Questions and Answers

**Tell us briefly about yourself (up to 250 words)**

My name is Michal Levinsky. I enjoy learning and new experiences. I am open-minded, curious, and confident. I grew up in a generally supportive and positive environment, with family and friends as a central part of my life. I remember becoming aware early on of the injustices and hardships some people endure and recognizing that I cannot be a bystander. The desire to make a contribution and help others make a positive change in their lives led me to become a social worker. Later, it became increasingly important for me to utilize my strong cognitive abilities and to satisfy my curiosity and love of learning. I chose to enter the world of research, with the goal of trying to make change through an academic platform. I currently have three major areas of activity: I am a PhD student at the Hebrew University, I work at the university's Research Center on Aging, and continue to work as a social worker, assisting people suffering from addiction and former prisoners. I spend the majority of my time on research, but I view fieldwork, to some degree, as an integral and long-term aspect of my life. I feel fortunate to be part of the changes that the people I work with are undergoing. Further, I see fieldwork and research as integrated: fieldwork contributes to a higher level of sociological research, while research can lead to insights applicable in fieldwork.

**Describe your Service (up to 120 words)**

For two years, I was a counselor in a school dormitory for elementary-school-aged girls who had been removed from dysfunctional families. I helped the girls with a wide range of their daily needs and served as a kind of substitute parent. These girls came from difficult backgrounds, had deep emotional scars, and were traumatized by being removed from their homes. I was still an adolescent myself and unfamiliar with this social reality. I had to cope with the complex emotions and behaviors that arose in this setting, without experience or emotional maturity. I developed in the face of these challenges. I formed deep and long-lasting connections with the girls that remain until today. This formative experience helped lead me to where I am and who I am today.

**Describe your interests and hobbies (up to 150 words)**

Outside my field work and research (which I love and are very important to me) I am interested in a variety of creative arts. In my spare time, I attend lectures and courses on literature, and continuously rediscover how words affect me and expand my mind. I enjoy the visual arts and visit museums around the world, and am also an amateur photographer myself. Besides, I enjoy socializing and spending time with people. In that vein, I am a member of a women's basketball team in Jerusalem.

**How did you hear about the Azrieli Fellows Program?**

I heard about the Azrieli Fellow Program through the university, in a publication advertising scholarships and through the recommendations of staff members.

**Please attach a summary of up to 120 words of your area and topic of research.
This is in addition to the Research Statement requested below.**

The proposed study will address the correlation between cumulative exposure to stress and poor physical and mental health in old age. The proposed study will investigate environmental and personal factors impacting this correlation. Environmental factors include two national indices: income inequality, and social vulnerability versus resilience. Individual factors include coping behaviors, positive (i.e., physical activity) and negative (drinking alcohol). The study will use longitudinal data from the Survey of Health, Aging and Retirement (SHARE) in Europe and Israel. The research is based on Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which enables simultaneous testing of multiple hypotheses within a system of research equations. The system of equations incorporates quantitative assessment of observed or manifested health variables.

**Please describe your personal background, e.g., childhood, family, community, etc. (up to 150 words).**

I grew up in a family of eight in a Jewish religious community in the Katamon neighborhood of Jerusalem. My social environment was generally healthy and supportive, with an emphasis on religious observance, striving for excellence, and family values. During childhood and adolescence, I was sociable, active in youth movements, a student council member, and volunteered in various activities. I easily excelled in school, and was able to engage in a variety of social activities and interests. The values embedded in me during childhood shaped who I am and continue to guide me. However, as an adult I chose my own path, and my current lifestyle differs from the one in which I raised.

**Please describe two significant, formative events in your life, one from your childhood and one from adulthood (up to 150 words for each event).**

**Childhood:**

When I was in high school, one of my classmates was murdered in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem. Until that moment, I had lived in a bubble, with little awareness of the traumatic facets of life. The unexpected death of someone who sat next to me in school left a deep and lasting impression. This painful experience raised questions about the meaning of life, and what I wanted to do with the life I have been given. In response, I helped dedicate a study room at the school in my classmate’s memory, and became active in other memorial events for her. This experience started me on my search for a lifestyle that would enable me to grow and engage with my social environment in a way that addresses life’s inevitable hardships.

