

# LIGHTNING STRIKES

BY RUTH EBENSTEIN

“Your brainpower is our advantage.”

These words welcomed the first cadre of a new program of student excellence in the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, called *Brakim* (Hebrew for lightning). The latest in a series of joint Israel Defense Forces (IDF)/Technion academic initiatives, the group includes fourteen men and one woman, all aged 18.

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Like other students in the *Atuda* (academic reserve program), *Brakim* participants will complete their undergraduate degrees and apply their education during their military service. This elite crew’s program is especially ambitious and accelerated: to complete their B.Sc. degrees as well as the coursework for an M.Sc. in four years. They will work on their master’s theses through projects selected for their military service.

“The sky is the limit for these young people, hence the name,” said Lt. Col. A., who heads the program. Appropriately, A. is both an alumnus of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (1990) and the IDF *Atuda* program. He initiated this idea some nine months ago and has seen it through to its fruition.

For the IDF, the impetus for developing this program was need, and a desire to carve out a place of excellence for mechanical engineering. “During the high-tech revolution of the last decade, mechanical engineering wasn’t sexy, and we found ourselves with a dearth of qualified candidates for R & D,” reminds A. “Instead, applicants were coming in with watered-down skills.”

As a result, the choice to offer this exclusive program at the Technion was not incidental. “What other university in the country could equip these young people with a strong core curriculum, and with the basics of mechanical engineering?” asks A. rhetorically. Moreover, Technion offers a rich array of 170 courses for first and second degrees in mechanical engineering.

Prof. Gershon Grossman, former dean of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, and the current dean, Prof. Zalman Palmor, both encouraged and supported A. all the way. “There was total agreement, support from the faculty and a keen desire to help,” he says.

The 15 *Brakim* students, who live in the dormitories on campus, come from all corners of Israel. At the opening ceremony in October 2002, students from the center of the country and the periphery, Russian immigrants, secular and religious youth, snacked on poppy seed cake and sipped tea, exchanging jokes and plans for the future.

A. is confident of their success. “I expect to see the fruits of this program in four years,” he predicts. ■