

# BGU



The Ben-Gurion University  
of the Negev Magazine

## Bursting Campus Bubbles

Students Adi Rosenstock (Left) and Chaya  
Mushka Grossman's idea for promoting  
shared life on campus | Pages 6-7 |  
**A special issue on Diversity at BGU**

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# Message from the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion

The ongoing war has exacted a significant toll on our University, impacting us deeply as an academic community. Surely now it is crucial that we maintain our capacity to study and teach together, especially in such challenging times. This ability is a vital element of our collective resilience. Numerous studies have shown that in times of conflict, fear, mistrust, and a tendency to retreat into “tribal” identities can often arise. This perception of being threatened by the other side can lead to more extreme opinions and expressions, further widening gaps between social groups. Many of our responses in times of emergency stem from the barriers that separate us in our daily lives.

The current rifts within Israeli society – both preceding and during the current war – prompt us to reflect on our role, as an academic institution, in shaping our future leadership. Questions about how we can foster a less divided and more democratic society, and how we can nurture a young academic leadership committed to values of equality, fairness and mutual acceptance, are more pertinent than ever.



## **The current rifts within Israeli society prompt us to reflect on our role, as an academic institution, in shaping our future leadership.**

Academia offers groups from diverse backgrounds a unique opportunity for a daily encounter in a shared space, to get to know each other. This environment can be the foundation for friendships and collaborations that extend beyond academic settings. It holds the potential to improve Arab-Jewish and religious-secular relations, among others, and to aid in the successful integration of minority groups into the labor market and other fields. Intergroup interactions in academia can also promote friendships, bridge divides, raise awareness of discrimination, and develop skills for dialogue and cooperation. Mediation between conflicting groups is also achievable.

In this challenging year, it is imperative that we strive to build trust and establish relationships between different groups. We must create an institutional infrastructure that promotes shared responsibility for our academic environment. If we fail to realize the potential of encounters in academic spaces, we risk losing a rare opportunity to create a better future for our communities.

The ongoing conflict and the current fragile state of Israeli society require that all academic institutions prioritize the creation and nurturing of shared spaces and partnerships among the diverse groups that comprise them. The relationship between these groups is a critical component of the resilience of the Negev communities, and we at Ben-Gurion University are committed to enhancing these connections.

**Yours,  
Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder  
Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion**

# Rothschild Cube to the Rescue

Ben-Gurion University is stepping up its community support by offering the Rothschild Cube as a free venue for various associations and organizations affected by the war and in need of work and meeting spaces.

Established through the generosity of the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation, the Rothschild Cube is equipped with advanced technological tools that simulate events from diverse social arenas, offering its guests a welcoming space to hold activities. "There are organizations whose activities have been disrupted by the war, and they need training spaces and meeting rooms," says Adv. Vered Sarussi-Katz, Director of the Community Action Department. "In consideration of their plight, we made the Rothschild Cube available."

"The collaboration between the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation and Ben-Gurion University is natural," says Jeff Kaye, BGU Vice President for Public Affairs and Resource Development. "The two organizations work together to drive the development of the country's south, particularly by fostering leadership in the periphery. Aiding and supporting the non-profit sector is an important means of achieving these goals, and providing solutions for organizations and associations in the south fits in with the vision we share. One such solution is offering the use of the Rothschild Cube free of charge."

Elli Booch, Director of Philanthropy at the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation (Israel), says: "We are pleased to have the opportunity to allocate the activity space to social organizations in need. The University's efforts to transform the Rothschild Cube into a hub for training and promoting social activism and entrepreneurship in the south are needed now more than ever."

Understanding the community's needs. Adv. Vered Sarussi-Katz



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# From Courtroom to Classroom

Lawyer Zehavit  
Mekonen Tzukerman  
is pursuing a PhD in  
conflict management  
and resolution



Lawyer Zehavit Mekonen Tzukerman, who already has a master's degree in law and an International MBA, is currently working on her doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Prof. Shifrah Sagy in the Conflict Management and Resolution Program at Ben-Gurion University.

