How to choose a post-doc position

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Our goals in doing a post-doc

- Good science
- Study and develop as scientists
- Return to academia as PIs
- “Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans.”
  -- John Lennon
Should we do a post-doc abroad?

- Yes!
- Vital step of professional growth
- Complex, frightening process. Tough adjustments upon arrival and return
- An experience for the entire family!
- Life abroad
Me

- PhD in Computer Science and Comp. Biology
- Post-doc in UC Berkeley, 2008-12
- My wife did a post-doc in parallel (LBNL)
- Left with two boys (5yo, 1.5yo), returned with another girl
- Member of university’s Gender Committee (post-doc is a huge obstacle for women in science)
Choosing where to go?

- A research field that you find exciting
- A lab that fits you as a researcher
- Where you are most likely to succeed
- A place that suits your family best
Ask yourself

- What are my strong points?
- What type of a lab suits me?
- Where do I imagine myself in 5 / 10 years
- Am I really made for research?
Am I good enough? (The Imposter syndrome)

- Used to be attributed to successful women
- Common among gifted kids and adults (yes, also in the academia)
- Performance attributions - שותено וכשלון
- Success is dismissed as luck or deception
- Consult with scientists you appreciate
Finding your new field of research

- Post-doc - chance to change your field
- What would you like to do in the near future?
- “Read the map” and identify trends
- What do you find exciting?
- Follow your heart
Attend a conference

- Meet with central figures in your community
- Possible advisors
- Consult with other students and post-docs
- Identify trends / future directions in your research field
- Follow your heart
What lab would match you best?

● A young PI or an older & established PI?
● A smaller or a larger lab?
● Independent research or micro-managed?
● Equipment you would need? Funding?
● Local collaborations?
Where to go (geographically)?

- A large scientific center (e.g. Boston)?
- How “isolated” is the university? (Jobs for spouse? Quality of schools?)
- Local Israeli/Jewish/Arab community?
- Distance from Israel (and time difference)
- Language
- Weather and local attractions
- Cost of living (housing, schools)
Life in California

- We had many many trips and hikes
- A huge opportunity to have fun!
- Countless trips (weekends, Sundays)

- Some motivation to why you MUST consider a post-doc.
Finding the right PI (yes, this is hard detective work)

- Scan the publication list of each PI
  - Filter irrelevant papers
  - Any recent papers that excite you?
- Number of publications per student per year
- How well did previous post-docs do?
  - Where published? Authorship?
  - Have they found a job?
- Consult with other people and the field (listen, and read between the lines)
Pick a “winning horse”

- Choose the PIs that will be leaders in 5 years
- Watch out for tired, momentum-driven PIs
Start early (>1 year before graduation)

- Think of ~10 possible labs
- **Ask for people’s help in introducing you**
- Send a short mail (with CV)
- Clearly state who are you, who is your advisor, main publications
- Be assertive and polite
- If they don’t reply, **don’t take it personally**. Nagging is okay (once).
Visit the lab (a must!)

● Usually, a full day with a talk and meetings.
● Plan ahead and prepare:
  ○ Read some recent papers
  ○ Think of possible research questions
● Remember the two goals of your visit:
  ○ Advertise yourself and your capabilities
  ○ Meet the PI and their group
● Don’t take anything for granted. Ask!
Manage and match expectations - minimize future problems

- Know what to expect, and let them know what to expect of you

- Duration of the post-doc
- Funding sources
- Leading your project
- Salary and health benefits
- Working days / hours / vacations
Meet lab members

- Ask about their research
- Lab atmosphere (solidarity? competition?)
- Equipment - do they have what they need?
- Working with the PI (pros and cons)
  - How often do they meet and talk about work?
  - Preparing a manuscript? Conferences?
- Any expected changes (relocation, grants)
- Cost of living, housing, education, weather
Ask yourself and others

● Is the PI a leading figure that will support you?
● Have you two connected? Excited about similar things?
● How independent will you be?
● Are lab members happy to come in the morning?
● Duration of fellowship / cost of living
● How supportive is the environment (dept / university)
After your visit

- Send a polite mail and thank your hosts
- You could try negotiating on your salary ("fixed" pay ranks, experience, benefits)
- Ask (politely) if they can refund flight / stay
- It might take a while to prepare a full job offer
- Remember to notify labs you have declined
My Family and Other Animals

- Be sensitive and plan thoroughly
- **Happy spouse = happy house**
- Ask about possible jobs. Use local connections (formal and informal)
- Social aspects - find other Israelis
  Some would be your 2nd family
Tap the wisdom of the crowd

- Find Israelis and other post-docs
- Ask:
  - Where to live
  - Where to get stuff
  - Schools, daycare, etc.
  - Cars and insurance
  - Leisure
Visa, Health insurance, Grants, and Tax treaties

- USA - long, cumbersome process (months)
- “International Offices” in most universities
- In the meanwhile, apply for indep. funding
- US-Israeli Tax Treaty
  You may be exempt from federal tax for two years
ARTICLE 23 - Teachers

Where a resident [of Israel] … is invited by … a university … to come … for a period not expected to exceed 2 years for the purpose of … engaging in research … at a university or … educational institution, his income … shall be exempt from tax … for a period not exceeding 2 years from the date of his arrival in that other Contracting State

[Read ARTICLE 24, “Students and Trainees” as well]
What if things go wrong?

- Sometime we fail
- Bad chemistry with PI, negative results, poor choice of project / lab
- Try to admit failure early, and contain damage
- It’s usually possible to switch project or lab
- **The champions make their own luck** (be ambitious and exploit your opportunities)
Bottom line

● An amazing experience for you and family
● Don’t give up on your dreams. Let your family know how important this is for you.
● It only seems frightening and complicated
● Keep in touch with scientists in Israel
● Remember to have fun!
Background and credit

- **US relocation tips**
  by Gill Bejerano
- **Ten Simple Rules for Selecting a Postdoctoral Position**
  Philip E Bourne, Iddo Friedberg
- **Finding a Postdoc Position**
  by Jerry Breslin
- **How to find the right postdoc lab**
  by Ron Milo / Maya Schuldiner
- **Selecting Your First Post-Doctoral Position**
  by Catherine M. Fuller
- **Survival strategies for choosing the right postdoc position**
  by Duncan T Odom
- **Selecting and Succeeding in a Postdoc Position**
- **Advice on Choosing a Successful Post-doctoral Position**
  by Gráinne Whitman, Brian Guzik and Larry Goldstein
- **Choosing a Postdoc**
  by Sean Carroll
Thanks and good luck!

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