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Classics in Israel: Where Do We Go From Here?

Ory Amitay

Abstract: Beyond the usual talk about the crisis of the Humanities, the situation of Classical Studies in Israel is complicated also by local peculiarities of Israeli society. First and foremost among them is the bad reputation enjoyed by Greek and Roman cultures, because of their respective roles in ancient Judean history, and of the perceptions of this history in modern Israel. This short paper addresses the problem and offers three possible avenues for some improvement: (a) The use of digital means to expand the teaching of the classical languages; (b) an engagement of the Classical Studies community in the Hebrew Wikipedia; (c) an emphasis on translation into Hebrew in PhDs.

Keywords: Classical Studies in Israel; Hebrew Wikipedia; online language teaching.

It is an honoring and humbling experience to be asked to comment on the state and direction of Classical Studies in Israel. This is a timely question, and at the same time one that is extremely difficult to answer. The main difficulty is that neither the Classics, nor the Israeli community of Classical Studies stand on their own. The crisis of the Humanities has already become somewhat of a cliché, yet it is nevertheless felt acutely worldwide. The global situation of the Humanities, or even of Classical Studies, is too wide a topic to be discussed here at any length. The same is true for the situation of the Humanities in Israel as a whole. Therefore, the comments presented here, although they stand against the background of a worldwide situation, relate solely to the state of Classical Studies in Israel.

One trait of Israeli culture that has a unique, problematic influence on the public perception of Ancient History in general, and of Classical Studies in particular, is the cycle of Jewish holidays. The famous adage about the essence of a Jewish holiday goes as follows: “They tried to kill us; they failed; let’s eat!” As a matter of fact, this is true only for Hanukkah, Purim and Passover—three holidays which commemorate the experience of ancient Judeans under three major foreign empires in antiquity. These holidays are scattered throughout the year, as is natural in any calendar that celebrates events from the past. Yet in the public perception, this also creates a deep confusion in the order of ancient history. Following the annual cycle, the sequence of empires is experienced as: Greece, Persia, Egypt—in reverse order to the correct chronology. In my experience, the precious little that is learned in elementary and high schools about Judean ancient history is not nearly enough to dispel the muddle created by the calendar.

A larger and more profound problem arises from the ways in which the memory of the ancient empires, as well as their respective cultures, are portrayed in the holiday lore. The Persian King of Kings, Xerxes-Ahasuerus, appears every Purim, in the Scroll of Esther, as a pleasure-seeking and negligent monarch, who in his inattentiveness signs the Judean people off to utter destruction. Every Passover, the Egyptian Pharaoh portrays

the very essence of hubris, as well as being the font and beneficiary of a cruel system of slavery. Yet among the foreign empires it is Greece (יוון) which appears as the greatest threat to Judaism. The most dangerous challenge is not physical (although the horror stories deriving from 2Maccabees certainly contribute their share to the general sense of terror), but rather cultural: on Hanukkah it is not merely the vicious evil of a foreign ruler that poses the danger, but rather the collaboration of insiders, Judeans whose goal is to go Greek and stop being Jews—and to compel their compatriots and coreligionists to do the same. The word for Hellenization in Hebrew—התיוונות—is used almost exclusively as a negative term, even among many who deeply appreciate such cultural contributions of ancient Greek culture as the theatre, history and philosophy, even democracy. Naturally, this adverse attitude grows exponentially stronger among the wide public that would rather reject all the above-mentioned contributions as essentially non-Jewish, and thus detrimental to Jewish culture.

The pictures become even grimmer when we turn to the second pillar of Classical Studies—Rome. Here, even the famous adage cannot hold; Romans consistently succeeded in killing immense numbers of Judeans. One “Roman” holiday is *Lag Ba’omer*, oddly connected in recent generations with the memory of Bar-Kochva (although the holiday itself, despite its long and varied history, has nothing to do with Rome or with the Third Judean War); another is *Tisha’ beAv*, commemorating the destruction of the Second Temple at the hands of Titus (and of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar). The common historical perception in modern Israeli society sees the first and the third Judean Wars (once again, the later event is commemorated earlier in the year)—as the beginning of the two millennia of long exile.¹ Together with Greece, the memory of Rome is reviled.

