



**General Report on the Departments of Jewish  
Philosophy in Israel  
By the External Evaluation Team  
for  
The Council of Higher Education**

**August 2010**

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## **PART I**

### **INTRODUCTION AND DESCRIPTION**

#### **(1) Composition of the Committee**

In response to the invitation of the Minister of Education and the Council of Higher Education a Committee of four members was created in early 2009 to review the undergraduate and graduate programs in Jewish thought in four Israeli universities, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, and Bar Ilan University. The Committee is comprised of: Professor David Novak, University of Toronto; Professor Alfred Ivry, New York University (Emeritus); Professor Moshe Idel, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and Professor Steven T. Katz, Boston University. Professor Katz also serves as the Chair of the Committee.

Ms. Michal Kabatznik coordinated the committee on behalf of the CHE.

#### **(2) Meetings in Israel**

The Committee, after receiving the Self-Study Reports prepared by the four universities to be evaluated, came together twice in Israel for discussion and on-site visits. The first visit took place in June, 2009 when the Committee made on-site visits to Ben Gurion University in the Negev and The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The second visit took place in December, 2009. At this time the Committee visited Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan and Tel Aviv University in Ramat Aviv.

(3) **The University Context**

Jewish Philosophy and Thought (hereafter, for the sake of simplicity, referred to as Jewish Philosophy) is taught at both the undergraduate and graduate level at the four major Israeli universities that the External Committee was asked to evaluate. All four of the universities have been teaching the subject for decades and have well established programs. In addition, all four universities have, today, significant numbers of students at all levels and distinguished faculties with national and international reputations. The main issue that confronts all of these programs is how to maintain their size and quality in light of current economic realities.

The relevant statistical data on the number of students studying Jewish Philosophy at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for the last academic year (2008-2009) is as follows:

**Students in Jewish Philosophy/Jewish Thought in 2008-2009**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>B.A.</b>	<b>M.A.</b>	<b>PhD</b>	<b>Total</b>
Tel Aviv University	118	48	4	<b>170</b>
Bar Ilan University	46	57	41	<b>144</b>
Hebrew University	85	51	41	<b>177</b>
Ben Gurion University	55	41	24	<b>120</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>611</b>

(4) **Criteria of Assessment**

The External Committee considered two separate sets of issues when evaluating the programs in Jewish Philosophy.

(A) The first issues were narrowly academic. That is, the Committee enquired into the usual matters of the size of the faculty, the distinction of the faculty, the quality of faculty publications, the quality of instruction at all levels, the organization of the curriculum and its coherence, the quality of advising for graduate students, the quality of the relevant university and departmental libraries, and related questions of the quality of the infrastructure supporting the programs. In the course of the present report the External Committee will provide its evaluation of all these central matters.

(B) In addition, and as a distinct subject, the External Committee also asked itself an essential question given the subject matter it was reviewing – Jewish Philosophy – and the geo-political context in which its review was being undertaken – the State of Israel. The Committee, comprised of senior scholars, all of whom have had long experience with Israeli universities as students, visiting faculty, and regular faculty, was conscious that there is an unusual status for a subject like Jewish Philosophy in Israel, a status that, somehow, needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating programs in this discipline. The significance of this consideration will become apparent later in the present report.

The External Committee would point out that this unusual role assigned to programs in Jewish thought has been apparent in Israeli university culture since the

founding of the Hebrew University in the 1920s. And this distinctive role continues to be understood as relevant, especially in certain of the university programs in Jewish Studies that are valued not only for themselves but also because they are involved in the production of teachers who will teach the subject in question at Israeli secondary schools. This means, among other things, that the study of Jewish Philosophy in Israeli universities has, in the past, been recognized as possessing historic and cultural significance that is vital to Israeli life outside of the universities. In effect, the teaching and study of Jewish Philosophy has historically been, and continues to be, an investment in the nurturing of the deep spiritual and cultural structures of Israeli public and private life.

## **PART II**

### **COMMITTEE FINDINGS**

#### **A. THE FACULTY**

(1) The faculties teaching Jewish Philosophy in Israel range across all academic ranks from Full Professor to Adjunct Lecturers. In general, the External Committee was impressed with the quality and commitment of the faculties at all four of the universities it reviewed. Senior faculty have earned their positions with important, and numerous, scholarly publications in Hebrew and other languages. Their work is disseminated by leading publishers in Israel and abroad, as well as by the leading, refereed, journals in their fields of research. Their research, which runs across the entire

spectrum of subjects from biblical studies to contemporary thought, is well known to scholars outside of Israel and, taken individually and together, represents a true contribution to scholarship.

