



Gil Blander: Bringing them home

It has always been the essence of the Israeli dream: to educate the country's scientific brainpower, which will drive the country's economy and ensure it is intricately connected to the West. That is indeed happening. Now, the task at hand is more nuanced: to bring back to Israel the best and brightest Israeli scientists among the burgeoning number of Israelis living and working abroad—mainly in North America—and at the same time ensure that those who stay overseas remain tightly connected to a global network of Israeli scientists which, ultimately,

contributes to the strengthening of Israeli academia and industry.

For Dr. Gil Blander, the subject has been top-of-mind since he started his postdoctoral fellowship at MIT in 2002, after receiving his PhD at the Weizmann Institute under the guidance of Prof. Moshe Oren in the Department of Molecular Cell Biology. At MIT, he met Prof. Eldad Tzahor who had just completed his postdoc and was headed to a new position at the Weizmann Institute. Prof. Tzahor handed him a list of some 50 names of Israeli postdocs in Boston.

Alumni

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All were either actively searching for positions in Israel or were considering returning—as long as they found the right job.

Dr. Blander held onto that list, and took it upon himself to update it on an ongoing basis. He remained in Boston after his postdoc and founded a company called Inside Tracker where he is now Chief Scientific Officer and President. Inside Tracker, based in Cambridge, MA, offers science-driven nutrition and lifestyle interventions which are based on sophisticated algorithms that track and analyze key biochemical and physiological markers in individuals.

“I have built my life and career in Boston but, like many Israelis in the life sciences here, the hope of moving back to Israel has always remained with me,” says Dr. Blander. “The fact that Israeli universities and companies are looking to fill positions with people who have had experience in the U.S. and Canada, in combination with the fact that so many Israelis in the life sciences are considering and hoping to return to Israel, exposed a real need to make matches between people and jobs.”

So, in 2006, together with friends Dr. Shmulik Hess, then a postdoc at MIT, and Rami Lotem, the husband of another MIT postdoc fellow, Dr. Blander started BioAbroad to respond to this need. It started off as a consortium of Israelis working in the life sciences in Boston—postdocs, physicians, and scientists in academia and industry—and offered networking opportunities, small job fairs, lectures by Israeli scientists visiting in Boston, and informal discussion groups. Today, nearly a decade later, BioAbroad has a presence in 20 cities in the U.S. and Canada, with two paid professionals and a bevy of volunteers who operate both social activities and professional ones; about 1,800 people in all have been involved in BioAbroad events. With funding from a small number of individuals and annual support from Israel’s Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, the IAC (Israeli-American Council), and major universities in Israel including the Weizmann Institute, the organization offers travel grants for Israeli scientists to fly to Israel for job interviews.

A nonprofit organization, BioAbroad aims to strengthen research and industry in Israel by maintaining a worldwide network of Israeli scientists, physicians, and entrepreneurs, and, says BioAbroad CEO Monika Lev Cohen, “encourages them to move back to Israel to use their expertise to advance Israeli academia and industry”.

Success is tricky to measure. Of the approximately 100 recipients of such fellowships over the years, some 70 percent are in positions in Israeli academia or industry. But thousands of Israelis have had some kind of touchpoint with BioAbroad, many of whom have returned to positions in Israel. Moreover, says Dr. Blander, “Building a strong network of Israeli scientists across America—people who stay in America and are well-connected—is essential for the success of Israeli science. So even though BioAbroad was started in order to help those who wanted to return to Israel, in fact it serves a second purpose of strengthening the network abroad. That isn’t any less important.”

At the same time, Israeli institutions and companies “know that they can come to us when they are looking for talent,” he adds.

This year, BioAbroad launched an excellence award for a young postdoc working in North America, which will be given in a ceremony at the annual gathering of the Israel American Council in Washington D.C. “The idea,” says Dr. Blander, “is to give a badge of honor to a young scientist, which will help draw attention to that person as a rising star, and to Israeli scientists in America in general.”

Early BioAbroad funder Yehuda Zelig, Senior VP of Biorest Ltd., says, “I believe that the most important asset of the State of Israel is its talented and brilliant youth, some of whom are residing abroad and aspire to return to Israel when they complete their training overseas. The country and its people and institutions must do everything in their power to bring them back home. This initiative, to consolidate and institutionalize such efforts, should be highly valued and supported by those who care about Israel’s future.”