



Zavalkoff  
Travel award  
for McGill  
graduate students  
& postdocs to travel to  
Tel Aviv University



**BRAIN@McGILL**

Bloomfield  
Travel award  
for Tel Aviv  
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& postdocs to travel to  
McGill University



**McGill**

Faculty of  
Medicine

**TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY** 

# Zavalkoff Travel award for McGill graduate students & postdocs to travel to Tel Aviv University

Interview with Melanie Banina



## Why did you choose Tel Aviv?

Dr. Mindy Levin's research team in the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy (SPOT) has long-standing collaborations with Tel Aviv University (TAU). We've been working with researchers at the Stanley Steyer School of Health Professions to develop a randomized clinical trial involving sub-acute stroke patients in Montreal, Israel and India. The Zavalkoff Award gave me an opportunity to contribute to the development and quality control of the project at a partner site.

## What was your experience with the culture there?

I felt at home as soon as I arrived. I ended up staying on campus at the new Broshim dorms, which were very comfortable, secure, and had easy access to public transit and downtown Tel Aviv. The population at the dorms was quite international and I met students from all over the world. At the Stanley Steyer School of Health Professions, I felt like I could have been at McGill SPOT. The faculty and staff were very welcoming and helpful both with work and with making sure that I was having a well-rounded experience in Israel. I got to leave the university campus often because our RCT site was at Loewenstein Hospital in Ra'anana, a city north of Tel Aviv. I quickly learned to navigate

the public transit system and realized that the greater Tel Aviv area was really accessible. In fact, all the city and intercity bus and train transit systems use a common public transit card and the fare is standardized across the country, so travelling between cities is very easy. I figured this out early on, so I travelled around the country on my free weekends. The most surprising fact for me was that there were so many different landscapes in such a

small area. The highway route between the most northern and southern point of Israel is shorter than the distance between Montréal and Toronto! I visited almost everything between the Golan Heights and Galilee in the north to the Mitzpe Ramon crater in the middle of the Negev desert. Some of my many highlights were being able to watch the Perseid Meteor shower in the middle of the desert and spending Canada Day weekend in old Jerusalem, which also happened to be the end of Ramadan, a celebration that I've never experienced first-hand. When I wasn't travelling on weekends, I had standing invitations to

Shabbat dinner with my friends and colleagues. I have encountered aspects of Jewish culture in Montréal, but being in Israel was an eye-opening experience. The people I met were really welcoming and proud of their home, and they taught me so much about the region's culture and history.

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**How is doing research in Tel Aviv different than at McGill? How is it similar?**

In general, I found the approach to research similar between my TAU and McGill research groups. At TAU, my supervisor and colleagues really pushed when it came to ensuring that the project was up and running as efficiently as possible. If they wanted something done, they found a way to accomplish the goal, often with innovative ideas. When you look at the culture in Israel, it's the same approach: You want it? Let's do it, let's find a way. So the attitude was pervasive in their approach to research.

On a personal level, there was good-natured teasing at my expense – “You're too polite, you have to talk. If you have a different opinion about the project, say it.” It was funny to get teased about “Canadianisms” that I didn't even realize I used or portrayed. My TAU team was very open and sincere. Working with them was a wonderful, fulfilling experience.

**How was this experience beneficial? What has it led to?**

First, this opportunity really facilitated my collaboration with the TAU team, as tasks related to the RCT were more easily accomplished in person. I was also able to write an article with my Israeli colleagues that would have been much harder to complete if we weren't in the same city having face-to-face meetings. Second, I took to heart the lesson to speak up. I tend to hold back my opinions because I feel that my ideas need to be thought out carefully and at length. But if one holds back on the conversation, then too much time may go by before realizing that a chosen path may have been wrong. It was a small lesson about effective communication, but it made me think about changing the way I approached my research goals. Third, the experience helped me see my abilities as a researcher - how much I know, what I'm capable of accomplishing outside of my comfort zone, and what knowledge and talents I can share. Finally, people perceive my time in Israel as a unique situation, so it often starts a dialogue about my experience of both Israeli academia and culture. I'm very eager to share my stories.

