

## **5768: The Year in Review**

By [Amir Afsai](#)

The 5768 (2007-08) academic year in Israel will be remembered as one of the most charged, volatile and ambitious in recent decades. It was a year of strikes, strife and strides: strikes on the part of the senior professorial staff, strife between Jewish and Arab students, and strides toward a new vision for the city of Jerusalem. The professors kept classrooms vacant for three months and nearly led to the entire year being scrapped; escalating confrontation in and around Gaza strained relations between Jewish and Arab students on campus; and through it all Jerusalem's students mounted a dramatic campaign to advance a new agenda for their city. Today, at the start of 5769, the struggle for Israel's higher education system remains far from settled; the situation in Gaza, though relatively calm for some months, is perilously close to a full-scale conflagration whose flames could again engulf Israel's college campuses; and the first fruits of the student campaign for Jerusalem have begun to ripen. Taken together these developments trace a window through which a key feature of Israeli society can be described: the extensive and untapped potential of Israel's students to impact the national agenda.

### **STRIKES**

Though scheduled to begin in October 2007, the Israeli academic year 5768 did not officially commence until January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Coming on the heels of the student strikes of the previous year, which shut down Israel's universities for forty days and evoked memories of the student protests in France in 1968, the senior professors, in a wrangle with the government over contract terms, threatened to sit out the entire year should their demands not be seriously addressed. Israel, warned the professors, was losing some of its brightest researchers to better funded programs overseas. Eight hundred faculty positions – the equivalent of an entire university – had already been cut. Unless the government significantly increased its share in the higher education burden there was a grave danger that the next generation of graduates would be left without an infrastructure capable of meeting their, and by extension the nation's, intellectual needs for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A commission appointed by the education ministry in 2000 had in fact submitted a series of recommendations to gradually improve the state of Israel's higher education system. It included a sequential easing of the tuition burden borne by the students without infringing on the budgets of the universities themselves, as well as a mechanism for making the universities accessible to a broader range of socioeconomic groups. Initially the government acceded to the commission's recommendations, but two years had not elapsed and already it reneged. It froze the tuition reductions, and to complicate matters further it cut over a billion shekels from the higher education budget between 2001 and 2006. This prompted the first wave of student strikes during the 5766 (2005-06) academic year, in response to which a new commission was appointed by the government in 2006 accompanied by a pledge to restore the money the government was withholding from the universities. Unlike the first commission, however, this one sought to heal the crippled system by levying the medical bill on the students and hiking tuition. It – the Shohat Commission – was the students' call to arms. They chained the university gates shut and took to the streets, disrupting traffic on major highways and staging mass rallies from Beer Sheva' to Haifa.

As they had demonstrated solidarity with the students during their time of need, so did the students support the professors in their struggle for improved working conditions. The vapors of revolution with which the previous year's air had been suffused were returning. A

united front emerged with a strident message directed at the government: If a long-term, comprehensive, sustainable, and fair solution was not put on the table, the struggle would resume such that the harrowing scenes of 2006-07 would be but the hors d'oeuvres. In the end, quite literally at the last minute, a compromise was reached with the professors and they returned to work. But it was more a deferment of the crisis than a genuine resolution thereof. Before the academic year was over, rectors were already warning that their budgets would not suffice to cover the expenses of 2008-09. And the students as well warned that if tuition rose, they would resume the struggle with redoubled resolve. Just days before the start of the 2008-09 academic year, with the threat of strikes and calamity looming, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert ordered that half a billion shekels be deposited in the universities' accounts forthwith, thus averting – though once again only temporarily – another crisis.

In a country with no oil or gas fields to bank on but with a legacy of outstanding scholarship and technological innovation, Israel's higher education system constitutes a vital strategic asset and the soundest investment for the nation's future. Regional shifts in power, as Israel's enemies acquire more sophisticated weapons, and the growing threat of Islamic terrorism to Jewish targets abroad demand that Israel maintain its technological edge and live up to its reputation for imagination-stirring ingenuity. Without a firm commitment on the part of the government to the future of the higher education system, Israel's position as a global leader in medicine, high-tech and other areas will be jeopardized. From the greatest miracle of the twentieth century, Israel will risk sinking to the level of its benighted third-world neighbors Egypt, Syria and Jordan.

