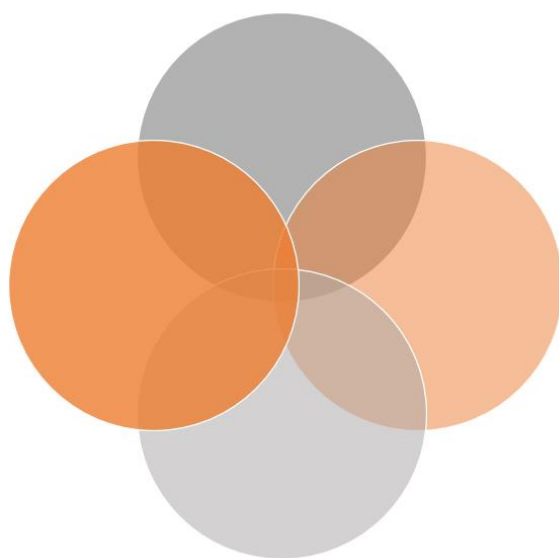


Rising to the Negev's Need:
A Position Paper



**Expanding the Role
of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
in Israel's Post-War Reality**

Introduction

Taking Stock of Ben-Gurion's Dream

The Hamas massacre of October 7th was the single bloodiest day for the Jews since the Holocaust, a reprise of which the State of Israel was meant to protect against. As such, it called into question numerous other conceptions that have guided Israel's institutions for more than a generation. There was, of course, the military strategy of containment and over-reliance on technology. But there was also the assumption that deep societal rifts—between the political left and right, for example, and the secular and ultra-Orthodox communities—do not truly threaten Israel's existence, nor need to be seriously addressed. Yet of all the conceptions that were profoundly shaken alongside our sense of security, perhaps the most troubling is the viability of David Ben-Gurion's dream.

Declaring that it is in the Negev “that the creativity and pioneer vigor of Israel shall be tested,” Ben-Gurion linked the ingenuity and determination needed to make Israel's desert bloom to the ability of its founding generation to build a strong national home. For decades, his dream has inspired Israelis of all backgrounds and ideologies with a sense of meaning and collective purpose. We saw this, for example, in the 1970s and 80s with the establishment of kibbutzim in the barren southern Negev by *olim* who sought a pluralistic society. We saw it again in the spate of agricultural communities that sprung up near Gaza after the 2005 disengagement, each a tangible statement of hope and healing. And we see this today in the IDF's decision to relocate its elite technological units to Beer-Sheva, in an effort to turn the Negev into a scientific engine for Israel. This pioneering approach that looks on an impossible challenge and sees a vast opportunity is in many ways what made Israel the Startup Nation, and a source of innovation and solutions for the world.

As Israel wages its current war in Gaza—and faces the increasing specter of a northern front—there is a sense among Israelis that the state of “the day after” must be a very different place. There are calls for the drafting of a constitution and for a new social contract; for an end to economic disparities, to taking for granted, and indifference. Everything is now uncertain, and everything will be up for grabs. To be sure, we do not yet know what shape this new state will take. But what we do know is that for it to succeed, we must pass once again Ben-Gurion's test of pioneering vigor and creativity. “If we will not stand in the Negev,” he declared, “we will not stand in Tel Aviv.” Put simply, in response to October 7th, we must double down on Ben-Gurion's dream.

Although founded to be, in Ben-Gurion's words, an “Oxford in the desert,” Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) has never strived to be an ivory tower. On the contrary, we are the driving force in the Negev's development and the key to its residents' social mobility. Yet the new urgency of the task before us demands a new, and still bolder, commitment to meeting the Negev's needs. In turn, this commitment requires an expansion of our spheres of influence, and a willingness to take radical responsibility for the Negev's health and prosperity.

This position paper is a first attempt at imagining what an expanded role for BGU might look like, and will hopefully spur much-needed input and conversation.

Context

Realizing the Potential of the Negev, and of Higher Education

As the university founded to advance David Ben-Gurion's vision for the Negev, BGU has always been ahead of its time, mission-wise. Spurred by the unique spirit of entrepreneurship that defines today's pioneers, we pursue not only outstanding research and education, but also the advancement of the Negev's diverse communities. Indeed, as the anchor university for a severely disadvantaged region, BGU strives to marry academic excellence with broad accessibility.