Similarly, the faculty in the more junior ranks of Senior Lecturer, Lecturer, and Adjunct Lecturer are, without exception, hard working, competent, learned, serious, and impressive. They are producing new research of substance and significance. Their future trajectories as scholars of quality seem certain.

(2) The relatively similar composition and organization of the faculties across departments is notable. Each department has attempted to represent just about all the major areas of Jewish philosophical and mystical study ranging from the classical sources to modern thinkers such as Buber and Levinas. However, while attempting to teach all the main subject areas of the discipline, all four of the departments reviewed emphasize pre-modern thought. That is, the largest percentage of their teaching and research is in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah. Alternatively, all four departments give less weight – and show less interest in – Modern Jewish Philosophy.

(3) The age/rank structure of the four faculties must be noted. All have, or until very recently have had, a considerable number of scholars who have been on the faculty for quite long periods of time. This has given the departments experienced teaching and high levels of quality publications. Alternatively, there have been only a small number of younger/newer appointments. This has resulted in the possibility – and in some universities the actuality – that problems of staffing, and teaching will arise

going forward, if they have not already done so. This matter has become particularly acute in the wake of recent retirements, or impending retirements, that have created major gaps in existing programs.

Though there is some variation in the number of faculty retiring in the four universities reviewed by the present External Committee, all are facing this problem to some degree. In the Committee's opinion it is a serious issue that needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

The implications of this situation are serious and could be highly detrimental to the quality of the programs under consideration. This state of affairs needs to be addressed by the four individual universities that are the subject of this review, as well as by the Council of Higher Education which is mandated to, and can, take a more comprehensive view of the matter.

## **B. MATTERS OF TEACHING AND CURRICULUM**

(1) The faculty at Israeli universities work very hard to create a reasonable classroom circumstance for their students. They teach many hours, at all levels, from students just beginning their studies to doctoral candidates. They also try to provide, with much success, broad curriculums that cover the main topics that need to be represented in a quality course of study. The External Committee found all the programs it reviewed anxious to meet the requirements of their students.

(2) The curriculum in place in all four universities attempts, as just mentioned, to provide a broad introduction to the main topics, subject areas, and thinkers in the area of Jewish Philosophy. The problem with all the curriculums, however, is that

they are thin even in the area covered -- usually because of a lack of sufficient faculty depth -- and, even with the serious, good-faith effort being made, they do not cover all the main areas adequately. And, with recent losses, retirements, and the general downsizing of the faculties, this basic curricular matter is getting worse, as testified to repeatedly by senior university administrators, Deans, Department Chairs, faculty members, and students at all levels.

(3) The curriculum in place at each university tends to be rather conservative. New subjects and methods, as well as forms of instruction across departments, e.g., interdepartmental courses and programs, and courses organized by topics, were underweighted in the curriculum design of each of the four departments. In this they are quite different from the offerings and organization of programs and departments in the major universities outside of Israel.

(4) Yet, despite the remarks just made in point (3), the faculty at three of the four universities, have made good-faith efforts, within modest parameters, to introduce some innovation in their teaching methods and in the organization of both individual courses and the curriculum as a whole. Radical reform of the curriculum was implemented by one university. Here the redesign of the entire Jewish Philosophy program has met with success.

### **C. THE STUDENTS**

(1) All four of the Departments of Jewish Philosophy that were reviewed teach both undergraduate and graduate courses in this subject area.

(2) In addition, Bar Ilan, because of its special *limmudei yesod* program, teaches a large number of students who are not specializing in Jewish Philosophy while at university.

(3) The undergraduate students are qualitatively very uneven. The admission standards for programs in Jewish Philosophy, as reported in the various Self-Study Reports prepared for the External Committee, show that these programs admit at least some students who would not be admitted to other undergraduate programs at the same university.

(4) The number of undergraduates studying Jewish Philosophy in total throughout the country, based on the data in the Self-Study Reports, is declining.

(5) There is a high student-faculty ratio at the graduate level in some of the programs.

