews and Arabs are happening in the workplace," Sakov says, "but in academia we don't see it enough.*

more confident in my abilities, like how to actually build a start-up –it's just priceless." He now plans to start his own company, based on the values he was raised on: to provide an egalitarian and empowering work environment for disadvantaged groups within the Arab community, including Arab women.



Lena Polevoi

"Respecting each other and working with each other creates a feeling of tolerance," said Watted.

By the program's end, two out of eight teams had raised investment funding for their start-ups to continue beyond the accelerator. Yet, to Sakov, securing funding is but "the icing on the cake."

"Professional collaboration is where humanity begins," concludes Sakov. "When you work with someone, you trust them. All of a sudden, the label that says Jewish or Arab disappears, and you see the person behind it."

## Coller Teams Start Up Despite COVID-19

### Student Teams Win $100,000 Each in Coller School Venture Funding

Even under this year's extenuating circumstances, TAU's Coller School of Management held its annual Start-up Competition, with 10 out of 70 diverse teams reaching the final stage.

The teams competed in two categories, food and technology. The winner of the Food-Tech track was Remilk, a start-up formed in the jumpTAU Jewish-Arab accelerator program that uses biotechnology to produce dairy products without animal products. The first place winner in the Technology and Entrepreneurship category was X-trodes Ltd., an Israeli biotechnology start-up that develops a wearable, wireless technology for brain-wave monitoring.

The winning team in each category received an investment of $100,000 from the Coller Foundation, and the runners-up received $25,000 from fresh.fund, a university-focused venture capital fund launched in 2016.

The competition, established four years ago, is open to all TAU students and alumni within 10 years of graduation, and aims to support entrepreneurs with exposure, professional guidance, and financial assistance.

"The competition demonstrates the values at the heart of TAU's academic ecosystem, which include supporting innovation, encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit, fostering diverse talents, and instilling managerial tenacity so as to maximize the chances of success," says Prof. Moshe Zviran, Dean of the Coller School of Management.

The finalists pitched their start-ups live to a panel of over 30 international and Israeli judges via Zoom.


The X-trodes team

*I chose academia because I wanted the gates of Jewish learning to open for me.*

# Opening Gates and Scaling Mountains: The TAU Women Breaking Convention in the Jewish World

By **Lisa Kremer**

## Four scholars bring powerful perspectives to Jewish studies, ancient history, political psychology, and gender studies

A young girl, captivated by her family's lively Talmud discussion around the Shabbat table, is prohibited from studying Talmud at school. A frightened girl squeezes her eyes shut as she dunks her body into the ritual bath so that she will be officially recognized as Jewish. A Hassidic high school teacher steals into university lectures and does not tell a soul when she enrolls in a master's program. A young ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) woman interviews heads of state, writing under a male byline for her political column in a Haredi newspaper, just happy to be published.

These seminal experiences, combined with relentless intellectual curiosity, drive TAU's Prof. Vered Noam, MA student Daria Tass, Senior Lecturer Dr. Nechumi Yaffe, and PhD candidate Estee Rieder-Indursky to achieve academic fulfillment. They come from different backgrounds and places. Yet, their common ability to overcome the frameworks that might limit them; to break convention; and to forge new academic perspectives led them to find a home at TAU.

Prof. Vered Noam

Photo: Muki Schwartz

## Opening Gates of Jewish Learning

Prof. Vered Noam, outgoing Head of TAU's Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Archaeology, was awarded the 2020 Israel Prize in Talmudic research—the first woman to be recognized in this subject that women have traditionally been prohibited from studying. "In my family the Talmud [rabbinic discourse on Jewish law and tradition] was a living, breathing part of the atmosphere. It was a way that people I loved connected with one another, and I wanted to participate. But the *beit midrash*, the Jewish study hall, was closed to girls. I chose academia because I wanted the gates of Jewish learning to open for me, and I knew they wouldn't in a traditional way."

Noam's scholarly work on rabbinic and Second Temple literature and the early halachic period is renowned in academic circles worldwide, yet the Israel Prize committee also noted her tireless efforts to unlock Talmudic literature for all Israelis. For example, she created a virtual beit midrash—the "Yomi" Facebook group—where learners from different backgrounds discuss a daily Talmudic page in a friendly and non-hierarchical atmosphere.

Her inclusive vision has been colored by her many years at TAU's Entin Faculty of Humanities. She explains: "I am happy that I teach at the most Israeli university—with students from across the spectrum of the population—at the center of Israeli life." She is particularly proud of Ofakim, the Rosenberg School's program that trains outstanding students to teach Jewish culture in secular high schools, which was founded and supported by the Posen Foundation. "Ofakim alumni are leaders in Jewish philosophy education, presenting high-level Jewish studies in a pluralistic way."

Noam believes her first love, the Talmud, encapsulates an open approach to Jewish texts and tradition. Similarly, she insists that her accomplishments should not be appraised from a gender-centered perspective; the Talmud should belong to everyone. "Male scholars are free to speak of their research without referring to their gender all the time."

"Talmud is a charming world brimming with color, humor, and logic. It grants freedom to create bold new ideas and a discussion linking generations across time and place", she concludes.

## The Personal Is Powerful

Daria Tass is a recent graduate of TAU's Ofakim program. Tass's family immigrated to Israel when she was four years old. Like many post-Soviet Jews, she had to undergo a conversion process.

"I never had a place to process being Russian in Israel—the emotions you feel when you hear you are not Jewish enough, not Israeli enough. My mother decided for me to go through the conversion process… To protect a collective identity, we do need guard posts and gateways, but the process was hurtful and in no way spiritual. I was so terrified standing

### A Talmudic Tale about Continuity and Change

Moses ascends Mount Sinai, but God is not ready: He is adorning the Torah's Hebrew letters with crowns for Rabbi Akiva, who will be born generations later and interpret the Torah through his understanding of these crowns. Moses wishes to meet this great rabbi, so God directs him to "walk backwards" into the future. Moses finds himself in a study hall. Disoriented, he doesn't understand a word of Rabbi Akiva's teachings, but his ears perk up and he settles in comfortably when Rabbi Akiva says, "This is *Halacha* from Moses of Sinai."

"Moses represents written Torah, and Rabbi Akiva oral Torah, or Talmud," explains Prof. Vered Noam. "This tale shows that Jewish culture has the freedom to change, and the courage to admit change is possible when continuity and ancient texts are honored."

Daria Tass

in the *mikveh*—the purifying ritual bath." Tass continues, "Ofakim helped me understand my connection to Judaism, and realize I could and should talk about these things. I can use my personal Jewish history to reach out to secular students and communicate Jewish culture in a way that will speak to them." Tass's feelings reflect the experiences of many Jews from the former USSR, who were persecuted for being Jewish in their birth countries, and then upon arrival in Israel were not considered Jewish.

