

The moral responsibility of academia

• By BERTOLD FRIDLENDER

These are very difficult days for us all. We ask ourselves how anyone can comprehend the brutal murder of young innocents like Gil-Ad, Naftali Fraenkel and Eyal Yifrah, and just two weeks later of Muhammad Abu Khdeir. Violence is increasingly permeating our lives; in the streets, on the Internet and worst of all in the minds of too many people. Violence and lack of respect for life seems to be penetrating all segments of our society and the need to fight it with all our strength is urgent. Can anyone imagine how wonderful life could be if we all lived in a peaceful and stimulating environment? A place in which the sanctity of life ruled our day-to-day activities, an environment that allows for mutual understanding and respect for one another?

Many will say easier said than done. However, we do have some microcosms in which we can try to implement these attitudes – in particular our academic institutions. As president of one of these institutions, located in the very heart of Jerusalem, I strongly believe that we do have an opportunity at our

colleges and universities to offer and stimulate the possibilities for dialogue and co-existence.

I strongly believe that academia is in a unique position in this turbulent world to plant seeds of understanding as part of our academic mission. Our academic role should go well beyond teaching a profession; we need to inculcate students with the values of dialogue, respect and understanding. Being professionals in the real world means understanding the heterogeneous society in which we live. Our professional obligations are to work and provide knowledge and service to all kinds of people, those who look like us and those who look different, those who think like us and those who think differently. We study to acquire a profession that serves everyone, without distinctions of any kind.

At Hadassah Academic College we have a very heterogeneous student body that includes Israeli Jews, Muslim and Christian Arabs, as well as Druse, and among them religious and non-religious individuals, all pursuing a common objective. These are people with equal obligations, equal rights and equal duties working together to obtain a



A VIEW of Hadassah College in downtown Jerusalem. (Courtesy)

benefit common to them all. It is interesting to see at the beginning of the first academic year the distance and distrust between each and every one of the different groups of students, a barrier that they bring with them from the outside world.

Over time, this barrier slowly breaks down, and a degree of interaction occurs with Arab and Jewish students working together. A degree of

understanding is developed, and through this coexistence over a number of years, students understand that we can indeed live together in peace and mutual respect. This is reflected by the number of final projects that are carried out together by Jewish and Arabs students.

I know that this may be a bit idealistic and that in the process there are a number of serious hurdles that we

need to confront. I am however convinced that all who are involved in academia should use this great opportunity to contribute in every possible way to promote dialogue and coexistence so that perhaps, at the end of the day, we can help reduce further intolerance, hatred and mistrust.

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