(6) The most serious problem for graduate students, beyond the number of course offerings, centers around the issue of finding a thesis advisor. There are simply not enough senior faculty available to serve in this role.

(7) Despite the very real problems faced by those seeking to do graduate work, the number of such students continues to be substantial (see statistics on p. 5 above).

(8) It must be emphasized that despite the curricular limitations, and other material difficulties encountered by Israeli students at all levels, the students whom the External Committee met with were uniformly appreciative of the faculty members who taught them. Though students – and especially graduate students – had many complaints, they continually expressed admiration for the faculties in the departments of Jewish

Philosophy. These laudatory testimonies referred both to the specific courses that the students were taking, as well as to the larger cultural-educational importance of their studies. The students also indicated that they saw the faculty as influential models in their personal development.

(9) Very positive sentiments were also expressed by all the alumni of the different programs who the External Review Committee met with.

### **PART III**

#### **CRITIQUE AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **A THE FACULTY**

(1) The main problem facing all Departments of Jewish Philosophy in Israel is the shrinkage of their faculty size. This decline in the absolute number of faculty teaching Jewish Philosophy is apparent in all four universities reviewed. Independently of all other considerations, and all questions of quality, the simple issue of adequate size is absolutely fundamental and non-negotiable. Unless the Departments of Jewish Philosophy receive urgently needed new appointments not only will they be unable to maintain their current roles -- as well as their current scholarly reputations -- but they will decline in function and stature and may, ultimately, be unable to maintain themselves as viable Departments. They will certainly see their national and international reputations erode.

(2) As examples of the quite urgent need for additional faculty lines, the External Committee would call attention to the need for appointments at several universities in medieval Jewish Philosophy – especially Maimonides and the Maimonidean tradition – and in Kabbalah, as well as in Modern (German) Jewish Thought from Mendelssohn to Buber. All of these subjects have seen a serious decline in their representation in the four universities visited over recent years.

Responding to the critical point just made, the External Committee 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. Given the diminution in size of the Jewish Philosophy departments that has already occurred, not to adopt such a replacement policy will assure the continued, very serious, deterioration of these departments. The immediate significance of this issue can be seen quite clearly in the present situation at three of the four university programs. All three of these programs have been negatively impacted over the past decade as replacements for retiring faculty have not been made. Today, these programs face the critical issue of not having a sufficient staff, a “critical mass” of faculty, to fully meet their obligations satisfactorily.

(3) The External Committee would call attention to serious problems with hiring practices at several universities. There does not always appear to be a coherent vision of what a department or a program should be when hiring new faculty. There is an over emphasis on “star quality, i.e., the quality of individual candidates for positions, and an under appreciation of meeting curricular and student needs. Faculties are more than

collections of individuals, no matter their individual quality, and appointments should reflect this fact.

(4) Promotion policies, like hiring policies, are essential to the success of departments. The Review Committee would encourage all universities to review their procedures in this area to make sure that they meet the "best practices" standard of universities.

(5) The members of the External Committee are well aware of the economic and daily difficulties facing members of the Israeli academic community. Nonetheless, it urges that Departments create departmental seminars and colloquia to foster conversation and better relations between faculty members, and faculty and graduate students. The sorts of interactions and conversations that such occasions create are essential to the training of students and the mentoring of junior faculty. Moreover, such events provide occasions for aspiring scholars to learn how to model their work and behavior.

## **B THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM**

The External Committee recommends that all four departments under review consider the following vis-à-vis their undergraduate curricula and teaching methods.

- (a) There should be more courses organized by topic.
- (b) There should be more planning of relationship between one course and another, and of the curriculum as a whole.

(c) There should be more interdisciplinary possibilities, e.g., in connection with the General Philosophy department in each university, and with the Jewish History, Bible, and Talmud departments in each university.

(d) There should be more emphasis on methodological issues and different methodological approaches. This should be a concern even at the B.A. level.

(e) Undergraduates should not regularly be students in the same courses as graduate students due to a lack of a sufficient number of courses designed for, and aimed at, undergraduates.

(f) Students should write more, and write more analytically, in their courses. And student writing assignments need to be graded and returned. Such feedback is an essential part of good undergraduate training and teaching.

(g) There should be undergraduate seminars which are completely separate from graduate seminars. In such seminars students will be able to develop logical skills, textual skills, and communication skills that are crucial.

