

What did Israeli students learn this year? the least possible

Shaul Arieli, June 12, 2018, Ha'aretz

If one looks at the education system in Israel through the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) glasses, the situation is not encouraging. Every year, the OECD examines the level of literacy of students aged 15-16 in reading, mathematics, and science, and has been predicting for years that in Israel, the proportion of high school graduates who will find it difficult to integrate into the society and the economy is one of the highest in the OECD. Teachers' achievements in Israel are also not high.

The severity of the situation is greater in light of the fact that in 2006-2016 the education budget increased by 30 billion NIS, and since then it has continued to grow. But all these billions resulted in an increase of only 13 points in the PISA exams in the sciences, and another 28 points in mathematics.

The explanation for this is neither new nor surprising. "We need to understand that we are educating students towards their future - not our past", says Prof. Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education minister, following the low achievements of Israeli students and their teachers. "Pedagogy in Israel is very traditional and standard. It is not oriented towards development of students' skills, it does not focus on creative thinking and problem solving ... Your education system has too many studies based on memorization ... It does not work that way 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.

This is not new. Like others, I published an article in 2005 ("Why study? – memorize) which read: "We were informed that from now on, part of the matriculation grade in Bible studies, will include memorizing the verses and reading them aloud. The goal behind the decision of the coordinator of Bible studies is to "bring the Bible closer to the students and improve their ability to read texts aloud." In the era of information

and technology, the innovation of the Ministry of Education is expressed in the emphasis not on the ability to understand the text, nor on critical thinking or even on the ability to understand the Bible, but on the ability of Israeli students to present a suitable Zionist response to the church choirs - and to sing according to the cantillation of the Bible a number of selected verses". And later: "The cultural richness of Judaism was born of criticism and wonder, controversy and daring - not from memorization and reading aloud ... intellectual curiosity must be created".

It is not surprising that Minister of Education Naftali Bennett chose in September 2016 to announce at an honorary event for the fund for the reinforcement of Jewish studies that: "Studying Judaism and excellence in it is more important in my eyes than mathematics and science studies", repeatedly rejecting criticism of this position. Such criticism was made by Rachel Elijor, a professor of Jewish philosophy who wrote a short while beforehand on Facebook: "The most important is the study of human dignity, of which the universal sanctity of his life is not dependent on religion or nationality".

It should be remembered that Bennett's party education clause ignores the diversity of society and seeks to apply to all children a Jewish (religious) Zionist (nationalistic) education. The love of the homeland that the "Jewish home" party seeks to educate for, involves the annexation of the West Bank, the continued domination of another people, and international isolation until we "habituate the world". Its educational model ignores commandments such as "Love the stranger". It offers the educational world on which Yeshayahu Leibowitz wrote the sharp warning: "When one accepts the view that 'the state', 'the nation', 'the homeland', 'security' etc. are the supreme values and that the unconditional loyalty to these values is an absolute holy obligation - he will be able to commit any abomination for this sacred interest, without any pangs of conscience".

This is reflected in the allocation of greater resources for the religious-nationalist-messianic education, to which, and it must be admitted, Gideon Sa'ar and Shai Piron were also partners. According to Ministry of Education data, between 2012 and 2016, the Ministry of Education increased the budget for religious high school students at

the sharpest rate compared to other sectors, reaching a peak of 33,000 NIS per student per year. This amount is 22% higher than the budget allocated to high school students of the general state funded sector, and 67% of the budget allocated to Arab high school students.

Bennett knows that shaping the political position of the youth will affect the political system, its character, and the regime of the State of Israel in the coming years. This insight is not hidden from those who wish to "settle in the hearts" and promote nationalistic messianic ideas.

But the educational disaster of Israeli society is even deeper and is touched by the characteristics of fascism. "Anti-intellectualism" has always been a symptom of fascism. The persecution of liberal intellectuals for their betrayal of traditional values or of the ideology that aspires to rule was the guiding principle of the thinkers of the Fascist elite. Leah Goldberg explained this by saying that intellectuals and artists threaten dictatorships and worldviews that suppress human freedom by "teaching humanity to say 'no' with bitter mockery when the time demands it".