Adv. Mekonen Tzukerman specializes in labor law, representing both employers and employees. Notably, she has helped many Ethiopian immigrants in cases of discrimination. The members of her community who benefited from her legal services have also drawn strength from her fighting spirit and gained courage to stand up for their rights and make their voices heard. Born in Israel to parents who made Aliyah from Ethiopia, Zehavit has experienced personally the multitude of challenges faced by Ethiopian-Israelis. Reflecting on her parents' struggles, she shares, "The challenges involved in my parents' integration into Israeli society required me to take on adult responsibilities from a very young age. Helping them manage all aspects of life was both a necessity and my duty."

Her parents' and community's struggles motivated her to pursue higher education: "I decided to enter academia to be part of a different milieu than members of my parents' generation. They grew up in Ethiopian villages with no formal education, and this inspired me to develop the



**I aspire to contribute to research and share my experiences with young people and women from similar backgrounds who also seek to forge ahead.**

discipline and work habits that helped me achieve my goals."

Zehavit chose to research questions that resonated with her own experiences: "Researching topics close to my heart lends them greater importance and meaning," she adds. "My doctoral work focuses on the sense of professional coherence and its relationship to acceptance of others by professionals in policing and law. I examine the dynamics of relationships between these professionals and the Ethiopian community in Israel through the lens of **salutogenic theory**."

Zehavit has been a practicing lawyer in Beer-Sheva since 2012, but is now fully dedicated to her doctoral research. When asked how she manages all the

demands on her time and attention, she explains, "Efficient and strict time management, combined with interest in research and a lot of ambition and motivation, enable me to reach all my goals."

"I aspire to contribute to research and share my experiences with young people and women from similar backgrounds who also seek to forge ahead," she says. Her advice to students who want to follow in her footsteps is straightforward: "Hard work and dedication lead to results and achieving goals." She adds, "Never give up. Surround yourself with supportive individuals who can join you in your journey, collaborate on your work, and help realize your dreams. With determination, nothing is impossible."

Ben-Gurion University has played a central role in Zehavit's career path, providing the kind of partnership and support that she advises others to find. "Ben-Gurion is my academic home. From the day I started my MBA at BGU, I knew I was here to stay. Numerous faculty members provided me with the necessary tools to advance on my chosen path of research."

Family support has also played a key role in her success. "My family is my anchor. My parents have always given me the feeling that they trust my decisions and are proud of me. I always knew I could rely on them."

## Salutogenic Theory

Salutogenic theory, developed by the late Prof. Aaron Antonovsky, focuses on factors that support human health and well-being, rather than on factors that cause disease. Antonovsky, a medical sociologist, developed this concept in the 1970s while studying the coping mechanisms of Holocaust

survivors. Antonovsky was one of the founders of Ben-Gurion University's medical school, and it was there that he developed his theory of health and illness, which he termed salutogenesis. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding what keeps people healthy, highlighting the

role of sense of coherence – a person's ability to view life as comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful. Salutogenic theory is applied in various fields, including health, psychology, education, and organizational development, to promote resilience and positive health outcomes.



# Bursting Campus Bubbles

A social initiative developed by BGU students Chaya Mushka Grossman and Adi Rosenstock, has become the first academic course providing tools for a shared life on campus

A recent hackathon at BGU led to the creation of a unique academic course, developed by two students, about shared life on campus. The “bubble-bursting course,” as they named it, has been incorporated into the academic curriculum, starting from this year’s second semester.

Chaya Mushka Grossman, an undergraduate management student, and Adi Rosenstock, a graduate student in sociology and anthropology, conceived of the course as a way to equip participants with better tools to navigate social challenges stemming from the coexistence of diverse groups on campus. The idea was to improve participants’ ability to connect with others and facilitate connections among people, while simultaneously laying the foundations for a shared life on campus. The course also aims to encourage recognizing and understanding the “other.”



**We study social inequality and issues related to politics, nationalism, ethnicity, religion and gender, and now I’ve found a way to promote social change right here on campus, where I feel at home.**

“As someone who comes from a diverse background who experiences the challenges of conflicting identities within myself, I don’t align with a single group. I believe in mixing with people who aren’t necessarily the same as me,” says Chaya. “When I arrived at the University and saw that most groups were separate and didn’t mix, I felt frustrated; I felt that I lacked the tools to connect with people, and when I tried to bring people together, they treated me with suspicion. When I heard about the hackathon focusing on the challenge of living together on campus, I immediately signed up

to pitch my dream – a course that offers students the tools to meet people different from themselves and break through the existing group boundaries.”