The public atmosphere created by this combination of history and folklore, therefore, creates a particularly challenging environment for Classical Studies. To give but one example: unlike countries such as Germany, Italy, France, Britain or the US, where Latin and sometimes Ancient Greek are still part of the curriculum in secondary schools (for the most part in the higher echelons of society and in strongly Christian circles), these two classical languages are altogether missing from the Israeli school system.² This means that while many German gymnasium students still take up Latin at the age of 10 or 12, their Israeli peers are hardly likely to encounter it until a decade or so later, at the earliest. This situation limits on the one hand the number of prospective students who might choose Classical Studies as university undergraduates, and on the other hand puts these same students at a clear disadvantage in comparison with many of their foreign peers.

What, therefore, can we do? Not a great deal, of course, concerning the global Humanities crisis. The main lesson that we may draw from it, at this stage, is to adopt a stance of humility and patience, as the heirs of a long and proud tradition now

¹ The importance of the Calendar in shaping public historical consciousness is demonstrated negatively by the relative inconspicuousness of the Second Judean War, during Trajan’s reign. Unconnected to any annual remembrance day, this crucial historical event is (in my experience) completely unfamiliar to the vast majority of the Jewish population in Israel.

² For a unique and inspirational case of a successful Latin program in one high school in Jerusalem see Baratz in this volume.

experiencing a time of great challenge. Nevertheless, in the local sphere there is ample room for action, particularly when we consider that in the present state of Classical Studies in Israel, even small improvements can go a long way. The principle I would suggest is at the same time republican and democratic, in that it requires us to perceive the future of Classics in Israel as our own business, and in initiating and directing action to rally and recover.

The first and most obvious means for development is the instruction of Latin and Greek to the general public and to the young generation in particular. As stated above, the main obstacle at the present is the almost complete absence of classical languages from the school curriculum. Even where cultural preferences would not lead to obstacles to the introduction of classical languages into the school system, the chances of getting a critical mass of support for Greek and Latin classes at schools has been generally impossible to reach.

However, the post-Covid era opens new opportunities. As things stand, the Classics community in Israel has the benefit of complete online courses for both languages, at beginner and advanced levels (four semesters' equivalent): Latin by Dr. Maayan Mazor; Greek by Avraham Arouetty.³ Given these online resources, and combined with Zoom sessions, it is now possible to envision an online class that would draw students from around the country to study classical languages. Following the singular efforts of Baratz et al. at the Israel Arts and Science Academy in Jerusalem, the Ministry of Education has now recognized an official program that allows high school students to matriculate in Latin at a high level (roughly equivalent to four university semesters). The same should be done for Ancient Greek. A high level (five points) of matriculation in Latin and/or Ancient Greek would be a worthy prize for those students who show interest in Classics and are willing to put in the considerable necessary effort. To be sure, in comparison with the general population, the body of high school students taking up Latin and Ancient Greek can be expected to remain exiguous. However, in comparison with the current headcount in our respective Classics departments, even a few score students annually across the country can make a substantial difference.

A second front where the Classics community in Israel can take action is the Hebrew Wikipedia. As any student of Classical Studies knows all too well, the English Wikipedia is an extremely useful tool for quick fact-checking. And while the reader should always beware of embarrassing mistakes that do occasionally creep in despite the vigilance of readers and editors, Wikipedia easily overshadows resources such as the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* or even *Brill's New Pauly* in both width and depth (not to mention that it is easily accessed online, and is free of cost). That is not, however, the situation in the Hebrew Wikipedia. Here, a great many articles still need to be written, and many others improved and enlarged. Turning the efforts of the Classics community in Israel towards Wikipedia has some very clear advantages. The immediately obvious one is that a growing coverage of the Classics will aid students, at all levels, who do study any related topic. A more general advantage lies in increasing the visibility of the Classics through Wikipedia among the population at large.

³ These courses were produced under the auspices of the late joint MA program in Classics funded by Yad ha-Nadiv and the Council of Higher Education (ת"ת), at the University of Haifa (Latin) and at the Open University (Greek).

The writing of encyclopedic articles is, of course, a serious and demanding task. Doing so in an open and collaborative encyclopedia robs the authors even of the small recognition in writing articles for professional lexica. Yet it is the same collaborative spirit that makes writing for Wikipedia an admirable exercise for the classroom, as I have learned from a decade of experimentation in this practice. In pedagogic and disciplinary terms, this kind of exercise is almost indistinguishable—in all but the format—from most regular classwork in the field: it requires collecting and evaluating sources, both ancient and modern; constructing a coherent narrative; and documentation according to academic standards.⁴

