

Marketing Technion as world-class center for ... hip-hop?

Meet the English-speaking grandmothers charged with rebranding the Haifa institute

Anglo File

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The Technion has a bit of an image problem, and Peretz Lavie, the president of Israel's esteemed institute of science and technology, is the first to admit it.

It's not that anybody dares contest its vaunted status among the country's academies of higher learning, its ability to attract the best and the brightest, or its many contributions to global scientific research.

It's more about its reputation as, well, a place for geeks.

"Obviously, this is not an American campus, so you're not going to find fraternities, sororities and football here," says Lavie, who took over as president of the 100-year-old Haifa institute in 2009. "But neither are you going to find students lounging around on the grass like at other Israeli campuses. So we've come to the conclusion that this has to be changed. That we need to show the world that Nobel laureates and prizes aren't the only thing important to us. That this may be a tough place, but our students are definitely not geeks."

The mission of rebranding the Technion as a cool, hip, fun place ("without compromising any of our academic demands," Lavie emphasizes) was assigned to a rather unlikely pair: two middle-aged grandmothers, one from the United States and one from the Britain, neither with any academic background in the sciences, who despite their

newfound expertise in the no-holes-barred-world of social media, are so publicity-shy they cringe at the prospect of being photographed.

Meet Yvette Gershon, head of the department of public affairs at the Technion, and her associate Barbara Frank, the university's YouTube channel administrator – two women who helped put together some of the most popular online videos to make their way around the Jewish world in recent months: holiday videos featuring, among other quirks, a hip-hop dancing Nobel laureate and a robot that lights a Chanukah menorah – all part of a campaign designed to show, as Lavie likes to put it, "the lighter side" of the Technion.

So this year, instead of uploading the usual Rosh Hashanah video greeting from the president dipping his apple into honey, Gershon, a native of Manchester with a degree in Arabic, and Frank, a native of Los Angeles with a degree in U.S. history, decided to do something a bit different. They browsed around and discovered that one of the Technion's graduate students was posting videos online of the weekly hip-hop dancing classes he leads on campus. What could be less geeky than hip-hop, they thought, and immediately contacted the instructor to enlist his help.

"I suddenly get this call from these two women before the holiday who tell me I'm going to have to teach the president of the Technion and the Nobel Prize winner, Dan Schechtman, a few steps in hip-hop," recalls Davide Schaumann, a recent immigrant from Milan, studying for his master's degree and



Yvette Gershon and Barbara Frank.

Yaron Kaminsky

doctorate in architecture. "I thought to myself that this must be a joke."

It wasn't, as he soon learned. The video not only has him dancing along with Lavie and Schechtman to a jazzed-up version of the classic "Shanah Tova," but also a collection of robots moving in tempo to the song. It's registered more than 103,000 views on YouTube since it was uploaded.

Gershon and Frank knew that having set the bar that high, they'd have to outdo themselves for Hanukkah. Thus was born the idea for their next big YouTube hit: a Rube Goldberg machine – a very complicated contraption that performs a simple task – it lights a menorah. They didn't have to think long or hard about whom to enlist for the job of creating it, immediately pinpointing Eyal Cohen, a fourth-year mechanical engineering student, who was already a two-time winner of the prestigious Technion TechnoBrain competition (in 2010, for con-

structing the world's longest yo-yo, and in 2011, for building a yo-yo that would recoil the highest after being dropped from a 100-foot crane).

The 28-year-old former paratrooper commander was able to enlist a bunch of his friends – Tomer Wasserman, another mechanical engineering student, along with Matan Orian (another winner of the TechnoBrain competition) and Dvir Dukahn, both industrial engineering students. It took them four weeks to come up with the idea, "including several sleepless nights," according to Cohen, and another three or four days to build the incredibly complex machine that uses a helium balloon and a robot to light the menorah. The video that demonstrates how the machine works was posted on YouTube about two months ago and went viral almost overnight, having since received almost half a million hits around the world, including

mention on America's widely watched CBS evening news.

"For me, it was a great way of merging science and religion," says Cohen, who in his spare time also teaches a class in robotics at the local high school.

Prof. Boaz Golany, the university's vice president for external relations and resource development, says the Technion is very much influenced in its new media strategy by what its partners abroad are doing. "We have collaborations with many universities abroad, most recently our new campus with Cornell University in New York City, and this is part of benchmarking," he says. "We are definitely watching and taking note of how they use new media tools, like YouTube, for branding purposes and disseminating information."

The new rebranding campaign is clearly meant to target outstanding university applicants who might otherwise have written off the Technion as a school that's all work and no play. But according to Gershon, there's also another target audience. "When videos like these go viral on YouTube, that makes our donors very happy," she says. "It also makes them feel very young."

Her partner, Frank, moved to Israel with her husband in 1975, where together with a group of fellow American immigrants, they moved to an agricultural settlement in the Negev right near the Gaza border. "None of us had a clue about farming," she says.

After a stint in high-tech, she began working at the Technion, where she says she has finally found her calling. "This place is a shot in the arm of Zionism."