**I hope that through our course, people will take an interest in one another, and we succeed in blurring the boundaries between different groups on campus.**

Raised and educated in the ultra-Orthodox community, Chaya continues, “I hope that thanks to this course, we will see the small ripples each student creates in his or her circles using the tools they acquired. I appreciate Ben-Gurion University for recognizing the importance of creating a shared space where everyone has the opportunity and ability to get closer and understand each other; and I am grateful to the University for trusting us, the students, to take action and promote cooperation and camaraderie on campus.”

Adi Rosenstock, Chaya’s partner in the project, is equally grateful: “In creating the course on bursting social bubbles, I applied the theories I studied in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. We study social inequality and issues related to politics, nationalism, ethnicity, religion and gender, and now I’ve found a way to promote social change right here on campus, where I feel at home. I hope that through our course, people will take an interest in one another, and we succeed in blurring the boundaries between different groups on campus, so that we can move towards a more comfortable and safer space. The best way to do this is to just sit down and learn together, to listen and get to

know the other side. From here, the path is easier.”

Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder elaborates: “As part of the course, students will consider questions such as: What group do we belong to? Do we know people who are different from us? What prevents us from getting to know others? Why are different groups insular and open only to those who are like them? How can I change this? Do we want to overcome our differences and burst social bubbles? Such questions are designed to challenge each student’s self-identity, as well as the identity of the group and its boundaries. We are all excited to see its launch.”

Additional contributors to the initiative include Dr. Yael Maayan, from the Office of the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, and Dr. Michael Sternberg of the School of Education, who will teach the course. The course and the hackathon that launched its development are supported by the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation and the Office of the Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion.

# Campus Diversity and Inclusion: A Transcontinental Collaboration

A delegation led by Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, visited the University of Rochester to learn about their extensive initiatives promoting equality and social justice



BGU delegation with their hosts at the University of Rochester. Photo: Matt Wittmeyer

Ben-Gurion University and the University of Rochester in the US have well-established academic ties. To strengthen these relations, Dr. Adrienne Morgan, Vice President for

Equity and Inclusion at the University of Rochester, invited Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, BGU's Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, along with her team, for an educational tour of the

North American campus. Founded 174 years ago and located in New York State, the University of Rochester boasts a student body of over 15,000. The University's



commitment to diversity and gender equity is supported by a team of 35 staff members, while the Susan B. Anthony Center works to bring awareness to, and advocate for, social justice and equality. This commitment was redoubled following the tragic murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020, an event that marked a pivotal change for the University.

In the wake of Floyd's murder, the campus saw a wave of protests led by students and medical faculty, including doctors and nurses who treat victims of violence within the African American community. The watershed incident galvanized their resolve to advocate for equal rights and combat racial discrimination.

The University of Rochester's leadership responded to the protests with a broad organizational shift, reflected in new policies on employee recruitment, staff training, educational

content, and a renewal of campus displays, featuring, for example, pictures of inspiring Black leaders and scholars in hallways and conference rooms.



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The BGU delegation received a briefing on issues affecting the LGBTQ+ community, antisemitic incidents, and anti-Black hate. The Israeli visitors also learned about the University's efforts to combat racism beyond campus grounds, as part of its social commitment.

The delegation, led by Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, also included Dr. Yael Maayan, Barak Dvir, Student Union President, and three students representing various university communities.

The visit took place before the October 7 attack, after which the University of Rochester's leadership team sent messages of support and encouragement to the Ben-Gurion community.

## Advancing Campus Diversity at BGU

### Senior BGU faculty participate in "Gvanim", the diversity in academia program

The fifth cohort of "Gvanim", the diversity in academia program, for senior faculty members and leaders across the university, launched recently. "This is one of the most significant steps we've taken to engage senior staff in thinking, discussing, and adopting practices of diversity and inclusion," says Adv. Vered Sarussi-Katz, Director of the Department of Community Action and one of the program's leaders. "I welcome the continuation of this initiative and look forward to seeing an expanding circle of diversity advocates on our campuses."

Dr. Malka Shacham, the University's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Officer, adds, "We see 'Gvanim' as an opportunity to create a dialogue that spans communities and disciplines; a dialogue that deepens understanding and partnership between students and faculty from different backgrounds, and fosters a productive space for joint action. The program has already cultivated a broad circle of diversity advocates who promote inclusion, diversity, and partnership. Its broad impact is evident both in the values we promote and the practical consequences for campus life."

