

Israeli Tech Entrepreneurs Mobilize to Face Humanity's Biggest Challenge

Instead of cyber, gambling, advertising and gaming, Israeli high-tech has an opportunity to pursue the good, with big money alongside. To develop technologies that trap carbon and buy time in the battle for the climate. Dozens of companies are already riding the wave



Remove



Zen Read



Itay Mashiach

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“Our dream is to transform this whole region back into a marsh,” says Yuval Lavi, from Ma’agan Michael, a kibbutz on the Mediterranean coast between Haifa and Hadera, as he gazes at the patchwork of fish ponds that lie to the north along the shoreline as far as the horizon. The sun is setting, the sky is a palette of bold colors, the air is alive with water birds and butterflies. Lavi speaks in quiet tones – maybe because he’s uncomfortable about the pioneers who drained the swamps (his grandfather among them), and are now probably turning over in their graves. But Lavi isn’t engaged in old-time pioneering and isn’t nostalgic about those who cleared the wetlands. He too is a pioneer, but the only thing that interests him is how to bury carbon dioxide without its reversing course and returning to the atmosphere.

At the age of 50, following a rich career in high-tech product management for social-media advertising, Lavi, along with Nachi Brodt and Regev Harush, founded Terra, a project whose aim is to capture carbon in the air and sequester it in the ground by turning unprofitable farmland (or fishponds) into marshland. Standing on the old observation point south of Ma’agan Michael, Lavi and Harush, kibbutzniks who served in an elite unit in the army, evoke Hollywood figures who have been called to the colors in order to save the Earth. Which is exactly their intention.

Increasing numbers of high-techies, entrepreneurs, masters of technology and venture capitalists in Israel are leaving the cool offices and padded chairs of fintech and cyber, rolling up their sleeves and plunging into the demanding and unpredictable [bog of the climate world](#). Spearheading this group is an evolving small but determined community whose target is the holy grail itself, the

solution that will put us in the forefront of the race to save the planet: the ability to trap CO2 and remove it from the atmosphere, and thereby reduce global warming.

There are no shortcuts in the climate-crisis struggle, and there is no substitute for dramatically reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Nevertheless, there is agreement in the scientific community that meeting the world's climate goals entails not only reducing future emissions but also capturing CO2 that is already in the air. On the other hand, it's also agreed that the available technology is not yet there. Michael Cembalest, a senior executive at J.P. Morgan, has observed that, "The highest ratio in the history of all of science is the ratio of the number of papers written on carbon sequestration divided by the actual implementation of carbon sequestration." The world is hungry for innovation in this realm, which is still in its infancy.

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Those who are less interested in saving humanity might perhaps be lured by the money this future industry promises to generate. According to forecasts of the International Energy Agency, carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies will handle tens of billions of tons of CO2 in the decades ahead. Already today, every ton captured can be sold for tens to hundreds of dollars, and prices are only expected to go on rising. It's not only the Biden administration and governments in Europe that are offering unprecedented incentives in trying to kickstart this technology. The huge software payments company Stripe this year hooked up with Google, Facebook and other corporations to form Frontier, an initiative that is already paying about \$1 billion to trap future carbon from development-stage startups, in order to spur the market. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. The money is in the air – it just needs to be grabbed.



‘Let nature fix it’

“There are two families of solutions: engineering and biological,” Lavi explains amid the fishponds at Ma’agan Michael. “We have chosen a biological solution. Our approach is to let nature do the fixing. People have only succeeded in destroying. There’s a mechanism here that worked for millions of years, so let’s let it work.”

Terra relies on the natural mechanism of plants, which consume CO₂ during photosynthesis. Over the years, many hopes were pinned on tree planting as a means to balance climate changes, so governments and organizations engaged in extensive afforestation. However, new studies question whether trees are the solution and warn against noxious by-products of planting them in inappropriate regions.

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Wetlands flora is better than forests, Lavi argues, because it develops faster and wetlands play a more active role in storing the carbon. “Wetlands are nature’s highways for carbon fixation,” he says, though most of them were drained in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, generally for agricultural purposes. “In most of these regions, agriculture is not efficient, so we say: Let’s take these lands and do something meaningful with them. Right now they are exerting a negative influence – by way of chemicals, the waste of electricity, tractors. An area that emits carbon can be turned into one that absorbs it.”