In addition to their role in securing Israel's regional superiority and international prestige, the universities perform an important function on the domestic societal level. They are a meeting place of ideas, cultures and personalities whose mutually enriching interaction is seldom possible outside the academic arena. They bring together religious and secular, upper class and lower, Jew and Arab, native and immigrant, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, big city and small town. Even if the encounter is not always smooth, Israel's campuses can serve as a model for the coexistence of conflicting opinions in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect. Should this unique space disintegrate or become the exclusive province of the well-to-do, instead of bridging gaps between Israelis it will widen them.

## STRIFE

Relations between Jewish and Arab students on Israel's campuses are as a rule amiable. There is a visible distance issuing from cultural – chiefly linguistic – dissimilarities; but it is a natural, harmless, even welcome, distance. For a society as culturally heterogeneous as Israel's to preserve its diversity entails that there be buffer zones between groups. Apart from the cultural distance, however, there lurks a more minatory force, one that rears its head from time to time and upsets the atmosphere of coexistence on campus. It is political ideology. In day-to-day encounters politics is safely tucked away, buried beneath myriad more pressing academic matters. Still, when the wrong circumstances come into alignment, the political genie finds its way out of the bottle. In 5768, with violence escalating in and around the Gaza Strip and with classes out of session because of the professors' strike, it was open sesame for the genie to make its appearance.

The first loosening of the cork came in November 2007. A fringe Arab student group organized rallies across the country's university campuses of a declaredly cultural nature to celebrate the *keffiyeh*, the traditional Arab headscarf and a symbol of Arab culture. The *keffiyeh*, however, turned out to be a pretext for championing the Palestinian uprising against Israel. The day of the rallies was chosen to coincide with the third-year anniversary of ignominious PLO chairman Yasser Arafat's death. Jewish students gathered in

counterprotest, and only the presence of security details prevented the scenes from turning physically violent. As the situation in Gaza continued to deteriorate in the following months, Arab student activism became increasingly radical and the atmosphere on campus more and more tense.

There is an ostensible resemblance between pro-Palestinian Arab Israelis and Western antiwar activists that it is important to dispel. The radicals among the former are not supporters of peace and not pacifists in the true philosophical sense, though they tend to style themselves as such. In the majority of cases they condone Palestinian atrocities against Israel and reject as a matter of principle Israel's right to self-defense. Frequently, they also deem it justified as part of their campaigns of intimidation to damage property, target innocent bystanders and provoke police. They conveniently hold themselves to a lower standard than the law in order to excuse the kind of criminal conduct for which citizens in a democracy are normally condemned, but they cry racism when society describes their behavior as primitive.

This duplicitous behavior was to be the hallmark of the radical Arab Israeli student activist groups throughout the 2007-08 academic year, culminating in a series of physically violent demonstrations that drove a bitter wedge between Jews and Arabs on campus. On the one hand, Arab Israeli students professed support for peace and berated Israel for what they called its disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force; on the other, they countenanced the Palestinian rocket attacks against Israeli towns – the same attacks for which Israel was retaliating to begin with. The Western Left may be adamant in its opposition to the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11, but it at least acknowledges the role of fanatical Islam in the attacks and denounces their perpetrators categorically. No such acknowledgement can be found among the radical pro-Palestinian camp.

In September 2007, two months before the Keffiyeh Day rallies, Israel's cabinet formally declared the Gaza Strip an enemy entity. In keeping with the Olmert administration's rhetorical legacy, it was a vacuous declaration made more for the press and the despairing families of Sederot than an indication of an actual turning point in the government's policy. Only after four months, hundreds of Qassam rockets, numerous deaths, and scores of injured did Israel at last seal its borders with Gaza, in December 2007. The move, effective but short-lived, drew the usual vituperative condemnations from anti-Israel human rights organizations; more importantly, however, it popped the cork from the genie's bottle once and for all.

In January the professors ended their strike and the students were back to being students again, but by then it was too late: a critical momentum had been attained on the part of the Arab activists. Emboldened by a wave of terrorist attacks in the capital, of which the most brutal was a massacre of eight students in a yeshiva in March 2008, Arab students identified in Israel's forbearance a weakness and resolved to take full advantage of it. Flyers with inflammatory language were in weekly circulation and a number of students in Jerusalem were busy forming terrorist cells affiliated with al-Qaeda and Palestinian Islamists. At Hebrew University, a group of Arabs accosted a Jewish student and threatened him with a knife, and at one of the pro-Gaza rallies an Arab demonstrator hurled a rock through a car's windshield.

