Correct, don't destroy
By Menahem Ben-Sasson

Some people waited eagerly for the State Comptroller's report about higher education in Israel. Now others are waiting eagerly to see if it will lead to the end of the higher education system.

The latter group is composed of people who do not understand how vital and important higher education is for modern society in general and for Israel, which is bereft of resources, in particular.

Some believe that a country which is dependent on divine mercy should invest in religious institutions. And others faithfully represent the world of the ignorant, or the way of thinking of the anti-elite.

As Akiva Ben Yosef, before he became Rabbi Akiva, said: "That I could find a scholar and bite him like a donkey."

Many others justify themselves by saying that higher education is all right, but why the need for academic freedom? Why does academic freedom mean the administration and budget of the higher education system must be independent? Who needs a fund to pay for trips abroad to foster scientific ties; and why does the state have to pay for faculty pensions?

The comptroller himself did not doubt the need for all of the above. His questions and criticism related mainly to how the system of higher education is run by those responsible for its orderly functioning, and those who are entrusted with regular oversight - the government ministries, the Council for Higher Education and the Planning and Budgeting Committee.

The nature of oversight is to look for defects. Its purpose is not to destroy but rather to correct. The heads of the institutes for higher education and those who ensure its orderly functioning must read the report and correct administrative problems.

In the past few days, however, many preferred to use the report to rip apart higher education.

Let us return to the cornerstone of higher education that many seem to miss - the creation of knowledge. Higher education does not merely inculcate know-how, turning it into awareness and disseminating it, it creates it.

Anyone who counts the weekly teaching hours of researchers is merely making his or her life miserable. The vast majority of researchers are immersed day and
night in their research (which addresses the very problems of our world).

Their laboratories are open and the lights remain lit for as long as they can operate them. The same is true of the libraries and the study rooms.

Budgetary edicts can reduce the hours when the libraries or the laboratories are kept open, but they cannot diminish the researchers' mission or motivation to get to the root of the truth and to create a font of knowledge for generations.

Order to create knowledge, they go to libraries in other parts of the world, to scientific conferences, and they continue writing and researching after the offices are closed and during off hours at home, via their computers, connecting with databases and alternate libraries.

It is difficult to imagine limiting the freedom of academic creation, the search after truth and the creation of know-how. The freedom of a slave to science is the freedom that society depends upon. It is a vital starting point for understanding higher education.

This has given birth to achievements that benefit the world; because of this, the entire world envied us in years gone by. And that is what we look toward when we attempt to prevent a brain-drain and get the best of our researchers to return to this country.

When we have an understanding of the basis of higher education, results will follow - cultural achievements, curricula, the education systems, inventions, medicines, agriculture and in short, everything that surrounds us.

All of these are likely to be curbed if we use the comptroller's recent report to destroy, kill, lose, and forget all that which we have toiled so hard to create.

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