

A university with the potential to change all of Israel — Ben-Gurion U

Chamovitz, Seserman spread the message in Colorado

By LARRY HANKIN
IJN Associate Editor

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was a huge believer in the potential of the Negev Desert for the growth and stability of the Jewish state. In fact, he lived in the Negev when he wasn't on the job in Tel Aviv or traversing the world on behalf of Israel. He wanted to set an example. During his final year as prime

received a PhD in genetics in 1992. He founded the interdisciplinary Manna Center Program in Food Safety and Security at Tel Aviv University in 2013, where he became dean of the life sciences faculty. Chamovitz was elected the seventh president of BGU in 2019. He is proud to have a leading role in realizing Ben-Gurion's vision



Prof. Daniel S. Chamovitz, president of Ben-Gurion University and a plant geneticist.



Doug Seserman, CEO of Americans for Ben-Gurion University.

'The future of Israel is the Negev, and the future of the Negev is Ben-Gurion University'

minister, 1963, Ben-Gurion put forward his vision of a university in the small Negev city of Beersheba — "an Oxford in the Negev." In 1969, the University of the Negev opened. After Ben-Gurion's death in 1973, it was renamed "Ben-Gurion University of the Negev" (BGU).

Ben-Gurion's notion that the Negev would, could and should play a crucial role in Israel's future remains a driving force that is being carried forward fervently by BGU's current president Prof. Daniel Chamovitz.

Chamovitz, along with Americans for Ben-Gurion CEO Doug Seserman and President Gary DeBode, met with the INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS during a Colorado visit this summer that included fundraising events in Aspen and Vail and a meeting with Gov. Jared Polis.

Chamovitz was born in Pittsburgh, Pa. in 1963, and grew up in the small town of Aliquippa, Pa. After starting undergraduate studies at Columbia University in New York City, he transferred to The Hebrew University of Jerusalem where he studied plant science. He

of a university in the Negev as the key to Israel's future successes. "A little-known fact is that we house the archives of David Ben-Gurion," Chamovitz says. "Could you imagine an American university housing the archives of George Washington? So, on my second day as president, I asked to go down to the archives, which are underground, and I asked to see Ben-Gurion's personal diary from May 14, 1948, the day he declared Israel a state.

"I started reading and I saw the conflict that this man was going through, the responsibility that he felt: 'Do I declare independence or do I not declare?'"

"The Americans were saying, 'Don't do it.' Some in the Jewish community, the Zionist community, were also saying, 'Don't.'"

"Am I going to cause the completion of the Holocaust by doing this, or am I going to redeem the Jewish people?"

"He felt the weight of history on his shoulders."

Now, the university is making Ben-Gurion's archives accessible to the general public.

Chamovitz says BGU is a crucial element in fulfilling the potential of the Negev as predicted by Ben

'There is no better social movement tool than higher education.'

Gurion.

"I left Tel Aviv University to take on the job at BGU because I truly believe that Ben-Gurion University is the most important university for the future of Israel. If Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

to live there. "The only place left for Israel's young people to build a future where they can afford to own their own apartment is the Negev.

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BGU focuses on providing higher education for Bedouins

does not succeed, the future of Israel is in danger, in doubt.

"If you go back to Ben-Gurion who said the future of Israel will rise from the Negev, you realize that 70-odd years later, the Negev has only 10% of the Israeli population.

BGU built and owns the only high-tech business park in Beersheba, adjacent to the university. It is also the largest employer in the region, and, along with Soroka Hospital, the major importer of educated population into the area.

"Our graduates, if they stay,

Access to and interest in higher education by the Bedouins has historically been limited, limiting economic opportunity for them.

"There is no better social movement tool than higher education," says Chamovitz. "That's how our grandparents or great-grandparents got into the American dream.

"How do you get first-generation immigrants involved in society? Integrating the Bedouin is probably the largest challenge because they come from Israel's weakest society from a socio-economic point of view — from the worst school systems. Most of their parents had never gone to or graduated high school — first

generation from a nomadic existence to an urban existence."

Chamovitz names two challenges to which BGU is rising: getting the Bedouins accepted into BGU, then having them graduate.

The university has devised a program for freshman Bedouin students in which they are given the skills in chunks to succeed in school, starting with the Hebrew language.

"These are people for whom Hebrew is clearly a second language, and English is a third language," he says. "We also give them math in chunks throughout the freshman year."

A dozen years ago, there were only 60 Bedouin students at BGU. Today, there are more than 800, and 70-80% of them are women.

"As we see in the world all over the world in higher education, it's the women who are the movers, who are the early adapters and integrators."

A Bedouin professor at BGU was recently appointed as vice president of inclusion and equity.