Starting this academic year, Tass will be teaching at a Tel Aviv high school and continuing at TAU as a master's student in ancient history, specializing in Persia. While both of her parents and her grandmother hold master's degrees, having grown up as a new immigrant in a periphery town, Tass does not take her career in academia for granted. Similarly, her choice of topic for graduate research comes from a personal place. "I am interested in purity as a concept in ancient times. Obviously, my research connects to my experience of being regarded as somehow unclean or not Jewish enough, as well as my experience as a woman, the idea of the mikveh, and aspects of purity relating to women. Female historians bring a different perspective to the study of history; it's not just about chronicling famous battles. I have been inspired by both men and women scholars at TAU, but in the women, I can see my future self."

## The Essence of Human Dynamics

Senior Lecturer Dr. Nechumi Yaffe gazes out her window at TAU's Department of Public Policy and feels thankful. Yaffe is the first Haredi woman on a tenure-track at an Israeli university and, for her, the green academic village reflects the possibilities before her.

Yaffe studies poverty in the Haredi community, and "how psychological mechanisms, social norms, and rabbinic authority play a role in creating and perpetuating poverty." Yaffe seeks to give her MA students,

Dr. Nechumi Yaffe

who come to TAU's Gordon Faculty of Social Sciences with strong opinions formed by years in public and private sectors, "a completely different narrative for thinking about poverty, and how it interacts with psychology, sociology and public policy."

Yaffe continues, "My students had to swallow hard when they saw me—I mean I wear a *sheitel* [wig, for modesty]. Many hold assumptions about the poor as being unmotivated and lacking character, making bad decisions, and leading unbalanced lifestyles. Yet those living in poverty are trapped by social structures. And so I present how the burden of change should fall on social systems, rather than on the individual. I have not had one class end on time, as my students ask question after question. They hold leadership positions, and this knowledge can change their professional decision-making and make a real difference."

Growing up on her father's coattails on the men's side of the synagogue, she was often told that she would have made a great rabbi if she were a boy. Yet finding an outlet for her intellectual curiosity was challenging. As a history teacher armed with a BA, she was tasked with rewriting the curriculum and textbook for Haredi high schools in Israel. To do so, she accessed the National Library on the Hebrew University campus in Jerusalem. "I saw students studying, read fliers about courses and lectures, and knew I had to become part of what was happening—I even snuck into classes," she laughs. Yaffe chose an interdisciplinary degree to grant her broad knowledge.

She began MA studies in conflict resolution without telling anyone—including her husband, who was surprised to find a tuition receipt in the mail. "I didn't know political psychology existed," Yaffe says. "But I was interested in group dynamics and power structures, something I became aware of as a child when my parents divorced and my siblings and I dealt with the reaction of the community and our school. We were judged for something we had not done, and we knew that was wrong."

After earning an MA and PhD at Hebrew University, Yaffe moved her family to Brooklyn, New York, for her post-doc at Princeton University. There, she worked at the research center of Nobel Prize winner Prof. Daniel Kahneman, together with Eldar Shafir, the center's director, and MacArthur Prize Winner Betsy Levy Paluck—both of whom she continues to collaborate with today.

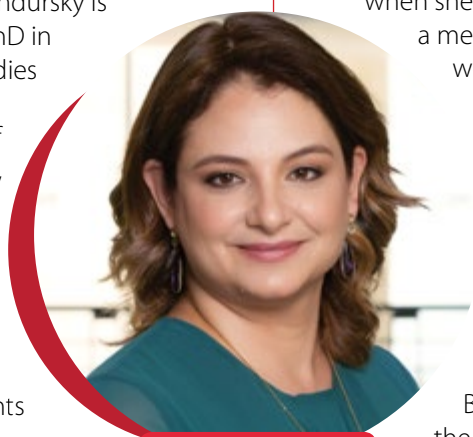
Transitioning her family back to Jerusalem, she found her daughter in a similar position to hers after her parents' divorce: a *persona non grata* due to Yaffe's occupation. "People

in the community are nicer than anticipated about my career," Yaffe continues, "but the system is meaner. It took a long time to find a good school that would accept my daughter."

Yaffe has tirelessly pursued what she wants—to expand her intellectual universe and remain within the folds of her community. These two desires may seem at odds, but Nechumi Yaffe insists she is simply being herself: A Hassidic woman with intense curiosity and intellectual ability. "It is not a contradiction for me to be in academia," she explains. "Hassidism looks at the essence, the inner reason for why things happen. My scientific work discovering the essence of human dynamics is another form of Hassidism."

## Scaling the Beautiful Mountain of Academia

Estee Rieder-Indursky is completing a PhD in the Gender Studies Program at the Porter School of Cultural Studies, Entin Faculty of Humanities. She is the 2020 recipient of the Dan David Prize for Doctoral Students for her research on discourses of Haredi women who study the Talmud.



Estee Rieder-Indursky

"As a Haredi woman, I never considered that women would learn Talmud," says Rieder-Indursky. "Now, I have interviewed over 30 for my research." In fact, many things have come to pass that she could not have imagined earlier in her life.

Rieder-Indursky married in her early twenties and quickly separated, a young son in tow. She worked as a journalist, "interviewing experts and heads of state and writing about politics for Haredi newspapers under a male byline, because it is a 'men's subject.' It didn't even occur to me to question that—I was happy to be working, published, and able to support my son.

"Growing up, I had a public library card, which was rare in our community. I was a voracious reader, which I guess taught me to write. Later, when I interviewed academic experts for work, I loved visiting campuses and would come early and leave late just to soak it all in," says Rieder-Indursky. After she was granted a divorce, she remarried at age 38 and began undergraduate studies in government at IDC–Herzliya. "I was debating about the Haredi community with a professor and he said, 'If you want to be taken seriously, you need a doctorate.' And I thought to myself, 'Okay, I am going to be you.'" And she meant it.

At around the same time, she experienced a feminist awakening when she was invited to a meeting of Haredi women in a Bnei Brak basement. "We shared our experiences. I listened to myself tell my story, and I listened to others' stories about being a wife, a mother, a woman in our community. By the time I climbed the steps out of that basement, I was a feminist.

"I am interested in uncovering the theoretical structure of Haredi feminism. I want to give voice to women who have not been heard from before in academic research." She is a board member of Itach Maaci–Women Lawyers for Social Justice, and took part in the No Voice, No Vote campaign—a political movement for Haredi women's representation. She was an active member of a coalition that petitioned the Supreme Court and, in 2018, achieved a historic correction: Haredi political parties can no longer bar women from their ranks *de jure*.

Her MA thesis on Haredi women and political activity was published in an award-winning Hebrew book, *Invisible Women*. The book—and her unique perspective in Israeli academia—made waves. In addition, former TAU President Joseph Klafter advised with her on integrating Haredim into academia. Now, alongside her doctoral research, she teaches two TAU courses, "Media, Activism, and Multiculturalism through a Feminist Prism" and "Women in Politics—The Personal Is Political." "Students have told me that my courses transform the way they think and speak," Rieder-Indursky says. "If you had told me 20 years ago that I would be pursuing a PhD and teaching at Tel Aviv University, I could never have believed it. Back then academia was a beautiful mountain that I never knew I would have the chance to climb."