A splendid vision, but how do you make money from it? Here, Terrra and the other companies in this field enter a tangled realm of incentives. The United States, for example, has allocated almost \$400 billion to take on climate change, including rewards for the CCS industry. In Europe, factories that exceed a greenhouse-gas emissions quota are fined, thus creating an incentive for companies that specialize in capturing CO₂ from chimneys. In Israel, it goes without saying, the authorities have yet to evince any interest in the subject.

At the same time, there are corporations that have an interest in reducing their emissions voluntarily, out of goodwill or for image enhancement. In many cases, what they are actually doing is offsetting their emissions, by paying companies that trap and fixate carbon. If you are willing to pay a bit more for a plane ticket in return for carbon offsets – an option many airlines offer on their websites – you are effectively participating in this market.

Still, it's still early days in this field, and it suffers from flawed supervision and difficulties of measuring. "The offset programs are pure greenwashing," Greenpeace executive director Jennifer Morgan said last year. Critics of the voluntary market label it a trick to hide the fact that in practice the companies continue to pollute. Frequently, it's sheer fraud. But with all the problems afflicting this market, for the companies that are truly trying to trap carbon on a large scale, the revenues generated from the "voluntary carbon market" are like oxygen for breathing.

Terrra may sound like a quaint local initiative, but its vision is far-reaching. "We want to be the Airbnb of carbon capture," Lavi asserts. The company is working on the development of small devices to measure the amount of carbon that's trapped in the soil or swamp, and on artificial intelligence that will process the data collected in order to update guidelines on the most efficient means to manage the wetlands. The business model is simple: look for places where there is agriculture that's losing money, and suggest to the farmers that they switch to carbon trapping. Those who are interested will receive a measuring device in the mail and stick it in the ground according to the instructions. At the end of the year, the revenues from the sale of carbon credits will enter their bank account. That's it.

In Israel, Terrra is already working with the Society for the Protection of Nature on 500 dunams (125 acres) on both Ma'agan Michael and on another kibbutz, Kfar Ruppin, in the Beit She'an Valley. Last year, the company sequestered 1,000 tons of carbon in the two sites, and it's in talks with partners overseas. "What we're doing is agriculture," Lavi says. "Carbon agriculture."

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The target is a holy grail, the solution that will put us in the forefront of the race to save the planet: the ability to trap CO₂ and remove it from the atmosphere.

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So how do you start a carbon-capture plot?

Lavi: “We don’t start, we stop. We come to a fishpond. To turn it into a marsh, all you have to do is stop farming. The flora will grow, the water will remain at a height of 30 centimeters [11.8 inches], and within eight months the entire surface will be covered. Look, human industry created the problem, and there’s a lot of hubris in the thought that industry is what will solve it. We come from a different place. The problem had already had a solution for three million years. Everything worked hunky-dory until we showed up.”



Terra's Regev Harush. All that interests him and his partners Lavi and Brodt is burying CO2 without its reversing course and returning to the atmosphere. Credit: Gil Eliahu

‘Drying the ocean’

Not far away, in the offices of RepAir, near Yokne’am, the goal is identical but the approach is the opposite. “The problem was caused by technological development, but technological development will also solve it,” says RepAir’s CEO and co-founder, Amir Shiner. The company’s product is the ultimate dream of tech optimists: a device that simply removes carbon from the air.

Only three companies in the world have active devices like these. “We are on the frontline, and it’s a hard front,” Shiner says. “People tell me we’re trying to dry out the ocean with a teaspoon.