The program is supported by the Council for Higher Education and its Planning and Budgeting

Committee, the Edmond de Rothschild Foundation (Israel), the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation & Endowment Fund, and the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation. It is also endorsed by the Israeli President's Office, led by Michal Herzog, the wife of the President of Israel. Also supporting the Gvanim program at Ben-Gurion University are Prof. Sarab Abu-Rabia Queder, Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion, Prof. Jiwchar Ganor, Chair of the BGU 'Israeli Hope' Steering Committee, and Dr. Yael Maayan, Director of the Shared Life Program.

Dr. Galit Fuhrmann Alpert is a computational neuroscientist, specializing in machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI). In her research she consistently combines technological analytical skills with contributions to medicine and society. Issues of discrimination and social injustice are particularly close to her heart, stemming from both personal gender-based experiences in the professional world and from her social worldview. "Racial discrimination is one example of minority discrimination, as is gender discrimination, and I believe that different types of discrimination share common characteristics. By highlighting those characteristics, we might also be able to correct them," she explains.

Dr. Fuhrmann Alpert completed her bachelor's degree in biology and computer science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, followed by a PhD in computational neuroscience at the Hebrew University and the Weizmann Institute of Science. She conducted her main postdoctoral research at the University of California, Berkeley, where she developed innovative approaches for the analysis of brain imaging data. Her research earned her the UC President's Postdoctoral Fellowship award, however, Galit turned down a tenure track position at the University of California and returned to Israel.

Seeking to apply her expertise in a practical setting, Dr. Fuhrmann Alpert moved to industry. She was recruited as an AI and machine learning expert and was the only scientist at eBay in Israel, where she worked with Big Data. Meanwhile, she decided to focus on research with social value, and began working with start-ups integrating AI into a range of projects with medical and social impact. This includes developing brain-computer interface applications, such as a communication system for ALS patients, a neurofeedback system to support populations with attention difficulties, a framework for early detection of dementia in the elderly, autonomous robotics for agriculture, algorithm development for drug discovery, and treatment using sound frequencies.

She joined BGU, after several years of research in Industry, driven by a desire to return to significant academic research with social impact.

Dr. Fuhrmann Alpert and colleagues in the Data4Good research group recently applied their AI skills to identify broad trends in equality and social justice. To this end, they used AI models to analyze tens of thousands of promotional posters for commercial movies. The analysis yielded a disturbing message: white actors enjoy a significant advantage over their peers from other ethnic backgrounds in terms of representation.



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The study's underlying premise was that the film industry plays a crucial role in shaping cultural and social perceptions, starting with promotional posters. Using an AI model, the study examined trends in the ethnic representation of actors featured on movie posters. Analyzing tens of thousands of English-language movie posters produced in the US between 1960 and 2021, the AI model classifies actors into predefined ethnic groups.

The researchers found that white actors consistently appeared on posters more frequently than Black, Asian, and Indian actors. Despite the apparent improvement in the number of actors from diverse ethnic backgrounds relative to their demographic representation

in the population, white actors are still disproportionately represented favorably on film posters. For example, the faces of white actors appear larger and more centrally located on posters compared to actors with other skin tones.

"Recent brain research shows that the size of an image affects memory," says Dr. Fuhrmann Alpert, adding that "more prominent images, such as larger faces of actors on posters, will be better remembered, influencing our personal and public consciousness", thus shaping cultural perception.

The study also revealed that Black actors tend to feature on crime film posters, while Asian actors are more likely to appear on action movie posters, suggesting a stereotypical representation of individuals from these ethnic groups. The results indicate that despite declared policies of political correctness aimed at promoting diversity and fairness for various minorities, underlying structural discrimination persists.

Dr. Fuhrmann Alpert explained that "discrimination is not always conscious, and sometimes there are even goodwill efforts to try and correct it. However, there are still deep cultural roots that are hard to eradicate. Culturally, we are simply educated to trust certain types of figures. We are all caught in this trap. It's hard for us to even recognize the biases we are subject to, including our own biases. I think our research is important because it highlights exactly such points of unconscious bias we are exposed to, and perhaps even create ourselves subconsciously."

The research team also included Dr. Michael Fire and Dr. Dima Kagan from Ben-Gurion University, and Mor Levy from Afeka Academic College of Engineering. The findings were published in the journal *Nature Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*.