# TAU Researcher Fights Epidemics Both Viral and Virtual

## Dan Yamin can detect any kind of contagious outbreak

By **Rafael Ben-Menashe**

TAU's Dr. Dan Yamin has developed a data tracking system applicable both to infectious diseases like coronavirus and to anti-Israel bias on social media. He cites human behavior as a key factor in the transmission of both.

Yamin, who heads the Lab for Epidemic Modeling and Analysis at TAU's Fleischman Faculty of Engineering, says that his approach is based on what traditional epidemiology lacks—data on human behavior.

"At the core of any transmission process lies contact mixing patterns," explains Yamin. "These patterns represent the social interactions of individuals," and, when it comes to the spread of diseases, "whoever doesn't consider these elements misses the point."

Together with Prof. Irad Ben-Gal, head of TAU's Laboratory of AI, Machine Learning, Business & Data Analytics, Yamin developed a tool for predicting transmission dynamics based on people's movements tracked on their mobile phones.

When COVID-19 first broke in Israel, Yamin consulted for Israel's Health Ministry, predicting local outbreaks with this phone data system.

"The tool is not only helpful for local detection of the virus but also for creating simulations of the virus's spread, telling us what will happen if one policy is replaced with another," he says.

Additionally, Yamin found that targeted lockdowns for high-risk groups and localized infection clusters are up to 5 times more efficient in reducing mortality as opposed to a nationwide lockdown strategy. This finding led the Israeli government to adopt a targeted approach as opposed to general lockdown.

Now, months later, Yamin and his team are developing a tool for early detection of COVID-19 infection based on mobile phone sensors which measure step counts, sleeping habits and other parameters.

### Think Viral, Tweet Viral

Before joining TAU, Yamin completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale University's School of Public Health. While there, he was disturbed by the level of anti-Israel sentiment on American social networks and its ability to go viral.

Based on the same patterns he studied in disease transmission, Yamin began creating a system that uses artificial intelligence to identify how certain groups use viral marketing tactics to spread anti-Semitic and anti-Israel messages.

Yamin explains that people who retweet posts casually are much like asymptomatic disease carriers. Many Twitter users will pass on information with covert or explicit anti-Semitic messages unintentionally.

Choosing when to respond on social media is a delicate matter. Hence, Yamin suggests using AI to assist with the decision-making process. "Being proactively pro-Israel on social media is not always the best approach," says Yamin. "Most anti-Israel tweets are not viral, so why waste time on tweets that won't go anywhere?"

### Next Generation of Disease Control

Looking ahead, Yamin believes data-based methodologies like his will be crucial for managing future viral diseases. As such, he will be a key member of TAU's multidisciplinary Center for Combating Pandemics, the first center of its kind in the world. "Data systems such as this one can substantially improve the accuracy of medical diagnosis in the future," he says.

# Enemies: A Love Story

**Synagogue worshippers**
Isfahan

## TAU's Alliance Center for Iranian Studies is a world authority on Iran and its Jews

By **Melanie Takefman**

Even though they have been enemies in official channels for decades, Iranians and Israelis have a mutual fascination with each other.

"Young Iranians are very intrigued by Israelis and are eager to contact them through social media," says Dr. Liora Hendelman-Baavur, the new Director of TAU's Alliance Center for Iranian Studies and a historian of Iranian women and media in the 20th century. "They want to know what is beyond the image of the 'Zionist enemy' as presented by Iranian sources."

In parallel, the popularity of *Tehran*, a critically-acclaimed TV series about a Mossad agent in Iran, attests to

*Continued on page 20*

**Jewish cemetery**
Pir Khaneh

**Yousefabad synagogue**
Tehran

**Jewish cemetery**
Isfahan

## A Captivating Glimpse of a Trapped Minority

Prominent Iranian photographer, filmmaker and TV producer Hasan Sarbakhshian started documenting Iran's Jewish community at the start of this century, when his wife discovered she had Jewish roots. As they dug deeper into this intriguing group which lives under a radical Muslim regime, the couple suspected they were being followed by the authorities. Sarbakhshian and his family fled Iran and now live in Prague. The result of Sarbakhshian's work is a beautiful and haunting photo collection. A corresponding exhibit entitled "Trapped Minority" was planned at TAU in honor of the 15th anniversary of the University's Alliance Center for Iranian Studies, but was postponed because of COVID-19. In the meantime, a sampling of the exhibit is featured on these pages. All photos appearing here were taken in 2007-2008.

**Jewish women celebrate Sukkot**
Tehran

# Enemies: A Love Story

the complex perception of Iran in Israel; Israelis view Iran as a threat but many are also nostalgic for the good relations the two countries enjoyed until 1979.

At TAU, this interest goes beyond curiosity. Now, in its 15th year, TAU's Alliance Center is the region's leading hub for academic research on Iran outside of Iran itself. With the Iranian-Israeli conflict constantly in the news, the Center is more relevant than ever.

No group encapsulates the precariousness of this relationship more than Iran's 20,000-member Jewish community, says Hendelman-Baavur. Recent Iranian legislation enshrined its boycott of Israel and underscored local Jews' status as a minority at risk. The law even makes it illegal for Iranians to meet with Israelis, a hard blow to Iranian Jews who until now could meet Israeli relatives in a third country.

Because Iranian Jews are a main focus of the Alliance Center's research, a photo exhibit documenting the community entitled "Trapped Minority" was planned to celebrate the Center's 15th anniversary. Although the exhibit was postponed indefinitely due to COVID-19, some of the photos by Iranian exile Hasan Sarbakhshian are published exclusively here.

## Flourishing Center

Founded in 2005, the Center was the vision of TAU governor and honorary doctor Lord David Alliance of the UK as well as David and Laura Merage of the USA and TAU Prof. Emeritus David Menashri. United in their fondness for their birth land's language, culture and history, they dreamt of establishing a center that would generate new insights into Iran.

Fifteen years later, their vision has become a reality.

The Center has cultivated a generation of Iran scholars who work in think tanks, major media, diplomacy, security institutions and other related fields. Hendelman-Baavur and her colleagues Prof. Meir Litvak (former director of the Center) and Dr. Miriam Nissimov are highly sought-after experts in international academic forums. The Center has published and co-sponsored 20 books and has hosted dozens of conferences, workshops and other events in its short existence. Moreover, it has become a keeper of Iranian Jewish heritage under the auspices of the Habib Levy Program for Iranian Jewish History and its sizable archive as well as the Program for the Study of Iranian Jews in Israel under the auspices of the Iranian American Jewish Federation of New York.

Dr. Liora Hendelman-Baavur

The Center also publishes the *ACIS Iran-Pulse,* a digital newsletter regularly cited by top international organizations.

