



**Committee for the Evaluation of Hebrew Literature
Study Programs**

Tel Aviv University

**The Faculty of Humanities
The Department of Literature
Evaluation Report**

February 2013

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Chapter 1: Background

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) decided to evaluate study programs in the field of Hebrew Literature during the academic year 2011 – 2012.

Following the decision of the CHE, the Minister of Education, who serves ex officio as a Chairperson of the CHE, appointed a Committee consisting of:

- **Prof. (Emeritus) Arnold Band, Department of Comparative Literature, University of California, Los Angeles, USA – Committee Chair**
- **Prof. Dan Ben-Amos, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, USA**
- **Prof. (Emeritus) Yehuda Friedlander, Department of the Literature of the Jewish People, Bar-Ilan University, Israel**
- **Prof. Nili Gold, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, USA**
- **Prof. David G. Roskies, Department of Jewish Literature, The Jewish Theological Seminary, USA¹**
- **Prof. Angel Saenz-Badillos, Departamento de Hebreo, Universidad Complutense, Madrid, Spain**
- **Prof. (Emeritus) Yosef Yahalom, Department of Hebrew Literature, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel**

Ms. Tamar Maagan-Efrati and Ms Maya Alayoff - Coordinators of the Committee on behalf of the CHE

Within the framework of its activity, the Committee was requested to:

1. Examine the self-evaluation reports, submitted by the institutions that provide study programs in Hebrew Literature, and to conduct on-site visits at those institutions.
2. Submit to the CHE an individual report on each of the evaluated academic units and study programs, including the Committee's findings and recommendations.
3. Submit to the CHE a general report regarding the examined field of study within the Israeli system of higher education including recommendations for standards in the evaluated field of study.

The Committee's letter of appointment is attached as **Appendix 1**.

The entire process was conducted in accordance with the CHE's Guidelines for Self-Evaluation (of October 2010).

¹ At the time, Prof. David Roskies also held a visiting professorship at Ben-Gurion University.

Chapter 2: Committee Procedures

The Committee held its first meetings on May 13, 2012 during which it discussed fundamental issues concerning higher education in Israel, the quality assessment activity, as well as Hebrew Literature study programs.

The Committee held the site visits to all of the five departments in May 2012.

During the visits, the Committee met with various stakeholders at the institutions, including the senior management, faculty, staff, and students.

This report deals with Hebrew Literature studies in the Department of Literature at Tel-Aviv University.

The Committee's visit to Tel Aviv University took place on May 16-17, 2012. The Committee thanks the management of Tel Aviv University, the Faculty of Humanities and the Department of Literature for the self-evaluation report (SER), for their hospitality towards the Committee during its visit at the institution, and for offering copies of their scholarly journals.

This report was prepared following the guidelines of the Council for Higher Education. It is a synthesis of the analysis of the SER, the interviews conducted with faculty members, the administration and students, and it summarizes observations and makes recommendations intended to strengthen the Department.

The schedule of the visit, including the list of participants from the institution, is attached as **Appendix 2**.

Chapter 3: Evaluation of Hebrew Literature Studies in the Department of Literature at Tel Aviv University

- *This Report relates to the situation current at the time of the visit to the institution, and does not take account of any subsequent changes. The Report records the conclusions reached by the Evaluation Committee based on the documentation provided by the institution, information gained through interviews, discussion and observation as well as other information available to the Committee.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seven years after the sudden merger of the departments of Hebrew Literature and of Poetics and Comparative Literature to form the Department of Literature at Tel Aviv University, the seams are still showing. This is true both on a curricular level, where the various tracks run parallel to each other and do not fully benefit from the creative synergy that such a merger should produce, and on a human resource level, where personal animosities are allowed to interfere with the smooth running of the department. Both problems can be ameliorated, we believe, if the name of the department is changed to reflect its true mandate, mission, and unique strengths.

The department's stated mandate is to foster a profound understanding of all components of the field of literature and the study of one literature, Hebrew. This Evaluation Report sets forth recommendations to strengthen the scope and depth of the track in Hebrew Literature and Israeli Culture by means of new hirings, a closer coordination among the various tracks, a revision of the core curriculum, and by achieving a better balance between theory-driven courses and courses that cover the historical sweep of Hebrew literature--classical, medieval and modern.

The hallmark of the new Department of Literature is its openness, which reflects the openness of the Tel Aviv campus itself. The surest way to foster that spirit of openness, we believe, is to channel greater financial and creative resources into the study of Hebrew literature, the national literature of Israel, in Tel Aviv, the world's first Hebrew City.

