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HIGHER EDUCATION IN ISRAEL AND ITS TRANSFORMATION

Higher education in Israel is clearly going through a radical transformation, the signs of which are obvious and the outcome impossible to predict. The wide-reaching student strike that has heralded the beginning of the 1998-1999 school year is only one factor in this crisis. To understand this situation, we first need to turn to a description of the model on which the universities were based. This will enable us to analyze the factors of change in the current crisis.

Well before the creation of the State, it was realized that a University should be created to accompany the national Jewish renaissance. This was the context for the founding of the first two institutions of higher learning: first the Technion in Haifa, as a school of engineering (founded in 1912), and above all the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (opened in 1925). In the pre-state period these two institutions could only be completely private, created as associations and funded by Zionist organizations. These associations also regularly sought funds abroad through the "Friends of the University" a method that is widespread in the United States. Student tuition only covered a minute part of the budget. After the founding of the State, this situation continued to exist. Higher education was always furnished by private institutions but the State had no choice than to participate in its funding. In the early years, the State contributed up to 80 % of the operating budget. This figure gradually dropped and no longer exceeds 60 %. However because of the State's ballast in university budgets, they lost most of their financial independence. Teachers' salaries have been fixed by governmental decision for many years and hence are identical across all institutions.

The rapid growth of the population (the total population has risen from 800,000 in 1948 to 2,150,000 in 1960, to 3,000,000 in 1970 and 4,800,000 in 1990; on November 1, 1998 the figure of 6 million inhabitants was reached) and the demand for higher education have both made it impossible for the traditional system to function as such. Although there are seven universities today (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Technion, Bar-Ilan, Haifa, Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheva and the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot) they cannot

handle the current demand (in 1960 there were 10,000 students enrolled in the universities; today there are more than 110,000). In addition these universities operate now at maximum capacity. In contrast to the systems found in some European countries (France, Italy, Germany) these institutions refuse to grow indefinitely. For instance the University of Tel Aviv (the largest of the Israeli universities) with 26,000 students has reached a ceiling which it does not wish to exceed (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Bar Ilan both do not wish to exceed 21,000 students each).

Demand thus outweighs supply. This is why, as early as 1972-73, a selection process was instigated (in fact it had always existed for the medical, pharmacy and dental schools) to enroll in the most popular departments and faculties (which aside from medicine were the Law school, psychology and management). Starting in the 1980s, the situation became intolerable. Many students were forced to go abroad to study (in particular in law). Societal pressure finally paid off. A new policy of university accreditation was gradually put into effect.

In fact, the first steps towards decentralization had already taken place. Most of the large universities had needed to open local branches in certain remote areas in particular in the far North and in lower Galilee. In fact the University of Haifa was originally a branch of Jerusalem. This however was not sufficient.

Private organizations (in particular connected to the Histadrut labor union), businessmen and groups of professors decided to open “colleges” based the American system which were initially authorized to grant B.A. degrees (comparable to the French “Licence” or in some cases to the Masters in France). It came as no surprise that the first subjects taught were law and management, followed by economy, psychology, communication and computer science. These colleges (in Hebrew *mikhlatot*) must be accredited by the council for higher education of the Ministry of Education. This council examines the teaching set up, the staff, the libraries, etc. Accreditation is only granted after in depth study. Accreditation is never institutional, but rather must be requested for each subject taught.

The main difference between colleges and the Universities is the way in which they are funded. The new colleges have committed themselves never to ask for public funding. The outcome is that tuition fees are extremely high: they are exactly twice those of regular universities (19,000 shekels or about \$ 4,550 as compared to 9,000 shekels or \$ 2,150). This is doubtless the greatest weakness of these private colleges (whose enrollment already exceeds 20,000 students). The 1998 general students' strike is primarily over university tuition fees. These students in fact pay precisely half as much as students in colleges do. The most underprivileged students (who often cannot enroll in the university

because they did not pass the entrance exam) find themselves in an extremely difficult situation as though they were being doubly penalized.

This panorama highlights the enormity of the transformation of the Israeli system of higher education. In a nutshell, Israeli higher education is experiencing a change that the European universities have already been through. Because the legal framework is different in Israel, the solutions will doubtless also be very different. In addition, funding is only part of the problem. Earlier or later, the State will have to take over the new colleges because it will have to absorb tens of thousands of students who, if the colleges disappear, will not be able to register at a university. In this respect, the situation is strangely akin to the one which prompted the French legislature to take over the funding of instructors in private schools, on the basis of the Debré Law (1959). The real stakes however are much higher. The Israeli universities have reached a level of excellence in many fields – both scientific and literary – because the emphasis has always been on research. The development of new frameworks for higher education creates pockets where research will be sidelined. The real issue is to what extent the college system will expand (as is the case in the USA) leaving the universities to handle more advanced (Masters and Ph.D.) study. Any other solution would further widen the cultural gap between social classes. It could in particular put a stop to upward mobility that has been one of the prime features of Israeli society. Israeli higher education is hence going through a real identity crisis that to a great extent mirrors the crisis in Israeli society. Severing the ties between university and society which characterized higher education for so many years, may threaten the legitimacy of what was for so long one of the shining examples of the country.

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