The foregoing events invite a question: What makes a person saw off the branch on which he sits, spit into the well from which he drinks, topple the ladder that is his only means of moving up, undermine the institutions that furnish him with education and democracy? The Arab students recognize that in no other country in the region would they enjoy the freedoms and opportunities extended them by Israel; yet many of them delight in its anguish, revel in its torment, and cheer its enemies on. The answer can be arrived at by analogy to a 2008 research paper by Professor Ofra Mayseless of Haifa University. Studying the behavior of children, Mayseless concludes that the offspring of lenient and distant parents, who avoid

reproving their children for wrongdoing and who outsource their upbringing to the school rather than involve the family in it, grow up in a disciplinary and hierarchical vacuum. They expect to be provided with the necessities of life but fail to appreciate the providers of those necessities; and when a figure of pedagogical or parental authority attempts to assert its preeminence, the child's immediate response is to revolt.

Years of blithe indifference on the part of the state, of insouciant attitudes whereby a college education is sufficient for molding future generations of national leaders, have created a vacuum similar in many ways to that of Maysel's children. The same relativism against which Allan Bloom warned, where the rigorous, critical search for objective truth as an ideal has given way to the modes of personal conviction and passion, has taken root in Israel's college campuses. In this climate, being outspoken and radical becomes the more sought-after trait where formerly sound reason and trenchancy were consecrated values. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the exponents of postmodernism and post-Zionism enjoy unprecedented popularity in the Israeli academic discourse of today. It does not follow from the above that governments should be proactively involved in academia to the point of constraining its autonomy; but neither should they withdraw altogether from the debate, for in doing so they prevent the voices of Ahad Ha'am, Weizmann, Jabotinsky, and Ben-Gurion from crucially informing it.

## STRIDES

When Uri Lupolianski was elected mayor in June 2003, it broke off more than half a century of unrivaled secular Zionist control of Jerusalem's city hall. Did the ultra-Orthodox mayor signify a turning point for the city or was he just a blip in its history? Would the new mayor steer the city in the direction of Benei Brak or would his administration address the concerns of the city's Arab and secular-Jewish sectors as well as those of his religious constituency? In the minds of many, his election reinforced a disconcerting trend regarding the capital. For years, Jerusalem's secular middle class families were emigrating to more hospitable satellite towns in what was frequently referred to as the "secular exodus," altering the demographic makeup of the capital such that it increasingly favored the ultra-Orthodox community. Furthermore, young couples at their crossroads opted to settle in Tel Aviv rather than seek their dwelling place in Jerusalem, making Jerusalem's image elderly and stagnant. And wealthy Diaspora Jews buying up real estate for use as holiday homes further exacerbated the situation by driving up property values beyond what the native population could afford and hurting local businesses with their protracted absence.

In 5768, with new municipal elections around the corner, Jerusalem's students mobilized to influence policy in City Hall on a scale never before seen. Their campaign began with an attack on five areas of life in the city where they felt policy was to their detriment: housing, employment, culture, environment, and transportation. In the area of housing, the students charged that property taxes were exorbitant and that there was a scarcity of available apartments in practical locations – near campus or downtown; in the area of employment, the students argued that the city did not develop its commercial infrastructure to make it competitive with that of Tel Aviv; culturally, the students said that the city could do more to promote the local arts-and-entertainment scene; on the environmental front, the students blamed the city council for Jerusalem's littered sidewalks, for scarring the few remaining green zones or greedily coveting them for construction projects, and for soaring pollution rates; and lastly, the students called the city's transportation system a disaster for being scandalously inefficient and stubbornly inconsiderate of changing needs.