In recent years, BGU has further expanded its mission to include economic development, as well. Recognizing that the key to a flourishing Negev is a young professional community, we have worked to make BGU a trusted partner to the region's government and industry, leveraging our role in technological innovation into a burgeoning, knowledge-based Beer-Sheva economy. And indeed, thanks to strategic investments in our core strengths and active collaboration with government and industry, BGU has helped turn the Negev into a world leader in such fields as water research, desert tech, medical education, autism research, and cyber security.

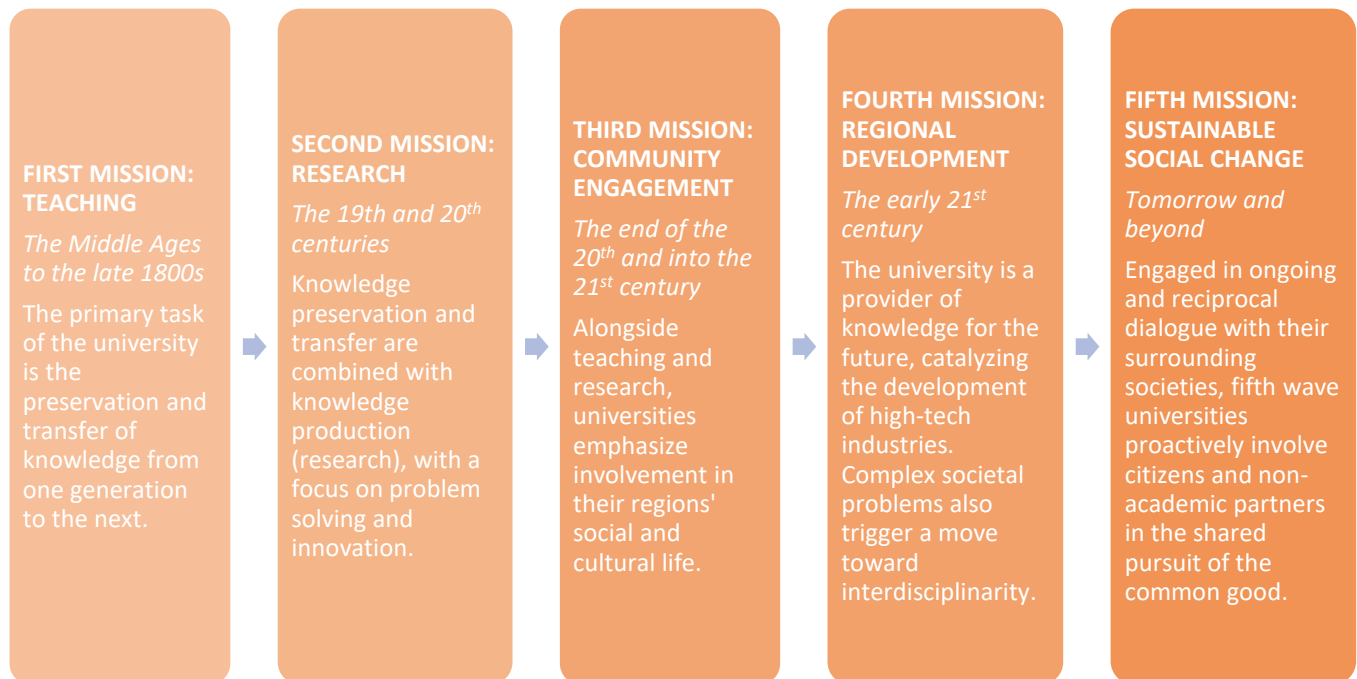
In the wake of October 7th, we are called to yet another challenge: transforming the Negev into not only a scientific engine, but also a resilient society. In pursuing this ambition, we may look for a model to America's "Fifth Wave" universities.¹

In the so-called "fourth wave" of higher education that began in the nineteenth century, universities turned to research as a means of improving humanity. Their breakthrough discoveries and technological innovations have incalculably bettered the human condition. Yet these accomplishments were accompanied by a siloing of knowledge and an increasing disconnect from society. As such, these universities are inherently limited in their ability to engage with complexity, and to bring the benefits of their research and education to the widest possible numbers in their communities.