The unusual situation of being an expert on a place she has never visited and probably never will doesn't faze Hendelman-Baavur. On the contrary, she says it has made her a more thorough scholar. She often checks multiple sources and cross-references information. Because she cannot contact her Iranian colleagues, she has developed a robust network of Iran scholars around the world with whom she can collaborate. She follows Iranian Twitter and Telegram feeds and Persian-language news apps religiously.

The Center also attracts international students from the region and beyond, including the United States and Turkey. This, Hendelman-Baavur says, is proof of its continuing relevance. Looking forward, she sees TAU strengthening its role as a global authority on Iran's modern history and Iranian Jewry, specifically because of this unique perspective.


**Jewish Iranians demonstrate in support of Gaza in 2008**
Tehran

# Seeing Light in Unexpected Places

## For Glaser Scholar Lea Tamanyo, making positive change starts with helping individuals

By **Melanie Takefman**

TAU graduate student Lea Tamanyo isn't afraid of challenges; she's had to overcome many herself, both in her personal life and academic career.

For example, as an undergraduate student in social work, she chose to gain practical experience in one of the most difficult and complex subfields—mental health. As she enters her second year of a master's degree at TAU's Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tamanyo realizes that this field, despite its complexities, is her calling.

Even before becoming a social worker, Tamanyo, a recipient of the Herbert and Sharon Glaser Foundation Scholarship, worked at an assisted living facility for men who suffer from mental illnesses. Many of them have had particularly difficult lives. At first, it wasn't easy, she says, but slowly she became absorbed in their stories. She developed especially strong relationships with three of her clients. "I quickly understood that their diseases don't define them. They have so much more to them than that.

"I was drawn by the fact that I could be the one to make a positive change, that I could help them lead their best lives. I felt like I had reached the right place," she says. "The work fulfills me and gratifies me immensely."

Now, armed with an undergraduate degree in social work, she works part-time at the same facility, alongside graduate studies at TAU.

### Overcoming Adversity

Tamanyo herself, the seventh of eight children, is no stranger to adversity. Her parents immigrated to Israel in 1991 from Ethiopia. She says that it was difficult for them to learn Hebrew, acclimate to the Israeli mentality, and earn a living.

"We studied by the skin of our teeth," says Tamanyo. "Our parents couldn't help us with schoolwork, and there was no money for private tutors or extra-curricular courses. I learned how to be self-reliant and teach myself."

Despite her parents' modest means, they instilled in their children a strong sense of purpose, perseverance, and the value of education.

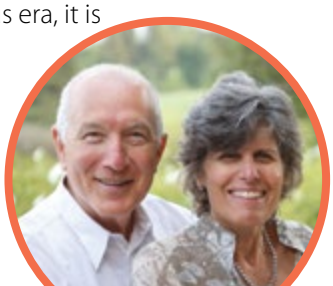
Tamanyo says her parents encountered ignorance about their culture. "Sometimes, it's a lack of awareness, not something intentional... At the end of the day, we are all immigrants, and we have to accept the other. Everyone brings with them a different color."

Although Tamanyo herself hasn't encountered the difficulties her parents did, it's clear that their experiences have shaped her identity and professional path. Seeing the best in every person, beyond their background or social identity, is a guiding principle for her.

### Personal Goals, National Impact

"Lea is a very talented, ambitious and forward-looking young woman," says Doron Kochavi, TAU Governor, who, with his wife, fellow TAU Governor Tammy Glaser Kochavi, selected Tamanyo as one of the recipients of the Herbert and Sharon Glaser Foundation Scholarship. "We believe that the way to create positive change in this country is to support individuals like Lea who want to strengthen it. In this respect, social workers play a vital role because they help the weakest members of society."

"I am grateful to the Herbert and Sharon Glaser Foundation, and the Kochavi family for my scholarship because it frees me from financial worries and allows me to focus on my studies," says Tamanyo. "Especially now in the coronavirus era, it is truly a blessing."



Doron Kochavi and Tammy Glaser Kochavi

# GLOBAL CAMPAIGN

Vlad and Sana Shmunis

**Shmunis School of Biomedicine and Cancer Research**

## Solidifying Israel's Leadership in Battling Disease

Tel Aviv University inaugurated the Shmunis School of Biomedicine and Cancer Research, in the presence of Israel's Minister of Science and Technology Izhar Shay and benefactors and TAU Governors Vlad and Sana Shmunis, online, via RingCentral.

The new School, part of the George S. Wise Faculty of Life Sciences, will enable a leap in biomedical research. The School's 300 researchers, students and staff in the fields of cancer research, cancer immunity, bioinformatics, microbiology, biotechnology and more will work to identify mechanisms that drive cancer and other diseases. Moreover, they will develop new pharmaceuticals and improve patients' quality of life.

"In supporting biomedicine and cancer research at TAU, my wife Sana and I firmly believe that we have found an ideal partner to move the needle towards curing cancer and other terrible diseases," said Vlad Shumnis, founder and CEO of RingCentral Inc. "Cancer is a disease that has unfortunately touched our family and far too many other families around the world. We hope that our gift to TAU will solidify Israel's place as a leader in molecular biomedicine and cancer research … and improve the lives of people in Israel and around the world."

The new partnership will enable the University to recruit the finest researchers, award the annual Shmunis Fellowships to exceptional PhD students, collaborate with leading academic institutions, host Shmunis Visiting Scholars, organize conferences and more.

"I am grateful to the Shmunis family for their important and generous gift," said Prof. Ariel Porat, President of Tel Aviv University. "Meeting high standards of other renowned centers for cancer research around the globe, the School will be a hub for the brightest Israeli and international researchers to join as faculty."

### Rosalie and Harold Rae Brown Core Cancer Research Facility Supports Critical Studies

The field of cancer research at TAU received an additional boost with the establishment of the Brown Core Cancer Research Facility. Thanks to the generosity of the Rosalie and Harold Rae Brown Charitable Foundation, the Facility will ensure that TAU cancer specialists have access to state-of-the-art equipment to accelerate their research. The facility will comprise refurbished labs and equipment of vital importance to cancer research.

**Recent Shmunis School achievements:**

- The **Gershoni Lab** was awarded a US patent for a novel vaccine against the coronavirus
- The **Stern Lab**'s genetic sequencing of the coronavirus tracked the spread of COVID-19 in Israel
- The **Ehrlich Lab** is developing virus-based immunotherapies for cancer
- The **Lederkremer Lab** developed a therapeutic approach for Huntington's disease, for which no treatment exists

**Taube-Koret Global Collaboration**

## TAU Partners with Bay Area Foundations on Neurodegenerative Diseases


Photo: Noam Wind

By 2050, an estimated 140 million people worldwide are expected to contract neurodegenerative diseases, including Huntington's disease, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). None are curable and major pharma companies have drastically minimized drug development in the field due to low success rates.

Now, with the support of the Koret Foundation and Taube Philanthropies, Tel Aviv University researchers have embarked on a groundbreaking collaboration with top Bay Area institutions to understand and find therapies for these diseases.

