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Everything should be taught

An academic institution does not belong to the state, but to all of mankind.

By Menachem Mautner

The Institute for Zionist Strategies sent a position paper to the heads of Israel's universities that examines the degree to which campus activity is Zionist in orientation. Allow me to propose a response.

Your position paper is based on an underlying assumption that is unacceptable to me, one which posits that the level of support for Zionism is the standard by which to judge a university. The university does not belong to the state, nor does it belong to the Zionist movement that created the state. It belongs to mankind, and it pursues three primary goals: generating academic knowledge that is likely to provide human beings with intellectual enrichment and a better understanding of the human condition; preserving the academic knowledge of the past; and disseminating knowledge to mankind.

The university is an institution that the liberal state must fund without taking any interest in the content of the research it produces or the material it teaches, even if this content is unsavory in the eyes of the state's leaders or even contradicts the foundations on which the state was established. The only criterion by which content should be judged in a university is the humanist one - namely, whether the content is intended to advance the welfare of mankind.

Allow me to discuss the content produced by universities - a question more difficult than another often raised in this context, that of the opinions faculty members express as citizens.

In a university, it is permissible to write, and even to teach, that in the 19th century, the Jewish people had better options than establishing a national movement that aspired to political sovereignty; that at the present moment in history, Israel needs to bring an end to the Zionist worldview that lies at the foundation of its existence; that the founding of Israel dealt a harsh blow to Arab inhabitants of the Land of Israel; that Israel needs to cease viewing itself as a Jewish and democratic state and begin characterizing itself as a state of all its citizens; that Israel needs to be a binational state; or that Israel needs to be incorporated into a Middle Eastern federation.

It is permissible to write and teach all these things, on condition that these ideas are founded upon concern for the welfare of Israel's citizens and their spiritual enrichment; and on condition that they meet the standards of the university's relevant research paradigms.

Content that does not meet the humanist criterion has no place in a university. Material that does not meet the standards of the relevant academic paradigms also has no place in a university, but that is because it constitutes shoddy academic work. Universities have institutions that are tasked with ensuring that academic work complies with the relevant academic paradigms and is done at an appropriate academic level.

Based on your mode of thinking, it would be possible to demand that the university teach only material that serves the immediate and practical interests of the state. Such an approach would place departments like business management, law, engineering and medicine at the center of the university. Such an approach would turn the university into a technical school.

Yet the university should give pride of place to the humanities, social science and natural science, fields where knowledge is sought for its own sake, without any considerations of how that knowledge might be put to immediate use. And once this material is produced by a university, it is no longer available solely to the citizens of Israel, but to all human beings the world over.

At the basis of your position paper lies the assumption that the State of Israel has one task: the exercise of political sovereignty and the nurturing of national culture. I disagree. The state is a tool for advancing a diverse set of human interests.

Aside from a national culture, human beings also need effective health services, quality education, housing, art and culture. Thus Israel does not only need to be a Zionist state; it must be a state that works to promote all the different types of well-being its citizens need. The production and dissemination of enriching academic knowledge is one of them.

You must cease judging the universities by the criteria of Zionism. The question of what specific content should be infused into Zionism today is an important one. I suggest that you focus on that instead.

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