# Using AI to Spotlight Discrimination

**Dr. Galit Fuhrmann Alpert uses AI models to identify trends in aspects of equality and social justice**

# An Academic Odyssey: From Ukraine to BGU

Yelyzaveta Myropolska transitions to full-time study at BGU after “Aliyah to Academia” program



The “Aliyah to Academia” program, conceived by Prof. Louisa Meshi, a faculty member in the Department of Materials Engineering, and supported by BGU’s Rector, Prof. Chaim Hames, aims to remove obstacles from the path of Russian-speaking new immigrants seeking higher education. The first cohort completed the Program at the end of the previous academic year and several graduates are now enrolled as regular undergraduate students. Building on this success, 58 new olim from Russian-speaking countries began their studies in the second cohort in January.

The Program will expand to offer three different tracks in the next academic year (2024-25), including an English language track and a designated track preparing new olim to enroll in psychology studies at BGU.

Economic hardship and language difficulties are considered the primary obstacles to integrating new immigrants into academia in Israel.

Prof. Meshi herself came to Israel from the former Soviet Union in 1990 and is intimately familiar with the challenges facing new immigrants. Alongside Alona Kushnir, liaison to the University’s Russian-speaking supporters within the Division of Public Affairs and Resource Development, they developed a unique program tailored for Russian speakers. Meshi and Kushnir envisioned a program that would give participants a significant boost towards building a life in Israel and worked together to create the conditions to realize it.

The results have surpassed expectations: 21 graduates from the first cohort of the “Aliyah to Academia” program were accepted to Ben-Gurion University and are now completing their freshman year.

Participants hail from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and are beginning to master the intricacies of the Hebrew language alongside their academic achievements. Liza (Yelyzaveta) Myropolska, 21, who made aliya from Ukraine, exemplifies this success. “The University has become my second

home,” she says. “The scholarships I received allowed me to focus on my studies and also enjoy a social life on campus. I am grateful to Ben-Gurion University for helping me attain higher education in Israel.”

Starting anew in Israel was challenging for Liza. She and her family lived in Odessa when Russia invaded Ukraine, prompting them to leave. Initially living in a moshav in northern Israel, Liza worked as a caregiver, but felt isolated due to the lack of peers her age. A text message from the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration about the program at Ben-Gurion University transformed her life. On the way to Beer-Sheva, the family passed through Rishon LeZion, where Liza, her mother, sister, and grandparents shared an apartment. A French bulldog adopted by the family completed the family unit.



**Liza was flying from Romania to Montenegro when the war began. “My thoughts immediately took me back to the war in Ukraine. It felt surreal to encounter war again in another country.”**

In October 2022, Liza arrived in Beer-Sheva to begin a new stage in her life, overcoming adjustment difficulties with the help of new friends and her social skills. “My social situation really improved after I met friends and fellow program members, and we began exploring Beer-Sheva and the entertainment options available for young people like us.”

Academically, she faced language barriers and a demanding course load. “The coursework was challenging, with a lot of homework and little time for socializing. I devoted all my time to understanding the material. Fortunately, we were helped by Artem, a very smart student in our class, who explained the material to us over and over, until we understood everything.”

Campus life became more positive as she connected with Russian-speakers in and out of class, and received academic support from the faculty.

The outcome is an unmitigated success. Now enrolled as a regular student in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, Liza feels like a full-fledged member of the BGU student community. “I had already studied cyber economics for two and a half years at a university in Kyiv, Ukraine, a subject closely related to industrial engineering and management,” she notes.

Despite the war that broke out after October 7, Liza remained undeterred. She was flying from Romania to Montenegro when the conflict began. “My thoughts immediately took me back to the war in Ukraine,” she recalls. “It felt surreal to encounter war again in another country.” Nevertheless, she returned to Israel in December for the belated beginning of the academic year, balancing her studies with work as a waitress in Beer-Sheva. “I am fortunate to be a student at BGU,” she says. “I made new friends, started my independent life in Israel, and got to continue studying the same subjects I learned at university in Ukraine.”

Transitioning from the supportive “Aliyah to Academia” program to regular undergraduate studies was not straightforward. “Adapting from a class made up of Russian-speaking students to a regular class was complicated. I’m usually at the center of things, initiating and leading, and suddenly I found myself in a different position. Since everyone around me speaks Hebrew, I feel less confident than I did in a Ukrainian- or Russian-speaking classroom. But I took the end of semester exams in industrial engineering and management just like everyone else, without any significant accommodations.”