Anchoring the partnership is the Koret Foundation, a Jewish philanthropic organization based in San Francisco which supports education, the arts, and the Jewish

community. Koret has directed $2.5 million to TAU researchers. Simultaneously, Taube Philanthropies has directed the same amount to a group led by Stanford University.

The Taube-Koret Global Collaboration in Neurodegenerative Diseases was the brainchild of Tad Taube, Chairman of Taube Philanthropies and President Emeritus of the Koret Foundation, who sought to initiate research cooperation in the field between TAU and Bay Area institutions.

The partnership was launched with a symposium held at TAU in January 2020. The goal of the collaboration is expanding brain research while strengthening US-Israel academic ties. The partner institutions are Stanford, the Gladstone Institute at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF), and the Buck Institute—a biomedical research institute specializing in aging.

Stanford University pediatric oncologist Dr. Harvey Cohen's involvement was key in making the Collaboration possible, which he directs from the Bay Area side. Dr. Anita Friedman, TAU's Global Campaign Co-chair and President of the Koret Foundation, was approached by Taube to support the TAU component.

Research conducted during the five-year initiative aims to characterize biomarkers to identify patients at risk of contracting neurodegenerative diseases and to test new drugs. Now, the researchers are advancing new strategies for drug development and creating personalized platforms for diagnosis and drug screening.

The ability to exchange adult stem cells derived from patients in both the US and Israel makes this research unique and effective, according to Prof. Karen Avraham, Vice Dean of the Sackler Faculty of Medicine and Taube-Koret Collaboration Steering Committee member. Prof. Uri Ashery, outgoing Head of the Sagol School of Neuroscience and a researcher in the Collaboration, says that thanks to the Collaboration, they can apply new drugs and treatments to these harvested stem cells—an important advance.

**COVID-19 Emergency Student Aid Campaign**

## Helping Students Who Need It Most

Sofi Winitz

The economic crisis resulting from the coronavirus pandemic hit TAU students hard. About 70% of them work to support themselves during their studies, but thousands lost their jobs due to recent lockdowns and layoffs. As a result, many are at risk for dropping out altogether. Others, often from the most vulnerable groups, are suffering crippling anxiety and depression arising from the pandemic.

Thanks in great part to the generosity of our donors, the University urgently awarded scholarships and psychological counseling grants to 2,200 students, and expects an additional 1,400 to be eligible for aid in the near future.

Sofi Winitz, a theater student who immigrated to Israel from Russia alone as a teenager, received an emergency grant after she lost her job. She said she was grateful to the University for supporting her in this time of need and enabling her to "continue studying without worries."

The TAU leadership is intensifying efforts to provide aid to all students affected by the coronavirus crisis so that not even one will miss out on an academic education.

**Ukrainian Jewry Research Initiative**

## Unearthing Treasures of Jewish History

Two Eastern European Jewish organizations have established the Ukrainian Jewry Research Initiative at TAU, the first to study the unique history of this community.

"Studying the Ukrainian Jewish community in its own right is a groundbreaking endeavor," said Dr. Michael Mirilashvili and Mr. Boris Lozhkin, Presidents of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine, respectively. "We chose TAU because of its reputation for innovation and out-of-the-box thinking."

The Initiative, which will be carried out by the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center in the Entin Faculty of Humanities, will focus on Ukrainian Jewish history from ancient times until the present. Researchers will rely on archival documents, periodicals and more.

"The Initiative is a welcome addition to the mosaic of Jewish studies, and we are grateful to the organizations for their vision and generosity. Although almost all of the major movements of eastern European Jewish history took place in Ukraine, it was always subsumed as part of 'Soviet Jewry,'" says Prof. Simha Goldin, Director of the Goldstein-Goren Center. "The time has come to study the distinctive characteristics of the Ukrainian Jewish community."

**Coller-Menmon Animal Rights and Welfare Program**

## TAU Establishes Israel's First Legal Framework for Animal Advocacy

An animal refuge served by the Coller-Menmon Program

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, TAU law students and staff played a critical role in the protection of animal rights as part of the Coller-Menmon Animal Rights and Welfare Program. They successfully advocated pro bono to ensure that animal care was considered an "essential profession," thereby ensuring that animal sanctuaries and rescue organizations could continue to provide food and medicine to their charges during lockdown.

Jointly funded by Jeremy Coller of the Coller Foundation and Israeli company Menmon Ltd., the Program was launched in 2018 at TAU's Buchmann Faculty of Law with a single academic course. The same year, the prominent legal clinic for environmental justice expanded its scope to address animal rights issues.

Today, the Program includes two academic courses, research fellowships and grants, conferences, the Coller-Menmon Chair, and the Environmental Justice and Protection of Animals Rights Legal Clinic. The Clinic conducts research, informs policy-makers, litigates, and provides legal aid to NGOs and activists.

"Bringing together research, education, and legal aid under one roof is essential in promoting animal rights and welfare," says Program Coordinator Attorney Amnon Keren.

Keren says that the Buchmann Faculty of Law aims to expand the Program into an interdisciplinary research center in the coming years. In the meantime, thanks to increased support from the founding donors, two post-doctoral fellows in anthropology will join the Program for the 2020-2021 academic year.

# "A Scientific Discovery Can Never Be Undone"

## Change-Maker Yuri Milner talks to the *TAU Review* about why he supports TAU and Israel

Yuri and Julia Milner

By **Ruti Ziv**

A theoretical physicist turned tech investor and philanthropist, Russian-Israeli Yuri Milner was a prescient early backer of Facebook and Twitter, and later of other successful companies. In the past decade, he and his wife, Julia, have focused on diverse philanthropic initiatives, among them the Breakthrough Prize Foundation, which supports the Breakthrough Prizes—the "Oscars of Science"—and the "70 for 70 Doctoral Fellowship Initiative" allocated to TAU and other Israeli universities on the occasion of Israel's 70th birthday in 2018. The Milners also contributed major emergency funding to TAU and other Israeli institutions at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis.

*TAU Review*'s Ruti Ziv spoke to Mr. Milner about his connection with TAU and Israel, his lifelong interest in science and technology, and his big idea—that scientists should be treated like celebrities.

### What is your first science-related memory?

My parents named me after cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who became the first man to be sent into space that same year. My first real memory of science is a book I read as a child about the possibility of other civilizations in our universe. Decades later, I co-launched an initiative called Breakthrough Listen, which addresses the the essential question, "Are we alone in the universe?"

### If a message from aliens reached Earth, how would you respond?

I think the only currency and the only sensible exchange between two civilizations that are separated by thousands of light years or more must involve asking something that is really essential. So I would answer them with a question, "What do you know about the origins of our universe?" and compare our answers to see if they're more advanced than us.

### You are greatly devoted to the Breakthrough Prize and other Breakthrough initiatives. Why?

Science is not appreciated enough. You would think if this is our main currency, we'd invest more in it. But we don't. Essentially everything that we are thankful for from our predecessors is based on science and technology, for example improved life expectancy, standards of living and economic progress.

