



Realizing Ben-Gurion's vision

WHEN I first spent time in the Negev, as opposed to rushing through it on a tour bus, I was captivated by the magic and potential of this vast area, which includes some 60% of the land mass of Israel and only about 10% of Israel's population. I immediately felt the energy of the people and the power of the geography. Two decades later, I believe that David Ben-Gurion was right when he said, "The future of Israel lies in the Negev." Today, it's important to add, the future of the Negev depends on Ben-Gurion University (BGU), the engine driving growth in the Negev.

In Arad, Beersheba, and throughout the Negev, I met people who were willing to live without some daily comforts in order to try to improve the world. They believed in their ability to make change and equally important, they believed anything was possible. They demonstrated an intriguing mixture of idealism and pragmatism. David Ben-Gurion once said, "The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer." The people I know in the Negev embody that spirit of commitment and perseverance.

The first time I stood quietly in the dry sands of the Negev with the intense sun beating down on me, the desert appeared to expand forever. The clear sky was so close that it dominated the landscape. A profound silence pervaded everything. I felt I was an insignificant human confronted by the power of the universe. No wonder Judaism and other great religions were founded in the desert, I thought. And no wonder this environment makes you understand the basics that all human beings need for a well-lived life.

Today Beersheba and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev are a dynamic hub of innovation. Here, we see and feel the outlines of our global future. Increasing numbers of leading scientists, academics, humanists, students, world-renowned hi-tech companies, and the elite divisions of the Israel Defense Forces are coming to Ben-Gurion University, its adjacent Advanced Technologies Park, and the Negev. There's a synergy between all of them that ensures rapid growth. Three years ago there were 100 hi-tech employees in Beersheba; today there are 2000, and by 2024, we anticipate there will be 7,000 hi-tech employees, of whom a significant number will be BGU alumni. Many people now refer to BGU and Beersheba as "Silicon Wadi."

BGU, the youngest of Israel's universities, will celebrate its 50th birthday in 2020, but it has already taken its place as one of the top 50 universities in the world under 50 years of age. It's known for

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A statue of David Ben-Gurion at Ben-Gurion University

cutting-edge research in desert and water science, cybersecurity, robotics, bio- and nano-technology, brain research and medicine, to name just a few. BGU's 70 academic departments, including Hebrew literature, Jewish thought, Israel studies, and business and entrepreneurship, attract increasing numbers of undergraduates. The active student life on a beautiful campus as well as the ability to be part of the Beersheba community are also factors in making BGU the fastest-growing university in Israel.

A central pillar of Ben-Gurion University's original mission is to help develop the Negev, and BGU takes this part of its mission very seriously. Today, BGU employs more people than any other single employer in the Negev. Forty percent of BGU students volunteer in Beersheba and the surrounding area. The university attracts new companies to the Negev in part because of

the talented BGU students, who can intern and later work with the companies. The university encourages graduates to remain in the Negev by showing them the value of building their lives in the Negev and then providing networking opportunities and job incentives. BGU works collaboratively with the cities and towns of the Negev and with diverse populations.

When I first experienced the Negev, I said to myself, I missed the 1940s and the creation of Israel, but now I understand the pioneering spirit of the people who created the state as well as the power of people to change the world.

On Israel's 70th birthday, let me repeat that concept here. If you missed the 1940s and the creation of Israel and you want to be part of Zionism in its purest form of creating good for all people, come to the Negev. Connect with Ben-Gurion University or with American Associates, Ben-Gurion University (AABGU), if you live in the US. Help improve Israel's future and the future of the world by furthering innovation in the Negev.

When Israel celebrates its 100th anniversary, I believe the world will be a better place because of the innovative changes emerging from the Negev. ■

Toni Young is the president of American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, which plays a vital role in raising funds and awareness for the university and fulfilling David Ben-Gurion's vision of the Negev across the United States