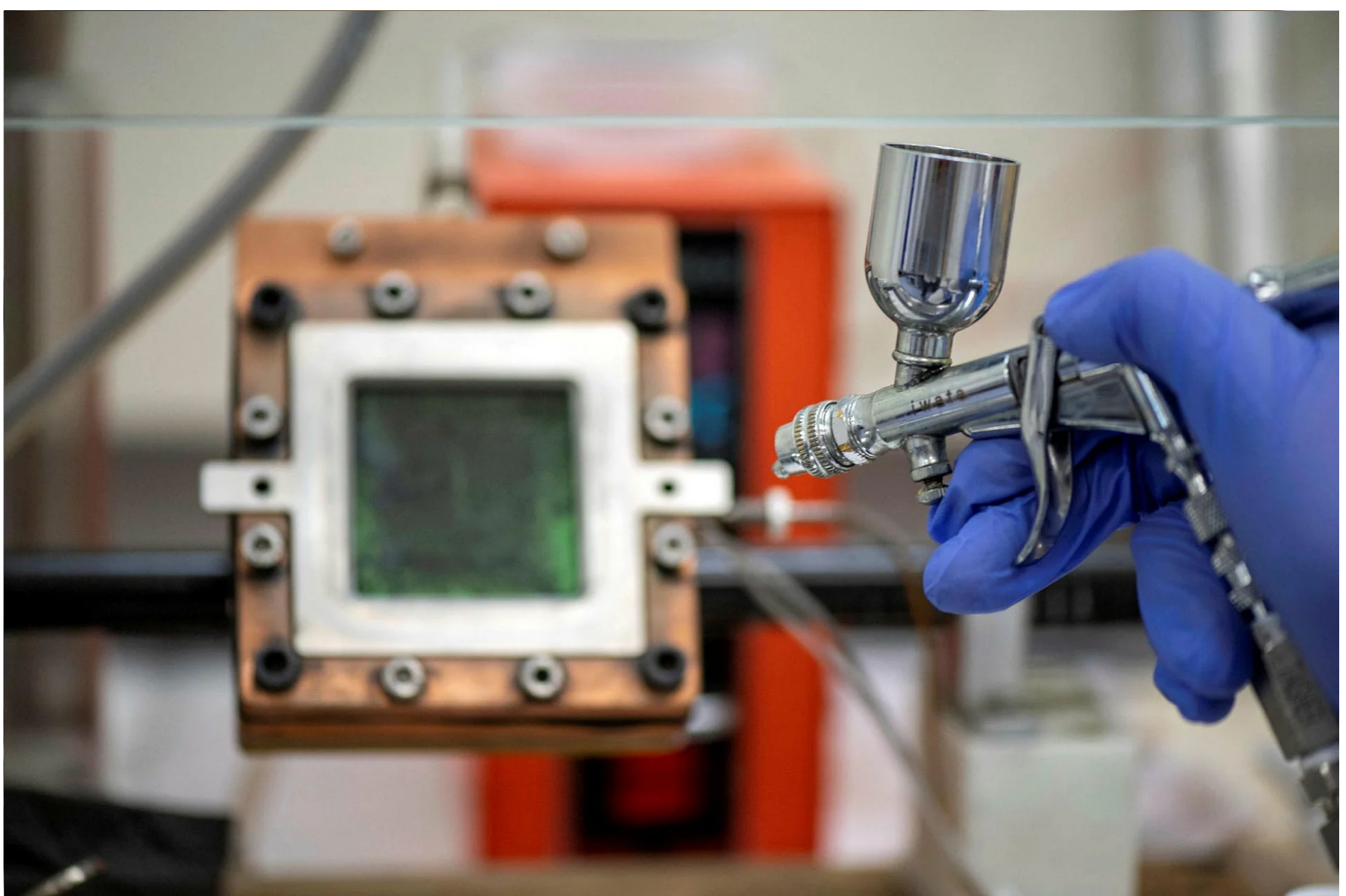
RepAir has developed a device that separates CO₂ from the air by means of an electrochemical reaction. In contrast to the competitors, who base themselves on heating to high temperatures, its device operates at the temperature of the environment, enabling savings of energy and costs. Although the team only began to set up the firm in the summer of 2021, the company has already received payment from Frontier for the first 200 tons of carbon it will trap. Only six companies in the world were selected so far to take part in the Frontier endeavor.

“It’s very important,” Shiner says. “It’s a vote of confidence, a first client. In another year there will be a first device on our own roof, the size of this desk. I’ve already told the landlord.” By 2025, RepAir plans to set up its first commercial facility in Iceland, in cooperation with a company that specializes in fixation of the carbon that is captured deep in the earth.

