

ISEF and Dr. Eti Ben Simon

For Dr. Eti Ben Simon, the road to her postgraduate research in Neuroscience at the University of California Berkeley was filled with surprises and celebration, but one thing is certain: It wouldn't have happened without The ISEF Foundation, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

Founded in 1977 by philanthropists Edmond J. (z"l) and Lily Safra and Nina Weiner, The ISEF Foundation's mission is to narrow socioeconomic gaps in Israeli society by providing access to higher education, along with leadership development opportunities for gifted students from underserved communities.

Eti is from Neshar, a small town outside of Haifa, where she lived with her father, a print worker; her mother, a municipal clerk; and her three sisters. Eti's parents had to leave school after the eighth grade.



"I always liked to learn and I was lucky to be good at school. But I remember feeling weird learning English before my parents did. And even though I love learning, I never thought I could afford going to university. My parents struggled to support us, and I grew up feeling that we couldn't aspire to something as luxurious as a college education."

But when the time came, Eti decided to try paying her way by working part-time and getting financial aid. She began her undergraduate career at Tel Aviv University in 2003, studying geophysics and biology.

"I chose to study biology because I was always fascinated by the human body and wanted to understand how this incredibly complex machine keeps us alive. I added geophysics because of TAU's planetary science program. Space always gave me an everlasting curiosity to understand where we came from."

ISEF entered the picture in 2006 when Eti decided to pursue a graduate degree in neuroscience. "I first heard about ISEF through the financial aid program in Tel Aviv when I started my master's. I was amazed at the level of dedication that ISEF inspired and the support that ISEF provides. It was such a great comfort to meet so many people from similar backgrounds. I didn't realize how lonely it felt to be the outsider until I met the people from ISEF. It felt like being home again."