

Sephardi philanthropist worries about students falling between the cracks

Nina Weiner's work encourages academic excellence, dedication to communities in country's periphery

• By HAYAH GOLDLIST EICHLER

Nina Weiner, along with the late Edmond Safra and his wife, Lily Safra, founded the International Sephardic Education Foundation (ISEF), a foundation to assist Sephardi Jews in Israel, in 1977. Their work today has expanded to include not just Sephardi Jews, but all Israelis deemed part of the geographical or societal periphery, such as Druse, Ethiopian-Israelis, and Russian-Israelis.

ISEF has over 11,000 graduates, including doctors, professors, educators and Knesset members. Sixty percent of ISEF graduates are female and all of them have served in the IDF or in civil service, an important aspect of the scholarship.

Weiner, who spoke with *The Jerusalem Post* on Thursday, tells the story of a girl from Afula who never finished high school but decided to do night courses to complete her matriculation exams. Her math teacher at the night course told her she had talent.

"Before that," said Weiner, "she didn't even know she was good at math." The student became an ISEF scholarship recipient and did her post-doctorate at California Institute of Technology.

Weiner worries about the rest of the students who don't get noticed by their teachers – the students who slip through the cracks of a problematic school system that doesn't invest enough in the periphery. This is what drives Weiner to invest so heavily in the periphery of Israel, to ensure that those cracks are mended.

She mentions another student who received 18 years of assistance from ISEF, who currently runs a lab at Tel Aviv University with a grant of €200,000 from the Marie Curie fellowship. This student moved back to live in Rosh Ha'ayin, where she grew up, next to her mother.

This is the kind of community connection that Weiner says the program aims to foster – encouraging successful students



NINA WEINER, co-founder and president of ISEF, poses with ISEF executive director Tomer Samarkandi (right) and chairman of the ISEF executive committee, Prof. Eli Avraham, at a donor event in May. (Ofer Amram)

to give back to the communities they grew up in and be role models of success.

Weiner can name dozens of ISEF scholarship recipients and discuss their careers and families offhand. She considers them a community and enjoys staying in touch with them. "Staying in touch with my students keeps me 20 years younger," she says.

She says she learns from her students and is constantly seeking their opinions on issues that arise in Israel.

An important aspect of the ISEF program, according to Weiner, is that the students are required to give back to society. Every student who receives assistance from ISEF is obligated to volunteer. Weiner calls it "circles of empowerment" – ISEF impacts individual students, and those students, in return, impact their communities.

Weiner, who is the driving force behind ISEF, was born to a Sephardi-Israeli mother, who attended the Herzliya Gymnasium high school alongside influential people such as second prime minister Moshe Sharet. Her father, an Ashkenazi Jew, was a staunch Zionist, even in the anti-Semitic climate in Egypt, where Weiner was born and raised.

Her father was taken to a concentration camp for Zionists in Cairo in 1948. Weiner says his

camp was more lenient than some of the other camps, especially those in later years, but anti-Semitism in Egypt was on the rise and it was not safe for her family.

Her family was able to flee Egypt with their Polish passports, telling the Egyptian authorities they were moving to Poland, while in fact they went to Israel.

Weiner says that some would ask whether they were refugees or part of the pioneer movement, there to build the State of Israel. She answers, "we were both."

On the one hand, she says, they fled Egypt with nothing – just three suitcases and a small amount of money. On the other hand, they chose to come to Israel because of their Zionism – they loved Israel and wanted to be there.

Of her move to Israel, she says "it was hard for us, but the *maabarot* were much worse," referring to the refugee tent cities set up for Sephardi Jews who fled to Israel. Weiner says she saw the difficulties the community faced in these cities, she knew the kids who grew up there, she volunteered with them, and saw the way they were mistreated by the government. This is where her concern for the Mizrahi community started.

She later moved to Switzerland to study psychology under Jean Piaget. Her first year with him she says was the hardest of her whole academic career.

Weiner moved to the US to study for an MA in psychology, but never stopped reading about the *maabarot*. She stayed up to date with what was happening in Israel all the time, reading all the different newspapers to get the full picture.