Background

In 2005-6 the departments of Hebrew Literature and of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University were merged to form the Department of Literature. Each of the constituent departments has a proud history. The Department of Hebrew Literature, home to the Katz Institute for Research in Hebrew Literature, the popular lecture series “Sefer Patuah” and to such leading scholars as Nurit Govrin, Avner Holtzman, Dan Laor, Israel Levin, Uzi Shavit and Reuven Tsur, was a leader in the field, both within Israel and abroad. The latter department, Poetics and Comparative Literature, sought to transform the study of literature into a science, grounded in such disciplines as linguistics, semiotics, and historical poetics. Popularly known as The Tel-Aviv School, it pioneered the study of the Hebrew Bible as a literary artifact, translation theory and polysystem theory. Its leading lights were Ziva Ben-Porat, Itamar Even-Zohar, Yosef Haefrati, Benjamin Hrushovski (later: Harshav), Meir Sternberg and Gideon Toury. The flagship of the Tel Aviv School was the journal *Hasifrut*, followed by the English-language *Poetics Today*. The “Lost Decade,” however, had a devastating effect on Tel Aviv University, and the humanities were particularly hard hit. A whole generation retired without being replaced. Direct casualties of the Lost Decade were these two departments, which were forced to merge, precipitously, and without a strategic planning process. The result, as the SER describes it, was a patchwork rather than a coherent plan. Whole areas of study, once the backbone of Hebrew literary studies at Tel Aviv, such as medieval Hebrew literature and the Haskalah, fell by the wayside.

Mission, goals and Self-Evaluation process

Given this complicated history, the question that preoccupied the Evaluation Committee from first to last was whether the two departments had melded into one in the seven years that have elapsed since the merger. The SER offered a very partisan view. Authored by the departmental chair and bearing a clear authorial stamp, the SER was heavily weighted toward one side of the merger. According to the Mission Statement, the central goal of the newly created unit was to create a “unique” synergy between literary theory and area study; to wit, a department dedicated to the mastery of theoretical approaches to literature as a whole, which in turn could be applied to the study and teaching of Hebrew and Israeli literature. Dedicated to the belief “that scholarly expertise should be deeply rooted in a profound understanding of all components of the field of literature,” the author upheld literary theory as the dynamic, universal, and philosophically sophisticated means of achieving this goal. Modern Hebrew literature, in marked contrast, was described as yet another “corpus”. While literary theory, in other words, was front and center, Hebrew literature existed merely in apposition to something much larger and more compelling. The challenge presented by Hebrew literature and culture was pedagogical, not philosophical.

The reality that confronted the Evaluation Committee during its two days of deliberation was fundamentally different from that described in the SER, in two senses.

A. For better: Modern Hebrew literature and Israeli culture are, in fact, the warp-and-woof of the Department of Literature at Tel Aviv University. In addition to its academic track, the department currently offers the only undergraduate program in Hebrew creative writing in Israel. Through such public programming as “Sifrut Plus” and the new scholarly journal *Ot*, the department has become a potent force for the dissemination and promotion of Hebrew literature and culture. Members of the department are active on a variety of cultural fronts throughout Israel; some are known to every reader of the literary supplements of Israel’s leading newspapers and are familiar faces on Channel One documentaries.

B. For worse: The Department of Literature is a house divided. If the SER itself laid bare “the lack of unification, or at least open, honest communication” among its diverse

faculty and reported on a meeting at which there was “profound disagreement on the future progress and structure of the department”. These divisions were only too apparent during our face-to-face deliberations. The committee was surprised to witness a display of personal animosity among members of the same department and to find that senior faculty absent themselves from the proceedings for personal reasons. The compatible merger of the two departments has yet to happen. It will require considerable healing on a personal level and much closer collaboration on a programmatic level.

The first and most obvious way for the department to achieve its dual mandate of fostering a profound understanding of all components of the field of literature and the study of one literature, Hebrew, the national literature of Israel, in particular, is to change its name. The current name describes neither what the curriculum actually encompasses nor the extent to which the department privileges and actively promotes **Hebrew** literary culture. It is presumptuous, moreover, for one department at Tel Aviv University to arrogate to itself the name of “Department of Literature” when there are other departments, such as French, English and American Studies, that are also dedicated to the study of literature. Therefore, adding “Hebrew Literature” to its name will go a long way towards creating parity between its two major partners.

