Pancreatic cancer pioneer Dr. Talia Golan co-published “game-changing” findings recently when she and other researchers revealed in the New England Journal of Medicine a new drug to treat the cancer with the highest mortality rate of all major cancers.

And the 45-year-old head of the Chaim Sheba Medical Center Pancreatic Cancer Unit and the Pancreatic Cancer Translational Research Laboratory says part of her success is due to the APF Edward H. Kass Medical Research Award early in her career. Kass awards go only to those who’ve graduated medical school within 10 years prior to potential receipt.

“It’s so hard in a very competitive society to get funded in the early stages of a career, to find someone who believes in you,” she says. “APF did. This funding definitely was one of the additional stepping stones for me to help develop my career goals.

“Today I am studying the unique biology of BRCA genetic mutations, relatively prevalent in my patient population, and their potential susceptibility to therapies that manipulate the DNA damage response.” Golan is also is also Medical Director of Sheba’s Early Phase Clinical Trial Unit.

Here’s a partial look at the game Golan and colleagues are looking to change:

- Pancreatic cancer is one of the few cancers for which survival has not improved substantially for more than 40 years.

- For all stages combined, 91% of pancreatic cancer patients will die within five years of diagnosis – only 9% will survive more than five years.

In the United States:

- In 2019 an estimated 56,770 Americans will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the U.S. and more than 45,750 will die from the disease.

- Pancreatic cancer is the third leading cause of cancer-related death in the United States, surpassing breast cancer. It is expected to become the second leading cause of cancer-related death in the US by the year 2020, surpassing colorectal cancer.

Her international colleagues are located at these institutions: The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, New York University Langone Medical Center and Toronto’s Princess Margaret Cancer Centre.

Golan says she chose to specialize in pancreatic cancer because she finds the biology of the disease “fascinating.”

Both her parents are doctors, Mom a radiologist and Dad a pediatrician, and she says it was just natural to carry on the family tradition. They made Aliyah from South Africa when Golan was 13.

“All of my childhood I was exposed to the realities of being a physician. I was exposed to people who were sick and to the realities of life and disease and health and I never felt any kind of aversion.

“I had good role models. I saw what it was like being there for other people.”

Golan attended Sackler Faculty of Medicine at Tel Aviv University. Toward the end of medical school she decided on oncology. “I wanted a field that enabled both a meaningful relationship with
patients and something where I could do a lot of research and affect quality of life for people.

Internship was at Hillel Yaffe Medical Center in Hadera (in the Haifa District about 28 miles from Tel Aviv), during which she took electives in both oncology and radiology.

Golan chose Sheba for residency because she was looking for a large hospital with an infrastructure for research and the opportunity for lots of clinical experience.

By the time she received the Kass award she already had her own lab set up. “I do translational research, which is ‘halfway between the bench and the bedside’ – I work with mice.”

Golan has protected research time and estimates that her work life is 50/50 -- clinical and research. “But it’s always very busy, terribly busy. And on top of everything I teach and I’m an administrator too.”

She has four children, three daughters and one son. And only one is out of the house (now in the army). Her husband works in the high-tech industry.

Golan says, despite being world renowned, her family is most important to her. “When I’m at home, I try to be at home.”