Among RepAir’s partners is the Haifa-based Bazan Group (formerly Oil Refineries Ltd.). Ties of this sort, which are quite common in the carbon world, are not meant only for public-relations purposes. Oil and gas companies have been dealing for years with technological challenges relating to carbon fixation and transport.

How does a nature-loving Haifa resident feel about cooperating with one of the most polluting companies in Israel?

Shiner: “A great deal of the money that reaches this industry comes from the oil and gas industry. There is a certain dissonance here that needs to be bridged: On the one hand, these companies are like a red flag; on the other hand, they understand that they will need to be part of the transition to a world without fossil fuels, and perhaps even lead the way to that world. They possess all the requisite knowhow, the infrastructure, the labor force, the means and the capital for achieving that goal. There’s suspicion, but when we speak with petroleum giants that want to invest in us, we ascertain that this is really their strategy.”



The RepAir lab. Credit: Gil Eliahu

What drives them

One interesting aspect of the CCS field in Israel is the attempt to weld the different players into a united community. That's the goal of Victor Weis, formerly the director of the Tel Aviv-based Heschel Center for Sustainability. Weis recently linked with Maya Jacobs, former CEO of Zalul Environmental Association, to form Climate Net, the community of carbon trappers in Israel.

The organization began as a hothouse for entrepreneurs. According to Weis, "In the course of the work, we started to map the other players in this field. We discovered that there are many entrepreneurs in Israel, all of whom think, like us, that they're alone. We said, 'Wow, something is happening here.'"

Last June, they organized the first Israeli conference on carbon sequestration, on Kibbutz Shefayim. "We didn't publicize it," Weis says. "We invited only people whom we already knew were engaged in this field. We planned for 80 to 100 people, and we had to close the list at 250 – the hall was absolutely packed. Everyone said it was a formative conference."

Fixating Weis for an hour in a chair at a Tel Aviv café is a challenge in its own right. He's managing dozens of projects, and his phone never stops buzzing: liaisons in the United Nations and in the government, entrepreneurs and investors, farmers and scientists – all of them involved as part of his net of never-ending initiatives. Currently, he is laying the foundations for an Israeli

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voluntary market for carbon trade, promoting a program of apprentice entrepreneurs in the field of carbon trapping, formulating a proposal for a national program of sustainable agriculture, and much more. He will soon be leaving Climate Net in order to set up a climate unit in the National Security Council.

connect. And it's amazing. We woke up late – but we woke up.

Avner Gross

"For this industry to grow," Weis says, "supportive regulation needs to be created and disruptive regulation removed, and of course we require money and professional support of the ecosystem." As a result of the June conference, working groups were formed that combine entrepreneurs, investors, scientists and government representatives. Together they are engaged in such subjects of mutual interest as surveying regulatory obstructions, ethical considerations and building economic models.

"I haven't seen organizing at the national level in other places in order to create this ecosystem," Weis says. "It's a growth engine, which can accelerate processes. Israel can close gaps."

What's driving you?

"Saving the world."



Victor Weis co-organized Israel's first sequestration conference, last June. "We planned for 80 to 100 people, and we had to close the list at 250 – the hall was absolutely packed." Credit: Gil Eliahu

The circle is closed

The offices of Airovation Technologies, in Nes Tziona, already have the sleek look of what you'd expect from a standard high-tech firm. The company, which entered the CCS field four years

ago, has 30 employees and raised \$15 million in its latest investment round. “If there is a message that I want to convey from my little corner, it’s that we need to start waking up,” says Gil Tomer, one of the company’s two founders. In contrast to other realms in the land of startups, in the carbon-trapping sphere Israel is lagging behind, he laments. He attributes this mainly to the fact that no binding policy has yet been charted to pressure the polluting factories to support the effort, a situation that is inhibiting initiatives.

He likens the state of affairs in the carbon realm to the world of solar panels as it was two or three decades ago, when the devices were not yet economically viable. “This time we don’t have 20 years; in this case, we need to undertake a change within five or six years,” he says. “We need to approach it the way the Americans planned the original moon landing. Not what we will get out of it now, or whether the profit line will be positive or negative, because with that line of thought, humanity would never have reached the moon, and would also not have developed the technology that was created along the way.”

