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## Business unusual in the ivory tower

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June 19 was the last day of classes at Tel Aviv University, but unlike in previous years, it was far from heralding the beginning of a relaxing summer vacation. Eleven days later, university president Zvi Galil unexpectedly announced his resignation, and tension erupted between two of the highest-ranking forums at this important institution: the executive council, some of whose members are businessmen, and the senate, the supreme academic body, which consists of deans and senior professors. The resignation was at first presented as a personal decision by Galil, but it soon emerged that his departure was the outcome of a passionate struggle revolving around a single question: Who controls the largest university in Israel?

"That was the first public battle between the businessmen and us, the academics," declared one TAU professor this week. "It's quite possible that it will also be the last. Our defeat will have an effect not only on TAU, but on all the other universities in the country."

Two people are on the front lines of this war: Galil, a professor of computer science who was appointed to his post two years ago after serving for 12 years as dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at New York's Columbia University, and Dr. Leora Meridor, a former senior official at the Bank of Israel and chairwoman of the board of Bezeq International, who replaced Dov Lautman in March as chair of TAU's executive council.

Exactly one week before Advertisement  
 Galil announced he was leaving, the two met. Meridor told him he had only one option: to resign, because of "administrative failure."

Now, for the first time, Meridor and Galil have each told Haaretz their version of the story, which is a far cry from the joint declaration they wrote at the time,



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which stated that Galil wanted "to devote himself to research," and Meridor "expresses profound admiration for Galil's work and personality."

"Both parties agreed not to say anything beyond the joint declaration, which preserves the good name of the university and the president," Meridor explained this week. But that agreement was violated when, on the very day it was published, it also became known that Galil was in effect forced to resign. Since then the protest of the TAU faculty has only intensified: Last week 275 senior professors signed a letter supporting Galil, and the senate decided to investigate the proceedings that led to his resignation.

Meridor says she broke her silence to confront the "groundless accusations to the effect that the executive council plotted against Galil, and that the decision to end his tenure was made on its merits." Galil, for his part, says: "I preferred to remain silent until they started to slander me." Meridor rejects the charges that she already planned to oust Galil when assuming chairmanship of the executive council.

"I knew they were saying he had to be fired, but I explained that I hadn't come to be the 'executioner,'" says Meridor, who does not conceal her disappointment with Galil. "At the first meeting, when I asked what his vision was, he was unable to apply the right principles to the reality around us. It's not enough to say the university has to be among the top 20 in the world."

Meridor claims she tried to promote formulation of a strategic plan to deal with the budget cuts imposed by the government on higher education. "In such a situation, you can't just keep on doing what was done before, only to a lesser extent. You have to make decisions: what should be severed with one sharp blow, and what should be strengthened. This is the ABC of management. In the next 10 years, about half the tenured staff will retire, and the university can move forward - on condition we know where we are heading. Under different circumstances, we could perhaps have waited until Galil concluded his term, three years from now. But we don't have the privilege of waiting for someone else. We need a president of a different stature."

#### 'A good man'

Meridor met with Galil regularly each week, and observes, "He's a good man, but he doesn't know how to be a manager. I'd give him a list of things that had to be done, and nothing would happen. It was a regular pattern: There would be a crisis and no decision would be made, as though the president was just a minor player."

She mentions three instances in recent months in which she waited in vain for Galil to act: during the crisis surrounding the continued operation of TAU's school of dentistry ("Beyond sending a letter accusing the authorities of failure to allocate a budget, he didn't do a thing"); the request that faculty members waive a 5-percent salary increase this year to help offset the deficit ("A president has to lead such a move, which is something that was not done"); and the failure to formulate a strategic plan for the university.

She adds that she met with over 30 staff members, including the rector, Prof. Dany Leviatan, various deans and leading scientists, "and gradually realized that the staff's opinions of Galil were much worse than those of the executive council. The conclusion was that the university was not being managed, and that Galil



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was an administrative failure."

One of the professors said that at faculty meetings Galil was indeed harshly criticized. This week several faculty deans declined to comment. "It's best to let the matter rest," said one.

At their meeting on June 23, Meridor told Galil that he was not suitable for the job, and demanded that he resign. "I said that for his benefit and for that of the university, it would be desirable to have a new president, who would deal better with the challenges. I had two options: I could decide that I can't handle the issue and avoid taking responsibility, or I could make sure there would be a new president. In my experience, it's least painful when you do it quickly."

The two met again six days later. Galil informed Meridor that he was not ready to resign, and countered that she should be the one to go. Shortly afterward, an executive council meeting began, at which Galil read a prepared speech, which lasted 20 minutes.

"If anyone had any doubt how out of touch Galil is, that speech buried him," was how one of those present described it.

At the meeting there was general agreement regarding Galil's unsuitability for the job. The three senate representatives on the executive council - Prof. Uri Shaked, Prof. Thalma Lobel and Prof. Ehud Toledano - led the discussion.

Meridor: "I said it was better for Galil to resign quietly. At the end there was an understanding that he had 48 hours to do so and if he didn't, the executive council would take steps to oust him. The next day there was an agreement about the resignation."

Last week, at a stormy discussion in the senate, several members demanded that Shaked, Lobel and Toledano resign for supporting Galil's dismissal. The three had planned to deliver a joint statement, but decided against it.

