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### Higher education's destroyers

By Avirama Golan

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In light of the harsh State Comptroller's report on higher education, it is hard to believe that the heads of universities and senior faculty are continuing to explain that transparent management of universities will harm the freedom to conduct research. And this is only a year after they arranged raises for themselves following a "non-political" strike, and increased the oppression of the cadre of workers known as adjunct lecturers, - the workers who keep the research going and the tuition coming in.

It is necessary to read the State Comptroller's report carefully to understand what it is the university heads are protecting. This is about a system that long ago became rigid, and which the management committees - the businesspeople who have been managing the universities since they became corporations, and the Finance Ministry people who know it well - have not dared to undermine.

This system is called "the fund for international scientific relations." It allots each faculty member, in dollars, a tidy sum according to rank and position. This allotment is annual, and sums that the faculty member does not use accumulate at his disposal. In January 2008, the annual allotment for a full professor stood at \$9,225, a sum that can be transferred or bequeathed to others.

Requests for travel expenses from this fund are approved by office-holders and bodies at the university, mostly in the faculty itself. The universities do not require faculty members to present the research they have carried out during their visits, nor do they follow up the results of the travel. The right to travel, paid for by the fund, is granted to every faculty member, with no account taken of the level of his academic work or the extent to which his area of specialization is important.

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Indeed, for the greater glory of research, even though the fund is intended for purposes of advanced study and academic research, Bar-Ilan University has gone so far as to allot money to a fund for the benefit of senior administrative employees. Bar-Ilan and the University of Haifa also enable their faculty members to transfer into the fund moneys they have accumulated in their sabbatical fund. Tel Aviv University, which does not allow this, nevertheless allows the use of sabbatical money to pay for travel - meaning it organizes tax evasion for sabbatical surpluses, and thus increases the sum for use.

In addition to active faculty members, pensioners at most universities are not required to submit an academic report on the trips paid for with money from the fund. The Council of University Presidents and its salary committee have never

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discussed the effectiveness or efficiency of the fund with respect to its effect on the level of tuition and research, or its contributions to faculty members and the universities.

These are the facts - and they are just part of the picture - but the key to understanding the collapse of the higher education system is found in the justifications that the universities have provided for them. Every time it has been proposed to them that an independent professional development committee be established, comprising professionals who are former faculty members, they have replied that there is no need to examine the reliability of a faculty member - who is at a high level and enjoys international prestige, and on whose shoulders rests the responsibility for the scientific advancement of his area of specialization - by means of a bureaucratic system that brings honor to neither the candidate nor the institution. They also say that preventing the possibility of pursuing professional development, or influencing the approval of the professional development by means of unnecessary committees, will severely damage Israel's influence in the international scientific community.

The faculty members are sinning twice: in their flawed understanding of the concept of academic freedom, and in ignoring their status as public employees. The second sin is the graver of the two. In a combination of whining and arrogance, they are refusing to link their struggle to the future of higher education and the status of other academics in the economy - teachers, doctors and social workers (and above all the young researchers and instructors, on whose backs they are traveling the world) - and they are rejecting any possibility of solidarity.

How ironic: No matter how much the academics barricade themselves behind "academic freedom," the public does not understand the difference between them and the Israel Electric Corporation, and the more insulted they become, the more the indifference to the universities' fate grows. And thus, while they are protecting their money, all around them higher education is collapsing and burying beneath it genuine academic freedom, the free creativity and thought without which society and democracy cannot breathe.

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