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The university's ivory tower

By Elia Leibowitz

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In 387 B.C.E., the Greek philosopher Plato, who is arguably the Western world's father of analytical thought, founded the Academy in Athens. The institution lasted for 900 years before it was shuttered by the religious Byzantine ruler Justinian in 529, mainly because it was viewed as a pagan establishment that espoused treacherous ideas and heresy.

According to tradition, the Academy's door was engraved with the statement: "Let no one ignorant of geometry enter." To be exact, the phrase most likely read: "Let no one inept at geometry enter." This is a small yet critical difference.

Social activity in the modern state revolves around a few central institutions such as government, army, schools, television, the courts, universities, banks, hospitals and synagogues. The remaining rooms in the structures in which these institutions are housed adhere to the creed engraved on Plato's door.

The entrance to the building that houses the government is emblazoned with the phrase: "Let no one ignorant of what is good for the state enter." The door to the army reads: "Let no one ignorant of how to conquer a fortified post enter." With the exception of patients, the only people who enter hospitals are those who know how to cure disease. Attorneys' chambers at courthouses are inhabited only by those who know the extent of justice. The boardrooms of banks are entered only by those who know how to invest money. The gates of stadiums are emblazoned with a sentence reading that anyone who does not know how to put the ball in the basket is barred entry. Anyone who does not know what God wants is not permitted to enter a synagogue.

There is one institution, the only one in the country, on whose gates is engraved a completely different statement - the research university. Its doors read: "Let no one who knows enter." Indeed, in contrast with all the country's other institutions, which are collections of knowledgeable people, the research university is an institution of people who do not know.

In a world in which life is a struggle for survival, those who do not know are easy prey for those who do. This is why walls were immediately built around Europe's first universities in the Middle Ages, and within those walls ivory towers



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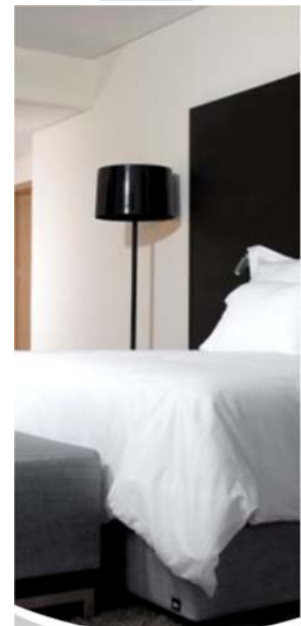
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were erected. The walls and towers were meant to protect those who did not know from those who did.

This was done by a small minority of powerful people who understood that in our competitive world, a world full of struggles and wars, societies that create and maintain cocoons for people who do not know or do not want to know enjoy a huge advantage. These powerful people, and at the same time people who have reached this understanding, have always been a small minority in any society, including Israel.

In the modern state, physical security, which is provided by the police and army, is accorded to everyone, those who know and those who do not know. Thus the walls and ivory towers in ancient universities were rendered tourist sites. This does not apply to the university as an institution. Not only has the existential danger not waned, it appears it has increased over the past generation for universities around the world, particularly in Israel.

University founders recognized the danger that threatened the institution. So they built walls and modern ivory towers. This is why Israel established a budget committee geared toward institutions of higher education and administrative councils to manage universities. Their main purpose was to protect the fragile, meager university-academic domain from public opinion's destructive force, political and economic propaganda, the market economy and the authorities.

In recent years, Israel has seen a steep decline in people's understanding of the research university's rightful place in human culture and its irreplaceable contribution to a country's strength and physical existence. This attitude is compounded by a misunderstanding of the function of the protective apparatus built around universities. This misunderstanding is evident among those who are supposed to be important pillars in the defensive wall; some university faculty members also suffer from this misunderstanding.

In light of these external pressures that are growing fiercer, some of which pose a hostile threat to the universities, the current defense is not holding up. The cracks in the wall have recently given way to flooding.

As a result, in almost complete contrast to the popular catchphrases uttered from every direction, we must say in a loud and clear voice: Around this we must build a concrete separation fence.

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