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Students at Hebrew University, October 22, 2017...
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On gender separation in academia

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The article by Medad and Pollak ("Academic Coercion is Rampant", Dec. 5) contains several features characteristic of the demagoguery present among supporters of segregated programs for the ultra-Orthodox community (haredim) in Israel's institutions of higher education.

First, the writers ignore the most important fact relevant to the topic – the devastating lack of school-level core education amongst haredim. Broad accessibility is a noble and important challenge for higher education, but in the case of the haredi population the gap that universities and colleges are required to bridge is enormous. It would appear that proposed plans for making higher education accessible to haredim offer a satisfactory way to overcome years of neglect. However, unless they are accompanied by a serious, carefully thought-out and appropriately budgeted program for correcting the sweeping early-age education anomaly (something of which we see no signs at present), it will be a far cry from satisfying its purpose. Moreover, the current vastly inadequate plans legitimize and encourage the retention of the present situation. If one really cares about integrating haredim into the workplace one should vigorously and generously promote core studies for haredi children, as well as supply a broad spectrum of professional and occupational training programs for haredi adults.

Second, Medad and Pollak talk about separated programs without mentioning or confronting the fact that the separation is asymmetric. In these programs, men are inherently superior to women: they are allowed to teach both men and women, whereas women can only teach women; the awarding of fellowships clearly favors men; and the fields of study offered to men and women are different.

Amazingly, the authors try to portray those opposed to the separated programs as people opposed to equal rights (here, the right of haredim to receive higher education). Indeed, accessibility rests on the basic democratic notion of equality, since adjustments have to be made in order to eliminate blockades differentiating the various parts of the population. But in their article, Medad and Pollak falsely hail this principle in order to promote segregation and exclusion: the present separated programs are really designed to let one group of people in by subtly requiring another group to move out. And this is done in the name of unity, equality and tolerance.

Current discourse in Israel around the more general issue is based on a blatantly false symmetry, whereby the harm caused to a religious man's feelings by the presence of women in the public arena is at least equal to – if not more severe than – the harm caused to a woman who cannot move around in that arena freely, as she sees fit. The fallacy in such a comparison is obvious: No-one would think of forcing a religious person to be near a woman, but a person who prefers not to be in the presence of others because of their gender or race must pay the price of that preference. Sensitivities and preferences cannot justify mistreating people just because their mere presence is deemed to be threatening.

The authors portray those worried about the long-term normalization of the separation as hysterical. Anyone who thinks that gender separation will not become the norm in Israel has to only consider what is happening today and extrapolate a few years forward. Israel is gradually normalizing, almost institutionalizing, the idea that there is no harm in men and women working, studying and serving the country separately. This is carried out under the official auspices of the government, is funded by public money, and is claimed to be motivated by aspirations of multiculturalism.

Third, rather than responding to the critics of separation, the writers claim that they do not act in the best interests of the haredim. In particular, they state that the critics are “frightened by the picture of haredim appearing on their campuses” – a blatantly false accusation, as those opposed to separate study programs are vigorously active in proposing alternative solutions by which the haredim are integrated into existing programs, and they view the isolation of the haredim in separate campuses as a serious drawback of a program that aims to integrate them into the Israeli workplace.

Medad and Pollak ask innocently whether the separate programs “prevent anyone from studying in mixed classes,” and then have the audacity to answer with a confident “no”. Well, we humbly claim to differ: There are many courageous haredim who prefer to study in the mixed programs, but for whom the existence of separated programs renders it extremely difficult for them to obtain their rabbi's approval and their community's assent. As has been the case with separated buses, once a new kind of separation appears, all ultra-religious people, even those who might have been able to live much better without it, find themselves under great pressure to respect it. Moreover, it would be far better for everyone if the enormous budgets needed for even only moderately good separated programs were to be used to set up excellent pre-university preparatory frameworks for haredi students. They would be given crash courses in core subjects, and would enjoy stipends as well as academic and religious support: research has shown that these are the issues that are most challenging for potential haredi students. So yes, the separated programs do prevent many haredim from studying in mixed programs, and from obtaining the training that would enable their successful integration into the Israeli workplace.

Fourth, the writers do not distinguish between true higher education and professional training. The former offers a lot more than mere studying to become an income-generating professional. In fact, there is an inherent conflict between the true higher education, which promote liberalism, free thought, and criticism, and the kinds of studies offered in the special programs for haredim, with their segregation, control from above of content and study materials, dress codes, etc.

Finally, something must be said about the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, which was attacked quite viciously by Medad and Pollak. Most of their accusations are irrelevant to this discussion. However, one point deserves a response, especially as it is relevant to the scandalous manner in which the separated programs have been imposed upon the higher education system.

The writers state that the members of the Academy “elect themselves”, and ask whether this is “proper for an institution funded by the public”. What do you suggest, Medad and Pollak? That Academy members be appointed by Naftali Bennett, in the same way he appoints members of the Higher Education Council (in particular, one of you) to fit his opinion about what their views should be? The basic motivation behind the 1958 law forming the Council for Higher Education was to prevent politicization of the academic world, and what is happening now is a cynical, steadily destructive move in the opposite direction. Academy members are indeed elected by the members of the Academy, in a process similar to the one used to select faculty members in universities.

Where academic excellence is the central criterion, peer review is universally considered to be the only reasonable way to proceed.

Pollak and Medad conclude their article by stating that “Perhaps with a more critical media the Academy would not have harmed its good name by taking a politically motivated position rather than a well-researched one.” Our opinion, in contrast, is that perhaps with more critical and active opposition to the separated programs (as was demonstrated by the Israel Academy), more decision-makers in higher education would join the effort to replace the politically-motivated segregation-based program of the Higher Education Council by one that would really integrate Haredim into Israeli society and the workplace. We unequivocally call upon all such people to do so.

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