> ***A relatively small nation like Israel with limited natural resources really has only one path—applying its intellectual potential to the problems of the world.***

## Do you view TAU as a breakthrough university?

TAU is known around the world, not just in Israel. I think it is definitely one of the most preeminent global institutions, and I think that the contributions of TAU are numerous and distinguished. Although we work with other scientific partners in Israel, we selected TAU as a prestigious partner and an administrator of some of our activities.

When the coronavirus crisis hit, we committed major funding toward COVID-19 research at TAU labs, alongside contributions to Magen David Adom and Ichilov Hospital [Tel Aviv Sourasky Medical Center], as well as a shipment of one million vitally-needed face masks for those essential workers who continued to go to work every day during the pandemic. In this case, we asked TAU to advise us on what would be the proper way to contribute. And their advice was very, very helpful to enable us to very quickly—and speed was critical in this situation—identify the most efficient ways to support Israel in a difficult situation.

## You marked Israel's 70th anniversary with a focus on science—you established a major doctoral fellowship fund and produced the "70 & 70" list recognizing Israel's greatest scientists with the *Washington Post and Ha'aretz*. What was your goal in doing so?

Israel is already famous for its science and technology, but I thought that its international reputation could be further enhanced by these initiatives. A relatively small nation like Israel with limited natural resources really has only one path—applying its intellectual potential to the problems of the world.

We must also recognize that science is global and universal. It is one of the few fabrics that connects the world and brings us all together. Especially in the world now, when people are feeling separated from each other due to the COVID-19 crisis, I think science is one of those elements that brings us all together.

Milner at a TAU event

## What lies behind your idea that scientists should be compensated like celebrities?

In today's world, recognition is based on either celebrity status or financial wealth. Few people are celebrated for their intellectual achievements. What the Breakthrough Prize is trying to achieve is to bring about a more balanced world whereby intellectual achievement will be celebrated at least on par with other achievements, and where scientists will receive the recognition they deserve. We thought that celebrating the most brilliant minds could maybe inspire kids interested in science to pursue an academic career.

## What advice would you give to young Israeli scientists who dream of changing the world?

Although I tried for a number of years to do this myself, I wasn't too successful. My advice would be contrary to my own experience—try to focus on fundamental science. If you put your name on a building, that building will not survive over hundreds of years. But if you make a scientific discovery, this is something that cannot ever be undone. In a thousand years from now, Einstein will still be remembered for his theory of general relativity, while many other great men will be forgotten. So if you really want to leave a lasting legacy for our civilization, the only sure way is through fundamental science and making discoveries.

I envy people who choose basic science as their occupation. Not being able to make a contribution myself, I am trying to focus our foundation on supporting those who can.

## Tell us about your connection to Israel and making Aliyah.

I became an Israeli citizen over 20 years ago. This was really an important calling for me because, growing up in the Soviet Union, I had limited ability to connect with my heritage and ancestors in a meaningful way. As soon as it was possible, I decided to become an Israeli citizen and, to the extent possible, to contribute to the State of Israel.

# New Mandel Center Fosters Well-Rounded STEM Graduates

## Expansion of humanities offerings ushers in new era in Israeli academia

By **Rafael Ben-Menashe**

Beginning in the 2021-2022 academic year, 1,500 incoming undergraduate students in engineering, exact sciences and life sciences will encounter a new opportunity in their studies: They will be able to take humanities courses as part of their regular degree requirements. The force behind this move—a first in Israel—is the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Humanities in STEM at TAU.

Enrolment in the humanities has fallen steadily worldwide. The number of humanities students at TAU dropped from 2,600 in 2003 to 1,600 in 2018, a reduction of 38% over 15 years.

In response, the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation, under the leadership of the late Morton L. Mandel, founded the Program for Humanities in Engineering at TAU in 2016. New on the Israeli academic landscape, the Program allowed a group of 25 honors students to add a sizeable humanities module to their engineering studies. After a successful pilot, the Program was expanded to include outstanding exact sciences and life sciences students as well.

The newest Mandel expansion will extend humanities offerings to all incoming STEM students at TAU, with a focus on courses that instill essential skills of humanistic thought such as critical thinking, debate, creative writing, ethical analysis and more.

"Students will take a refreshing jump into a pool for the mind," says Prof. Yochai Oppenheimer, Academic Head of the Mandel Center.

Michal Levin and Amit Alkoni

### Welcoming Uncertainty

Students enrolled in Mandel Center-sponsored humanities courses say they provide a break from the more regimented styles of thinking in STEM subjects.

"In the sciences, we fear questions that don't have definitive answers," says Michal Levin, 4th-year engineering student. "In the humanities, we are taught to embrace those types of questions."

Levin also points to the Mandel Scholarship she received as a tremendous aid in her studies. "It eliminated the stress of finding work and financing my life while studying."

Amit Alkoni, a 3rd-year engineering student, says: "During my army service in the Intelligence Corps, I saw how effective evaluation of communication and ethics could expand my professional horizons. These are tools I ultimately acquired through studying humanities."

Shortly before his death in 2019, Morton Mandel, entrepreneur and lifelong Israel supporter, received a TAU honorary doctorate.

"The Mandel Foundation's generosity has enabled TAU to rejuvenate the humanities, ensuring that TAU students benefit from this crucial school of thought, which in turn benefits Israeli society as a whole," says TAU President Prof. Ariel Porat.

Prof. Jehuda Reinharz, President and CEO of the Mandel Foundation, adds: "Tel Aviv University is a pioneer in this far-sighted work across the disciplines, and I am quite certain that it will become a model for many other institutions in Israel and abroad."

# Souvenirs of Sand and Sea

## A TAU International student shares her Tel Aviv experience

By **Sugandh P. Ojha**

It was thrilling to receive my acceptance letter from Tel Aviv University. As an International Relations graduate with an interest in global security, it was a dream-come-true moment. At 25 years old, with two years of work experience under my belt as a journalist in my native India, I saw it as a perfect plan: to explore an often misinterpreted country such as Israel. I already had a great impression of the country through articles I'd read and YouTube videos.

Upon my arrival, I rented an Airbnb for my first few days with a classmate from the U.S. By chance, the owner had cousins from Russia visiting as well. My very first interaction in Israel

*Continued on page 30*

From top left, clockwise: Sugandh P. Ojha; Jerusalem's Old City; a market in Israel; Sugandh with friends at Millie Phillips Student City and in Tel Aviv Center; Sugandh with *Fauda* co-creator Lior Raz. All photos courtesy of the author.

# A TAU International student shares her Tel Aviv experience

started with a conversation about the World Wars, the reunification of Jewish families, and how these folks found each other later in life, each assuming the others had died in World War II. From that moment, I knew I was going to have an enriching global experience in this country.

Israel hasn't disappointed me in that regard.

After a week, I moved into a beautiful studio apartment in the Millie Phillips Student City complex on the TAU campus. Our welcome session was organized by the TAU International Student Life Team and held at the Sarona Beer Garden – an absolutely breathtaking bar which epitomizes the Tel Aviv lifestyle.