Admittedly, Wikipedian assignments in the classroom require more work from all parties involved. Consider that a regular assignment is written, then read and graded only once. A Wikipedia article is likely to go back and forth between student and teacher, thus increasing the amount of effort involved in the process. Yet there are also considerable advantages. Firstly, production of first-rate internet content is nowadays a highly marketable skill. A major obstacle in drawing students to Classical Studies is the common notion that such studies are impractical, and contribute little to future employment opportunities. This, in my opinion, is far from true. The philological skills and aptitude that stand at the heart of Classical Studies, as well as the training in turning the results of philological study into a coherent argument or story, are certainly beneficial in a great variety of professional (and other) circumstances. If we adopt Wikipedian praxis into our curricula and classwork, we can at the same time test the limits of our methods of teaching vis-à-vis the cutting edge of the digital information age, and offer our students a palpable preparation for their professional careers.⁵

A further argument in favor of Wikipedian work is that it has substantial potential in increasing the visibility and enhancing the reputation of our field. At the most immediate level, a drive to develop the Classics section of Hebrew Wikipedia will provide the public, and our current and future students in particular, with a better resource for study and self-familiarization with the treasures of Greece and Rome. In the longer run, such a drive can and should serve as a rallying point, and as a source of pride, for all of us in the field of Classics. One may imagine a not-so-far future, wherein the ISPCS conference includes a survey of all the Classics articles written for Wikipedia in the previous year, commending and awarding the best article writers and the most prolific institutions and departments. Such self-confidence will surely emanate beyond the community's limited confines, will improve our public standing, and will hopefully draw to our departments and courses a new generation of students, eager to make a difference in the public sphere through their studies.

A third front where Classical studies can make a significant advance is that of translations into Hebrew. As things stand, only a tiny minority of the classical works that have survived down to our day, has also been translated into Hebrew. It is hard to

⁴ At the level of a seminar paper we usually expect also an expression of personal opinion, which of course is out of place in an encyclopedic entry. This expectation can be met through an ancillary assignment, in which the students are required to engage with the material on a personal level.

⁵ This, of course, is true not only for Classics, and is certainly worth considering in other branches of the Humanities.

imagine a seminar in Classics or in Ancient History, taught in an Israeli university, where the students would not be required to read some of the ancient sources in English or other translation. Anglophone, German, French and many other students enjoy an almost full access to the world of the Classics in their native tongues, but this is hardly the case in Hebrew. The same is true, of course, for those among the general reading public who read the Classics recreationally. In other words, a key factor in bringing people to the Classics is to bring the Classics to them first.

The task of providing a full set of Hebrew translations for the entire classical corpus, or even for its popular core, is certainly a Herculean endeavor. The completion of such a task seems to me beyond the Israeli Classics community's capabilities in the upcoming generation. Nevertheless, as in the previous two avenues for action suggested above, it is at least possible at the present stage to initiate a process that will bear fruit later on.

A possible step that may help the process along is the introduction of a new approach to PhD's in Classics, written in Israel. At the present, most dissertations in Classical Studies, in Israel and abroad, are rather long monographs, dealing in great detail with a relatively narrow subject. In the local arena, there is room to consider a different format, viz. one that focuses on translation. In this format, the student will provide a Hebrew translation of a classical text of a certain length.⁶ This translation will then be presented online on the departmental website, openly accessible to the public. The translated text will be accompanied by a short introduction to the author and the text, taking into account previous scholarship and presenting its essentials. The translation will also be accompanied by three peer-reviewed articles—a requirement whose fulfillment accords a PhD according to the Israeli system of higher education. Writing them will also furnish the doctoral candidate with one of the most useful skills in modern academia, i.e. the production and publication of peer-reviewed papers. It will be highly beneficial for the young generation of scholars to take their first steps in their publishing careers with direct guidance of their PhD supervisor. It will be highly beneficial for the public at large, to have free online access to Hebrew translations of the Classics.

In conclusion to these observations and suggestions, I should like to remind us once again that the particular crisis experienced by Classical Studies in Israel is a very small part of a much greater whole, greater indeed by two orders of magnitude: from the Classics to the rest of the Humanities, and from Israel to the rest of the world. These huge differences in scale can be depressing, and therefore dangerous. What is the point in taking action, in the face of a problem that is obviously much too large to tackle? The answer, I would stress again, lies not only in the overall sense of duty so many of us feel, but also in the understanding that even small improvements can make a real difference for our situation in the years and decades to come. It is certainly not our job to complete, but we are not free to stand aloof from it.

University of Haifa

⁶ The actual length required may be dependent on the genre (prose vs. poetry), difficulty of language, and the standards set by each department.