The Study Program

What best characterizes the new department is its culture of diversity, which can be seen at several levels. On the programmatic level, students are encouraged to mix-and-match sub-disciplines. Unique to Tel Aviv University is a highly developed program of Independent Study. In three of its five undergraduate programs--Poetics and Comparative Literature, Hebrew Literature and Israeli Culture, Translation Studies--the core curriculum has been reduced to a minimum in order to make room for as many elective credits as possible. The SER even speaks of “the rigidity of a pre-given syllabus,” which is being supplanted by “the flexibility of a developing learning process” —as if a tightly structured course was somehow a detriment to learning. Recently, the department introduced a mandatory 1st-year MA seminar, drawing on students and faculty alike, designed to model the rigors of methodology--and its multiplicity. Each year the seminar is devoted to a

broad, overarching topic. In 2011-12, the chosen topic was "Literature, Economics and Class." This seminar received universal praise.

The large number of elective courses, however, does not necessarily translate into a real diversity of approaches. Cultural and ideological criticism underlines course offerings in Hebrew as much as they do the general literature curriculum. While the study program is cluttered with such courses as "Orientalism in Hebrew Literature," "Galut in Israel," "Radicalism in Modern Hebrew Poetry," "Sadomasochism in Hebrew Literature," "The Mother in Hebrew Poetry," and "Writing in a Minority Language" (a course on Yiddish literature in Hebrew translation), courses devoted to a single author, or genre, or period, are few and far between.

This presentist perspective comes at the price of historical depth and cultural literacy. We noted with satisfaction that all first-year students are now required to take an (excellent) yearlong Introduction to Medieval Hebrew Poetry. Thereafter, however, the department offers not a single elective course in medieval Hebrew literature. Whereas there is a full complement of introductory courses in narratology, theory of literature, prosody and poetry, the Hebraic component consists merely of a yearlong historical survey of Hebrew narrative prose of the 19th and 20th centuries (popularly known as "*matayim shnot*") and a grab-bag survey of Modern Hebrew fiction taught by a string of visiting lecturers. Students in the Hebrew Literature track, meanwhile, are offered a choice between an introduction to folk literature and an introduction to the literature of Jewish mysticism. Most of the former is devoted to theories of folkloristics and the rest to scholarly approaches to Jewish folk literature. The student, in other words, is given no primary exposure to the literature itself. While the Poetics and Comparative Literature track has recently introduced a yearlong survey in Classics of Western Literature, required of all students, there is nothing comparable for the track in Hebrew Literature and Israeli Culture. At no point in the curriculum are the latter given hands-on exposure to the Hebrew Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud, the midrashim, or to a thousand years of Hebrew homiletical and ethical writing.

Recommendations

1. The department should therefore encourage its students—on all tracks—to avail themselves of the course offerings in the Department of Hebrew Culture Studies, That is where students can acquire first-hand exposure to the Hebrew classics. The Department of Literature, in short, should assume responsibility for the acquisition of Judaic literacy, something in short supply in the Israeli educational system, as key to achieving Modern Hebrew literacy.
2. Currently, the department has a Teaching Committee whose job it is to respond to student needs and complaints. We recommend that the department create a Committee on Instruction, whose job it will be to coordinate and supplement course offerings from across its various constituencies. Among its responsibilities will be to:
 - (A) Eliminate the duplication of syllabi;
 - (B) Create an Introduction to Hebrew Classics analogous to the obligatory Introduction to Western Classics;
 - (C) create a 1st-year MA seminar in Hebrew Literature and Israeli Culture analogous to the one that now exists in the track of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory; and
 - (D) Introduce an obligatory course on scholarly writing.

In addition, this committee should plan ahead, so that in the semester that an elective is being given on Isak Dinesen's art of storytelling, for example, a parallel elective course be offered on Agnon's art of storytelling. Instead of proceeding on parallel tracks that meet only by chance, if ever, the Committee on Instruction should be empowered to create a truly coordinated curriculum.

Faculty

The department's culture of diversity also spills over into the makeup of its faculty. Recent appointments have come from far and wide, with an eye toward hiring faculty that has an expertise in more than one literature or discipline. As the department faces a significant number of imminent retirements, its long range future will in large measure be determined by new appointments. On the one hand, we noted with satisfaction that the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities committed himself to a policy of replacement. On the other, we were concerned that with so many existing lacunae, the first appointment to be made will be in the field of Translation Studies. No satisfactory rationale was given why this, among the manifold legacies of the Tel Aviv School, was to be given priority; or for that matter, why Translation Studies is being offered as an undergraduate track, rather than a specialization on the graduate level. Another area of concern was the problem of dividing the work load. With so many recent retirements, the senior faculty is forced to take on a large number of dissertations. A maximum of ten dissertations per faculty member seemed to us extremely onerous, unless it was accompanied by a reduced teaching load.