The thrust of the student campaign was in its call to out-of-towners studying in Jerusalem to register with the Ministry of the Interior as official residents of the capital. On

the one hand, it was a vehicle for rallying the students to action, to effect a material change in their status that would open the door to more and better-coordinated action as the elections approached. On the other hand, it was a means for the numerical strengthening of the secular camp, which tended to stay home on election day whereas the ultra-Orthodox voted with one mind per the rabbis' instructions. Some four hundred students are known to have reregistered as Jerusalemites through the Tirshom Yerushalmi campaign, and it is believed that hundreds more did so of their own initiative but still under the general influence of Tirshom Yerushalmi's vigorous campaigning. Supposing that the secular electorate grew by a thousand votes, the arithmetic contribution of the students was negligible: a quarter of a million votes were counted altogether, and the victor in the 2008 race won by around 20,000. But the impact of the students should not be measured in numbers alone. More than their ballots made the crucial difference, it was the energy that they generated around the secular candidate Nir Barkat that tipped the scale. They roused secular Jerusalem out of its apathy – the same apathy that lost Nir Barkat the election five years earlier.

The students do not perceive their grievances to be particular to their own experience; rather, they consider them universally applicable, benefiting the city's residents at large. Ultimately, however, their struggle is particularistic. It perpetuates the alienated status quo wherein the secular camp looks after its interests, the ultra-Orthodox vie to maximize their influence, and the Arabs continue to reject the establishment and complain that they are ignored. Yet it can be demonstrated that in each of the five areas identified by the students as problem spots, both the Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox play an integral role; and indeed for this reason, what ought to be strived for is integration – especially in the commercial sphere, for from there it can more easily spread to the other dimensions. The role that the students can play in such an initiative makes them ideally suited catalysts for effecting dramatic change in the capital.

The Mount Scopus campus of Hebrew University is surrounded on three of its five sides by Arab neighborhoods. The single Jewish neighborhood, Giv'a Zarfatit to the northwest, has reached the full potential of its growth and beyond it are ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods; to the east is the Judean desert; south, southwest and west are the neighborhoods of Mount of Olives, Wadi al-Joz and Sheikh Jarrah, respectively; and to the north is the neighborhood of 'Isawiyyeh. As the Arab residents of Jerusalem are not citizens of any country, there are considerable obstacles in the way of their complete integration into the fabric of Jerusalem. The city is understandably reluctant to invest resources in their neighborhoods since they may eventually be ceded to the Palestinians, and the Arabs are hesitant to recognize Israel's sovereignty over them because of the repercussions such recognition would have should they come under Palestinian sovereignty one day. Despite this complex state of affairs, in day-to-day interactions between Arabs and Jews there is rarely any overt animosity. A measure of mutual unease there is, but it is an inevitable consequence of political and cultural realities. Jewish students, of a particular mindset as far as culture and attitude, could by all means be renting rooms in the Arab neighborhoods to the south and west of Mount Scopus. It would be odd at first, and likely there would be some attendant complications; but the mutual benefits both to the students and to the Arab residents would, with the passage of time, make the phenomenon as practicable as it would be commonplace. To the students would thus be made available dozens of affordable apartments in walking or biking distance from the university, and to the Arabs would be introduced a new source of income and development.

Jerusalem's unemployment rate is one of the highest in the country. Widespread unemployment is a chronic feature of towns with high proportions of Arabs or ultra-Orthodox Jews, and it is Jerusalem's fortune or misfortune that it has high proportions of both. The Arab sector ranks high on the unemployment scale because Arab women are overwhelmingly

confined to their homes and because Arab men have formidable barriers of language and modernization to overcome in acquiring jobs. The ultra-Orthodox sector ranks high on the unemployment scale because it is not a part of their culture to work for a living. With so much of Jerusalem's potential workforce dormant, it is virtually impossible to conceive of a market as dynamic and robust as Tel Aviv's. On the other hand, Jerusalem's status as a super-magnet for tourism and as the axis of the Jewish world puts it in a position that is unparalleled with respect to the potential for commercial entrepreneurship at its fingertips. Joining forces with local students and availing themselves of their innovative skills and ideas, the Arabs can transform their communities into thriving tourist attractions, nurtured on the one hand by their exotically un-Western lifestyle and enjoying on the other the fruits of Israel's commercial acumen. Similarly, though the adjustments required will face considerably greater resistance, the ultra-Orthodox, whose lifestyle is no less and probably more exotic than the Arabs', can recast their neighborhoods as one of great spectacles and tourist destinations in all of the Middle East. In both cases, the preservation of the indigenous culture will have to be carefully balanced against its exposure to outside influences, but precedents for such undertakings exist. The city, for its part, can encourage these programs by raising money with socially minded philanthropists, of which there are many, and setting up funds to be made available specifically for these purposes where local individuals or organizations collaborate with students.