The Program provided an invaluable opportunity that Liza wholeheartedly recommends. “Despite the difficulties, I have no regrets about being part of the BGU “Aliyah to Academia” program. I’ve started a new era in my life, and I’m really happy.”

# Cultural Sensitivity in Student Services



## Social worker Nadim Ghanayim brings expertise and empathy to BGU's Student Psychological Services

Born and raised in the city of Sakhnin in the Galilee, Nadim Ghanayim understood early on that academic studies were his path to success. His journey toward fulfilling this goal began in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and special education. He later retrained in social work, earning certification in the treatment of sexual trauma among adults.

Nadim then completed a master's degree in social work at Ben-Gurion University before moving to Germany, where he worked with asylum seekers from Syria and other Arab countries.

Concurrently, he continued his research, focusing on the "construction of masculinity among Syrian refugees." Canada was his next stop, where he expanded his research to refugees from all over the world, specializing in trauma and post-trauma treatment. Today, Nadim works at Ben-Gurion University's Psychological Service for Students while pursuing a PhD in the Department of Social Work.

We asked Nadim what drew him to social work. He replied: "Coming from a traditional, patriarchal environment, I have often reflected on the social structures and socialization processes of Arab society. The absence of emotional discourse in Arab society, as well as the prevalent gender inequality, seemed critical issues worth investigating and raising awareness about."

Those same traditional structures posed challenges to his academic career: "The distance from home and family was a significant obstacle for me," he says. "As the youngest in my family, starting university early required me to leave home and lead an independent life. It was a tempering experience. Navigating the diversity of Israeli society also proved challenging." Nadim credits his supportive family for his success. "To this day, my late mother accompanies me in my successes, and I deeply appreciate my wife, who supports me and encourages me to

aim as high as possible."

Balancing family life, academic responsibilities, and work is a challenge familiar to any graduate student. For Nadim the secret is effective time management and high motivation. He describes a constant dilemma in choosing priorities, "with the main question being how to balance quality time with my family and academic tasks."

His work at the Student Psychological Services brings its own set of challenges. "One of the challenges that I face," he explains, "is adapting Western theoretical knowledge to practical, culturally-conscious, sensitive work with members of a traditional society."



**We recommend reducing exposure to troubling images, limiting news consumption, sharing distress with close people, and seeking professional help if needed. Involvement in social action can also be beneficial.**

Like students everywhere, those at BGU primarily seek psychological services for stress and anxiety, especially exam-related stress and difficulties adjusting to student life. The events of October 7 and the war in Gaza, of course, compound such stressors. Nadim and his colleagues provide essential support to help students manage anxiety. "First of all, we recommend reducing exposure to troubling images, limiting news consumption, sharing distress with close people, and seeking professional help if needed. Involvement in social action can also be beneficial," he says.

"Following October 7, and in light of the large number of inquiries, we launched a hotline to support students. My colleagues and I worked together to accommodate the range of voices and emotional responses that reflect the complexity of Israeli reality," he explains. The work is both rewarding and enlightening.

"Our experiences were fascinating, diverse and complex." Nadim recalls, "they were often also inspiring, for example with clients who overcame real difficulties by tapping into their strengths. Every improvement reported by my clients, even the most minor change, gives me great satisfaction."

"The therapeutic process requires a heightened awareness of differences and cultural diversity," Nadim emphasizes. "For instance, I treated an Arab student who was experiencing alienation from her parents after moving from the village to the big city; from her family's embrace to an independent lifestyle in a Jewish city. In such situations, the therapist's role is to be aware of the complexity of the situation and try to empower the client within her family. It is very important to exercise caution, because such situations can also endanger the lives of women from certain regions. A therapist drawing only on Western cultural perspectives would struggle to grasp the full complexity of the situation."

Michal Manhaimer adeptly navigates multiple spheres. Coming from an ultra-Orthodox home in Bnei Brak, she is currently pursuing a master's degree at Ben-Gurion University in the Mandel Social Leadership program, while advancing her career in social entrepreneurship.