Airovation’s technological innovation is based on research done at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. From the side, the product in question seems to be no more than a water container with a little foam. This is the third time in my reporting on this subject – and it will not be the last – that I have had occasion to reflect on the visual banality that accompanies the effort to save humanity. Airovation focuses on industries in which carbon emissions are inherent, such as glass manufacturing. The company’s solution is amazingly elegant: The emissions from the glass factory will be streamed into a facility the size of a shipping container, in which a chemical reaction will capture 90 percent of the carbon and convert it into solid minerals – carbonates and bicarbonates. The minerals can be sold to the fertilizer or cosmetics industries, and in the case of the glass factory, one of the products is required for the manufacture of glass. The circle is closed.

In 2003, Tomer returned from a global surfing trip in which he searched for the perfect wave. (Three of the entrepreneurs who were interviewed for this article are surfers, a phenomenon that calls for a separate study.) Shocked by the pollution of Israel’s beaches he encountered on his return, he took an active part in the establishment of the Green Party, “out of some sort of naivete that this place can be changed. That naivete has perhaps passed, but I still believe that a group of people who believe in something really can change the world.”

Later, Tomer was engaged in entrepreneurship and investments in various spheres, until he became acquainted with Marat Maain, the other cofounder, and with the idea that took on substance as Airovation. “I grew up in Tel Aviv right under Reading [power

station], with the black soot that awaited us every morning and the asthmatic children. In the face of that, you ask yourself: ‘What kind of world do I want to leave after me?’ I have three children. In what do I want to invest my time?”

At first, Tomer and Maain found it difficult to raise funds and recruit employees. “I didn’t dream that [one day] I would be in a place where I would be able to tell big investors, ‘Thanks – in the next round,’” Tomer says. “Back then, I knocked on every possible door, and people always looked at me as though I were a tree hugger. We bit our lips and worked in Maain’s yard in [the village of] Srigim. Every day we burned all kinds of things that we had collected, Ikea furniture. I brought the stuff in the trunk of my car.”

The team he put together represents a more general shift of direction in high-tech, he believes. “They are people who at all different stages of their careers started to ask themselves in recent years: Who am I working for? What am I doing with my time? Where is it leading? From interviewing dozens of people – I have a lot more applications than I need at the moment – I can see how much movement there is toward our field. People are writing touching texts saying that they don’t mind working for half of what they earn now. ‘I’m fed up with spending my time on something in which I see no useful purpose.’”



The lab at Airovation Technologies. Credit: David Bachar

A ‘ticking hourglass’

In the transition from the subtly illuminated high-tech offices to the raw-concrete structures of Ben-Gurion University, in Be'er Sheva, the urgency may have lessened lower, but the fervor and the enthusiasm are just as intense. Dr. Avner Gross, from BGU's geography department, recently returned from climbing Mount Etna, in Sicily, where he collected soil for his research into the possibilities of fixating carbon through massive, oceanic algae breeding. If we scatter mineral-rich powder in the sea, he ventures, like the dust that has been discharged in volcanic eruptions across history, it will act like a fertilizer and fill the oceans with algae that will devour carbon from the air.

Gross was surprised at the community he found at the carbon sequestration conference last June. "I didn't know it was that big, so hot," he says. "I've been involved with this for some years, and I had no idea that there was such a huge world out there, people who also don't know that I'm in the profession. And that's true of all the carbon researchers in Israel. Do you understand? Everyone is in their world, their niche."

His first experience as an academic at a conference of entrepreneurs and investors exposed Gross to a disparity between the worlds. "You see people speaking with a great deal of self-confidence, but not with the depth that an academic is looking for. On the one hand, you think, they're wrong about this, there it's not like that; and on the other hand you say, but maybe they're the ones who are right, not me! Why is it necessary to go deep into everything and slow it all down? We need to make progress, so maybe we should liberate ourselves a little from this academic rigidity. We have a ticking hourglass."

Gross adds, "Academia is living in a world of long ago. It didn't grasp that the pace has to quicken. Research is deep, but slow. It doesn't focus on finding a solution, because there's no dialogue between academia and entrepreneurs and industry. There's some sort of wall."

