

1 – The General Report on the Departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel

The General Report on the Departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel makes clear that many of the problems facing Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University are shared by the three other departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel.

All four departments are praised for their programs, their students, and their distinguished faculty. In fact, they enjoy a special status (which is referred to in the report) as the leading departments for the study of Jewish Philosophy and Thought in the world, in terms of their programs, quantity and quality of students, and faculty. What seriously threatens this special status are the “economic realities,” the budget cuts that have in past years mercilessly weakened the departments. A graph follows that lists the number of B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. students in the four departments during the 2008-2009 academic year. What is surprising is that Bar-Ilan had the fewest number of undergraduates, but by far the largest number of graduate students. Why this is true needs to be explored, but this graph strengthens the arguments of the External Evaluation Team (EET) that Bar-Ilan needs at once additional faculty to serve as advisors to its graduate students. The general report points to the “issue of finding a thesis advisor” as “the most serious problem for graduate students [in Jewish Philosophy at Israeli universities]” (p. 10). The problem is most severe at Bar-Ilan given its large number of graduate students.

The general report states emphatically that “the main problem facing all Departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel is the shrinkage of their faculty size.” (p. 11). This was one of the central points the Chair of Jewish Philosophy sought to make in the division’s self-evaluation report. The EET urges “that the four universities whose departments it reviewed adopt a policy of replacing retiring faculty members in Jewish Philosophy (and recently retired or departed faculty members) on as close to a 1:1 ratio as possible.” This is a necessary first step.

The general report also states that “All the Departments of Jewish Philosophy need more resources from their respective universities, and from the government, for the funding of graduate students. This is an absolutely essential matter” (p. 16). This was another vital point that the Chair of Jewish Philosophy underscored in the self-evaluation report.

The general report contains other crucial suggestions and recommendations, which come up again in the Bar-Ilan report, and will be addressed in the next section. One interesting suggestion, which may be addressed here, is the EET’s call “that individual universities seek academic alliances with other Israeli universities” (p. 18) This suggestion for cooperation among the four departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel is intriguing and demands more thought.

2 – The Report on the Division of Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University

The report of the EET on the Division of Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University begins on a bleak note: the present situation regarding Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan “is not satisfactory” (p. 4). The report explains that the situation is not satisfactory because “economic pressures” and administrative decisions have considerably reduced the number of faculty positions in the department. Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University “has seriously declined in quality over the past 5 years,” and the lost faculty positions have “created an urgent need for [new] faculty lines” (p. 5). The EET voices great distress at these findings and warned that the situation must be changed. It states that the “University Administration has a *moral and educational obligation* to invest more of the University’s resources in … the Department of Jewish Philosophy in particular. This department embodies the core mission of Bar Ilan University to bridge *torah* and *madda*” (p. 13).

On a positive note, the report depicts the faculty as “comprised of able and well-respected scholars with national and international reputations,” who “go far beyond their normal responsibilities” for the wellbeing of the department in difficult economic times (p. 14). Similarly, the EET was impressed with the level of the students in Jewish Philosophy. Its stern conclusion reflects this dichotomy between praise and censure (p. 19).

Yet the report goes far beyond praise and censure. It contains much constructive criticism and helpful and creative suggestions that need to be considered at once, even apart from its strong recommendation (p. 15) for new faculty positions and an influx of financial support for Jewish Philosophy. Some of these suggestions will be considered in the following section.

The report also raises the issue of private fundraising for the division of Jewish Philosophy. The EEC is aware that such private fundraising is prohibited by Bar-Ilan, but recommends that in light of the special status of Jewish Philosophy in Israel, the matter be reconsidered (p. 16). On the issue of sources of funding, the report also questions why “the University receives support from the national authorities for each graduate student, [but] these payments do not make their way in an economically equitable manner to the Department so that it might hire the additional staff needed to teach all the students who are enrolled in its courses” (p. 6).

