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Kitchen University

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Abstract (Summary)

Yossi Vardi, one of Israel's first high-tech entrepreneurs, is perhaps the most prominent example. Vardi started Tekem (a Hebrew acronym for Advanced Technology), in 1969, when he was only 26. Tekem was one of Israel's first software houses. In the ensuing 43 years, Vardi has helped found and build over 60 high-tech companies, in software, energy, water and Internet. His son Arik co-founded Mirabilis in 1996 and sold it in 1998 to America Online for \$407 million. Mirabilis invented instant messaging, which Arik and partners called ICQ (a play on the words "I seek you"). The initial funds for Mirabilis came from father Yossi.

My favorite example of entrepreneurial legacy is the Vilenski family and its "kitchen university." Dan Vilenski was a pioneer in Israel's high-tech industry who brought three major American firms to Israel - Kulicke and Soffa (K&S), KLA-Tencor and Applied Materials.

All the Vilenski children graduated from father Dan's kitchen university at the Vilenski's home in a Haifa suburb. The institution has two simple rules, Dan tells *The Report*. "First, enrollment is one on one." The entire family does not gather collectively to manage the affairs of one of its members. Instead, a Vilenski child meets with father Dan in the kitchen to discuss a key issue.

Full Text (722 words)

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"ENTREPRENEURIAL fathers produce entrepreneurial sons disproportionately," notes Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Edward Roberts, in his award-winning 1990 book "Entrepreneurs in High Technology: Lessons from MIT and Beyond."

Nearly two-thirds of a sample of computer-related entrepreneurs, he found, had fathers who started their own businesses. His findings focused mainly on MIT graduates and related to males, since most entrepreneurs are men - although my own study of 4,000 Technion, Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, graduates revealed that fully 15 percent of the women alumnae also started their own businesses (the proportion for men was more than double).

In Israel, too, we are now seeing second-generation start-ups, launched by children of parents who launched businesses. Roberts calls this "entrepreneurial heritage." It is another reason for optimism that Israel's booming start-up energy will sustain its momentum in the future.

Yossi Vardi, one of Israel's first high-tech entrepreneurs, is perhaps the most prominent example. Vardi started Tekem (a Hebrew acronym for Advanced Technology), in 1969, when he was only 26. Tekem was one of Israel's first software houses. In the ensuing 43 years, Vardi has helped found and build over 60 high-tech companies, in software, energy, water and Internet. His son Arik co-founded Mirabilis in 1996 and sold it in 1998 to America Online for \$407 million. Mirabilis invented instant messaging, which Arik and partners called ICQ (a play on the words "I seek you"). The initial funds for Mirabilis came from father Yossi.

Ruth Alon is the daughter of Uziah Galil, father of Israeli entrepreneurship and founder of the Elron and Elbit high-tech companies. She founded Netvision, which at one stage was Israel's largest provider of Internet and Internet-based services.

Some father-and-son teams founded start-ups together. Navot Peled is founder and CEO of Gizmox, a software firm that enables companies to move its organizational software into the "cloud," rather than take up space in the firm's own computers. His son Guy works with him. Gizmox has raised several million dollars in venture funding, in 2009 and 2011, despite the drought of venture capital.

Reuven Agassi and his son Shai founded Quicksoft, later known as TopTier. Shai started several firms, including two acquired by German software giant SAP, where he went to enjoy a stellar career. Shai has now launched Better Place, which aims to run cars solely on rechargeable batteries, without gasoline. The first electric Renault Fluence cars are now running on Israeli roads.

But my favorite example of entrepreneurial legacy is the Vilenski family and its "kitchen university." Dan Vilenski was a pioneer in Israel's high-tech industry who brought three major American firms to Israel - Kulicke and Soffa (K&S), KLA-Tencor and Applied Materials.

Vilenski and his wife Judith, a nurse, have five children. All five have started businesses. Irit and Noa are twins. Noa is a fashion designer (Peek-a-boo), and Irit does interior design, mainly for coffee shops (Inside-out Studio). Yael does cake art (Ooga-ooga), while Sigal's Strudel Design offers graphic and logo design services.

Son Ofer, formerly an Israel Air Force pilot, co-founded Jungo (software to bring broadband to homes and businesses) in 1998 and sold it in December 2006 to NDS for \$107 million. For the past four years, he has been working on building Hola, a software firm that will vastly speed up home-based Internet.

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"Second, I do not offer unsolicited advice," says Dan. He may have been Chair of Applied Materials (Israel) and corporate VP - but a meeting at the kitchen university has to be initiated by one of the Vilenski children.

Ofer Vilenski recently spoke to 300 Technion students taking a course on Technological Entrepreneurship. Seated next to me were his sons Idan (11) and Itay (7). When Ofer tossed questions at the audience, both boys raised their hands to answer. When Ofer elicited questions, they each had several. And good ones, too.

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