

A MESSAGE TO OUR ALUMNI

By Aviad Stollman, Global Director
Photographs by Shauli Lendner



Aviad Stollman: "Each Fellowship and initiative is an investment in a shared legacy of excellence."



Leore Heim was pushed to the limit working on both his MD and PhD at Tel Aviv University, but the Azrieli Fellowship "always had my back."

The Azrieli Fellows Program has always sought not just to keep pace with change but to anticipate it. We continue to adapt so that our support remains relevant and transformative. Our alumni embody this spirit most fully: While our current Fellows often pursue structured academic paths, alumni must navigate more unpredictable realities. Some remain in academia while others move into industry, non-profits or public life, both in Israel and abroad. Wherever they are, they remain part of our network, leading in their fields, advancing knowledge and building connections that span borders. As we look ahead, we see our work as a shared endeavour: we are building on a legacy of excellence while opening new paths for the next generation of scholars and leaders.

Why the Visiting PhD Fellowship matters

In 2025, we launched the **Azrieli International Visiting PhD Fellowship**, welcoming exceptional doctoral candidates from abroad for three to four months in Israel. These visiting scholars bring fresh perspectives, spark cross-border research and strengthen Israel's ties to the global academic network. We also hope that some will return as postdocs, deepening the connections they established here. For alumni, this is a chance to engage with — and help nurture — the next generation of international collaborations. If you are a supervisor at an Israeli institution, you may even host one of these outstanding PhD students yourself, enriching your own research while expanding the program's reach. And if you are a faculty member outside of Israel, send us your top PhD students!

Evolving to meet current needs

With the introduction of this new track, we are phasing out the **Early Career Faculty Fellowship**. The decision reflects our ongoing commitment to identifying and addressing the most pressing needs. When we launched this Fellowship track in 2015, there was no comparable program in Israel, and it filled a vital gap for new faculty returning from postdocs abroad. Over the course of 10 cohorts, we supported 77 exceptional scholars in establishing their labs, building teams and accelerating their careers. Today, the Israel Science Foundation's **Beresheet Program** provides substantial support in this area, allowing us to redirect resources to where they can make the greatest impact — such as fostering early-stage relationships through our Visiting PhD Fellowship.

Strengthening the alumni network

Our alumni are at the heart of our mission. In the coming year, we will expand opportunities for alumni to connect, collaborate and contribute. Initiatives will include targeted networking events, workshops, writing retreats, mentorship programs and collaborative projects that leverage alumni expertise. We see our alumni not only as beneficiaries but as co-creators of the program's future — shaping initiatives, sharing knowledge, and amplifying our impact across Israel and around the world.

The story of the Azrieli Fellows Program is, ultimately, your story. Each Fellowship and initiative is an investment in a shared legacy of excellence. We invite you to stay engaged, share your insights and help create new possibilities for the next generation of scholars. ▲●■

TWO PATHS, ONE VISION

AZRIELI ALUMNI WHO PURSUED AN MD-PHD TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY HAVE LEARNED

By Kristy Strauss
Photographs by Shauli Lendner

Training to be both a scientist and a medical doctor is an ambitious goal, and one that's very challenging to achieve. The first hurdle is finding an academic institution that offers the opportunity to pursue both paths simultaneously. Highly competitive MD-PhD programs that integrate the two disciplines have been offered at a handful of U.S. institutions since the mid-1970s. In Israel, however, the model is still relatively new, with only a handful of schools beginning to offer the dual approach.

Since 2007, the Azrieli Fellows Program has supported a small but growing number of researchers in Israel who have chosen this path. The first Fellow to pursue this academic journey was Naama Elefant-Bernstein, who was determined to earn her PhD in computational biology, systems biology and genomics while simultaneously pursuing an MD at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Back then, however, a dual program didn't exist, and Elefant-Bernstein had to negotiate with the medical school to create the program for herself.

Over the years, the Azrieli Fellows Program has supported nearly 10 researchers who chose to pursue the MD-PhD option through the Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellowship. The Fellowship provides financial support, networking opportunities that encourage interdisciplinary research, and events at which Fellows can connect.

For alumni Fellows like Elefant-Bernstein, Irene Unterman and Leore Heim, however, the Azrieli Fellows Program has meant much more. It was their sounding board and a constant source of encouragement.



