

“This is a Lie!”

An open letter to the Hebrew University Community

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“THIS IS A LIE!” SHOUTED AT ME THE PRESIDENT of the Hebrew University Menachem Magidor in the midst of my presentation at the recent Senate meeting on December 3, 2003.

Thus accused me President Magidor publicly of lying to the Hebrew University community. In this open letter I disprove his accusation, based, in addition to other evidence, on Magidor’s own answers to the questions of the major Israeli newspaper “Maariv,” which it published last Friday (23/1/04) in a five-page long interview with me about the lack of leadership and consequent lack of accountability at the Hebrew University. (To download the article, in Hebrew, see the footnote below.¹) After resting my case at the end of this letter, I demand that President Magidor retract his accusation and publicly apologize.

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One of the most inimical characteristic of the Hebrew University (HU) culture is its unfortunate lack of a clear distinction between truth and falsehood. The reason that I write this letter is to help redraw that essential demarcation.

Was I lying?

What invoked HU President Magidor’s brusque exclamation at the Senate meeting was the second bullet on the twelveth slide in my presentation, “Accountability at the Hebrew University: whether, to whom, and how?” That bullet read:

Upon commencement of his presidency, Magidor promised the HU Trustees that he would invite outside visiting committees to all departments and units, but he has not kept his promise.

¹ http://pluto.mscc.huji.ac.il/~msyberg/Higher_Education/Maariv_article.pdf

The Hebrew University incorrigible faculty. The indispensability of systematic, independent reviews of any organization, not just a university, is universally recognized outside of the Hebrew University.² Universities around the globe, including the Weizmann Institute, review the performance of their research faculty in a perpetual cycle of 5 to 7 years. Not so at the Hebrew University, where, for example, as Professor Yaron Ezrahi from the HU political science department informed recently a sizable audience, the late President Ben-Porat tried a decade ago to review the Faculty of Social Sciences, but was repelled by its senior faculty.

Independently supporting Ezrahi’s testimony is a message I received last summer from a pivotal HU faculty member saying: “I fully support the idea to have departmental review committees on a regular basis. I have suggested and discussed this with every Rector/President since Yoram Ben Porat. I don't believe that it can pass [as a resolution in the HU Senate]. But I will gladly help in a sure to fail attempt to implement such a system here.”

Weizmann does do reviews by outside experts, which have a great impact on the President and the Trustees.

—David Baltimore
President
California Institute of Technology

One of the most important elements of a report by an outside review committee is the assessment of the work of individual researchers. In departments of large performance variance as are many at the Hebrew University, the excellent minority of researchers are in favor of such visitations, whereas the mediocre majority is naturally against them. The

² From “A Policy Statement on Academic Review of Graduate Programs,” University of California, Berkeley, 1990;
http://opa.vcbf.berkeley.edu/AcademicPrograms/report_only.html :

“The primary purpose of all program review is the improvement of graduate programs as measured by the quality of the faculty, the students, library, and other educational resources, the curriculum, available facilities, and the academic reputation of the program among its peers. Institutions of higher education, like individuals, require regular scrutiny and self-examination to improve, and the systematic review of academic programs is an integral part of this process of improvement.”

“Program review helps in long-range planning, and in setting both institutional and departmental priorities. It gives administrators and academic leaders critical information about the size and stability of a program, its future, faculty resources and student market, its equipment and space needs, its strengths and weaknesses and its contribution to the mission of the institution. It helps set goals and directions for the future and ensures that overall academic plans and budget decisions are based on real information and agreed-upon priorities, not vague impressions or theoretical schemes.”

“Program review provides a mechanism for change. By creating a structured, scheduled opportunity for a program to be examined, program review provides a strategy for improvement that is well-reasoned, far-seeing and as apolitical as possible.”

“*Program review results in action.* Growing out of the reviewers' comments and recommendations, the institution develops a plan to implement the desired changes on a specified, agreed-upon timetable.”

latter stand to lose from recommendations to reallocate resources away from themselves to those who can use them better in their research. When university governance is characterized by majority rules, as is the case at the Hebrew university, it surrenders control to the mediocre majority, which can therefore successfully resist visitations by review committees.³

The promise. In 1997, in order to improve HU accountability, caring Trustees decided not to extend former President Gutfreund’s term in office, and nominated current President Magidor who promised to exercise leadership and establish, inter alia, a systematic, academic review process at the Hebrew University like at the better universities. The same sources who told me that added that President Magidor has not fulfilled his promise during his six years in office. This, the message quoted above, and additional evidence presented below served as basis for my statement at the Senate meeting, which evoked Magidor’s accusation, “This is a lie!”