As in other universities across Israel, Tel Aviv relies too heavily on adjunct faculty to teach the required introductory courses. In our judgment, the core curriculum should be taught in rotation by all members of the tenured faculty.

Despite its many internal obligations and wide-range of commitments in the public sphere, the faculty supports a prodigious number of scholarly colloquia and conferences and produces a significant body of original research. The new in-house publication, *Ot*, is exemplary in both form and content; is cutting-edge without being obscure and inaccessible. It is a true sign of generation renewal.

Recommendations

1. When seeking to replace retiring faculty with new blood, therefore, priority must be given to reinstating the teaching of medieval Hebrew poetry and the literature of the Haskalah. In keeping with the department's global mandate, an immediate search should be initiated for a tenured position in medieval Hebrew literature within its

Arabic context. The next search should be for someone to teach the Hebrew, Yiddish, and German Haskalah within the contexts of early modern Europe.

2. The number of dissertations per faculty member should be reduced. The department should take into account reducing teaching loads for faculty members supervising 8-10 dissertations
3. The core curriculum should be taught in rotation by all members of the tenured faculty

Students

In general, the students we met were very impressive, highly motivated, and seemed unaware of the deep divisions besetting the department. They reflected a diversity of interests, ranging from the aspiring young poets and prose writers of the creative writing program to the Ph.D. student completing years of archival and biographical research and another working on the manifesto as a literary genre. They evinced a sense of discovery when the theoretical writings of a Derrida or Deleuze and Guattari seemed directly applicable to the work of an early twentieth-century Hebrew prose writer. Some students were also aware of lacunae in the curriculum, such as a lack of serious exposure to the premodern classics, the so-called "Hebrew Bookcase." The students we interviewed expressed satisfaction with the guidance and attention they received at the hands of the faculty, and the faculty, in turn, took evident pride in its policy of "airing out" their students--encouraging MA students to study abroad--and worked hard at getting them scholarships. It is fair to say that the Department of Literature in Tel Aviv University reflects the openness of the Tel Aviv campus itself.

Infrastructure

The Committee was duly impressed by the library facilities in general and by the new on-line services that the library was in the process of implementing. Tel Aviv University is in the forefront of computerization.

Chapter 4: Summary of Recommendations

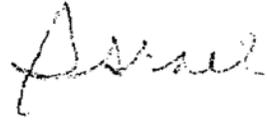
1. We strongly recommend that the department be renamed The Department of Hebrew and Comparative Literature and Literary Theory.
2. We recommend that the department set up a Committee on Instruction, whose job it will be to create a truly coordinated curriculum across its various constituencies.
3. In all tracks, the core curriculum should be taught in rotation by all members of the tenured faculty.
4. The department should encourage its students—on all tracks—to avail themselves of the course offerings in the Department of Hebrew Culture Studies, specifically for the purpose of studying the Hebrew Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud, the midrashim, and a thousand years of Hebrew homiletical and ethical writing.
5. Two new searches should be initiated immediately to replace retiring faculty: one in medieval Hebrew literature within its Arabic context, and another in the Haskalah within the context of early modern Europe. 6. Every effort must be made to generate a spirit of cooperation and collegiality which is so lacking in parts of the department. While we are not so naive as to believe that the restoration of tranquility in an academic unit is easy to achieve, it is something that needs to be addressed head-on.

Were this great and diverse department to achieve its full potential, it would have a lasting impact on the future of Hebrew literary studies and of Israeli culture as a whole.