While at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Irene Unterman drew heavily on the Azrieli community. "So many opportunities opened up because of small conversations."

Elefant-Bernstein completed her MD-PhD in 2011 and is now a research associate at the Center for Precision Medicine and Genomics at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. In October 2024, Unterman completed her MD and PhD in biomedical sciences from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is currently in a dermatology residency at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, where she is a Nativ Fellow. Heim is expected to complete his MD and PhD in neuroscience at Tel Aviv University in late 2025 and begin his internship at the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya.

Aperio contributor Kristy Strauss spoke with the three Fellows to discuss their academic journeys, lessons they have learned and tips for other Fellows pursuing the demanding parallel academic program.

Kristy Strauss: Pursuing a joint MD-PhD degree is an ambitious undertaking. What did you learn during your Fellowship years that you are applying now?

Leore Heim: There are the practical things you learn throughout your education, but the Azrieli Fellowship gave me something more than that. My PhD was one of the most difficult things I have ever done for many reasons — mainly, dealing with day-to-day failures in the lab. But the people I met at Azrieli always had my back and gave me confidence, which has given me the ability to persevere when things get tough. That was really significant, even more than the practical things I learned.

Irene Unterman: The Azrieli community was an anchor for me during those years — both my peer group and the Azrieli team who helped me connect with the alumni network and find other people

who have been through this journey. I'm no longer afraid to put myself out there and ask questions, and I learned there will always be a strong alumni network that I can turn to for advice.

Naama Elefant-Bernstein: My Fellowship gave me the opportunity to connect with an amazing group of people in my cohort who were so impressive and supportive of each other. Even though we were in different fields, I think we learned different lessons from each other that we apply in our work today.

KS: How did you compartmentalize your thinking and efforts to pursue two demanding areas of study?

NEB: I love science, and I love medicine, and they're very intertwined paths as far as I'm concerned. I don't like to consider them as two different disciplines. I am a big believer that doing research makes you a better doctor, and being a doctor makes you a better researcher. **IU:** I loved doing each individually. I always thought that there would come a point where I would have to go one way or the other. But along the way, I met many mentors who are active physicians and scientists and incredible at what they do, and they're able to combine it.

KS: Still, juggling two rigorous programs must have been demanding. What was your biggest challenge and how was it managed?

NEB: The real challenge is finding a place that allows you to do your residency and continue your research after you've graduated. There aren't many options in Israel, so for me, family medicine gave me that one day a week where I could continue my research in genetics. Now, my research and area of medicine are in the same space. But it took a very long time to get here.

IU: For me, it was the frustrating realization that I needed answers but had no one to ask, because those answers didn't yet exist. It was then that I figured out that in my teeny tiny field of research, I am the expert — and I am responsible for finding the answers I needed. I had incredible mentors, but their job was to help me figure it out on my own. While it was challenging, it gave me a lot of confidence. I learned that I might not know everything — but in this tiny bubble, I know something.

LH: There were many challenges, like maintaining a work-life balance. Dealing with failure was also quite challenging. But it was an eye-opening experience. I discovered a lot about myself — my faults and my strengths — which is priceless.

KS: Leore, how did you manage to achieve work-life balance in the end?

LH: I haven't found work-life balance yet. Some might say I'm one-dimensional because work is a big, big part of my life, and people might say it takes up more of my time than it should. But I struggled for a long time with finding balance, and I think striving for it put me under more stress. Now, I'm just living the way I like, which is long hours, and I'm okay with it.

NEB: To Leore's point, I think work-life balance is a fictional concept and nobody really has it. It's good to strive for balance, but it's tough. There are times when you need to put in long hours, like when you're studying for exams and you don't have much of a choice. Work-life balance is something that fluctuates, and we shouldn't be so hard on ourselves during those moments when work — or life — takes up more of our time.

KS: I'm sure you had some wonderful moments pursuing an MD and PhD. What's one memory from your involvement with the Azrieli Fellows Program that sticks with you?

IU: If I had to pick one, it would be when I got the call from Azrieli for an interview. They were just so, so friendly on the phone. It was like we had known each other for years, even though we hadn't even met.