The Truth

It should be marked first that President Magidor did not dispute the fact that he indeed made the aforementioned promise. Magidor branded my claim a lie by trying to give the impression that he *did* keep his promise by bringing six visiting committees during his six years of tenure in office.

Being rudely interrupted by President Magidor’s “That’s a lie!” I retorted right there and then that the number of visiting committees per se is uninformative. Of significance was the percentage of HU researchers who underwent outside academic scrutiny during his six years as president. I also pointed out to Magidor and to the Senate that to keep his promise to the trustees, that figure should have been upward of 90%, in light of the common practice at reputable universities. “Was the figure in that vicinity?” I asked. But Magidor refused to answer; neither at the Senate meeting nor to my message to his office asking the same question.

Only three units reviewed in six years. The Israeli newspaper Maariv was successful where I failed in securing President Magidor’s response. Although he did not inform Maariv newspaper of the percentage of faculty who underwent academic scrutiny during his presidency, Magidor did

³ “Academic self rule was even more absolute at the Hebrew University than in Germany, since in Germany the universities were under the supervision of the civil servant managers of the higher education departments at the education ministries of the different German federal states, and those have occasionally intervened in academic affairs. Some of them even supervised their universities like American university presidents do. In the absence of such state supervisors, faculty self rule in academic affairs at the Hebrew University was almost absolute. In principle, the HU Board of Trustees could have maintained [academic] supervision similar to that in the German states, but it lacked the administrative apparatus to do so.”

— Joseph Ben-David, 1985, *Israeli universities, dilemmas of expansion, diversification, and management*, in Ackermann, Carmon, and Zucker, “Education in a forming Society: The Israeli System, Vol 1, p. 531.

inform that *four* (not six) visiting committees were active during his six years as president: economics, pharmacy, veterinary, and livestock sciences.

But Magidor was inaugurated HU president in October of 1997, while the economics visiting committee submitted its final report in June of 1996; a full year and four months earlier! How can President Magidor then give the Israeli public the impression that the economics visiting committee was his initiative? Since the purpose of this letter is to help redraw a clear demarcation between truth and lies at the Hebrew University, *I demand of President Magidor to explain that.*

Setting the economics review committee aside yields that during his six years in office, President Magidor has brought just three outside committees to review only three academically not-very-central units of the Hebrew University—two of the three on animals—which otherwise comprises scores of other units that are in urgent need of the first review in their history.

But reviewing only a tiny fraction of the Hebrew University units in six years, as President Magidor did, cannot possibly qualify as fulfillment of the promise he had made to the trustees. Therefore, Magidor felt the need to explain to Maariv newspaper his manifestly poor performance. To that end, Magidor summoned the “Intifada” (the Palestinian ‘uprising’) as an excuse, claiming that the HU could not enlist appropriate candidates who would be willing to serve on visiting committees to the HU.

However, during the first three years of Magidor’s term as president, there was no “Intifada.” About half of the HU academic units could have been reviewed during that period. Moreover, during the other three years of Magidor’s term, the Weizmann Institute continued to review its research faculty by the best scholars of the world. Therefore, the Palestinian ‘uprising’ does not seem a very good excuse for President Magidor’s non-performance.

No money for reviewing committees. Moreover, Professor Yehoshua Kolodny told me recently that during his recent term as HU Dean of Natural Sciences, he appealed to President Magidor to invite visiting committees to some of his Faculty’s major departments, but was refused on the pretext that there was no money to fund such an endeavor. But, as is well known from organizational theory and practice, monitoring the employees of an organization is the most important managerial responsibility, and should be budgeted at topmost priority. Moreover, the identification of non-research-active faculty, who could have been reassigned to more productive activities at the service of the university, should have paid off many folds even financially.

Postscript (Feb 18, 2005)

A straight lie is difficult to explain, and Magidor never did.

