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Fools in the public sphere

By Yaron Ezrahi

There is nothing that strengthens the self-assurance and the abilities of a citizen in a democracy to judge and to criticize the government more than learning, and in particular at the post-secondary level. But the policy of the recent governments in Israel toward the universities has proven that here, as in other areas, the government has no interest in investing public funds in the public's education and in strengthening the public as the sovereign vis-a-vis the institutions of state.

It is not merely by chance that the ability of the universities in Israel to impart higher education to the students - that is, to expose them during their first three or four years of higher learning to a broad range of cultural and scientific assets, as well as to methodologies of judgment and critical observation - has been eroded, as they have had to fight an ongoing battle against far-reaching cuts. Instead, the universities, which are no longer worthy of being called institutions of higher learning, have become schools for research and advanced technical training. Except for Bar-Ilan University, which requires students in all its various fields of specialization to take 16 hours of basic studies (mainly Judaic studies), a student of chemistry or economics at most of Israel's universities can study almost nothing except chemistry or economics from the beginning of his first year until the completion of his doctorate.

The sad result is that every year the academic

system here produces thousands of "technicians" in law, engineering, economics, medicine, physics and so forth, who have spent none of their academic careers studying any other field other than the one they have chosen for their profession. Every day, Israeli society pays a heavy price for the "professional" decisions of people with advanced degrees who are in fact little more than narrow-minded experts.

In this way we have jurists who have to deal with sex offenders without having had a single lesson in the social sciences, something that might have prepared them better to understand the complex psychological and sociological aspects of the phenomenon. They deal with the legal aspect of sex crimes as if they were the be all and end all. Thus, too, we have doctors who were never exposed to a lesson in ethics, but who daily use their authority to make fateful ethical decisions. In this way, too, we have an army of economists who have never studied almost anything other than economics, who have never been exposed, for example, to cultural studies, but who wield the budgetary ax with intolerable ease when it comes to cultural institutions such as orchestras, operas, museums, theaters and universities, which for them constitute parasitical organizations that lack legitimacy because they are unable to fund themselves.

With all of this in mind, it is clear that the Shochat committee is nothing more than a symptom of the failure of the state, which even today is being led by a government that tries to continue evading its responsibility to make it possible for all citizens to fulfill their right and duty to acquire higher education. This follows the disgraceful failure of the state to provide even adequate lower education in the state school system.

We have here a group of highly influential

economists and officials who are undoubtedly well intentioned but are unable to view university studies as something other than a "subsidized commodity." It is therefore no surprise that in this case as well, they expect the client to pay the full price.

As noted, the relinquishment of higher learning, which the government finds desirable both from a budgetary point of view and because it has no interest in active, educated citizens, reflects - beyond the fact of the privatization of universities studies - the general strategy of divesting the state of responsibility in critical areas such as health and the imprisonment of criminals, and transferring it to the blind forces of "the free market." Abandoning the universities to the forces of the market will put an end to the chances of funding higher learning and be the final nail in the coffin of the universities as cultural and spiritual centers.

Therefore, despite their good intentions, the members of the Shochat committee are naive - or perhaps they are just dissembling - emissaries of a cynical and apathetic government that has no interest in improving the country's educational and cultural institutions as a basis for a democratic and enlightened citizenship and a higher quality of life in Israel. It is, rather, a government that prefers foolish citizens to educated ones.

When the spokesmen of the Shochat committee talk about encouraging excellence in university institutions, they are referring to professional and research excellence in the narrow meanings of the words, while neglecting, not unintentionally, cultural and spiritual excellence and the development of the Israeli human being. The university professors and their students still have time to thwart this absurd move, which is in tragic opposition to the vision of those who formulated university education in Israel - Chaim Weizmann,

Martin Buber, Albert Einstein, Judah Magnes,
George Wise, Natan Rotenstreich and Joseph Ben-
David.

Instead of allowing the state to raise tuition fees, the national discourse should focus on how to give higher education an appropriate position on the list of national priorities.

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