During the first years of Bedouin students at BGU, they generally wanted to graduate and become teachers, but now they are going into social work, psychology, medicine, computer science and engineering.

BGU is even bringing Bedouin students into the world of Israel's "start-up nation."

"We have an incubator for high-tech graduates to start their own start-ups."

Chamovitz says enabling the Bedouins to succeed is changing the way they live.

For example, "a female graduate of Ben-Gurion University is not going to allow her husband to have another wife and least 12 children. They are becoming modernized and that is the key for the success of Bedouin society."

BGU is supported in the US by Americans for Ben-Gurion, headed by Doug Seserman, who is remembered locally as the CEO who spearhead-

ed the rebranding of the Allied Jewish Federation to JEWISHColorado.

Seserman applied those skills to affect a rebranding of what was called American Associates, Ben-Gurion University — AABGU — to the simpler and more direct "Americans for Ben-Gurion — A4BGU."

"[A A B G U] was a mouthful and kind of clunky, and people didn't necessarily understand what we did and our relationship to the university," says Seserman.

Seserman says in doing market research ahead of rebranding, peo-

BGU

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Ben-Gurion University of the Negev campus in Beersheba.

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RCF awards \$2.1 in Jewish life grants

Rose Community Foundation awarded 40 grants totaling more than \$2.1 million to local Jewish organizations this year.

Over 23% of grant recipients were new to RCF and over 20% of grants were awarded to current grantee partners that are piloting a new idea, project or program.

“Rose Community Foundation’s refreshed Jewish life strategy challenges us to acknowledge and nimbly respond to emerging opportunities in our Jewish community that have surfaced through extensive data collection, community conversations and previous funding opportunities,” says Vanessa Bernier, RCF program officer for Jewish life.

“This grant slate reflects the needs of our region’s increasingly diverse Jewish communities and represents the foundation’s commitment to being a pluralistic funder, recognizing that the various Jewish settings, practices and perspectives in our region are critical to fostering a dynamic Jewish ecosystem.”

Most organizations received general operating support in an effort to provide maximum nimbleness and flexibility in deploying grant dollars, with the exception of new grantees and nonprofits that requested funding for a specific program or project. These are the grants:

18Doors — To help 18Doors empower people in interfaith relationships to engage in Jewish life and encourage Jewish communities to welcome them by expanding the organization’s clergy referral network and online services and resources.

Mountain States ADL — To support Words to Action, a program empowering Jewish students and their allies with strategies to respond to heightened antisemitism in high school settings and on college campuses, with a particular focus on encouraging Jewish student groups to partner with other coalition groups to respond to bias-motivated incidents of all types.

BaMidbar Wilderness Therapy via Ramah in the Rockies — for capacity building to promote whole-

health wellness in the Jewish community, including mental health, and wilderness-based journeys of self-discovery and healing.

Bend The Arc — for the Jeremiah Fellowship, a year-long national leadership development program for Jewish young adults in community organizing skills and access to leaders across the country.

BBYO, Rocky Mountain Region — or the Colorado chapter’s efforts to maintain and expand its programming and services.

Boulder JCC — for capacity building in data management, information technology and brand identity.

Congregation Har Hashem — for a new low-barrier Jewish education program, providing multiple entry points for families and youth at little or no cost.

CU Boulder Hillel Foundation — to help expand financial support from parents, alumni and community.

Denver Academy of Torah — for a new mental health and wellness curriculum for 7th -12th graders that addresses issues facing teens from age appropriate, Jewish lenses.

Denver Community Kollel — to help pilot and scale a podcast to diversify and broaden the Kollel’s adult Jewish education efforts.

Denver Jewish Day School — to help address the pandemic’s financial impact and explore new sustainability projects.

The Efshar Project via Colorado Nonprofit Development Center — to build Jewish identity, advance quality early learning experiences at Jewish ECE Centers and provide access to Jewish education for all families.

Einstein Academy — for implementation of a national Hebrew language acquisition program.

Ekar Farm — to connect the Jewish community to environmental and food justice through experiential education programs for Jewish community, food production for hunger relief, and community food and environmental initiatives.

Foundation for Jewish Camp — for diversity, equity and inclusion coaching, with a focus on racial equity and inclusion at Colorado Jewish



Vanessa Bernier, Jewish life officer at Rose Community Foundation

day camps.

Friendship Circle (Chabad Jewish Center of South Metro Denver) — to enhance programming for families and children with special needs, with a focus on rebooting in-person programming.

Honeymoon Israel Colorado — to provide Jewish couples with visits to Israel, enhance local pre- and post-trip programming and resume local in-person gatherings and learning opportunities.

