Israeli universities resist rightist assault

Our friend in Montreal, Stephen Scheinberg, emeritus professor of history at Concordia University and co-chair of Canadian Friends of Peace Now, is pleased to share this “good news” story, which he wrote for The Mark:

…. Israel’s nascent McCarthyism emanates from several sources, including right-wing members of the Knesset and several non-governmental organizations that have enjoyed important financial support from rightist American sources.…. 

The rightist campaign has achieved some success, such as the removal of Prof. Naomi Chazan (chair of the NIF) from the contributors to the Jerusalem Post, threats to the financing of both NIF and Human Rights Watch, and most probably the withdrawal of funding by the new, Tory-dominated board of Canada’s Rights and Democracy from three human rights groups.…. 

However, … the Israeli right may have miscalculated when it went after the universities. Israel’s university faculties are obvious targets for the right because liberal education and academic freedom are anathema to those who believe that their particular brand of Zionism should reign triumphant in every corner of Israeli society. If they knew any history, they might also have thought that the universities would capitulate with no more than a whimper of protest. In the Cold War 1950s, American universities cooperated with congressional investigating committees and the FBI to purge their faculties (Canada and the U.K. profited when they absorbed some of these academic refugees). So there was some reason to think that Israeli academia, which is overwhelmingly dependent on government financing, would not protest too much.

In this instance, it was Im Tiirtzu (Hebrew for “if you will it”), purporting to be a student organization, that launched the offensive. This same organization had won important support last February when it attacked the NIF as the instrument behind the UN’s Goldstone Report on the Israeli army’s Gaza offensive.

Education Minister Gideon Sa’ar even addressed their convention, and Prime Minister Netanyahu sent warm and encouraging greetings to a group whose leader, Ronen Shoval, told writer Gershom Gorenberg that “the purpose of the New Israel Fund is to dismantle Israel as a Jewish state,” and that the human rights terminology of groups it supports “serves Communist interests.” Shoval must have been channeling the late senator McCarthy.

The first reaction of BGU’s president Rivka Carmi was to condemn the threat made by Im Tiirtzu but ignore the organization and its letter. However, other past and present university leaders recognized that this was the time to speak out. Gen. Shlomo Gazit, former president of BGU and a former head of military intelligence, did not mince words. “Israeli society,” he wrote, “is
on the verge of being consumed by a menacing wave of McCarthyism stoked by nationalist movements and publicity-hungry legislators. If we ignore this wave and it’s not stopped immediately, it will endanger – perhaps even destroy – Israeli democracy.”

Haifa University president Aaron Ben-Zeev thundered: “Im Tirtzu is a political organization trying to dictate whom a university will or will not hire. This is academic destruction, the kind that will bring us to the kind of situation prevalent in Iran or communist Russia,” while several of the university heads signed a joint letter against the dangers of “thought police.”

Obviously, this was only one major battle in a war for the soul and character of Israel. Legislators are now framing repressive legislation in the Knesset, and other rightist organizations that are more sophisticated than Im Tirtzu will continue to malign and attack the institutions of progressive Zionism. However, the university presidents have made an impressive stand against the forces of repression, and perhaps, with their example, the centre can hold.