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Mount Scopus or Mount Olympus?

By EMMANUEL
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A code of ethics would clearly define what does and does not constitute academic freedom of expression.

On November 2, the Knesset Education Committee hosted a special hearing – “The Exclusion of Zionist Positions in Academia.” The event was chaired by MK Zevulun Orlev and attended by Education Minister Gideon Sa’ar, MKs from various political parties, high-ranking representatives of the universities, NGOs and ordinary citizens.

Two NGOs, the Institute for Zionist Strategies (IZS) and Im Tirtzu, were asked to present the main conclusions of their study on what they claim to be the increasingly post-Zionistic narratives of the country’s political science and sociology departments. In October, IZS published a 122- page document called “Post-Zionism in Academia.” Im Tirtzu published in May a 64-page document called “Anti-Zionistic Incitement and Bias in Universities.”

Both publications include an extensive review of syllabi, and both reach the conclusion that students are mostly taught a onesided and derogatory description of nationalism in general and Zionism in particular. Im Tirtzu’s report also includes testimonies of students about what they claim to be the one-sidedness and political intolerance of their professors, as well as a review of the political petitions signed by Israeli academics.

Instead of addressing the issues raised by the IZS and by Im Tirtzu, the academic establishment has reacted with scorn and arrogance. At the Knesset hearing, Ben-Gurion University rector Zvi Hacoheh interrupted IZS’s presentation, calling it “nonsense” and claiming (without proof) that its paper did not meet the most basic criteria of academic research. Tel Aviv University rector Aharon Shai also claimed IZS’s paper was not a research paper (without explaining why) and added that adopting an academic code of ethics (as proposed by Sa’ar at the beginning of the hearing) would “destroy Israeli academia.”

MKs were divided. Meretz’s Haim Oron and Nitzan Horowitz claimed that the alleged political bias of political science departments should be discussed in the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and not in the Knesset. To which Kadima MK Ronit Tirosh replied that expecting the CHE to discuss the issue was naïve at best and hypocritical at worst: Since it is mostly composed of university professors, it automatically circles the wagons around its peers. Tirosh, of course, could have added that, as the body that represents taxpaying citizens, the Knesset is entitled to check if that tax money is used to pay the salaries of professors who call for an international boycott of Israel.

TWO DAYS after the Knesset hearing, *Haaretz* came out in defense of the universities by claiming that adopting a code of ethics would harm academic freedom. It wrote that Sa’ar proposed such a code as a result of the lobbying of Im Tirtzu. But the idea of a code was first proposed by Prof. Amnon Rubinstein, a renowned academic with impeccable liberal credentials. Moreover, BGU has such a code (the only local university to have one). Did BGU adopt its code to “destroy Israeli academia?”

Rubinstein advocates the adoption of a code of ethics in his article “Academic Freedom of Expression” to be published this month in the Interdisciplinary Center’s journal *Law and Business* (a draft of the article is posted on his personal website). The article addresses the question as to whether calls from certain Israeli academics to boycott Israel are part of freedom of expression.

He argues that professors enjoy a special status because their students have to listen to them and take their exams to succeed (certainly for mandatory classes). So professors have obligations precisely because they have privileges. Rubinstein is of the opinion that there is no appropriate legal mechanism in Israel to ensure that professors do not abuse their freedom of expression and respect the obligations that stem from their privileges.

Thus he recommends the adoption of a code to clearly define what does and does not constitute academic freedom of expression. In the US, such a code was adopted in 1940 by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and it has been revised and updated. The code states that professors "should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others."

Those here who oppose the adoption of a code would do a service to the public debate by presenting sound arguments instead of claiming it would "destroy Israeli academia" or that Sa'ar is a pawn of Im Tirtzu. Until they do, one will have reason to assume that they have a problem with accuracy, restraint, and respect for the opinions of others.

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