Signed by:



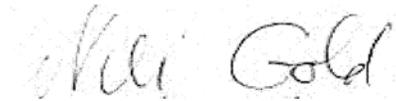
Prof. Arnold Band
Committee Chair



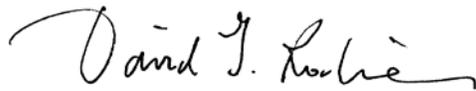
Prof. Dan Ben-Amos



Prof. Yehuda Friedlander



Prof. Nili Gold



Prof. David Roskies



prof. Angel Saenz-Badillos



Prof. Yosef Yahalom

Appendices

Appendix 1- Copy of Letter of Appointment



January 2012

**שר החינוך
Minister of Education**

Prof. Arnold Band
Department of Comparative Literature
University of California, Los Angeles
USA
وزير التربية والتعليم

Dear Professor Band,

The State of Israel undertook an ambitious project when the Israeli Council for Higher Education (CHE) established a quality assessment and assurance system for Israeli higher education. Its stated goals are: to enhance and ensure the quality of academic studies; to provide the public with information regarding the quality of study programs in institutions of higher education throughout Israel; and to ensure the continued integration of the Israeli system of higher education in the international academic arena. Involvement of world-renowned academicians in this process is essential.

This most important initiative reaches out to scientists in the international arena in a national effort to meet the critical challenges that confront the Israeli higher educational system today. The formulation of international evaluation committees represents an opportunity to express our common sense of concern and to assess the current and future status of education in the 21st century and beyond. It also establishes a structure for an ongoing consultative process among scientists around the globe on common academic dilemmas and prospects.

I therefore deeply appreciate your willingness to join us in this crucial endeavor.

It is with great pleasure that I hereby appoint you to serve as the chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of Hebrew Literature Studies.

The composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Arnold Band, (Chair), Prof. Dan Ben-Amos, Prof. Yehuda Friedlander, Prof. Nili Gold, Prof. David Roskies, Prof. Angel Saenz-Badillos, Prof. Yosef Yahalom.
Ms. Tamar Maagan-Efrati will coordinate the Committee's activities.

In your capacity as the chair of the Evaluation Committee, you will be requested to function in accordance with the enclosed appendix.

I wish you much success in your role as chair of this most important committee.

Sincerely,

Gideon Sa'ar
Minister of Education,
Chairperson, The Council for Higher Education

Enclosures: Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Ms. Michal Neumann, The Quality Assessment Division
Ms. Tamar Maagan-Efrati, Committee Coordinator

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Appendix 2- Site Visit Schedule

Hebrew literature - Schedule of site visit – Tel-Aviv University

Wednesday, May 16, 2012

Time	Subject	Participants
09:30-10:15	Opening session with the heads of the institution and the senior staff member appointed to deal with quality assessment	Prof. Dina Prialnik, Vice Rector Prof. David Horn, Head, Academic Quality Assessment
10:15-11:00	Meeting with head of Faculty of Humanities	Prof. Eyal Zisser, Dean Ms. Nira Shirman, Administrative Director
11:15-12:00	Meeting with the academic and administrative heads of the Department of Hebrew literature	Dr. Orly Lubin, Head of Dept. Ms. Ricky Zik-Slonim, Administrative Assistant
12:00-13:00	Meeting with senior faculty and representatives of relevant committees*	Prof. Nitsa Ben-Ari Prof. Michael Gluzman Prof. Yochai Oppenheimer Prof. Hannah Naveh Prof. Galili Shahar Dr. Tova Beeri Dr. Yael Levo Dr. Iris Milner Dr. Smadar Shiffman
13:00-13:45	Lunch (in the same room)	
13:45-14:30	Tour of campus	Dr. Orly Lubin, Head, Lit. Dept.

* The heads of the institution and academic unit or their representatives will not attend these meetings

Thursday, May 17, 2012

Time	Subject	Participants
09:30-10:00	Meeting with Adjunct faculty *	Dr. Oreet Meital Dr. Michal Arbell Dr. David Rotman
10:00-10:30	Meeting with Junior academic faculty *	Dr. Uri S. Cohen Dr. Dana Olmert
10:30-11:15	Meeting with BA students**	Up to ten students
11:15-12:00	Meeting with MA students**	Up to ten students
12:00-12:45	Meeting with PhD students**	Up to ten students
12:45-14:15	Lunch (in the same room)+ Closed-door meeting of the committee	
14:15-15:00	Meeting with Alumni**	Mr. Nimrod Dori Mr. Yaakov Herskovitz Ms. Noa Shenhav Mr. Assaf Walden Ms. Natalie Wienstein
15:00-15:30	Summation meeting with heads of department and institution	Prof. Dina Prialnik, Vice Rector Prof. David Horn, Head, Academic Quality Assessment Dr. Orly Lubin, Head, Lit. Dept.

* The heads of the institution and academic unit or their representatives will not attend these meetings.

** The visit will be conducted in English with the exception of students who may speak in Hebrew and anyone else who feels unable to converse in English.