On the other hand, former HU President Hanoch Gutfreund told me recently that he not only brought the committee to visit the economics department, but he also brought the committees to the veterinary school and to the pharmacology department. Therefore, Magidor falsely attributed to his initiative three visiting committees out of the four that he listed to “Maariv” newspaper. This means that during his eight years in office as president, Magidor brought only one visiting committee; to the husbandry (domestic animals) department.

The convenience of non-leadership. The following letter (translated from Hebrew), written by Professor M. Abeles on July 5 1999, should have helped HU President Magidor in identifying the necessary resources that could have been saved and applied towards financing visiting review committees to the Hebrew University. It epitomizes the lack of leadership from which the Hebrew University suffers.

Professor M. Magidor
President
The Hebrew University
Sunday, July 25, 1999

Dear President Magidor:

As you possibly know, I am serving now as head of the Biology and Medicine Branch in the Israel Science Foundation (ISF). Recently, during deliberations of the Equipment Committee, a disgraceful situation has arisen, whereby, because of personal quarrels, the Hebrew University wastes its resources, and then demands matching from the ISF for that waste. []

I am writing to you to request that you intervene to remedy the situation and to prevent disgrace from the Hebrew University.

It is possible that the Hebrew University administration finds it more convenient to waste several hundred thousand dollars in an inefficient solution, instead of intervening in the personal quarrels between its faculty members, but the HU administration cannot expect the ISF to cooperate with it on this waste.

Beyond the disgrace that is made public by submitting a disdainful application like that, the Hebrew University risks losing the contribution of the ISF to equipment acquisition in the future.

Sincerely,
— M. Abeles

In addition to expressing his indignation at the waste of precious resources to satisfy the personal vagaries of the Hebrew University faculty, Professor Abeles also identifies—in the passage that I underlined in his letter—a major leadership breakdown: Professor Magidor finds it more convenient to waste a few hundred thousand dollars of public resources entrusted to him in order to keep the real masters of the HU, the faculty, happy even in their petty feuds, rather than to exercise the leadership expected of a university president.

Unconstitutional expiration of the HU Committee on Academic Policy.

Responsible for outlining the university’s academic policy and for its implementation, the HU Committee on Academic Policy is one of the university’s most important committees (Chapter 5 of the bylaws of the HU Constitution). Chaired by either the President or the Rector and comprising also non-faculty public figures, it is the committee that is empowered to “commission review committees, make decisions upon their

advice, and oversee the implementation of such decisions" (Article 55 of the bylaws of the HU Constitution).⁴

Having met for the last time on May 28, 2002,⁵ President Magidor has inexplicably let the all important HU Committee on Academic Policy, *which should have handled visiting committees to the university*, expire into non-existence. Without the Committee on Academic Policy, it is not clear who has been setting the academic policy of the Hebrew University during the last year and a half—if anyone has done so at all—and by what authority. Besides revealing President Magidor’s trifling attitude towards visiting committees, this substantial infraction of the Constitution of the Hebrew University by its president constitutes a serious breach of accountability and should be addressed by the body which the Constitution crowns as the University’s Supreme Authority; its Board of Governors.⁶

I did *not* lie!

By interrupting my presentation to the Senate on the lack of accountability at the Hebrew University with the unjustified cry, “That is a lie! I brought six visiting committees!” HU President Magidor tried to give the impression to the public that he has kept his promise to its trustees, the HU Governors, to install a systematic review process at the Hebrew University. In this letter, I have provided ample evidence that he has not kept his promise, and demonstrated that Magidor’s publicly accusing me of lying on this most important issue has no basis. I therefore demand that he retract his totally unwarranted accusation, and that he apologize for it publicly. It is not for my lost honor that I am demanding the retraction and apology, but for that of the Hebrew University. The clear demarcation between truth and falsehood must be restored!

—Yaacov Bergman

⁴ It was before this committee that former President Gutfreund should have brought the 1993 Gould Report recommending to shut down and restart the HU business school, but failed to do so.

⁵ I was told that a few weeks ago by the office of the HU Academic Secretariat.

⁶ Selectiveness with respect to the HU Constitution is noteworthy. When several Senate members tried to propose former Rector Ben-Sasson for reelection in the Summer of 2001, the fine print of the HU Constitution was consulted meticulously, and he was struck out as a possible candidate.