Israel is where the Bible took place. Even if a person is not religious (which I am not), it is a very mystical experience to live in a place that is a holy land for the three Abrahamic faiths. Beyond religion, Israel is a melting pot of cultures where Jews from over 80 countries made aliyah to settle in their homeland, importing their diverse traditions and recipes with them. I see this diversity as I walk Tel Aviv's streets: I witness food vendors serving different cuisines including Syrian, European and Moroccan; people dressed in different traditional styles wearing kippas and headscarves; and people of different nationalities speaking mostly in Hebrew.

I also often witness Arab and Jewish Israelis eating the same food at the same place, which shows how they coexist in this tight-knit society.

These people of multiple identities are united by the strong emotion that they belong in this country; I know this because of the many conversations I've had with different Israelis. Even members of the younger generation feel attached to this land and feel safer here than anywhere else.

Tel Aviv is an amalgamation of old-world culture and next-gen lifestyle. You see traditions such as Shabbat—wherein Orthodox Jews refrain from using electricity and gadgets on weekends—alongside modern nightlife. Clubbing is a favorite Israeli pastime, for example.

My first semester courses included field trips which gave us a comprehensive understanding of Israel's culture, politics, socioeconomic structure and regional threats, as well as people, food, and most important, wine from the Golan Heights! From these experiences, I can attest that the best way to learn about a country is to visit places and live like a local.

The most memorable experience I had was a Shabbat dinner at Israel's first kibbutz, Deganya. The community functions as a family. As I entered the kibbutz's dining hall, the room felt like a museum, adorned with old pictures showing the community's establishment and its first inhabitants from more than 100 years ago. Israelis are very close to their history, and it was touching to hear the kibbutzniks share their stories! The way people welcomed me in the community made me feel at home; eating with everyone at the same table full of countless dishes was a heart-melting experience. The dining hall was a huge room with tables seating 20 people each which means around 100 people can eat there at once. Sounds crazy during the COVID-19 era right? I'm glad I could experience it before the virus ruined the beauty of togetherness.

Israel is a very eco-friendly country. Compared to Indian cities such as Mumbai and Delhi, the pollution level is low. Electric scooters and bicycles are very popular. The buses, trains and cabs are also excellent modes of transport, and the country is well-connected by an easy-to-use transportation network.

Living on campus, the Carmel Market and the Jaffa Flea Market are nearby, must-visit places to buy cheap products and beautiful souvenirs; these markets also have the best collection of *mamash ta'im* (truly delicious) spices and candies in town! Even if you are not buying anything, visiting these places on Fridays before Shabbat is a fun experience, watching people singing and playing instruments on the streets.

What will I miss most about Israel? tahini and shawarma; hummus and lip-smacking Arabic desserts—*knafeh* to name one! Most of all, I'll miss the amicable people, with whom you can talk in any situation, whether you are stuck in an elevator or enjoying the beach—it doesn't matter if you know them or not!

*The author graduated with a master's degree from TAU International in 2020.*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# Finding Humor in Imperfection

Photo: Shay Bachar

By **Melanie Takefman**

*TAU Review* held a Zoom interview with well-known Israeli comedian, writer and TV and radio host Einav Galili, who earned her BA degree in psychology and arts from TAU in 2001

"Holocaust jokes are a wonderful thing," says TAU alumna Einav Galili. "When you laugh at something, it doesn't dishonor it; it's another way of dealing with something that's impossible to deal with…the Holocaust intrigues me and in that way it is totally mine to laugh about."

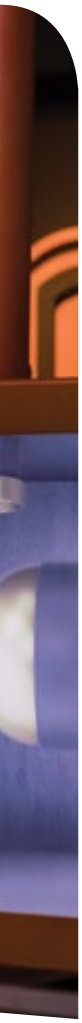
By contrast, if a German told a Holocaust joke, "I would shoot him," she says jokingly, maintaining her trademark poker face.

"Comedy is a way to expose our dark side without anyone dying."

For decades, Galili has brought a sharp, intellectual and hilariously wry voice to Israeli media. Yet, with her influence comes responsibility: Galili believes that she has a role to play in shaping public discourse. "It's part of my job to extract topics from their conventional molds and clichés and forge something more complex," she says.

In Israel, "you must be radical to have a presence…People want short, extreme and click-baity. I often try to give a fuller picture."

The same is true about the range of subjects she broaches on the morning radio show she co-hosts: from politics to the connection between koalas and human diseases. For Galili, comedic and serious content need not be separated. "The most interesting people are those whose humor is



laced with pain and whose pain is laced with humor. In the end, it's all different layers of the same thing." Yet, sometimes being funny comes at a cost.

As a main panelist on one of the country's longest-running TV satires, *State of the Nation* (later renamed *Back of the Nation*), Galili is no stranger to controversy.

"What we say makes people uncomfortable…..It's a program that's a big headache to support and maintain. You have to withstand pressure and you receive angry phone calls."

Still, she has never been censored. With governments around the world cracking down on journalists and limiting freedom of speech, she doesn't take that for granted and considers herself "spoiled" in this respect. At the same time, she says that viewers themselves often quash serious programming.

"You come home in the evening. Life is tough…it's hard to make a living… You don't have the energy for another burdensome investigation about violence against women. You want Netflix!" she says. "I understand them."

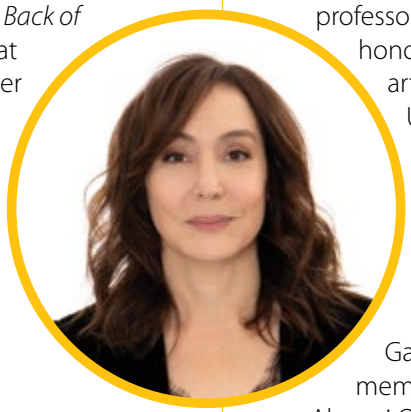
## Exposing National Neuroses

That being said, satire is "like the vital signs of a human body. If we don't have it, it's like declaring death." Humor is especially important during crises such as the corona pandemic. "Sometimes humor can be divisive; one group laughs at another. But when people laugh about a common experience such as corona, it brings people together."

In addition to her radio show and *Back of the Nation*, she hosts the Israeli version of the BBC TV program *Room 101*, in which she interviews Israeli personalities about their biggest fears or pet peeves. She also lectures about humor and writes newspaper columns. She recently produced a documentary about the anti-aging industry.

Galili is one of several well-known female comedians in Israel, but women are still the minority in the field. An avowed feminist, she says that she insists on having at least one female writer on the *Back of the Nation* team. What separates her from her male counterparts, she says, are the jokes she doesn't make. She will never make a joke about a woman being old or ugly or fat, she says.

> ***"The most interesting people are those whose humor is laced with pain and whose pain is laced with humor."***



She will, however, soliloquize about her children's hamsters, their proclivity for reproduction, and what happened when she had to eulogize one of two identical pets (she didn't know which one died).

