

STUDY IN ISRAEL

JOY IN DIVERSITY

"The **Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies** is a place where people come to study Jewish and Israeli heritage, history and literature, regardless of their level of religious observance or non-observance, or how they identify themselves," explains its president, Prof. Doron Bar

Wendy Elliman

Although yeshiva study halls are full in Israel, while Jewish Studies classes at universities are emptying, "that doesn't mean that secular and traditional Israelis don't care about their heritage or tradition," says Prof. Doron Bar, president of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies. "Quite the contrary! They very much want to connect, but in a way that resonates with them, that responds to their needs and those of Israeli society."

That is exactly the Schechter Institute's *raison d'être*. The 36-year-old graduate school offers open and pluralistic academic Jewish study. Located down the hill from Jerusalem's Israel Museum, Schechter has some 1,800 alumni all over the country (and the world), representing a large range of diverse backgrounds and interests.

"People confuse Judaism with Jewish studies," says Prof. Bar. "My family, for example, came to this country seven generations ago and settled first in the Old City and then in Mea Shearim. My Jewish identity is different than theirs. I'm a secular Jew. I'm an Israeli, rooted in the Bible and with a deep love of the Land, and I'm at Schechter because I believe in connecting Israelis to their Jewishness and their heritage."

"Judaism belongs to us all"

Shira Lupiansky-Hasson is a teacher who graduated from the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in 2017 after majoring in Midrash and in Judaism and the Arts. Born to Israeli parents, she grew up in the United States and describes her Jewish background as 'unaffiliated.' "My parents were very very secular Israelis. So, I did not grow up with any Jewish knowledge apart from speaking Hebrew at home. We did not go to shul nor did I attend Jewish camps or participate in Jewish movements; in fact, I didn't even know these things existed. We were these unengaged Israelis living in America."

That all changed after Shira made Aliyah in 1997 and became a tour guide in the army. "I met many Jewish tourists who came to Israel, particularly



Prof. Doron Bar, President of the Schechter Institute (Photo: Itai Nadav)

youth groups, and I realized that I presented this strange duality; I spoke perfect Hebrew and English and was wearing an army uniform. I realized I had this unique insight into two worlds and I could be a bridge."

This exposure piqued Shira's interest in exploring her Jewish roots: "It came from a place of curiosity, the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn." After settling in Jerusalem, it was only a matter of time until she found Schechter. Today, she still lives what she learns: "The home I raise my kids in is different from the one I grew up in. We keep to the Jewish calendar and our kids do not see Jewish rituals as something foreign or scary," she notes.

Muki Jankelowitz, 55, is originally from South Africa and is a tour guide living in Modi'in. He is currently in the process of completing his Masters in Midrash and Aggadah at Schechter. Muki describes his Jewish upbringing in the South African Jewish community as "intense" and points out with a smile that, "the synagogue we drove to every Shabbat was an Orthodox shul." Today, he is part of a traditional egalitarian congregation.

"When I came to Schechter, I decided on the Midrash and Aggadah track because I wanted to strengthen my knowledge of Jewish texts in a plu-

"The Schechter Institute opened my world, equipped me in ways I didn't expect, changed how I thought. I found out who I was and where I belong on the Jewish spectrum"



Shira Lupiansky-Hasson (Photo: Shira Lupianski-Hasson)

ralistic learning environment," says Muki, adding: "I did not go there seeking 'hizuk' (or religious strengthening). Schechter provided me with the confidence and familiarity of Jewish texts to use in my tour guiding. Prior to Schechter, I did not have a strong knowledge in Jewish texts. I knew a lot of



Muki Jankelowitz (Photo: Itai Nadav)

Jewish history but I was looking for ways to connect these biblical stories and legends to my guiding and teaching.”

Lior Taf graduated from Schechter two years ago. He was 33 and, by then, had served in a Nachal infantry brigade in the IDF, acquired a BA in Music and Humanities, married, became a father and worked at the digital department for the TALI (‘enhanced Jewish studies’) Education Fund. Jewish Studies had arrived relatively late on his agenda.

“I grew up in Givatayim, with scant connection to Yiddishkeit,” he says. “My first glimpse into a Jewish heritage, of which I knew little, came in my mid-twenties through a joint program between the Israeli Scouts, where I worked at the educational department, and the Hartman Institute. The program aimed to give some Jewish knowledge and consequently Jewish identity to the Scouts. Not long afterwards, I became sufficiently curious about where I came from, about the lives of my grandparents and great grandparents in Poland, and decided to do something about it. Schechter seemed like the right place, so I signed up for an MA in Jewish Studies



Lior Taf (Photo: Dana Bar Siman Tov)

and majored in Jewish Education and in Judaism and the Arts. My experience there reached my heart as well as my head. It opened my world, equipped me in ways I didn’t expect, changed how I thought. In short, I found out who I was and where I belong on the Jewish spectrum.”



Prof. Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern (Photo: Dana Bar Siman Tov)

A pluralistic arena

Prof. Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern is an associate professor of Jewish History at Schechter, where she has taught for nearly 20 years. A social historian who describes herself as a secular Jewish woman whose identity derives from Jewish culture and tradition. She characterizes the Institute as “a pluralistic arena where secular and religious Israel meets, and where all groups can find their place.” Her focus is Women and Gender Studies, in which she combines its universal aspects with Jewish Israeli interpretations, and gives her students tools both to navigate an ambiguous world and to bring change in their own communities.

“In Judaism, as in every faith, there are people who interpret its teachings to fit their own needs,” she says. “We look at why people are stringent toward women, whether it’s always been this way in Jewish observance, and who benefits from it. Understanding what’s happening is a first step towards empowerment. It equips us to act.”

Over the years, Prof. Margalit Stern has had Orthodox, Hasidic, newly religious and newly secular women in her classes, single, married and divorced, and even a handful of men. “The student body at Schechter is diverse and inclusive, each individual bringing their own viewpoints and perspectives. We speak our minds and hearts here in a nonjudgmental, safe haven. What I try to give my students is assurance that they can choose their way in Jewish life, not according to group or community or synagogue, but by following their internal compass. Judaism increasingly hears the voice of women. Women are engendering change in the social environment.”

This approach, according to President Bar, is part of what makes the Schechter Institute unique among Israel’s 60 institutes of higher learning. “Not only is it the sole academic institute devoted primarily to the academic teaching of Jewish Studies, but our students come here not as future researchers, but to

engage with one another in small intimate classes – to speak, hear, teach and learn their story, their Jewish identity and tradition. Jewish learning isn’t one size fits all. We find joy in the diversity of voices that we bring together.”

Lior Taf sums it up: “Everyone comes to Schechter from their own place, and everyone leaves with something new.”

For more information about the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, visit schechter.edu



About the Schechter Institute

- The Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies offers Israel’s largest MA program in the field of Jewish Studies. Students can choose from numerous tracks, including: Jerusalem and Israel Studies, Judaism and the Arts, Gender and Feminist Studies, Jewish Music, Bible, Jewish Thought, Midrash and Aggadah, Talmud and Halacha, Jews of Spain and Islamic Lands (Sephardic Studies), Israel Studies and History of Zionism, and Jewish History.
- Schechter enrichment courses for English or Hebrew speakers offer high-level learning of Jewish sources, which also address contemporary issues. Schechter’s Fall 2020-Winter 2021 Zoom courses are open for registration now.
- Those wishing to further their knowledge in Jewish studies are invited to browse Schechter’s book catalogue.