Fifth Wave universities, by contrast, strive for integration and responsivity. Moreover, while they recognize the value of competition in spurring excellence, they prioritize collaboration as the best means of addressing wicked problems. Perhaps most important, by viewing themselves as evolving platforms for effecting large-scale, systemic change, they measure their success against social outcomes in the regions of which they are a part. Indeed, by using their regions' advancement as institutional North stars, these universities both inspire and participate in the results that their societies—and the world—need.

¹ See, for example, Michael M. Crow and William B. Dabars, *The Fifth Wave: The Evolution of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2022).

THE EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSITIES



BGU must be Israel's first "Fifth Wave" university.

Mission

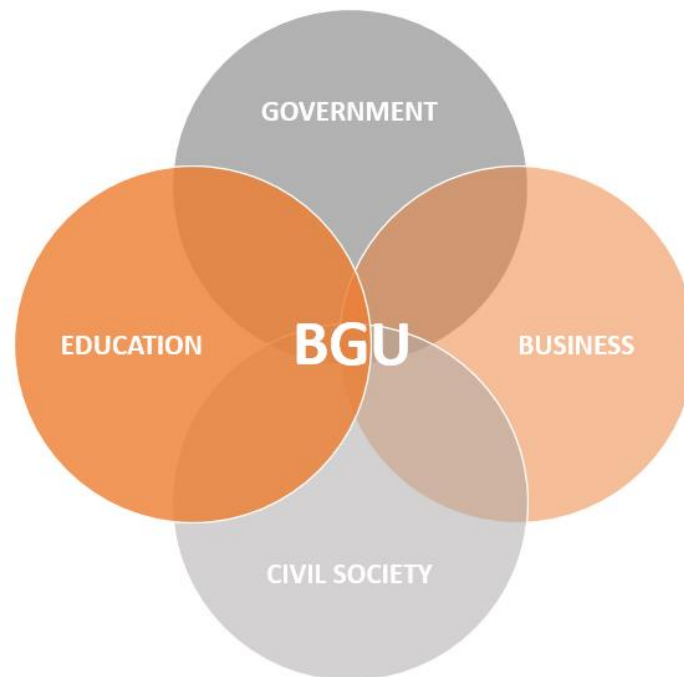
Expanding Ben-Gurion University of—and for—the Negev

As a Fifth Wave university, the BGU of the post-October 7th reality will play an even more central role in reinvigorating the economic, social, and cultural health of the Negev's communities. By placing key resources and unique expertise in reciprocal relationship with the region's government, military, business sector, and civil society, we will accelerate the outcomes that the Negev needs.

Working proactively with all stakeholders committed to the Negev's success, BGU will serve as the anchor for a regional ecosystem, integrating knowledge and efforts across sectors and within communities. Guided by Ben-Gurion's vision of the Negev as a source of solutions for Israel and the world, we will work with partners to close the gaps between education, discovery, innovation, and real-world practice, leading to both transformative *and* sustainable social change.

By drawing on the complementary strengths of our partners, whether in infrastructure, technology, or expertise; and capitalizing where possible on existing assets rather than developing new systems or entities, we will also minimize costs while maximizing benefits—for the Negev, and BGU's own capacities. Finally, our unique emphasis on social mission alongside research and teaching excellence will have the added benefit of attracting committed, idealistic students and faculty. We will be a beacon for both Israelis and Jews around the world who want to be part of something larger—and to help make the desert bloom.

THE ECOSYSTEM-ANCHOR MODEL



As the nexus between government, industry, and civil society, BGU will anchor a regional ecosystem that both enhances education, discovery, and innovation, and extends their benefits throughout the Negev.

OBJECTIVES OF AN EXPANDED MISSION

In advancing a rededication of our third mission, BGU will align its actions with the following strategies:

- **Engage BGU faculty and students in local solutions.**

Recognizing the profound benefits to their education and research, as well as the critical contribution of their expertise, collaborations for the betterment of local communities will involve, so much as possible, students and faculty.