INTERMOUNTAIN JEWISH NEWS — for the digitization of its print publications, 1927-1967, extending the reach of its archives that preserve the history of the Colorado Jewish community.

Israeli-American Council — for multi-generational family programming to bring together local Israeli and Jewish American families, to elevate Jewish tradition and Israeli culture.

The Jewish Experience — to provide educational and community connections to families across the spectrum of Jewish life, to expand outreach efforts to young couples and families with young children, and increase

collaboration with other metro Denver Jewish organizations.

Jewish Explorers (JEWISHcolorado) — for values-based Judaic programming for Jewish families with preschool- and elementary-aged children, while connecting families to a welcoming and inclusive community.

Jewish Family Service of Colorado — to advance social and economic justice by raising awareness and seeking stakeholder-informed, community solutions to alleviate systemic and COVID-related poverty challenges faced by Jewish individuals and households.

Jewish New Teacher Project via New Teacher Center — to help JNTP partner with local Jewish day schools in an observation-based and data-driven methodology to mentor new teachers.

JTown — to offer opportunities that enrich Jewish life and create connections through shared experience, with a goal of fostering a culture inclusive of individuals and families regardless of barriers to participation in Jewish life.

Judaism Your Way — to maintain and expand its programming and services to anyone who seeks a connection to Jewish life.

Kabbalah Experience — to expand its marketing and branding work to reach a more diverse population of educators and students.

Kavod Senior Life — for its post-pandemic efforts to reengage residents and older adults across the community in in-person and hybrid programming, increase the availability of mental health resources for residents, and introduce new technology to streamline health screenings for staff, visitors and residents.

Live On | LIFE & LEGACY — To support Year 4 of Live On | LIFE & LEGACY, a RCF initiative in partnership with the Harold Grinspoon Foundation, to provide incentive grants, marketing resources, coaching and training for dozens of local Jewish organizations to ask for legacy gifts and create a culture of legacy giving in the metro Denver Jewish community.

Merkaz Torah V’Chesed — to pilot a new intergenerational body of programming to address loneliness

and isolation experienced by older Jewish adults as recovery from the pandemic continues.

Mikvah of East Denver — for construction of the new *mikveh* as an inclusive place for community connection, fulfillment of ritual commandment and revitalization of connection to Judaism.

Moishe House — for its peer-led programs for Jewish young adults that help create home-based Jewish experiences, including a year-long justice series focused on exploring contemporary economic, political and social issues through a Jewish lens.

Moving Traditions — for research and development of Moving Traditions’ curriculum for multiracial families and Jewish teens of color, as the organization seeks to diversify its community groups for pre-teens and teens.

OneTable Colorado — to empower young adults who do not yet have a consistent Shabbat dinner practice to build one.

Repair The World — for a local Jewish service corps, Serve The Moment, to support up to 30 part-time members to engage in acts of service.

SCN Regional Security Initiative (JEWISHcolorado) — for employment of a regional security advisor, supporting the local Jewish Security Initiative, cofounded by JEWISHcolorado, RCF and ADL, to ensure the safety and security of the Colorado Jewish community.

Shalom Park — to reinvigorate Jewish programming at Shalom Park by hiring three diverse rabbis, ensuring residents’ spiritual needs are met through Jewish offerings. (Shalom Park received emergency funding in February, 2021 for PPE.)

UpStart — for a Colorado Change Accelerator Alumni program, through which UpStart will reinvest in the 20 current Denver-based alumni of accelerator.

Valley Beit Midrash — for programming rooted in current events for young adults in metro Denver, to improve lives in the communities through Torah learning, social action and leadership development.

Yeshiva Toras Chaim — to increase its capacity by updating its administrative, communications and technology processes.

Re-brander Seserman focuses on BGU

BGU

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ple were shown a picture of David Ben Gurion. Less than one in five Jewish millennials could recognize him by face.

“Now the good news was that when we told them who he was, more people were familiar with him as the founder and first prime minister of Israel and as the name of its airport.

“I thought it would be the other way around but his ideas on what Israel is supposed to be, why the Negev is so important in the future and what the university does — that’s all been lost. We went about trying to reconstruct that.”

A4BGU’s logo and marketing materials feature the visage of David Ben Gurion.

“So who are we? We’re Americans first, living in the Diaspora, Jews and non-Jews who are for Ben Gurion and the university that carries his name, which is the most vital institution, we believe, for the future of Israel.

“We are partnering in the remarkable, which is modern Israel as manifest through a university.

“We are the university in Israel that has a mandate for the region, and by having a mandate to develop the region, we’re driving the country forward.” ■



Bedouin students avail themselves of opportunities at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Dani Machlis