**Would you recommend other students pursue research opportunities outside of McGill or specifically in Tel Aviv? Why?**

I would definitely encourage students to experience as different an academic culture (and culture in general) as possible. By nature, we get bubble wrapped at the university. We're supposed to be exploring knowledge and expanding it, but we still end up being influenced by the ideas of our university and faculty. I experienced a different culture at TAU and I came back with a different perspective and refueled drive to excel in my chosen career path.

If they wanted something done, they found a way to accomplish the goal, often with innovative ideas.



# Bloomfield Travel award for graduate students & postdocs at Tel Aviv University to travel to McGill

Interview with Shlomi Sragovich

## Why did you choose McGill?

When I started my PhD, my PI, Prof. Illana Gozes, told me about a collaboration between Tel Aviv University and McGill, supported by the Eldee Foundation and the Bloomfield family of Montreal. Prof. Gozes said she has a collaborator, Prof. Anne McKinney at McGill, and she asked me if I would be interested. So I said, "Why not?" This sounded very interesting. Back then the collaboration with Prof. McKinney was just in discussion and this year we moved forward, several experiments were done and samples were shipped to be tested at McGill.

## How was doing research at McGill different than in Tel Aviv? How is it similar?

I have to admit it's very similar, as our research facilities and research level is very high. Generally, I think one of the main goals of the collaboration is to take advantage of the capabilities that we don't have and that the labs at McGill do have. So in this way you can execute your plans and do your research. It multiplies the effectiveness of your research. Not only for equipment, but also for the knowledge. For example, with a current experiment, we performed the first part involving animal studies at Tel Aviv University, and as soon as we finished it, samples were shipped to McGill. In Prof. McKinney's lab there are capabilities that we don't have, so in this way we complement each other. I think that is the best way to describe it.

## What was your impression of Montreal culture?

I love it. Even though it is in North America, this city's spirit is very European. Unlike Toronto, for example, which is more American. I find there is a kind of a charm in this city. It's not too big and noisy like New York, but it's also not small. It's hard to describe, you just feel it.

## What do you think you've gained from this experience?

For me it's a great opportunity to expose myself to additional knowledge and a bit of a different culture than ours, to meet new people, and learn new methods and techniques. Here, I prepare all the data that I gained at McGill and try to do everything I can within the timeframe I have. Then, I'm supposed to take it back to Tel Aviv University for analysis. We have the software, so this is something I can do back home. That's what I meant by complementing each other. Our project has significantly moved forward and we already have future plans

for additional experiments.

I personally believe that every technique, every new area that you expose yourself to, may prove to be beneficial in the future. In academia the most important thing you gain are the principles; the tools to think and to take something that you've learned and implement it for other purposes when needed.



Dinner with Brain@McGill academic committee members for the collaboration with Tel Aviv University. From right to left: Prof. Claudio Cuello, Mrs. Martha Cuello, Mr. Shlomi Sragovich (Visiting Ph.D. student), Prof. Nahum Sonenberg, Prof. Anne McKinney (Chair of McGill's academic committee), Prof. Illana Gozes (Chair of Tel Aviv University academic committee), Prof. Rose Goldstein (VP, Research and Innovation), and Dr. Mark Hardy.

## Would you recommend other international students pursue research opportunities at McGill? Why?

Of course, specifically at McGill and also in general because collaborations between universities in the world are a blessing. They strengthen the ties between universities, between countries, and between people. It's excellent. You can't say anything bad about it, it's impossible.

