

Fascism Is Creeping Into Israel's Education System

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If we look at Israel's education system through the prism of PISA – the Program of International Student Assessment – the situation looks bleak. Every three years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development conducts these exams to check the skills of 15-year-old students the world over in reading, mathematics and science. Consistently, the results for Israel suggest that the percentage of high-school graduates who will find it difficult to integrate into their society and economy is one of the highest among the more than 70 countries in which the PISA surveys are conducted. The achievements of Israel's teachers, which the test also evaluates, also leave much to be desired.

The situation is even worse, considering that between 2006 and 2016, the local education budget actually grew by 30 billion shekels (about \$7 billion) and has continued to increase apace since. But the investment of all those billions resulted in improvements of only another 13 points in the PISA science tests and another 28 points in math section.

The explanation for this is neither new nor surprising. “We need to understand that we are educating students for their future, and not for our past,” says Andreas Schleicher, coordinator of the PISA and in essence the OECD’s “minister of education,” in regard to the low achievements in Israel. As he told Haaretz (Hebrew edition) last month, “Pedagogy in Israel is very traditional and standard. It is not directed toward developing the student’s skills, it does not emphasize creative thinking and problem solving. There is too much rote learning. It doesn’t work like that anymore. In the modern world you are not rewarded for what you know, but for what you can do with the knowledge you have accumulated.”

There is nothing new about all this. In 2005, I published an article in the wake of an announcement by a senior Education Ministry official, in which I wrote: “We have been informed that henceforth part of the matriculation grade in Bible will include memorization of verses and reciting them aloud. The goal underlying this decision by the coordinating supervisor of Bible studies is ‘to draw the students close to the Bible and to improve their ability to read texts aloud.’”

“How lovely that in the age of information and technology, innovation in the Education Ministry takes the form of placing the emphasis not on the ability to understand a text, nor on critical thinking or even on the sheer ability to find one’s way through the recesses of the Bible, but on the ability of Israeli students to present an appropriate Zionist response to church choirs by chanting a number of selected verses according to biblical cantillation.”

And, continuing: “Judaism’s cultural richness was born from criticism and wonder, from disputes and from daring, and not from memorization and reading aloud It’s essential to create intellectual curiosity.”

We should not be surprised by the politicization of the education system. In September 2016, Education Minister Naftali Bennett chose to declare, at an event saluting the TALM (Hebrew acronym for “enriched Jewish studies”) education fund, that, “The study of Judaism and excelling in it is more important to me than the study of mathematics and science.” Not for the first time, Bennett also rejected criticism that was leveled at this approach. One such critique was voiced at the time by Rachel Elior, professor of Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: “What is most important are studies about human dignity, according to which the sanctity of life is universal and is not conditional on religion and nationality.”

It’s worth recalling that the education clause in the platform of Bennett’s Habayit Hayehudi party ignores societal diversity and advocates foisting a religious-Zionist (nationalist) education on all Jewish children. The love of homeland that the party seeks to teach involves annexation of the West Bank, continued rule over another people and the international isolation of Israel until “we accustom the world” to this policy. Its educational model ignores such biblical imperatives as “you shall love the stranger.” It evokes the educational approach about which Yeshayahu Leibowitz wrote a searing warning: “A person who accepts the opinion that ‘the state,’ ‘the nation,’ ‘the homeland,’ ‘security’ and so forth are the supreme values, and that

unconditional loyalty to those values is an absolute and sacred duty, will be capable of perpetrating every abomination for the sake of that sacred interest, without any pangs of conscience.”

Bennett’s approach is reflected in the allocation of resources to nationalist-religious-messianic education, in which, it must be said, the two previous education ministers, Gideon Sa’ar and Shai Piron, were also complicit. According to Education Ministry data, between 2012 and 2016, the ministry increased the per capita budget for students in state-religious high schools by the highest percentage of all the educational streams: Totalling 33,000 shekels (about \$9,500) per student per year, the sum allotted was 22 percent higher than that for students in the secular state education system, and 67 percent higher than for students in Arab high schools.

Bennett knows that by shaping the political outlook of the country’s youth it will be possible to influence the political system, and with it Israel’s character and regime, in the years ahead. This insight is shared by all of those who wish to “settle in the hearts,” and promote nationalist and messianic ideas among the larger public.