The "ethical code" for university lecturers, formulated by Prof. Asa Kasher at Bennett's request, is perceived as such by many, as by Deputy Minister Tzipi Hotovely, who wrote on her Facebook page in September 2014 on the core of Israeli high-tech, the engine of economic growth: "The insubordination of 8200 officers is a social explosive belt and reflects the moral bankruptcy of the educational system in which they were raised. They are not worthy of serving in the most moral army in the world. The chief of staff must act for their dismissal immediately".

The Israeli failure in the literacy tests also attests to the "degeneracy of the language," which we can find among many elected officials. But no one comes close to the culture minister. All the fascist textbooks used a limited vocabulary and very basic syntax, reducing the tools for critical and complex thinking. In a five-minute speech given to high school students, Miri Regev announced that Stav Shafir is a Communist and Shelly

Yachimovich, voted for "Hadash" pointed out that "Miri Regev is no thief" and that "Jerusalem is forever and forever – clap!".

In this culture, which sanctifies the contemporary and the specific, we find it difficult to follow and understand processes that take place over many years until a specific cut of the picture of reality reflects the full strength and ramifications of the process in which we were subjected to. This is not the first time that the truth is revealed in its nakedness in relation to the teachers of Israel. This happened two years ago, in the case of the teachers of Israel and the history of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Suddenly, the gloomy picture was revealed to us: In a survey conducted by "Israel Hayom" newspaper, 69 percent of the teachers did not know what happened on November 29, 1947, while 57 percent did not know what the "green line" was and how it was determined. In other words, what is to be memorized is carefully chosen – "the prayer for rain", because it is one of the factors affecting the decline in rainfall according to the Ministry of Education, and not defining events in the history of Zionism.

This ignorance of the issues that determine our fate is not coincidental. It is the result of recent years, as the education system is under the leadership of ministers from the nationalist and religious-messianic camp. The process that takes place in the state education system consists mainly of two important trends that determine the political culture and the one that exists in the public sphere.

The first, and most important trend of the two, is the one that insures, in the absence of familiarity with the main milestones, that the curriculum will not establish a set of concepts and facts and a sketch of historical processes that can serve as a basis for a fuller understanding of Zionist history and the conflict with the Arabs. The gap of knowledge created makes it easier to cast "historical truths" and change them according to one or other political need, as demonstrated by the comparison made by the Prime Minister between Hitler and the Mufti.

The second trend relates to removing the old ways to the new. The introduction of nationalist, religious, and messianic content into the curriculum, as Education Minister Bennett does covertly, is easy and convenient when there is no other solid basis of knowledge to deal with. This is another expression of Bennett's plan, which claimed that for the sake of the Land of Israel, the people of Israel and the State of Israel must be changed. He and his colleagues focus today on "settlement in the hearts" after a series of theological traumas originating in the messianic crash on the rocks of reality, primarily the Disengagement Plan, the evacuation of Amona and Migron, and the cessation of construction in the settlements as a result of international pressure.

This evil spirit, which is sweeping Israel's educational system, completely contradicts the spirit of its founders who sought to secure the future more than to preserve the past, as David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi wrote in their book "Eretz Israel" in 1918: "If we seek to establish the borders of the land of Israel today, especially if we see it not only as the inheritance of the Jewish past but as the land of the Jewish future ...".

Even worse, if these trends are not blocked and the process does not reverse, Israel will fulfill the warning of Lord Nathaniel Rothschild in his letter to Herzl in 1903: "I will tell you with utter sincerity: I would be appalled to see the establishment of a Jewish colony in the full sense of the word. This colony would be a ghetto, with all the prejudices of a ghetto. A small, petty, religious and non-liberal Jewish state that would reject the Gentile and the Christian".