The cultural potential contained in Jerusalem's unique demographic constitution is remarkable, but even more remarkable is how little of that potential is realized. Few places in the world bring such culturally diverse communities together in such close quarters. When the students talk of culture, what they mean are bars, clubs, theatres, and the like. In this regard, it is more their fault than the city's that they find Jerusalem's cultural offerings spare. The Arab and ultra-Orthodox communities are bustling with cultural life, and the students could be playing a key role as an intersection between their world and the worlds of the Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox. Intercultural reading groups, intercultural culinary festivals, intercultural music festivals, and so forth are just some ideas to pursue in the cultural domain.

Environmental policy and transit planning are two areas where change perforce comes from above. Interest groups can lobby to promote their agendas, but they do not draw the maps and they cannot commission a fleet of buses on a whim. Still, the students, because of their tendency to be more ecologically aware, have a responsibility toward the environment that must be brought to bear on city planning; and because they are a sector that uses public transit as their primary means of getting around, they also have a responsibility toward the lower-income classes who do not own cars and are not politically involved. When the Lupoliansky administration pushed the Safdi project that would have covered the capital's western hilltops with new neighborhoods, the students were instrumental in the battle to save the mountains from the bulldozers and cranes. And more recently, after long and hard negotiations with Egged, the students succeeded in rerouting some of the bus lines between the city center and the university. What else can the students do? Jerusalem's Arabs have a habit of burning their waste, polluting the air and making it unpleasant to breathe. They are not the only ones who do this, but it is a more common practice in their parts. The ultra-Orthodox, meanwhile, are notorious for throwing garbage onto the sidewalk, where it blows in the wind and makes walking around unpleasant. Again, they are not alone in this vice, but it most acutely visible where they reside. Both the Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox would not take kindly to official municipal intermeddling in their mores, but they might be more receptive if the students were to try it. The environmental channel could serve as another conduit for dialog between the students and the two communities not organically a part of Jerusalem's mainstream, and in establishing such dialog the city could be made more esthetic and inviting.

Only a few miles separate the downtown area from Mount Scopus on a map. Nonetheless, the daytime commute can last more than an hour on the bus. The chief reason for this is that Egged avoids crossing through Arab neighborhoods in getting to and from the university, despite the fact that traffic is not nearly as dense there and that the residents of those areas are permitted by law to travel freely throughout the country. Instead, Egged's buses plough through the narrow and congested streets of the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods. Unofficially, two bus systems operate in Jerusalem. They do not communicate with one another – a fortiori they do not coordinate their affairs – with the result that some bus routes overlap and others that could and should link up do not. In the western parts of the city, Mount Scopus and Giv'at Zarfati, the buses belong to Egged, a government-subsidized company with networks all over the country. In the eastern parts of the city, the buses (most are minibuses) belong to an Arab company. Yet even after factoring in the discount that Egged offers students, the rides on the Arab buses are cheaper. Here again is confirmed the same pattern where the potential for integration – in this case in transportation – is forgone, and everyone suffers as a consequence.

## CONCLUSION

Not counting colleges, Israel's student population totals 120,000. In the country's congenial multiparty system, 120,000 is a powerful number. To illustrate the point, a senior citizens' party raked in seven Knesset seats (out of 120) in 2006 subsequent to earning just over 185,000 votes in the national election. The pivot of their campaign was improved social security for the elderly, better retirement benefits, improved medical care, and other similar causes. They did not offer a vision for national security, for economic prosperity, for reduced crime, for safer roads – yet they attracted thousands of votes from students with no immediate stake in the welfare of the elderly. Analysts explained that the students, embodying the country's intellectual elite, voted for the senior citizens' party as a way of expressing their disdain for and lack of confidence in Israel's political leadership.

With parties for Arabs, Marxists, antireligious, Mizrahim, settlers, national-religious, and senior citizens, a national students' party is a viable prospect. Committed to the promotion of Israel's higher education system in a Zionist spirit, to constructive Jewish-Arab dialog on campus, and to Jerusalem as the center of the Jewish world and a model for multicultural coexistence, the student party can define a platform around which a broad consensus can be generated and confidence in Israel's political system can be restored.

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