(h) There should be a system of regular and serious advisors for undergraduates. This practice, which is a regular part of academic life outside of Israel, seems very largely absent in Israel. As a result, students needing guidance often do not receive it with the result that they either flounder or drop their course of study, or both.

(i) There is too much dependence on Adjunct Faculty.

Such innovations and changes as here suggested will send students the strong message that they are wanted. They will certainly impact positively on the drop out rates that several departments are experiencing as indicated in their Self-Study Reports.

**C GRADUATE STUDENT EDUCATION**

The External Committee recommends the following:

- (a) Graduate students need, and deserve, an adequate number of their own courses and seminars.
- (b) Departments need to introduce courses on both academic writing and methodology that are specifically aimed at graduate students.
- (c) Departments need to assure that there are supervisors for all their students, and that the acquisition of such a supervisor does not require a Herculean effort.
- (d) There needs to be more coherence and structure in the courses taken by M.A. and Ph.D. students.
- (e) Graduate students need to write more and to have their writing critically evaluated and returned with thoughtful feedback.
- (f) Efforts should be made to create more of a sense of academic community among graduate students. Obligatory seminars, among other possibilities, might make a partial contribution in this area of concern.

**D. THE FUNDING OF GRADUATES AND POST-GRADUATES**

(a) 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.

(b) At every university visited by the External Committee the same complaint was raised, with passion, namely, that there are not enough Fellowships or Teaching Assistantships, and those that do exist are funded at an inadequate level. This is a matter of urgency that must be addressed by both the individual universities and the CHE.

(c) There needs to be some funding of Post-Doctoral positions for the talented young scholars receiving their Ph.D.s at Israeli universities. Too many of the advanced graduate students we spoke to told us they planned to leave Israel as there was no opportunity for them in the country.

**E. LIBRARIES**

The External Committee is deeply concerned with the cutting of all university library budgets. The library is still a crucial tool for study and research in Jewish Philosophy. With the current cuts – up to 50% of library budgets – combined with those made over the past decade, the necessary collections of books and journals in Israeli universities are simply not there. Outside of Jerusalem this is an especially important issue. Though new computer aided services, and various online resources, help to offset some of the problems inherent in the reduction of library budgets, not all the problems can be solved in this way. Of course, though desirable, it is impossible, given the limited available resources, for each library to acquire all the needed material, but some sort of

more active and reasonably funded consortium system needs to be created. And library budgets for the purchase of books and journals in the area of Jewish Philosophy must be increased.

**F. PROMOTION PROCESS**

The members of the External Committee well understand that this is, inherently, a complex issue. At the same time, however, it recommends that all four of the Israeli universities it has reviewed follow “Best Practice” in this matter. This requires:

- (a) The creation of a clear and fair process;
- (b) The public dissemination of what this process entails;
- (c) The timely management of the process according to an agreed calendar;
- (d) That department and university administrators set out the standards to be used for evaluation clearly, and that all expectations be transparent.

Unfortunately this has not been the case at all four of the Israeli universities visited by the Committee.

It is essential for the maintenance of the integrity of the Israeli academic community that the CHE take steps to assure the just implementation of tenure rules and processes in all Israeli universities.

**G. CREATING INTER-UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS**

In several of the individual reviews on specific programs in Jewish Philosophy, the External Committee has recommended that individual universities seek academic alliances with other Israeli universities. In the current economic situation this recommendation should, in fact, be extended to all universities teaching Jewish Philosophy, insofar as this is feasible. Graduate students, in particular, should be permitted – and encouraged – to enroll at more than their primary home institution in order to get a broader set of courses, wider exposure to different faculty, and contact with a larger pool of their graduate colleagues. Such cooperation should also be encouraged, insofar as it is practical, among faculty. For example, Tel Aviv University and Bar Ilan are just a few miles apart. Each is limited in the size of its faculty and course offerings. Creating cooperation between the programs in Jewish Philosophy in the two universities would help to overcome these weaknesses. Possible connections between other universities, though logistically more complex, are not unthinkable. One has only to look at several large consortium arrangements that exist in America – in Berkeley, Chicago, and Boston/Cambridge – to find workable and suggestive models that might be the basis for such inter-university cooperation in Israel.

The CHE, given its national scope and authority, could play a valuable role in encouraging such an initiative. Creating a suitable committee, with members drawn from all the relevant individual universities, would, in the view of the External Committee, be a significant first step in exploring this potentially highly valuable undertaking.