Her resume is impressive, highlighting her versatility across various fields. Within the ultra-Orthodox community, she has made a name for herself as a determined and successful career woman. Among her many initiatives, she founded and led workshops designed to support at-risk ultra-Orthodox girls. One notable workshop, "Assukah" (Employed), was tailored for ultra-Orthodox girls who had dropped out of school and lost their social support framework. Some had become estranged from their families and found themselves isolated, lacking female role models. Michal's lectures and personal attention provided these young women with hope, and several maintain contact with her to this day.

Michal's academic career is fueled by a profound love of learning. "I pursued a bachelor's degree in political science and international relations because the field fascinated me. I studied for a master's degree in gender studies because I was an activist promoting ultra-Orthodox women, which led me directly to my current degree program, in the Mandel MBA program in social leadership within the Guilford Glazer Faculty of Business and Management. This degree takes my management skills to the next level with an emphasis on the social activism I am deeply passionate about."

Residing in Bnei Brak, Michal is a mother of five. Her two eldest sons are currently serving in the army, while her three younger children attend ultra-Orthodox educational institutions. She defines herself as Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) - Israeli

Michal recounts the challenges she faced on her academic path. "I encountered several obstacles. The first was within my family circles. I am the first in my family to pursue higher education. My parents highly value

knowledge, and education was very important in our home. However, when I wanted to aim for academia as a young adult, my parents told me, 'Get married and have children first.' So, I began my undergraduate studies relatively late, when I was already a mother of four boys, with my youngest a newborn. The second obstacle was mental. I had no one in my social circle to consult with. When a dedicated academic program for ultra-Orthodox women opened in Bnei Brak (under the auspices of the Open University), the dream of studying at a university became accessible."



**My parents highly value knowledge, and education was very important in our home. However, when I wanted to aim for academia as a young adult, my parents told me, 'Get married and have children first.'**

Michal emphasizes the unwavering support she received from her family. "Without my family's steadfast support, completing my studies, especially with honors, would have been impossible. They assisted with childcare, helped me through exam periods, and provided constant moral support, pride, and encouragement. During my master's studies, I was honored with the 'Meir Award for Social Involvement,' and three generations of my family celebrated my achievement at the graduation ceremony."

Balancing her career with family life is a challenge Michal meets head-on. "My husband's support, combined with my sense of mission, propels me forward. I used to go to a café to study quietly, but over time I realized I was missing out. Now I sit and study in my living room in Bnei Brak with my laptop, my notebooks and tables. This is the best example I can set for my children, showing them the importance of

striving for excellence."

"The attitude of ultra-Orthodox society towards higher education has changed significantly over the years." Manhaimer notes, "More women are pursuing higher education and acquiring professional degrees. It is no longer rare to find women with academic degrees, especially in separate programs designed for the ultra-Orthodox population."

What advice does she offer to ultra-Orthodox women aspiring to follow a similar path? "Don't be afraid to be the first to do what you do. Even if you're the only ultra-Orthodox woman in your program and you feel uncomfortable, persevere. Don't be afraid of combining family life, work, and studies, because it is achievable."

"Most ultra-Orthodox women enter academia because they need a profession; a minority pursue higher education to enrich their knowledge or because they dream of an academic career. The more programs that cater to the specific needs of ultra-Orthodox women, the more will come." However, the situation for ultra-Orthodox men is different, Michal observes. "There is a significant challenge in integrating ultra-Orthodox men into academia, and their dropout rates are high. How to bring them closer to academia is a question that needs addressing."

How has BGU contributed to her success? Michal responds, "I take immense pride in being part of the Mandel Social Leadership MBA Program. It is a great privilege to be involved. Although I am the only ultra-Orthodox woman this year, and possibly the first in the program's history, I hope others will follow in my footsteps."

When asked about her sources of inspiration and her biggest dream, Michal reflects, "My parents. My father exemplifies social awareness and compassion, while my mother embodies strength and determination. The blend of their qualities is truly inspiring." And her dream: "To pursue a PhD and for my children to follow in my footsteps."



# Between Bnei Brak and Ben- Gurion

**Michal Manhaimer, a student in the Mandel Social Leadership MBA Program and a mother of five, talks about academia and the ultra-Orthodox**

Photo: Courtesy

A portrait of Dr. Yael Maayan, a woman with curly brown hair and a blue streak, wearing a purple blazer and a patterned top. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is dark green. An orange geometric shape is in the top left corner.

