The best and brightest: Education is our nation’s generational calling

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 17.12.2024

Education ranks first among the fields where the brightest sons and daughters of the national religious sector are encouraged to contribute, according to a comprehensive survey conducted in July for *Beit HaTzionut HaDatit* (House of Religious Zionism). In response to the question “Where should the best go?”, “education and social work” was chosen by the largest share of respondents (approximately 37%). The fields of law, media, public and political activity, defense, and religious engagement followed closely behind.

The emphasis on education, even during a time of prolonged and intense warfare that has underscored the severity of the security challenges and amid profound crises in law, media, and the economy, highlights the recognition of its pivotal role. It reflects a deep understanding that education is the key to every area: Leadership, security, science and technology, economic prosperity, culture, and social cohesion. The eternal nation not only does not fear a long journey but believes that only through education can true influence be achieved, a nation be built, and a model society for the future be created.

The devastating war that began on Simchat Torah 2023 continues to shake us, dismantling long-held assumptions and historical paradigms. It forces a profound reckoning with the essence of the state and the unique destiny of our people among the nations. This war has brought us back to foundational values and reminded us – a truth we sought to escape – that we are still fighting for our very survival.

The atrocities, terror, and dread of the monstrous attack that struck us without warning, followed by the sorrow, grief, and heavy price paid, have been tempered by extraordinary stories of courage and heroism. Astonishing self-sacrifice and unprecedented bravery emerged from “ordinary” citizens and soldiers who heard the call and answered, “Here I am.” Our enemies, who expected to find a fractured nation and a weakened army, instead encountered heroes of unyielding spirit and strength – young fighters who revealed the true character of this

generation: a generation of valor.

When we ask what shaped these young individuals and instilled in them the values that inspired their heroism, the role of the education system cannot be overlooked. This is not to diminish the profound influence of the home and family, where the roots are first planted, nor the role of community, youth movements, or military service, where the IDF instills these values deeply. Yet preceding all of this are the efforts and investment of the education system — in classrooms, schoolyards, educational trips that connect youth to the land and society, and various social-educational frameworks.

Just days after the education system was once again in the headlines following the concerning results of the 2023 TIMSS international mathematics and science exam, it is important to highlight its role in our resilience during the far greater test of the past 14 months. (This does not absolve the system of its obligation to act urgently to improve performance in mathematics and science, fields that are vital for Israel's future.)

The education system carries the nation's most critical responsibility: building the next generations!

It is tasked with fostering excellence and encouraging achievement in both the scientific and humanities fields. Without excellence in science, Israel will struggle to maintain its status as a startup and innovation powerhouse, strengthen its capabilities (including military), finance its many needs, and ensure a high standard of living. Without excellence in the humanities, Israeli society will falter in preserving its spiritual and moral strength, refining its identity, and answering the question, "National security – for what purpose?" The system must cultivate graduates who possess values, knowledge, and skills that enable them to develop as independent, educated individuals with emotional and social resilience, maximize their potential with a sense of purpose, and contribute to society, the community, and the state.

Within the national-religious public, this mission is viewed as a sacred duty, fulfilling the commandment to "teach them to your children." Here, the education system is expected to instill awe of heaven, a love for Torah and commandments, and the tools to strengthen Jewish and faith-based identity. It must produce graduates who are idealistic, state-minded, proud of their identity, and committed

to preserving the Jewish character of the state, the unity of the people of Israel, and the settlement of the land. These graduates must skillfully balance between the sacred and the secular, Torah and work, tradition and modernity, and religion and state.

This mission must be accomplished in a reality marked by confusion, instability, and blurred boundaries between truth and falsehood, weakened authority, technological advancement, tension, polarization, diversity, and separatism. The education system absorbs all social disparities and ideological conflicts, yet it also has the power to influence them, promoting tolerance, openness, solidarity, and a shared sense of purpose.

The challenges facing the education system are immense. These include fundamental questions regarding its philosophy, structure, and processes; planning and budgeting; integrating technological innovation into teaching; upgrading learning environments; and improving its relationship with other related systems. Above all, there remains the fight for quality human capital.

The importance of education is universally acknowledged. The understanding within the National-Religious public that now is the time for its brightest youth to enter education presents a valuable opportunity. While it is not sufficient on its own, it is a strong starting point from which to advance complementary, practical steps.

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