That insight spawned an innovative initiative. "We are now in the stages of establishing an academic carbon-fixation forum," Gross relates. "We formed a group – a few researchers from select institutions in Israel who work in the fields of carbon in the ocean, on land and in the air. Our first goal is to create a network of researchers, but outward-looking. To bring the entrepreneurs to us, to come to them, to start transmitting knowledge rapidly, because there's no time. We have to accelerate the way we do things in the climate realm. Many researchers are developing amazing things and don't even know they are in possession of gold."

Gross is optimistic. "I see amazing mobilization from all directions. It's something that's beginning to build up speed. The

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In the end, in order to cope with the climate crisis, we need to roll up our sleeves and dirty our hands. There is no choice. And we love it.

Iddo Tsur

worlds of entrepreneurship and tech come from here, academia comes from there, all the brains are starting to connect. And it's amazing. We woke up late – but we woke up.”

No interest

In order to see close-up the stage of the dirty and clumsy experiments, I travel to Atlit, south of Haifa, to the backyard of Iddo Tsur, who together with Dan Deviri this year established the startup Carbon Blue. With glittering eyes, Tsur and Deviri show me a white container, half a meter tall, to which is attached a faucet that draws water from a yellow jerrican that Tsur filled with seawater that morning. It's too soon to say whether out of the messy yard in Atlit history will be made the way it was made in Jeff Bezos' garage in Bellevue, Washington, but after the two explain their project, it doesn't sound out of the question.

“Iddo and I studied together the whole subject of trapping carbon dioxide,” Deviri says. “We mapped the problems and the obstacles, and then we took the physics and the chemistry and tried to see theoretically how the processes could be applied and improved.”



Carbon Blue's Iddo Tsur and Dan Deviri. A journey of 10,000 megatons begins with a jerrican and one small garden hose. Credit: Amir Levy

When they say they “studied the subject,” they mean it. Deviri, who's 32, worked and studied in academic science for a total of 17 years – from the age of 14, when he became the youngest student at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, in Haifa. He has three undergraduate degrees, a master's and a PhD, covering,

between them, the fields of chemistry, physics and biology, and he has studied, among other subjects, cancer and degenerative brain diseases.

“In the field of cancer, I conducted a study with the potential to bring about some sort of clinical treatment, and it barely stirred interest in academia. They publish an article, and then they move on to the next project. That’s something that really bothered me. So, toward the end of the doctorate, I decided that I didn’t want to continue on the academic track, at least not now. I want to do research, but at its end to take the next step and use its fruits to do good in the world.”

Tsur, also 32, studied physics within the framework of the army’s elite Talpiot program, but left the army last year when the climate-tech world “began waking up,” as he puts it. “I understood that that’s where I needed to be. Beyond the business opportunities, it’s something where one can work and make a meaningful contribution.”

For Israeli investors, you’re a walking cash machine.

“Yes. Many investors contact me via LinkedIn – a great many.”

The learning process involved a few months of reading articles and evaluating the problems. Their first insight was that there isn’t enough territory available on earth for afforestation, and therefore an engineering solution was needed. The second insight: Trapping CO₂ from the air requires huge facilities, because its concentration in the air is so low that, removing a significant amount requires processing a very large quantity. Deviri notes, for example, that the Carbon Engineering company is now building “the largest installation of its kind, in Texas, which will trap a million tons a year. Its area is the size of the Vatican.”

Accordingly, they decided to set aside air and turn to the sea. The sea is always in a state of balance and in a state of saturation: If carbon is extracted from it, a vacuum is created that immediately fills up with air.