"We reached the unavoidable conclusion that there were basic and irreparable problems [with Galil's ability to fill the position]," they wrote in their speech, which was published in Haaretz.

The executive council is convinced that Galil stands behind the senate's decision to investigate his dismissal and behind the professors' letter supporting him.

Does the ousting of Galil signal the victory of the businessmen over the academics?

Meridor: "The members of the faculty who sit on the executive council also supported the ouster. Academic freedom is very important to me, but the dismissal is unrelated to that, it's a matter of administrative ability. Those who leveled criticism at us do not have first-hand familiarity with the situation."

A financial agreement was drawn up between the executive committee and Galil, which guarantees him a higher salary than that of a tenured professor, but lower than that of university president; the disparity between the two levels ranges between NIS 10,000 and NIS 15,000 per month. The agreement is now awaiting the approval of the wages director in the Finance Ministry, and when and if that is received, Meridor promises to publicize its details.

### **'No administrative failure'**

In his home in Tel Aviv this week, Galil was planning the next stage in the battle over his reputation.

"I didn't have any administrative failure, and I have nothing to hide, but now I'm being vilified. My presidency fell apart because of the business elite, of which I was not a member," he explains, adding that two main groups are responsible for his ouster: the executive council and a large proportion of faculty deans, who have rebelled against budgetary cutbacks. Of the two, the confrontation with the

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former seems more fundamental.

Galil describes several battles that he waged against the committee. The first revolved around the construction of the new dormitory compound (the "Sheikh Munis" complex). The tender for the project was won by Housing & Construction, which is controlled by Shari Arison; it calls for eight buildings to house 2,300 students and young staff members. The executive council decided that negotiations on behalf of the university would be handled by committee member Alfred Akirov.

Galil: "I thought that was improper because Akirov is a real-estate mogul. I wanted to prevent the appearance of improper conduct and asked Akirov to let the director general of the university handle the negotiations. Akirov was furious, and since then I've felt I was a marked man."

Akirov was unavailable for a comment. Meridor claims she was not involved in the issue.

The second confrontation was related to the strike of faculty members at local universities about two years ago. Lautman, chairman of the TAU executive council at the time, came out against the strikers and called for injunctions against them. Afterward he also demanded that the gates of the university be closed to the lecturers, who continued to arrive at the campus to do research.

Galil says he opposed both moves: "I didn't support the strike, but I believed that the meaning of academic freedom means, among other things, that the court should not be brought into the university and that the faculty should not be treated with violence."

He claims that the argument with Lautman reached the university's legal committee, which was asked to clarify the president's powers and determine whether the executive council was allowed to give him orders.

"The legal committee decided that I was the one who runs the university, and that only during a time of crisis can the executive council intervene," he explains. "That is actually the heart of the struggle. The council did not forget this and took revenge on me for what I ostensibly did to Lautman. In hindsight, it may be that I won a few battles, but lost the war."

### **'Public figures'**

The names of the members of the TAU executive council do not appear on the university Web site. Six of the 11 are "public figures," but that is a somewhat vague description: Most of them are businessmen or are people associated with businessmen. Indeed, council members include Akirov, chairman of Alrov; attorney Ruta Oren, of the leading law firm S. Horowitz & Co.; and businessmen Ran Kroll and Dr. Yehoshua Gleitman. A relatively new member is Prof. Boleslav Goldman, personal physician of former prime minister Ariel Sharon. Up until a few months ago, businessman Carmel Vernia, former CEO of Converse and the chief scientist of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor, and Dan Propper, the chairman of the Osem Group, also served on the council. In recent years, Liora Meridor was also a director on the boards of firms headed Lautman, Akirov and Propper.

"These businessmen work with one another and spend their free time together," says a professor who opposes Galil's dismissal. "Galil is an outsider, and the positions he took - for example, in supporting the faculty - aroused the wrath of the executive council. It's hard to believe that managerial problems would have been a sufficient reason for the dismissal, had he gotten along with them."

On the other hand, another professor says that "presenting the businessmen as scoundrels, or the deans as disloyal, is a caricature. The situation is more complex. It's clear that had there not been pressure, from above and below, Galil's tenure would not have ended."

Galil vehemently rejects the arguments against his managerial and leadership

abilities. "It's nonsense, and the letter of support for me proves that there is no basis for these claims. The former president of the Hebrew University, Prof. Menachem Magidor, was also unsuccessful in getting his faculty to postpone a 5-percent salary increment for a year. When the issue of the strategic plan came up, I said I would present it at the end of the summer, but Meridor didn't wait. I warned her that she was causing tremendous damage to the university and to the institution of the presidency, and she replied that the damage would be greater if I stayed."

The day after their first tough meeting, Galil flew to France for a fundraising campaign. The next time they saw each other, he told Meridor she was the one who should resign. "The public didn't choose her, and her job was to back me. The discussion in the executive council was very short, and when they started talking about me, I left the room. An hour later my attorney called and said I had 48 hours [to resign] before I was dismissed. I was thrown out of the job like the most lowly employee. No university employee can be dismissed that way. At the moment there is no question that Meridor is the supreme ruler at the university. The opinion of the faculty members and the students has lost its importance. They are the real building blocks of the university - not the executive council, whose members are temporary guests."

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