

Higher Concerns

Israelis are worried about their leadership. The Jewish state's political life is never without its share of controversy, but the last year has seen a monsoon of scandals and mishandled crises—including the war in Lebanon, in which admirable aims were eviscerated by diplomatic and military failure; the withdrawal from Gaza, in which the uprooting of thousands of families from their Gaza homes emboldened Israel's enemies on multiple fronts; and the criminal investigation or indictment of the country's justice minister, president, and two successive prime ministers—a situation so acute as to make many Israelis wonder whether there is not something more profound at play, a kind of deterioration of public life, or perhaps a breakdown in the mechanism that is supposed to produce leaders of integrity and skill who dedicate themselves to public service.

How do great leaders arise? There are, of course, so many intangibles of character that make for the combination of judgment, steadfastness, and courage necessary to lead. But there is one investment a society can make which may contribute directly to the emergence of good leaders: In the area of education, and especially higher education. Great leadership begins with citizens who are deeply familiar with, and committed to, the history, ideas, and values of their people. To produce wise political and cultural figures, a nation's schools must provide tomorrow's leaders not only with the proper skills required for political activity, such as public speaking and organization, but also with a serious education in history, literature, philosophy, and other disciplines collectively known as

the “humanities.” For this reason, some schools, such as Columbia University and the University of Chicago, require students to study a “core curriculum,” a set of specific courses covering the classic works of Western civilization with which every educated person should be familiar. In this way, the universities have historically seen their role as fostering the next generation of citizens and public servants who would have the perspective, wisdom, and strength of character necessary for exercising sound judgment on behalf of their communities and their nations.

The Jewish state, too, was founded on a vision that included a dream of creating a new generation of Jews capable of leading their people in their new, sovereign life. Theodor Herzl envisioned the establishment of a Jewish university, and even canvased the Ottoman Sultan for its establishment in Jerusalem. Chaim Weizmann, writing in honor of the founding of the Hebrew University in 1925, argued that the new Jewish institution would “shelter within its walls teacher and disciple animated by the spirit that they are all building a home... for Jewish values which will not only be the soul and the guide of our effort in Palestine, but will radiate out its influence into the world, and make its contribution to humanity.” Albert Einstein, too, believed that the Jewish university had the capacity to “demonstrate with the greatest clearness the achievements of which the Jewish spirit is capable.” The university, he believed, would become “a great spiritual center which will evoke the respect of cultured mankind the world over.”

In a Jewish state, of course, such a vision would not mean simply the re-creation of the same humanities programs taught in non-Jewish settings. Heirs to a tradition which produced the Bible and the Talmud, Jews have always understood that they possessed not only a unique way of life, but also a message for the world grounded in a unique Jewish understanding of life, morality, God, and the ways of the world. It was the supreme dedication to this worldview which led Jews around the world to endure hardship and persecution rather than abandon their identity. Even those Jews who knew little about their own heritage understood that they were protecting something precious—a message of enduring relevance not just for

ourselves, but for all mankind. In order to develop a future of thoughtful, historically minded, uniquely Jewish leaders, a new concept of humanities would have to be developed—what we may call a “Jewish humanities.” Such a curriculum would combine the riches of Western civilization, to which both Israel and Diaspora Jewry consider themselves the heir, with those of the Jewish tradition, from the Bible to the Talmud to modern Hebrew literature.

In the last generation, however, something has gone wrong with this crucial element of the Zionist enterprise. While Israeli universities have succeeded in producing world-class scholars in fields like the natural sciences and economics, the vital area of the humanities, after prolonged neglect, has entered a tailspin. Drastic budget cuts have sharply reduced the number of faculty positions and scholarships, with the brunt of the burden borne by the “unprofitable” humanities programs. Libraries, too, have suffered, with Israel’s leading universities cutting back the purchase of books and journals by 50 to 80 percent in the last few years, making it increasingly difficult for students to write their papers and for scholars to conduct basic research. The Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn, after visiting Israel in May 2006, noted that “overall reductions in the funding of universities have severely impacted the humanities, in terms of staff reductions, available fellowship aid at all levels, and the possibility of academic employment for even the most gifted young students.... At the highest level, there is brain drain abroad; for the rest, frustration and dispersal through the labor market in ways that have little to do with their specialist training.” Veteran journalist Sever Plocker, writing in *Yediot Aharonot*, similarly describes a once-proud academic culture now in free fall: “Without budgets even for teaching assistants, not to speak of world-class lecturers, the departments are drying up, the talented minds fleeing, the classrooms emptying out.” Aaron Ciechanover, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist, spelled out the implications of this decline in a recent interview:

There's an educational deterioration at all levels. Even when speaking to those possessing academic degrees, I find garbled language, the lack of cultural depth, and ignorance when it comes to general history and the history of the Jewish people.... I see an intimate connection between the degeneration of the Israeli spirit and the degeneration of the country. Without developed humanities and Jewish studies, there will be no high-quality science of any kind in the State of Israel. Not physics, not chemistry, not mathematics, and not medicine.

A generation in the making, the collapse of the humanities in the Jewish state has come at an inauspicious time. If the humanities are needed to give us the clarity, wisdom, and perspective to give our people direction, then one cannot but notice the lack of such direction in the most crucial areas of Jewish life. In the diaspora, the absence of a creative Jewish intellectual leadership has resulted in the inability of rabbis, scholars, and communal leaders to present a coherent message as to what meaning Judaism may have today—without which there is little hope in convincing our most talented young people why, at the end of the day, Jewish identity is anything more than an irrational and arbitrary attachment to a people of the past. In Israel, the most influential thinkers, scholars, and writers have increasingly adopted a worldview prejudiced against the kind of cultural flowering that was to be the centerpiece of the Zionist awakening, and Israel's academic establishment has, for the most part, deferred to post-modern fashions in areas such as sociology, history, philosophy, and Jewish studies. These factions argue that the Jewish people is nothing more than an "imagined community," an artificial construct with no genuine basis in history; that nation states like Israel are an outdated political form that naturally leads to racism; that the cause of establishing a Jewish state was an essentially immoral enterprise. The failure of Israeli thinkers to mount an adequate response to such views has left tomorrow's Jewish leaders, both in Israel and on campuses across the West, at a loss to defend their own identity and the cause of a Jewish state.

The encouragement of great leadership is not an exact science; but neither is it rocket science. It begins with education, and in particular, a university system that provides far more than vocational preparation for the next generation of high-tech *wunderkinder*. It requires a profound investment in Jewish and Western humanities, for only in this way can a generation of citizens emerge who understand the meaning of our past, the imperative of public service, the reasons for sacrifice, the possibilities of the spirit, the obligations of ethics, and the unique potential of the Jewish people. In a democracy, one must cast a wide net, investing in the education of an entire populace, and especially in those institutions which will produce the authors, activists, journalists, judges, politicians, and cultural heroes of tomorrow. There may be no tonic for Israel's immediate ills. Great leaders are neither bought nor manufactured on demand. But they can emerge, in impressive numbers and at just the right moments, when hewn from the stone of our collective spirit.

David Hazony, for the editors
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