In 1977, she joined efforts with Edmond and Lily Safra to assist the kids that she had met in the *maabarot*, to build up the periphery of Israel.

"We wanted to help build the development towns that weren't being developed," she said, adding that there were problems with the schools in these neighborhoods and that communities were being neglected.

Weiner wanted to identify the most promising students and give them the opportunity to learn so they could become role models for their communities.

She proudly boasts that "a student who starts their BA with us, we stay with them all the way throughout their education." ISEF will assist their students with their academic studies all the way through their post-doctoral studies, including studies abroad, as is the case with numerous ISEF scholarship recipients who have gone on to study at Harvard, Yale, California Institute of Technology, and other prestigious universities around the world.

Weiner talks about Israel as a "start-up nation" but warns that the investment is 20 years old and we have to ensure that we continue investing so we continue to innovate. She says ISEF is always looking to the future.

She relates that when she started ISEF, some people told her she was "being divisive," but she knew what she wanted, she had Safra behind her, and, she says of herself, "I am a tank."

Leading doctoral students win Adams fellowships

Out of 72 alumni, 23 already in senior faculty positions

• By JUDY SIEGEL

Seven outstanding Israeli doctoral students received on Sunday a total of \$1 million in prestigious Adams Fellowships of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities from Canadian philanthropist Marcel Adams. A 95-year-old Holocaust survivor who fought in the War of Independence and made his fortune in Canadian real estate, Adams established the fellowships in 2005. To date, 102 young and promising Israeli researchers received fellowships.

All of the recipients were men, even though until now, the academy's professional committee chose 25 women among the previous 95 recipients. "It just turned out that way this time," an academy spokesman said.

Each of the seven will receive over \$100,000 for up to four years of doctoral studies (\$30,000 a year), as well as exemption from tuition. Academy president Prof. Ruth Arnon said at the ceremony in Jerusalem that the meticulous screening process of the universities and of the academy's professional committee of the fellowship program, ensure the winners' high quality," she said.

"We are proud and happy that out of 72 alumni till today, 23 have already been given senior faculty positions in universities, nine are in hi-tech companies and two work in hospitals. The foundation's investment in these young and talented scientists bears fruit and ensures the future of science in Israel."

The recipients are:
• Izchak Goldshtein, a 29-year-old doctoral student of computer science who served over six years as a cyber-security specialist, a team leader and a projects officer in an elite IDF technology unit in the Atuda (academic reserve) of the IDF. He is the



ADAMS FELLOWSHIP winners pose with their accolades, alongside Marcel Adams' children, Linda and Silvan. (Courtesy)

second child of his family to win this fellowship. His older brother Moshe won a fellowship in 2007 and is now teaching physics at Tel Aviv University.

• Barak Hirshberg was born and bred in Jerusalem where he was educated at Boyer High School and became interested in the sciences, particularly chemistry. He joined the IDF for six years as a theoretical chemist in RAFAEL Ltd., and left to study for his doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem despite an offer for a position by RAFAEL.

• Eran Sagi completed his high school studies externally at the age of 16 because he was "bored." He went on to study physics at TAU. He is now specializing in condensed-matter physics at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, focusing on electronic systems. He has several publications in prominent scientific journals. His plan is to return to an academic position in Israel following a post-doc abroad, so he can help educate a new generation of scientists and engineers.

• Omri Azencot's research at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology is considered unique to Israel since he specializes in physics-based simulations in computerized graphics. He collaborates with a lab at the University of Stanford in Cali-

fornia, Ecole Polytechnique in Paris and the Institute for Numerical Simulation in Bonn. He plans on developing this field in Israel, which can attract companies and lead to cooperation between the academy and industry and establishing research centers within Israeli hi-tech companies.

• Ido Sagi, a student of the top one percent of HU, is doing his doctorate in the use of stem cells and his research focuses on their potential for replacing human tissue destroyed by disease.

