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FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

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Fifty Years of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies

Margalit Finkelberg

Dear Professor Price, dear members of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies, dear guests,

It is a great honour for me to speak today before this forum. A great honour and a great responsibility, for I feel that I am also speaking for those who are not with us any longer, those whose vision, enthusiasm, and deep love for Classical Studies made this jubilee possible. It was indeed the Founders – Prof. Abraham Wasserstein of the Hebrew University, Prof. Shalom Perlman of Tel Aviv, Prof. David Sohlberg of Bar Ilan, Prof. Akiba Gilboa of the University of Haifa -- who fifty years ago conceived the idea of this Society, gave it its particular form and defined its rules. I hope they would be proud of us today.

The Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies was founded in 1971, at the high point of historical and cultural developments which had brought about what I would without hesitation define as the Golden Age of Classical Studies in Israel. This period of prosperity was a direct outcome of the cultural policy advanced in the decades that followed the foundation of the State of Israel. The young Jewish state strove to be on an equal footing with other nations by attaining ‘normality’, one of the cherished ideals of secular Zionism. This meant, among other things, providing the young generation with tools and opportunities for mastering the universal culture. As David Ben Gurion, a staunch supporter of the promotion of Greek and Roman classics in Israel, put it in 1958,

Perhaps I will look like a dreamer to you... I believe that we will be able to mobilize in Israel, among the Jewish people, the best literary and scientific minds and that we will give to the nation all the good and important things of the literature of humankind... The idea gives me no rest for many years now. Since the establishment of the State I felt that together with the State as such we should also establish a State of Spirit (מדינת הרוח). We have to give to the Hebrew generation (for Hebrew is their language) all the treasures of human spirit, since each of us is a citizen of the world.

The higher education policy was inspired by the same vision. Dozens of talented graduates in all academic fields were dispatched to Europe and North America to continue their studies at the best universities. Classics was no exception. In the 1970s, a cohort of young classicists who had took their doctoral degrees abroad came back and joined the faculty of Israeli universities. Full programmes in Classical Studies were now offered not only by the Hebrew University, whose Department of Greek Language and Literature (later the Department of Classics), was founded as early as 1928, but also by the universities of Tel Aviv (since 1956) and Bar Ilan (since 1970). Competent and dedicated tutors taught Greek and Latin to the students of Classics and other disciplines. Scholars trained in Classics were also employed at the departments of History, Archaeology, Jewish Studies, Philosophy, Linguistics, Comparative Literature, History

of Art, Theatre Studies. The BA programme of Classics in Translation launched by the Tel Aviv University's Department of Classics enjoyed wide popularity, and the importance of classical education was generally taken for granted.

This was the historical and academic background against which scholars and students of the classical world from all over the country joined their efforts to found the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies. Professor Abraham (Adi) Wasserstein of the Hebrew University (1921-1995) was elected its first President; he was also the one who gave the Society its name. Almost immediately, the meetings of the Society became the central event in the life of the Israel classical community. Three years later, in 1974, the first issue of the Society's periodical *Scripta Classica Israelica* was published. Classical studies in Israel achieved critical mass and became an equal partner on the international stage.

I was hardly aware of all this when, in the late 1970s, I attended an ISPCS meeting for the first time. I was then a PhD student at the Hebrew University and had only recently graduated from the Ulpan. The meeting took place on the Bar Ilan campus. I arrived from Jerusalem with the Professor (then Doctor) Ra'anana Meridor, with whom I was taking a seminar on Greek Lyric Poetry. She pushed me into the room full of strangers (it was the time of a coffee break) and commanded in a fierce whisper: 'Move around, move around!' (הסתובבי, הסתובבי!). I doubt I made any significant contacts on that memorable occasion, but that distant Bar Ilan meeting was only the first in a long series of yearly encounters which over the years have brought me many friends and many happy memories. For each yearly meeting of the Society is part of a recurring cycle punctuating the life of the classical community of Israel – from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, from Tel Aviv to Bar Ilan, from Bar Ilan to Haifa, and later also to Beer Sheba and still later yet to the Open University, and back to Jerusalem.

In the course of the fifty years of its existence, the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies assumed many important roles and fulfilled many tasks. Its signal achievement is of course the *Scripta Classica Israelica*, an academic journal of international standing whose contributors include both the most illustrious international names and up-and-coming scholars. But the *Scripta* is also a chronicle of the life of the classical community here in Israel. From the Dissertations in Progress to the Obituaries which, sadly, have been appearing too frequently in recent years, the *Scripta Classica Israelica* embraces the entire life cycle of our classical community, for better or for worse.

No less importantly, the meetings of the Society have provided a welcoming platform for generations of young scholars at the beginning of their academic careers. For many of those present, myself included, a talk at an ISPCS meeting was the first encounter with the quintessential academic experience of presenting one's work before the audience of colleagues and peers. The yearly meeting is also an unofficial job market, the pivotal moment at which a young scholar and his or her work are for the first time presented before the senior colleagues, subject to their assessment, and thus become visible. The importance of these initiatory experiences is hard to overestimate. Furthermore, thanks to their international character, the Society meetings also provide the Israeli classicists the opportunity to directly communicate with colleagues from all over the world and, through the key-note speaker programme, to attend live presentations by the most distinguished scholars in the field.

This is not to say that we are in a position to paint too rosy a picture. Some successful past initiatives notwithstanding, more could be done in such spheres as outreach or student support. It should not be forgotten, however, that we are living in an increasingly challenging institutional environment. The number of academic positions in Classics, Ancient History, Classical Archaeology and related fields has sharply decreased in recent years, and this unfortunate development has found direct expression in the numbers of the Society's registered members. We are fewer today than we used to be. Nevertheless, the President and the Committee continue to do their best in order to fulfil their primary task of consolidating the classical community of Israel into a friendly, cohesive and mutually cooperative whole. For, above all, the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies is a warm and welcoming home, a tribal fire (מְדוּרַת שֶׁבֶט), as it were, for the family of scholars and students of classical antiquity in Israel, and I am confident that it will remain the centre of the life of the classical community in this country for years to come.

Tel Aviv University