**Adulthood:**

When I was enrolled in a design course, we were given the task of designing a specific product. We discussed various tools for planning and implementation, but were expected to find solutions on our own. I remember this as a formative event, because at the time I did not believe I could discover on my own how to create something I had never made before. However, eventually I successfully accomplished the task. This opened my mind and made me realize I did not have to depend on others in order to accomplish what I want to do. I realized that I can independently do research and learn how to reach my goals.

**Please describe any significant voluntary activity you have been, or are currently involved in. This may include volunteer work in the community, emissary work abroad, involvement in youth movements, university campus activity, etc. Provide details of the type of work you did. What did you contribute to the activity, and what did you gain from being involved? (Up to 150 words).**

I was active in a youth movement, and helped initiate a weekly visit to a neighborhood nursing home. My career as a social worker stemmed from my desire to make a contribution to society. For many years, I have privately tutored women who are studying for academic degrees but lack a supportive background or resources. In my current position with the Addictions Unit, I volunteered to update the data collection system. This led to decisions that improved policies for patients. I was active in opening a day care center in Jerusalem for women struggling with addiction; previously there had been no resources for this population. For me, these activities provide a sense of satisfaction and meaning in life. At the same time, I always strive to excel in everything I do, and I am sure that my activities touched people and had positively impact on them and their environment.

**Describe an experience or event in your life in which someone demonstrated leadership and had an impact on you. Why was that person an effective leader? (Up to 150 words)**

My mother demonstrated family leadership in supporting the changes I underwent. Alongside the strong values ​​and healthy atmosphere in which I was raised, there was a great deal of rigidity and conservatism regarding issues of religion and gender. Over the years, I redefined my worldviews, which my parents sometimes saw as extreme or overly progressive. The personal changes my siblings and I went through were sometimes painful for our parents. After a long process, my mother was able to talk with us openly, acknowledge mistakes she made, and take responsibility for them. My mother is not a leader by nature, but her ability to open her mind and change her position, and especially her courage in taking responsibility, are leadership skills that I truly appreciate. The discourse she initiated led all of us to courageously explore and discover who we are, and enabled us to forge closer and deeper relationships.

**Write a five-sentence paragraph to convince high school students to accept an element of your thesis topic for their final matriculation project (“Avodat Gemer”).**

You are young and have your life before you. Everything happening to you now will affect your life and determine who you will be in adulthood. If you want to take part in pioneering research on an issue that is crucial to the world and relevant to your personal life, I recommend a relatively “new” research population - the late life. I encourage you to explore the path along which life’s experiences may affect you and the society in which you live, into the future. Overall, consider today how you can bring about social change for tomorrow.

**What was the most unexpected thing that you have ever done in your life?**

After receiving my B.A., I left the academic world for several years. This was unexpected, because I was used to striving to excel and progressing along the obvious and expected path. During these years, I was involved in various social activities, the arts, and handcrafts. I tried to find myself and what I truly wanted, not what I was accustomed to thinking I wanted. In retrospect, I see how I matured and developed during this stage. I learned that it was important for me to take time to explore, and that I wanted to choose the path to which I felt most deeply connected. Eventually, I realized that I wanted to pursue research and social work. This decision emerged from my own personal passion, rather than from accepting what was expected of me.

**What improvements would you like to see in Israel in the next 20 years? What should be done today in order to reach these goals? (Up to 150 words).**

I would like see Israel as a leader in the social realm (and not only the realm of science and technology, as it is today). To me, this means that public services should be provided at the highest possible level. Reducing social gaps and granting equal opportunity to all segments of society is crucial. The heart of public policy should be preventative and proactive, not just “putting out fires”. Israel should be leading and developing models of social change that can form the basis of global intervention practices. To achieve this, the academic world must be in contact with those in the field. The highest level of professionalism must be implemented in all public frameworks. Cutting-edge research should be presented to policy-makers. We must build a suitable platform so that researchers and people in the field who are visionaries can lead the development of policies, and not simply follow them.