# Building Bridges Through Shared Spaces

**Dr. Yael Maayan, Director  
of the Shared Spaces  
initiative at BGU, promotes  
understanding between  
different communities on  
campus**

Dr. Yael Maayan joined BGU with a rich background in advancing Jewish-Arab partnerships, and she is now contributing her expertise to improving relationships among diverse populations at the University. "Diverse societies, particularly those grappling with ongoing conflict, require constant cultivation of social relationships. This need is amplified with communities from separate educational systems. To break entrenched patterns, these groups need regular encouragement, opportunities, and clear signals from authorities to foster meaningful change."

"If we invest significantly in the relationships between the different groups at the university, we can provide tremendous service to our students. In my research, I found that many students do not approach students from other groups because they feel they lack the social skills to break the barriers. These are skills that can be acquired and taught, especially in a safe and comfortable environment like our campus."

Dr. Maayan's personal journey has deeply influenced her professional focus. Growing up in a home with a father who was educated in the right-wing Betar movement, and a mother who was raised with the values of her socialist youth movement, she was exposed to political debates that allowed her to form her own independent views. As a child, she felt angry when someone was left out of the group, and by fighting against the exclusion, often paid a price for going against the grain. Over time, however, she learned that she could surround herself with new, more inclusive groups.

Dr. Maayan completed her bachelor's degree at Tel Aviv University and her master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Haifa. Her doctoral dissertation, which earned her a scholarship from the Office of the President of Israel, analyzes two academic spaces and how they label Arab students.

A pivotal moment for her was the October 2000 Arab protests in northern Israel. Having just moved from Tel Aviv to Kiryat Tivon, she was

involved in promoting a common education system for schools in the Nazareth area. Her undergraduate studies in sociology, particularly courses on the structure of power relations in Israeli society, were fresh in her mind. She could feel and identify how fear among those around her, including herself, shaped policies towards the minority group. This realization troubled her, and a few months later as part of her work, she found herself training northern district police officers, and later cadets in the police academy, about Arab society in Israel and the concept of culturally sensitive policing.



**As a child, she felt angry when someone was left out of the group, and by fighting against the exclusion, often paid a price for going against the grain. Over time, however, she learned that she could surround herself with new, more inclusive groups.**

During the conflict in Gaza in May 2021, Dr. Maayan was working at 'Abraham Initiatives,' an organization that promotes partnership in mixed cities, schools, academia, and the media. During this period, the organization received numerous requests to conduct training sessions at various organizations and academic institutions. Their team, composed of Jews and Arabs, with knowledge and expertise in emergency situations, conducted extensive training sessions for staff members, company managers, and educators involved in the 'shared education' movement, based on the Northern Ireland model.

Like many others involved in promoting such partnerships, Dr. Maayan faces many significant obstacles in her work. "Even in the most progressive organizations, there is a

tendency to over-simplify issues and address them superficially to achieve calm," she explains. "This disheartening dynamic underscores the truth of the saying from the Midrash about the Torah: 'if you forsake me for a day, I will forsake you for two,' which applies to social relationships as well – they need constant maintenance."

Thanks to her experience following the sectarian unrest in Israel in May 2021, which affected campus life alongside many aspects of wider society, Dr. Maayan was approached to develop training and recommendations for fostering shared life on the BGU campus. The training program, which was ultimately developed in collaboration with the Security Department, expanded the concept of security rather than dismissing it. The training included discussions on belonging as a value the University wants to nurture, interactions between security personnel and Arab students, and event analyses. The Security Department continues to engage in dialogue with Dr. Maayan's team, conducting in-depth training and preparations for Ramadan, with encouraging feedback from the field.

Looking ahead, Dr. Maayan emphasizes the importance of promoting equality and fairness to create proper relationships between citizens. "We will invest in a range of regular programs that nurture relationships and recognize the legitimacy of each community," she explains.

Her experiences in Northern Ireland, where the state continuously invests in recognizing both Catholics and Protestants equally, have shaped her vision. Indeed, she counts Prof. Tony Gallagher from Queen's University, Belfast in Northern Ireland as a role model. Gallagher developed, institutionalized, and researched 'shared education' in Northern Ireland. He created a national model that connects Catholics and Protestants through the education system, laying the foundation for stability based on mutual recognition.

"There are serious ongoing efforts to ensure equality and fairness, at the University, but there is still a long way to go."



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