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EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

The world's finest educational systems encourage academic excellence and social equity – raising educational levels and closing achievement gaps. Attaining these dual goals is one of Israel's greatest challenges. Beit Berl is at the forefront of meeting that challenge ■ Ilana Kraus

Whether you define Israeli society as blessed with diversity or plagued by atomization, few would disagree that the need to bridge social gaps and prepare for a future of changing demographics is one of the major challenges facing Israel today.

“Beit Berl College has been a leader in training Israel's teachers, artists, public and non-profit leaders for almost 70 years,” states President Tamar Ariav. “We believe that the power of diversity stems from the vibrant mix of people and cultures who work together to create something much greater than the sum of its parts. This can only happen in a place that levels the playing field, brings people together as equals, and invests in every one. At Beit Berl, we are working to shape the face of Israeli education for the next 70 years.”

With its location in the center of the country, adjacent to large Arab and Haredi population centers, and its reputation for academic excellence and putting theory into practice, Beit Berl College is naturally suited to tackle the needs of different populations. Today, almost one in five of Israel's secular-school teachers is a Beit Berl graduate.

The Faculty of Education specializes in the training and development of teachers, principals, educational counselors and youth workers – from early childhood through elementary and secondary education, from

special education and informal education to youth-at-risk. Beit Berl's Faculty of Arts-HaMidrasha encourages fresh exploration in the fields of painting, sculpture, photography and film, theory and criticism, digital media, installation art, curatorship, and visual culture. The Faculty of Society and Culture integrates academic and practical knowledge in a wide range of cultural and social fields. With over 8,000 students, Beit Berl College is an incubator for training future generations.

Respectful discourse

“Our campus is a microcosm of the country as a whole, and we have already developed an infrastructure of quality and cooperation,” said Mary Copti, co-director of the Center for Education for Shared Society, along with Dr. Ilana Paul Benyamin, an expert in multiculturalism in education. The Center's goal is to change the way Israeli teachers see our society and teach our children. “We aim to educate the next generation toward greater equality, and less divisive discourse,” explained Copti, who is also a lecturer at the College's Faculty of Education. “The academic milieu offers us a wonderful opportunity to bring the diverse sectors of society together, to teach them how to create meaningful encounters through greater awareness,” she stressed. “Fundamentally, we are working toward creating a more democratic outlook, and making

everyone feel that they belong in the public space.”

Although the Center has only been operating for two years, it has already made an impact on campus. Scores of lecturers have added cross-cultural bibliographic materials to their courses; administrative and academic faculty learn Arabic; and Jewish and Arab education students co-teach in both school systems.

The Center's flagship Shared Society Course was piloted last year with 60 Jewish and Arab students of education. They learned about minority-majority relations, the history and socio-economic make-up of the two communities in Israel, and, as Copti explained, “learned to talk with people who have different views and ideas, to express differences of opinion without fear of reprisal, while respecting the opinions of others, even if you disagree. We aim to make this course mandatory for all education students,” she added. “We want to set an example for other academic institutions in Israel and around the world.”

Making higher education accessible to all sectors

Until recently, the ultra-Orthodox community has remained outside mainstream academic life, mainly by choice, but this is changing, as seen in the growth of Beit Berl College's Center for Haredi Educators. “Now in its fourth year, with hundreds of students and graduates, it began with two men seeking to earn a B.Ed. as well as a teaching certificate, and then quickly expanded,” the Center's director, Orit Lerer Knafo, recounted. Most of them were seeking professional training in special education and work with at-risk youth, areas which had not only been swept under the rug in their society, but also sorely deficient in professionally trained staff.

“Our graduates are becoming leaders in the Haredi education system – as school principals, counselors and administrators,” Lerer Knafo added proudly. “We do not compromise with these students. We demand academic excellence but accommodate their needs and do not attempt to change them.”

The college provides supplementary English classes, extra lessons in computer use and academic study skills, and arranges classes at hours that suit the students' work schedules and family obligations.

Men and women study in separate classes, but use campus-wide facilities. This model has come under fierce criticism in Israel, and has been challenged in court, because of the gender separation. But the Council on Higher Education has chosen Beit Berl College to lead in developing this model, and the college leadership stands behind it. “Integrating Haredim in academia is part of a slow but steady process of integrating into Israeli society,” states Nir Hacoen, Executive Director of Beit Berl College. “This stands at the heart of our approach to education.”

“On campus, ultra-Orthodox students use the library, the computer facilities, so they pick up on the sense of mutual respect that exists on our campus,” Lerer Knafo stressed. “The instructors, male and female, Arabs and Jews, are members of the Beit Berl faculty, although female lecturers only teach Haredi men in online classes. The students are committed, and have excellent learning skills. We have an unrivaled graduation rate – almost 100% – and our graduates are in high demand in the workforce.”

Orit Lerer Knafo also heads the Program for Ethiopian Mediators, initiated by the Ministry of Education to provide education degrees and teaching certificates to Ethiopians who have been working, with no career path, to facilitate communications among Ethiopian parents, their children and the school staffs. After they earn their teaching certificate, the Ministry will hire them as teachers. “They come to Beit Berl for academic studies and practice teaching,” Lerer Knafo explains.

For both the Haredi and Ethiopian-Israeli students, the support system and individual attention that Beit Berl College provides makes all the difference. “The Ethiopians, too, study in separate classes, because of their schedules. Most work full time and have families, and we try to accommodate their needs, providing special support, such as tutoring at exam time,” director Lerer Knafo affirms. “By giving special support to groups and individuals, they do not feel like anonymous students. They feel that Beit Berl is their home. They feel wanted here,” she adds. “After all, the ultimate goal of educating toward a shared society is for all Israelis to feel that they belong.”

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PIONEERING FILM DEPARTMENT

The Film Department of the College's HaMidrasha Faculty of Arts is among Israel's leading film and film education programs, bringing new voices and new faces to Israel's flourishing film industry. With an internationally-recognized faculty, diverse and talented student body, and an atmosphere of freedom to imagine and create, the department is a hub of pioneering young people encouraged to inquire and dare, to try the new and different. From Bangalore to Barcelona to San Diego, Beit Berl College students win prizes in international film festivals. “We encourage our students to tackle tough issues in film – to look outward, to their surroundings, not only inward to their personal lives,” explains Department head Dan Muggia. In a recent co-production with the Internationale Filmschule Cologne (IFS), students dealt with issues of

national identity in a migrant society: the experience of being a stranger, filming on buses and relocation centers in Germany. Other students documented the dynamics of a medical clinic for asylum seekers near Tel Aviv's central bus station. Committed to bringing new talent from all sectors of Israeli society, this year the department will open a preparatory program for talented Arab Israeli young people. “Lacking film studies in high school, Arabs are underrepresented in Israeli film schools, and in Israel's film industry,” Muggia said. “We want to hear their voices.”



The academic milieu offers a wonderful opportunity to bring the diverse sectors of society together – to learn, teach, research and create on a level playing field