## Is there anything you would like to add?

I hope that the same way as I came to McGill, people will come to Tel Aviv University, by applying to the Zavalkoff Travel Award, supported by the Zavalkoff Family Foundation. In general, all the Israeli universities are excellent, and specifically Tel Aviv University, which conducts truly world-class research. Tel Aviv is a great city. It's an international city like many other cities around the world whether it's Paris, London, or New York. I'm sure that people will enjoy this and love to be at Tel Aviv University, in Tel Aviv in general, and Israel as well.

## Interview with Rachel Posner



### **Why did you choose McGill?**

I was in my first year of my PhD, working at the lab back home in Tel Aviv and my research focus was mainly on genetic mechanisms, however some results led us to questions regarding behavior and neural circuits. The head of my program mentioned the McGill-TAU collaboration so I entered the McGill website to review labs available. I saw Dr. Michael Hendricks' lab, who I'm visiting here and it was exactly the kind of methods and scientific questions I wanted to get into, so I initiated the collaboration. It was a perfect combination.

### **How was doing research at McGill different than in Tel Aviv? How is it similar?**

One aspect is exposure and experience in different techniques and methods, but the other is just sort of looking at similar scientific questions but with a different perspective. For example, at the lab back home the students have in depth knowledge of certain genetic mechanisms. Here, the lab members specialize in behavior, so when we are looking at the same data, I'm surrounded by a team with a different expertise. So this gives me new ways to look at my data and ask new questions, or have new ideas about experiments that we can do.

### **What was your impression of Montreal culture?**

Well, I'm actually originally Canadian, I grew up in Toronto but moved to Israel when I was 10. So my memories of Canada are from a different city, which has a very different culture and atmosphere. Montreal is a very rich city with a lot to do and

see (and eat!), always something going on. On one hand it's an amazing city to study in with so many Universities and students, and on the other, PhD studies can get very intense at times, so it's great to be in such a lively city with a lot going on when you need a break.

**By changing your location and meeting new people you're always going to get new exposure to new areas of research, which is very beneficial for your career as well as for your research project.**

**How has this experience been beneficial? What do you hope it will lead to?**

I got this scholarship twice so this is my second round. I was here for the first time 2 years ago and it was really the beginning of my PhD. At the time, we were just checking out different directions. So my last visit mainly focused on learning new techniques that Dr. Michael Hendricks has here at the lab in Montreal. I had some very fruitful preliminary results and now we're hoping to expand the project. I think this experience is just amazing for networking. By changing your location and meeting new people you're always going to get new exposure to new areas of research, which is very beneficial for your career as well as for your research project.

**Would you recommend other international students pursue research opportunities at McGill? Why?**

For sure, especially in a PhD, which is a very long process. For any student the opportunity to relocate and get exposed to new ideas and new ways to tackle a research question or challenge always helps.

The transition between labs can obviously depend on each individual case, but in my experience the lab here everyone was really amazing. They were very open and helped me to get settled into work with such ease. So, it didn't take a long time to start experiments and get to work.

On my first visit, I was here for three months and roughly the

first two months was dedicated to a learning curve. It was a very delicate technology with a lot of stages. But I implicated the technology at home, and configured a system to conduct similar experiments in Israel. I think three months is a bit short to collect results for publishing, but it is enough time to get acquainted with a new technique or establish a proof of concept. I felt it was enough time to get grounded in the lab here. I was able to stay in touch with lab members that hosted me, so it became a long term collaboration and relationship. Three months was enough to make that connection.

I think it's hard for people to imagine leaving for three months while in the midst of their PhD. There's a lot of pressure to get results and publish and you think that leaving for three months might delay everything. On one hand, that might be true and it might delay a bit, but on the other hand, in the long run, the exchange gives so much on so many levels that I highly recommend it.

**Anything else to add?**

I think that at times in research projects you can get stuck on how to tackle a question. Just by being somewhere else and talking to different people, all of a sudden, a certain perspective can open up and help shift to a new direction. Also, each university or department is going to have their specialties and resources, so to be in a new place enables to broaden the possibilities of questions you can answer.

