



TEL AVIV אוניברסיטת
UNIVERSITY תל אביב

Tel Aviv University Review

A Partner for Social Equality

Tel Aviv University has worked with the ISEF Foundation for 40 years for the advancement of Israeli society

The ISEF Foundation, now celebrating its 40th anniversary, is one of the major organizations addressing the social and educational gaps in Israeli society. Over the past four decades, guided by its motto – “A different way of protecting Israel: developing its brainpower” – ISEF fellowships have nurtured thousands of TAU students, many of whom have gone on to hold leading positions in every sector of Israel's economy and society. And every one of these graduates is committed to giving back the life-changing gift they have received, by helping others follow in their footsteps.

Below are the stories of three young people whose lives and futures have been transformed by this unique alliance:

Yan Bihdriker

A diplomat in the making

ISEF student Yan Bihdriker, 25, is studying at TAU for a BA in Political Science and American Studies. Living with his ailing, unemployed mother and 86-year-old grandfather in a tiny public housing apartment, Yan knows full well that his ticket out of poverty and all the way to the achievements he dreams of are excellence, hard work, and ISEF.

Born in Uzbekistan in 1991, Yan remembers watching the news on TV even as a small child. "I've always been interested in politics," says Yan, who came to Israel at the age of seven, and speaks three languages fluently: Russian, Hebrew and English. "So, even though my mother would probably like to see me in a well-paid high-tech job, I prefer to become a diplomat."

Admitted to TAU, Yan applied for every possible scholarship, and finally chose ISEF "because I was fascinated by their Leadership Program – which is highly relevant to my objectives." Now in his third year of studies, Yan participates in ISEF's highly selective internship program, doing research and writing policy papers for the Department of Strategy and Policy at Israel's Ministry of Public Security.

But perhaps most important for Yan, is ISEF's unique sense of family. "My elder 'brothers and sisters' in ISEF hold leading positions in every sector, and they can open doors for me," he says. ISEF is definitely pointing Yan in the right direction for his next endeavor: to attend one of the world's top graduate schools, such as Harvard or Columbia University.

Hen Biton

Role model and future brain researcher

Where Hen Biton comes from, the town of Nesher just north of Haifa, an academic career is anything but the normal course for a young woman of 24. "For most of the people I grew up with, the university is an unknown world, seemingly beyond their reach," says Hen. But for this gifted student taking a double major in biology and psychology with an emphasis on neuroscience, "the sky is the limit" is not a cliché but a way of life. And ISEF is her ideal launching pad.

"I'm curious by nature," says Hen. "I've always wanted to learn and to know things, and the university is the ultimate environment for me. My greatest aspiration is to become an academic researcher." But as fascinated as she is by her studies, Hen is certain that her university experience would not have been complete without ISEF's support and mentorship.

"The ISEF Leadership Program opened my eyes to the real social and educational issues in our country," she explains. "It helps you ask the right questions – about your identity, where you came from and where you're going. Moreover, when I first came to TAU, ISEF helped me feel at home. I knew I always had someone to turn to."

Volunteering in the community, also through the ISEF program, Hen found that she had a lot to offer youngsters from similar backgrounds. "We ISEF students know how to help these kids," she says. "Most important, we serve as their role models, bringing ISEF's all-important message: 'If I could do it, you can too.'" Today, in her third year at TAU, Hen is one of six ISEF Coordinators, specifically chosen for their leadership skills, who guide groups of younger ISEF students at their respective institutions.

And Hen herself is also guided by the accomplishments of her predecessors, including numerous ISEF scholars who have become successful in academia. One major beacon is leading TAU researcher, ISEF graduate and recently appointed ISEF Chairperson, Dr. Vered Padler-Karavani of the George. S. Wise Faculty of Life Sciences.

Dr. Vered Padler-Karavani

Trailblazer

"My first encounter with TAU occurred in the 3rd grade, when I attended the program for science-oriented youth," recalls Dr. Padler-Karavani. "It was love at first sight. I decided right away that I would be a scientist when I grew up." But for the young girl from Rosh HaAyin, such aspirations were unusual, and academic studies seemed very far away. "My parents sent me to a good high school, but they didn't have the means to support me through university," she says. That's when Vered discovered ISEF.

"ISEF doesn't just support you financially," she emphasizes. "ISEF has a social agenda: closing gaps through education. And ISEF teaches you that once you've made it, you must help others do it too. This is the ISEF way, proven time and time again – with a staggering success rate of 96%! For all ISEF scholars, it's a way of life and a lifetime commitment."

ISEF supported Vered through her BSc, MSc and PhD, all at TAU. Choosing to specialize in Glycobiology – the study of sugars in living cells and their potential medical applications – she did her postdoctoral research at the University of California San Diego, supported once more by an ISEF International Fellowship, and returned to TAU in 2013, to start her own lab and join ISEF Israel's Executive Committee. Gradually attaining prominence in the scientific community, she is currently a member of an international consortium on heart disease supported by the EU, and has also received a substantial grant from the European Research Council. In 2016 she finally came full circle, becoming the volunteer Chairperson of ISEF Israel.

The ISEF Foundation was established in 1977 by the late Edmond J. Safra, his wife Lily Safra, and Nina Weiner, who has served as the organization's president since its inception. ISEF's goal is to diminish Israel's socio-economic gaps through higher education, and enable young Israelis to realize their academic potential. Supporting an average of 500 students at 21 Israeli institutions every year, ISEF is the only NPO that stands behind its students throughout their studies - from the undergraduate stage all the way to postdoctoral research at leading institutions worldwide. ISEF scholars contribute to every sector of Israel's economy, while also mentoring younger ISEF students, and serving as "Ambassadors of Goodwill" in other countries that require their expertise.