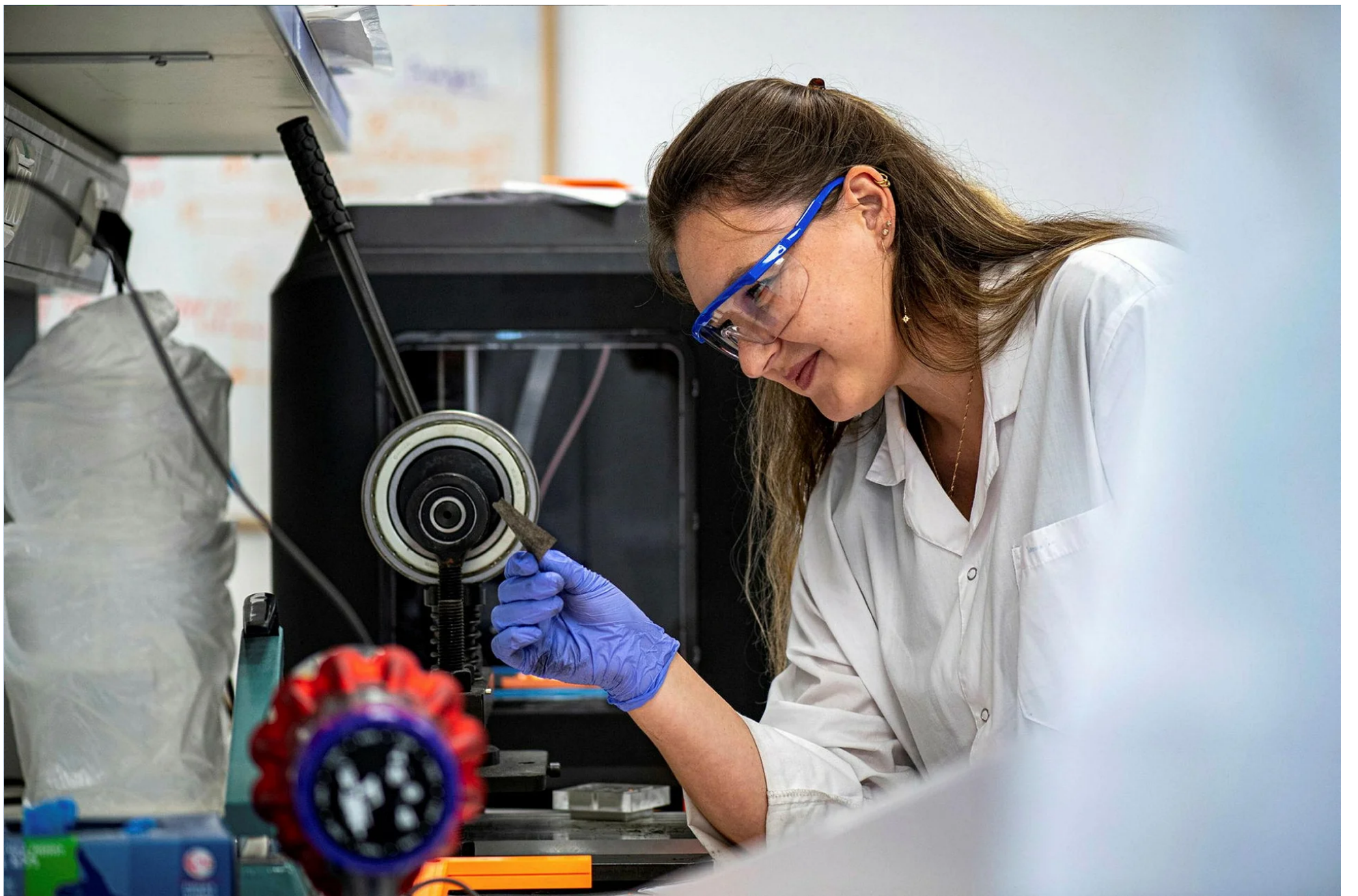
An additional problem they discerned in the existing engineering solutions relates to the supply chains. “You have to understand the scale,” says Deviri. “We’re talking about the need to trap 10 billion tons of carbon a year. If in the process something is produced that also needs to be removed, in the end we’re stuck. The way we built our solution in the maritime environment is supposed to address all these problems – being in a small area, without supply chains, without by-products.”

The planned solution is a facility that can be installed on a platform in the sea, and that will pump up seawater, separate the carbon in it by means of a chemical process, and transfer the gas

for burial in the sea floor, before returning the water to the sea with no ecological damage. Last spring, they demonstrated the idea in laboratory conditions, recruited initial employees and began speaking with investors.

Concurrently, the two theoreticians turned off the computers, ordered valves and pumps, and started to build a scale prototype of the facility in the yard. Each morning, Tsur would go down to the sea to fill the jerrican. Even a journey of 10,000 megatons begins with one small garden hose. “In the end, in order to cope with the climate crisis,” he says, “we need to roll up our sleeves and dirty our hands. There is no choice. And we love it.”