- **Emphasize data and evidence-based decision making.**

We will inform our strategies with data and encourage our partners to use evidence-based practices; share and integrate information; and engage in rigorous evaluation.

- **Enhance BGU's brand and build on its strengths in ways that contribute to further growth and ability for impact.**

By emphasizing activities that align with our strengths and in which we are positioned for success, we will build trust in our partnership model; attract accomplished and idealistic faculty and students; and secure the resources we need for still-greater impact.

- **Match key BGU resources with the Negev's needs and opportunities.**

We will identify existing assets that can serve as a foundation for larger efforts or be strengthened for still greater impact. We will also seek out complementarities between our resources and the Negev's needs, and emphasize the unique potential of the Negev to solve pressing global challenges.

- **Create alliances that represent and empower all of the Negev's communities.**

We will seek to ensure that all citizens of the Negev are part of the process of rebuilding the region, and that tomorrow's Negev reflects the strengths of all its communities. To that end, we will strive to include multiple perspectives when working with partners to design solutions and emphasize sustainability.

- **Leverage strategic partnerships for the Negev's development.**

Alongside collaboration with industry and entrepreneurial impact, we will strive to contribute both knowledge and experience to the process of building a strong and resilient Negev.

Plan of Action

Planting Strategic Seeds

The following are proposed strategies for helping to develop a thriving post-war Negev, along with specific ideas that may serve as starting points for discussion and exploration.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INNOVATION, & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

At the heart of entrepreneurship is the translation of ideas into economic or social opportunities. This makes the provision of entrepreneurial skills and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial mindset vital to BGU's efforts to foster regional growth and prosperity. Moreover, we must create the conditions for still more knowledge spillover to Negev industry, and ensure alignment between our knowledge production and local industry needs.²

SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS & EMPOWERMENT

Rather than engage with communities in ad-hoc and temporary ways, BGU will embed its teaching, research, and human capital at every level of the Negev's society. We will develop mutually beneficial strategies for solving problems, empowering communities to address their own challenges, and creating a vibrant civil society.

RESEARCH & GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

² For more on the ways that universities can transfer productivity-enhancing knowledge to industry, see E. Jason Baron, Shawn Kantor, and Alexander Whalley, "Extending the Reach of Research Universities: A Proposal for Productivity Growth in Lagging Communities," Brookings Institution (September 2018).

As the complexity of our society and the world's problems are by definition interdisciplinary, BGU must accelerate its efforts to integrate knowledge and research across faculties. In addition, rather than aiming simply for an increase in research outputs in critical fields, we must leverage our intellectual capital and the unique potential of our location into solutions that Israel and the world needs.

EDUCATION, ACCESS, & EQUITY

In the coming decades, Israel will need hundreds of thousands of new graduates who can contribute to and benefit from an economy increasingly based on the application of new knowledge and technologies. To that end, we must work harder and more creatively to develop the untapped potential in the Negev, even as we work to attract more top talent to the region.

Resources

Building Support and Capacity

Inherent in the design of Fifth-Wave universities is an emphasis on lean, integrated, and technologically intensive operations, which minimize waste and costs for stakeholders even as they increase impact. By building on existing education and research assets as well as strong partnerships, we will obviate, so much as possible, the need for new bureaucratic entities and systems and their associated high costs.

Nonetheless, for the expanded third mission outlined in this paper to be truly “win-win,” the funds necessary to realize the chosen strategies cannot be carved out of BGU's existing operation budget. Rather, they must be secured as part of the University's \$1 billion, ten-year global campaign, which has raised in excess of \$400 million since its launch in 2021. To reach our ambitious goal, we must meet the following objectives:

LOOKING AHEAD

While the war in Gaza is far from over, and the shape of a victory far from clear, the ideas put forward in this paper can already serve as the basis for fruitful discussion. The outcomes of that discussion will help us not simply respond to the devastating events of October 7th, but also spearhead the Negev's recovery and future prosperity.

David Ben-Gurion once said that “the fate of Israel depends on two things: its strength and its righteousness.” As our finest soldiers express the former on the battlefield, we at BGU can seize this pivotal moment to express the former through our work for the Negev and Israel.