The External Committee would here add that neither the CHE, nor any individual University Administration, should take possession of this practical suggestion and

advance it in the hope that it would reduce the pressure on the CHE and individual universities to maintain their own departments at an adequate level of funding and staffing. The fact is that the individual departments of Jewish Philosophy are presently weak, and the situation threatens to get still worse, and therefore the departments can ill afford to be neglected further. Rather, the correct way to interpret the current suggestion is to understand that the weaknesses and difficulties in the present situation are so severe that they can only be properly and adequately met by a two-sided approach. The first side involves a direct infusion of resources into departments in order to make new faculty appointments, create more graduate fellowships, and build support for university libraries and other infrastructure. The second and complementary side is to explore the possibilities that inter-university cooperation could create that would supplement the very limited available resources.

## **PART IV**

### **FINAL OBSERVATIONS**

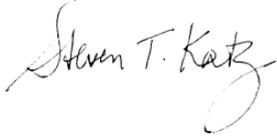
The External Committee unanimously agrees that Jewish Philosophy is a subject that, in Israel, is important not only within the confines of the country's universities but also outside of them. Israel, as a democratic and Jewish state, cannot maintain a flourishing intellectual and moral cultural environment if it neglects the sources of Jewish values and tradition. Accordingly, it is incumbent on university administrations, as well

as on the CHE, to foster those disciplines that enrich the cultural, spiritual and civic currents of national life.

It is tempting, under the impact of short term pressures and financial difficulties, to ignore this broader educational and socio-cultural mandate and to sacrifice subjects like Jewish Philosophy to departments of business, or biology, or nanotechnology. But those who administer the universities must resist such temptations, for they are entrusted with preserving – and fostering – a larger, more complex and valuable legacy. They need to appreciate that universities are more than colleges of technology and business administration, and that, especially in a country like Israel, they play a much more profound role than merely being places that produce competent managers and technocrats. In practical terms this means that if Israel is to have a viable, dynamic, culture, within a state that is meaningfully Jewish, it must provide resources to subjects that contribute to its national well being and not only to its economic prosperity. Among such subjects, such human necessities, is the study of Jewish Philosophy. The results of such funding decisions are not easily quantified or measured, but only those who are insensitive to fundamental issues in Israeli life in its totality will ignore or dismiss them.

The topic the External Committee here raises for consideration is, we know, very large and complex, and the members of the Committee make no pretense at resolving it. But they do want to emphasize that it is a major, unavoidable, matter that the CHE, as well as the individual universities, must confront if they are not to fall short of their manifold responsibilities within the wider context of Israeli society.

**Signed By:**



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Prof. Steven Katz, Chair



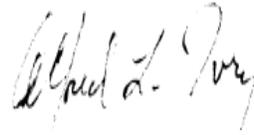
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Prof. David Novak



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Prof. Moshe Idel



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Prof. Alfred Ivry

# Appendix

## Appendix: Copy of Letter of Appointment



December 11, 2008  
14613083

**Prof. Steven Katz**  
**Prof. of Jewish Philosophy, Department of Religion**  
**Boston University**  
**U.S.A**

Dear Professor Katz,

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, particularly as our nation reaches maturity in its 60<sup>th</sup> year.

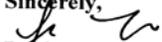
This most important initiative reaches out to scientists in the international arena in a national effort to meet the critical challenges that confront the Israeli higher educational system today. The formulation of international evaluation committees represents an opportunity to express our common sense of concern and to assess the current and future status of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 a Chair of the Council for Higher Education's Committee for the Evaluation of Jewish Philosophy Studies. The composition of the Committee will be as follows: Prof. Steven Katz – Chair, Prof. Moshe Idel, Prof. Alfred Ivry and Prof. David Novak. Ms. Michal Kabatznik will coordinate the Committee's activities.

In your capacity as a 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 a Chair of this most important committee.

Sincerely,

  
**Professor Yuli Tamir**  
**Minister of Education**  
**and Chairperson of the Council for Higher Education**

*Enclosures:* Appendix to the Appointment Letter of Evaluation Committees

cc: Ms. Riki Mendelzvaig, Secretary of the Council for Higher Education  
Ms. Michal Neumann, Head of the Quality Assessment Unit  
Ms. Michal Kabatznik, Committee Coordinator