The project is indeed at an early stage, but Carbon Blue is moving ahead rapidly. “We met with international funders that specialize in carbon trapping. These are people who have heard many solutions, and they were very, very surprised to hear about our ours,” says Tsur. Next year, they hope to be ready to hook up with an industrial plant and begin sequestering carbon. Here in Israel.



The RepAir lab. Credit: Gil Eliahu

‘Totally profit-oriented’

Movement can be felt not only on the technological and scholarly fronts, but among investors as well, says Yair Reem, who together with partners in Berlin formed Extantia, a venture capital firm specializing in the climate.

Are you philanthropic investors, or is there really an economic

opportunity here?

Reem: “The answer is unequivocal: We aren’t going to succeed in changing anything on the planet if it’s not good business. Change will come only if there’s money in it. We are totally profit-oriented.”

Do you identify a major business opportunity here?

“We identify an opportunity that will be 10, if not 100, times as large as the digital revolution, which generated companies like Google, Apple and Amazon. What we’ll see in the de-carbonization revolution will be larger by far. Think of the value of Amazon, which invented a new industry twice – once the online store and once cloud computing. We need to invent a new industry of carbon capture and fixation. And look at the quantity: 1,000 gigatons. And every ton has a price of about \$100. Multiply \$100 by a trillion to be trapped, and it’s an industry worth \$100 trillion. I would call that a business opportunity.”

Most of the Israeli interviewees, who are familiar up-close with the fast-money mills of Israeli high-tech, were quick to complain about the lag here in the carbon capture realm. But one of Reem’s German partners in Extantia, Torben Schreiter, who is very familiar with the world market, has only good things to say about Israel. In Germany and Holland, for example, there are only a handful of startups that are dealing with carbon, he says, “and not much is happening there.”

According to Uriel Klar, the director of PLANETech, a nonprofit organization that promotes climate innovation, there are a dozen startups in Israel dealing with carbon sequestration. That may not sound like a lot, but it constitutes a not-insignificant proportion of the estimated 400 companies doing similar work worldwide. On top of the 12 startups, there are also a few dozen Israeli firms that provide the circle of support – for example, by developing tools for measuring the quantity of carbon captured.

In the meantime, the number of initiatives is constantly being updated. For example, Asaf Licht and Or Meraz, who are establishing a startup in this sphere, but are still working under the radar. Licht, 29 (“Tell Forbes they have another year,” to include him in their annual “30 under 30” story), was in his fifth year of medical school at the Haifa Technion, when a charismatic professor corralled him for a carbon-capture project.

“It was clear to me that this was it. The technology is amazing, and economically, I can’t pass it up either. I had been of a mind to develop pharmaceuticals, but it was such a hot year that I said to myself that maybe there are more urgent things.”

A revolution

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We aren’t going to succeed in changing anything on the planet if it’s not good business. Change will come only if there’s money in it. We are totally profit-oriented.

Yair Reem




As Israel’s Special Envoy for Climate Change and Sustainability, Ambassador Gideon Bachar represents Israel in international forums that deal with climate concerns. No less than that, however, he represents the climate in the government. Together with Victor Weis and Climate Net, he was, this past June, one of the organizers of the carbon sequestration conference. Bachar is also a dreamer, and if only half of his ideas were to take on substance, we might still have a chance.

“We have here an opportunity for a breakthrough,” he says after delivering a lecture at the Museum of Natural History in Tel Aviv. “The most promising thing from my point of view in this field is the rehabilitation of nature as a tool for carbon fixation. For the first time, nature can start to generate income money. Like a farm, like a factory. That has never happened. Until today, we made money from nature only by exploiting it. We cut down trees, produced rubber, emptied the sea of its fish. For the first time, we have an opportunity emerging in which the rehabilitation of nature, the growing of forests, restoration of the ecosystem, will earn a profit. That is a revolution. That is something we need to promote.

Are you optimistic?

“I am always optimistic – without optimism there is no future. I also see the situation, though, and then I am realistic. But optimism is always a derivative of your activity. If you take action, you change reality.”

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