But the educational disaster currently being experienced by Israeli society runs deeper: It is tainted by signs of fascism. “Anti-intellectualism” has always been a symptom of fascism. The persecution of liberal intellectuals for their supposed

betrayal of tradition or of authoritarian ideology was an obligation for the thinkers of the elite in such places as fascist Italy. Discussing this, the poet and author Lea Goldberg noted that intellectuals and creative artists pose a threat to dictatorships and to worldviews that deny human liberty, when they (the artists) teach “humanity to say ‘no’ with bitter derision when the time demands it.”

This, too, was how many perceived the “code of ethics” for university lecturers drawn up last year by philosopher Asa Kasher at Bennett’s request. And MK Tzipi Hotovely, later to become Israel’s deputy foreign minister, wrote on her Facebook page in September 2014 in reference to the creative backbone of Israel’s high-tech industry, the engine of the growth of the country’s economy: “The refusal of officers in [IDF intelligence unit] 8200 [to serve in the reserves] is a social explosive belt and reflects the moral bankruptcy of the education system in which they grew up. They are not worthy to serve in the world’s most moral army. The chief of staff must start the process of their dismissal immediately.”

Israel’s failure in the PISA literacy tests also attests to the “degeneration of language” that we see in many elected officials. Still, no one even comes close to the minister of culture in this regard. All fascistic textbooks used throughout history have made use of a minimal lexicon and the most basic grammar, with the aim of depleting the tools for critical and complex thinking. In a five-minute speech that then-Likud MK Miri Regev delivered to high-school students while appearing on a panel of politicians in 2012, she asserted that Labor MK Shelly Yacimovich voted for

Hadash (the communist, Jewish-Arab party), and activist Stav Shafir (who later became an MK from Labor) was a communist.

In such a culture, we may find it difficult to follow and understand a process that unfolds across many years – until the moment when a particular slice of reality reflects the full force and implications of such a process. This is not the first time the naked truth about Israel's teachers has been exposed. It happened two years ago, too, in the episode of the survey of teachers regarding the history of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Suddenly we were confronted with the gloomy picture: A survey conducted in September 2015 by the newspaper Israel Hayom found that 69 percent of the country's school teachers do not know what happened on November 29, 1947, and 57 percent do not know what the Green Line is or how it was determined. The material that must be memorized is chosen carefully – the prayer for rain, for example, because according to the Education Ministry this can influence rainfall – but it does not include formative events in the history of Zionism.

There's nothing accidental about this ignorance concerning issues that determine our fate. It is the result of the fact that in recent years the Education Ministry has been led by figures from the nationalist and messianic-religious camp.

The process that is occurring in the state education system has become exacerbated mainly due to two important trends, which are instrumental in creating the political culture and the greater social culture that exists in the public domain.

The first, and more important, trend guarantees – in the absence of knowledge of Israel's major milestones – that the school curriculum will not include certain concepts and facts, and outlines of historical processes, that could serve as the basis for a fuller understanding of the history of Zionism and the conflict with the Arabs. It is easier to introduce “historical truths” into this knowledge vacuum and to change them according to various political needs – as seen, for example, in the prime minister's remarks about the Jerusalem mufti Hajj Amin al-Husseini's supposed responsibility for proposing the Final Solution to Hitler.

The second trend involves the introduction of nationalist, religious and messianic content into the curriculum, which Bennett manages to do clandestinely; it's easy and convenient when there is no other solid base of knowledge to be contended with. This is a manifestation of the education minister's main mission, based on his statement that for the sake of the Land of Israel it is necessary to change the people of Israel and the State of Israel. He and his colleagues are now focusing on “settling in people's hearts,” following a series of traumas deriving from the shattering of messianism on the rocks of reality: the Gaza withdrawal, the evacuation of the illegal

Migron and Amona outposts, and the containment of the building momentum in the settlements as a result of international pressure.

This evil wind that is blowing through the country's education system is in total contradiction to the spirit of the country's founders. They sought to ensure the future more than to preserve the past – as David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, Israel's second president, wrote in their 1918 book, "Eretz Yisrael": "If we wish to determine the borders of the Land of Israel of today, [it is] mainly if we see it not as the preserve of the Jewish past but as the land of the Jewish future."

Indeed, if these trends are not halted and the process not reversed, Israel will end up realizing the warning of Lord Nathaniel Rothschild, who wrote to Theodor Herzl in August 1902, "I tell you very frankly that I should view with horror the establishment of a Jewish colony pure and simple. it would be a Ghetto with the prejudices of a Ghetto; it would be a small petty Jewish state, orthodox and illiberal, excluding the Gentile and the Christian."