• Michael Kalyuzhnyson, the son, grandson and nephew of scientists, came from Russia when he was five and was brought up on the Carmel in Haifa. From a young age, he was interested in science and even participated in science camps. He decided to study biology at HU, where today he is a doctoral student of ecology.

• Yinon Spinka, a doctoral student of mathematics at TAU participated in Bar-Ilan University's mathematics program since high school, completing his matriculation exam in 10th grade. Following his army service, he returned to continue his degrees with honors and now concentrates on models from statistical mechanics, collaborating with researchers both in Israel and abroad.

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Wikipedia co-founder, genome project leader win this year's prestigious Dan David Prize

• By NIV ELIS

The co-founder of Wikipedia and the leader of the Human Genome project were among the six recipients of the annual Dan David Prize at Tel Aviv University Sunday evening.

"Once again we are welcoming in Tel Aviv some of the greatest contributors to the advancement of humanity – this year in fields that are connected to the way we gain knowledge and share information," said Ariel David, the son of the late Dan David and a board member of the Dan David Prize and Dan David Foundation.

Each year, the Dan David Foundation awards \$1 million in each of three categories – past, present and future – which is then divided up among the recipients within each grouping. The award is intended, in part, to provide prestige and monetary benefit in fields that don't always yield big paydays, but contribute to humanity.

The laureates donate 10 percent of their prize money toward 20 doctoral and post-doctoral scholarships.

"These prizes do inspire people to go for the best," said Prof. David Haussler, one of the two recipients of the future-themed prize. "We want to have unlimited horizons. We want to imagine we can do spectacular things and there always is that possibility. And the prizes remind us that."

Haussler is best known for his work leading the Human



DAVID HAUSSLER
(Courtesy)



PETER R. BROWN
(Courtesy)

Genome Project, which first mapped the entirety of a human being's DNA. Today, he is part of the Global Alliance for Genomics and Health, which is seeking to create a framework for sharing genetic information.

"This information can be extremely helpful already in fighting diseases like cancer," he says. "For the first time we can actually read the DNA in the cancer cells and know what we're up against. That's already leading to all kinds of exciting creative ideas on how to cure cancer."

The challenge for the group is creating a common code through which thousands of researchers, hospitals, doctors and clinics can share DNA information in a way that makes relevant sequences easy to find and compare, all while taking into account privacy concerns.

"You just have to have a common protocol," he explains, specifying that the idea is not to make a central DNA database, which could have Orwellian

implications. In a sense, it's like creating an Internet for DNA.

"Until we can completely understand the ramifications of sharing your DNA information around the world, we need to be careful."

Haussler sees the future of fast computing and big data playing important roles in studying the genetic role in health. The genome project he led took years and \$300m. to map out one person's genome. Today, sequencing a person's DNA can be done over a few days, for as little as \$1,000, using an automated sequencing computer. The potential to study all that data, personalize medicine, and catch problems before they start could have a profound effect on humanity, he says.

One of his two fellow "future" recipients, Michael Waterman, worked with him in the human genome project, and developed an algorithm used for systematically comparing DNA.

In a sense their work is asking to make a "Wikipedia" for DNA,

a fitting comparison given that the sole winner in the "present" category was Jimmy Wales, the co-founder of Wikipedia.

Wales feels the entirety of public human knowledge should be available for free online. When given a substantial cash prize from the UAE, he decided to channel it toward a foundation focused on furthering freedom of information rather than keep or return the money from an unsavory government.

The full interview with Wales will be in tomorrow's *Jerusalem Post*.

Finally, looking back to the past, two recipients split the prize for their contribution to historical understanding: Prof. Peter R. Brown and Prof. Alessandro Portelli.

While Portelli examined the relationship between private and collective memory and how their interactions color our historical understanding, Brown is a scholar of late antiquity. His major contribution was putting a new spin on the decline of the Roman Empire, showing that the "long twilight" was actually a culturally rich period that dramatically shaped the future, in no small part due to the development of Rabbinic Judaism, the rise of Christianity and the proliferation of Islam.

"We always associate periods of supposed decline with gloom, doom, black and white photographs. And instead you're looking at a set of flourishing communities on the ground," he said.