One point that was raised several times was the relation between the division of Jewish Philosophy and the division of General Philosophy since the split of the department into two divisions. The split has harmed Jewish Philosophy: “There is too little interchange between the Departments of General Philosophy and Jewish Philosophy” (p. 12), and students are “inadequately prepared – and with many fewer options – regarding the acquisition of general philosophical skills” (p. 6). The report concludes that “there is a need for a renewed conversation between the Department of Jewish Philosophy and the Department of General Philosophy” (p. 17). This is crucially important and the division of Jewish Philosophy wholeheartedly agrees.

3 – Response of the Division of Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University

The Chair of Jewish Philosophy is pleased to report that some important changes – called for by the EET in its report – have already occurred or are occurring:

1. **NEW POSITIONS.** The report notes the extraordinary fact that the “last new regular appointment was made 10 years ago,” that many faculty lines have been lost in the past decade, that and that “all appointments, promotions and tenure in the area of Jewish Philosophy are presently frozen.” (p. 5). It stresses repeatedly that new faculty lines are urgently needed. The first such line has now been given! During the spring, in response to the suggestion of the Dean at that time, and in view of the exceptional letters of evaluation that the Dean received in support of Dr. Shlomo Sela, the President of Bar-Ilan found funding for a new senior level position in medieval Jewish philosophy and science.
2. **PROMOTIONS.** The report is highly critical of the promotion procedure at Bar-Ilan: “Promotion and tenure actions are extraordinarily slow, and the process is highly inefficient, unfair, and ultimately, destructive” (p. 5; also, p. 15). As cited above, it is concerned more immediately with the fact that “promotions and tenure in the area of Jewish Philosophy are presently frozen.” The freeze seems now to be lifted. There are at present delays, but by December 1, it should be known with some certainty whether the freeze has indeed been lifted. Bar-Ilan is also initiating this academic year new appointment and promotion procedures that are designed to be more efficient and to speed up the process.
3. **LANGUAGE CLASSES.** Graduate students are now finding it easier to take needed language courses at the university, at least as regards French, German, and Arabic.

The report brings to light certain changes that may be taken by the division of Jewish Philosophy that could strengthen the curriculum. Some of these changes were suggested by students during the visit of the EET. One complaint is that “there is totally inadequate preparation in methodological areas” (p. 9). Following the recommendation of the EET (p. 16), the division will ask Dr. Sela to teach an annual course for graduate students on methodology and academic writing, beginning with the next academic year. Another complaint is that “there is no strong sense of community among the graduate students.” Following the recommendation of the EET (p. 17), the division has instituted this year required monthly (and, if desired, semimonthly) meetings of Ph.D. students, where the students take turns and present their doctoral research, with time for questions and socializing. Other suggested changes concerning the curriculum (pp. 9 and 16) will be brought to the division’s instruction committee for careful consideration.

4 – Concluding Remarks: Gratitude and Hope

The division of Jewish Philosophy, despite initial skepticism, is most grateful to the CHE for its initiative and its efforts in implementing this process of self-evaluation of departments of Jewish Philosophy. The CHE is also to be complimented for choosing such a distinguished and committed Review Committee of internationally-renowned scholars of Jewish Thought. The division of Jewish Philosophy was very impressed with the EET's professionalism and deep concern for the well-being of Jewish Philosophy in Israel and at Bar-Ilan University in particular. Their report reflects their approach. It points to the strengths and weaknesses of the department, contains much constructive criticism, and abounds in helpful suggestions and recommendations. As stated, some of these comments are directed to the division. Some of these have already been implemented and others will be carefully examined by the division's instruction committee and senior faculty to see to what extent they can be incorporated into the curriculum. But the harshest criticism is directed at the administration of Bar-Ilan University and the national authorities that supply it with funding. Are they prepared and willing to listen to and implement the recommendations of the EET?

The Chair of Jewish Philosophy, his colleagues, the students of the division, and the alumni, all hope that the precious time and effort devoted to the self-evaluation of the division of Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University will indeed yield fruits, and that the powers that be will be motivated and encouraged to find and make available the funding and resources needed to adopt the recommendations of this important and carefully written report. During their visit, the EET stated that despite years of budget cuts and the resultant decline in the department, Bar-Ilan still has one of the strongest departments in the world (although that status is now in danger). We would like to be the best. The CHE report states clearly what must be done to achieve that goal and, at the same time, warns of the consequences if its recommendations are ignored.