LH: For me, it was the moment I realized I wasn't alone and overcame my insecurities. One evening, I attended a ceremony that the Azrieli Fellows Program hosted to congratulate all the new cohorts. The program always puts on amazing events, and this was no exception — there was great food, great speeches and everyone was well dressed. I felt a bit shy being recognized in this way, but realizing that other new Fellows had similar feelings broke the ice, and it was beautiful. Suddenly, we were all in the same boat, and it was a reminder that we share the same feelings and stresses.

NEB: One of my best memories came from a volunteer opportunity, which is an important element of the Azrieli Fellows Program. Another Fellow and I went to a school in Kiryat Gat, and we brought a sheep's heart to dissect with the kids. There was one kid who was beyond excited, and I just saw the sparks in his eyes. It was so moving.

KS: Are there any pro tips you can offer Fellows just starting down a similar path?

IU: Don't be scared to engage and share your thoughts with the great people running the Azrieli Fellows Program. So many opportunities opened up just because of small conversations I had with them. I felt shy to reach out to them for so long, and when I did, I got such an incredible response.

NEB: My advice would be to stay in touch with other Fellows you meet and with the organization. They're great people to have in your life. Also, participate in program events, even if you think you're too busy. Take advantage and be part of it as much as you can. ▲●■

"I love science, and I love medicine, and they're very intertwined paths as far as I'm concerned. I don't like to consider them as two different disciplines"

Naama Elefant-Bernstein, the first Fellow to pursue both an MD and PhD simultaneously, with the late David Azrieli at the Fellows' opening event in 2007. For her, a Fellows-organized visit to a school in Kiryat Gat brought lasting memories.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ISRAEL HADARI

TIPS

FROM AZRIELI FELLOWS & ALUMNI

1

Build a trusted network of experienced peers you can speak with openly about current challenges. You'll likely find that many have faced similar issues and can share practical strategies for overcoming them.

Idan Frumkin
2024–2025

2

Be proactive. Things will not happen without you making them happen.

Ben M. Maoz
2018–2019



3

Work on topics you are passionate about and with people you enjoy working with. Both will make this journey so much more fun.

Anat Perry
2016–2017

4

What eventually becomes exciting science rarely seems so at first.

Takashi Kawashima
2019–2020



5

Be open to talking to others. It may create unexpected opportunities.

Raja Giryes
2010–2011



6

Take to heart the kind spirit and generous atmosphere of the Azrieli forums and events. Since it's so uncommon, carry it with you to other professional frameworks.

Ohad Sorek
2021–2022



7

Be patient with yourself and with the research process. Research is not a sprint; it's a marathon.

Danfei Hu
2023–2024



8

One of the skills the Azrieli program teaches—and one of the hardest to get comfortable with—is mingling at events with large groups of strangers from different professions. Being able to start conversations with people from completely different fields is such a valuable skill, both in academia and in practice.

Efrat Vertes Cohen
2011–2012



10

Develop your soft skills: learning how to win people over to an idea, how to socialize professionally, and how to work with and even manage small teams. This is useful in academic conferences, in grant applications and as working professors. But it's also invaluable outside of academia.

Paul Greenham
2015–2016



9

Protect yourself from burnout. Exhaustion and chronic stress can reduce your creativity and productivity, and make decisions harder. Take the break that you need, and do not let a day go by without doing something for yourself.

Evgenia Mitsou
2022–2023



1) Assistant professor in the Faculty of Life Sciences at Tel Aviv University, Graduate Studies (2014–2015) and Early Career Faculty (2024–2025)
2) Head of the Drimmer-Fischler Family Stem Cell Core Laboratory for Regenerative Medicine at Tel Aviv University, Early Career Faculty (2018–2019)
3) Associate professor in the Department of Psychology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and 2025–2026 Harvard Radcliffe Fellow, Early Career Faculty (2016–2017)
4) Senior scientist in the Department of Brain Sciences at the Weizmann Institute of Science, Early Career Faculty (2019–2020)
5) Professor in the School of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Tel Aviv University, Early Career Faculty (2010–2011)

6) Postdoctoral Fellow at the Faculty of Humanities, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and lecturer at the School of Architecture, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Graduate Studies (2017–2018 and 2021–2022)
7) Postdoctoral researcher in psychology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, International Postdoctoral (2023–2024)
8) Senior architect at MAZA, Graduate Studies (2011–2012)
9) Group leader at the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Athens, Greece, International Postdoctoral (2022–2023)
10) Co-founder and CTO at Scale Social AI, International Postdoctoral (2015–2016)