Her various endeavors have given her insights into the human psyche. "We live in a society preoccupied with perfection: We strive to look perfect, to make a good impression, to portray ourselves as more than what we are, more beautiful, younger, more confident, more successful in our careers, taller, skinnier."

To her, perfect is boring. It is exactly in imperfection—"the defects and the cracks"—that she finds her most engaging and inclusive material.

## Drawing on Academic Training

Analyses like these exemplify how psychology permeates Galili's many professional roles. Her TAU studies left an imprint on her in other ways too. Studying at the University taught her discipline and the value of hard work, she says. If you put in the effort, you see results.

Her studies also armed her with critical thinking skills—how to differentiate between reliable and unreliable information—an important ability in the era of social media and fake news.

Galili recalls her time at TAU as enjoyable and enriching. She was completely immersed in her studies, alongside "amazing" classmates and inspiring professors. She remembers Prof. Ina Weiner, a "fascinating" professor who taught her honors psychology, and art historian Dr. Henry Unger, who "taught me elementary terms about the arts world. It was precisely enough to know what to look for."

As an alumna, Galili is one of 85,000 members of the TAU Alumni Organization, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year under the direction of Sigalit Ben Hayoun. The Organization's goal is to leverage the influence of TAU alumni as a positive force in Israeli society and serve alumni through shared knowledge, networking and opportunities.

Upon receiving her BA, Galili completed the coursework for a master's degree in psychology, but never submitted a thesis. Even though she is happy with her career, she has never stopped dreaming of returning to TAU to complete her MA.

We hope she realizes that dream.

Photo: Adi Orni

## TAU's Mints Prize Awarded to Poverty Expert

**Prof. Sabine Alkire** received the 2020 Prize of TAU's Boris Mints Institute for Strategic Policy Solutions to Global Challenges (BMI) for her "exceptional contribution to the understanding of the dynamics and implications of poverty" at a digital ceremony last month.

Alkire, director of the Oxford Poverty and Development Initiative, made poverty studies a more exact science when she developed the Multidimensional Poverty Index to provide accurate and actionable data to policy-makers, together with Prof. James Foster. The Index has already been applied to 101 countries.

"It is obvious to everyone that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic will dramatically aggravate the problem of poverty, and not only in the less economically developed countries," said Dr. Boris Mints, President of BMI. "Against this landscape, the scientific and practical activities and civic position of our laureate, Sabina Alkire, take on special significance, arousing great respect and admiration."

Since 2017, the $100,000 BMI Prize has been given to an exceptional individual who has devoted his or her research to solving a strategic global challenge, and whose public action and ideas have made a transformative impact on global policy formation and contributed to the welfare of a significant number of communities worldwide. The Boris Mints Institute was founded in 2015 at TAU.

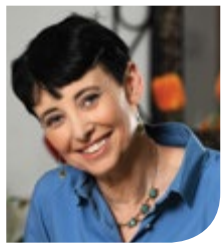
"It's so heartening that the Institute would recognize poverty to be a global challenge that needs a strategic policy solution," said Prof. Alkire in recognition of her award.

Members of the Institute's International Advisory Board attended the ceremony remotely, among them former Prime Minister of Montenegro Igor Lukšić and former Prime Minister of Armenia Prof. Armen Darbinian. Also present online was Prof. Michael Kremer of Harvard University, 2018 BMI Prize Laureate and 2019 Nobel Prize Laureate.

## Three TAU Israel Prize Laureates in 2020

This year, three Tel Aviv University faculty members were among the winners of the Israel Prize, the country's highest honor, bestowed on Israelis who have made outstanding contributions in various fields. The ceremony, which is traditionally broadcast live on TV on Israel's Independence Day, was pre-recorded without an audience for the first time because of COVID-19.

**Prof. Joseph Klafter** of the Raymond and Beverly Sackler School of Chemistry, immediate past President of TAU (2009-2019), received the prize for Chemistry and Physics. He was cited for contributions in the dynamics of anomalous motion in varied systems in the fields of chemistry, physics and biology. "Over the years, the immense and universal importance of his work has become evident, as more and more systems can be exhaustively described using the methods he developed," the Prize committee said of Prof. Klafter.



**Prof. Vered Noam**, outgoing Director of the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies and Archaeology, received the prize in Talmud Studies. She was recognized for developing an important methodology for the study of Talmudic literature, among other achievements. Prof. Noam is widely lauded for mentoring junior scholars and for making Jewish texts accessible to the general public. She is the first woman to receive the award in the Talmud category.

**Prof. Gideon Rechavi**, of the Sackler Faculty of Medicine, received the prize for medicine. He is the founder and director of the Sheba Medical Center's Cancer Research Center and has spent most of his professional life at TAU in parallel. Prof. Rechavi's studies on the molecular basis of childhood cancer have won him numerous awards and have been the subject of more than 500 academic articles.

## Outstanding Year for TAU Math Teams

TAU took home top honors in two prestigious math competitions in 2020. TAU students won three Grand First Prizes competing for Israel in the International Mathematics Competition, and a team of high schoolers trained at TAU won three medals at the European Girls' Mathematical Olympiad.

Only 10 Grand First Prizes were awarded to the 546 competitors at the International Mathematics Competition. "The Israeli students performed fantastically, achieving great personal results. It is a privilege and a pleasure to see such wonderful minds at work and to see the enthusiasm and joy with which they approach mathematical challenges," says Dan Karmon, team leader and a PhD student at TAU's Raymond and Beverly Sackler School of Mathematical Sciences.

At the European Girls' Mathematical Olympiad the three Israeli winners represented a TAU program to support and train young students in partnership with the Future Scientists Center and the Ministry of Education. Mathematics professor Eilon Solan trained the delegation. Both competitions took place online.

## TAU Students Ensure Safe Water Supply in Tanzania

Thanks to TAU students, schoolchildren of the Babati district, Tanzania, can drink clean water at school.

As part of an ongoing project run by the TAU chapter of Engineers Without Borders, six TAU students flew to Tanzania during the 2019-2020 winter break to build and improve local water infrastructure.

With the help of local students and teachers, the team installed a 40,000-liter rainwater collection system on the roof of the Babati District School, where 1,000 children study daily. They also maintained previously installed systems and provided training to local residents.

Tanzania suffers from an unreliable clean water supply, with a long dry season, poor infrastructure, competition with wildlife over water sources, and a high concentration of fluoride in water which is harmful to humans.

"We take all of our theoretical ideas learned in the classroom and implement them in order to change lives," explains TAU student Assaf Pras, a member of the delegation.

The main focus of the most recent trip was to provide drinking water to schools, but the team provided further support to the community, such as establishing a new library, he says. "Every time we are in Babati, we work on the next step—for example, how to provide water not only to schools but to homes," says Pras.

This was the fifth TAU delegation to the school district, led by TAU Prof. Dror Avisar, head of the Water Research Center and the Moshe Mirilashvili Institute for Applied Water Studies.

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