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Educating during wartime

Despite the challenges, Tel Aviv University thrives



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Educating during wartime

Tel Aviv University has thrived, despite the challenges

By Alan Rosenbaum

ON THE morning of October 7, Raz Elkayam, 25, a native of Sderot and a third-year student in biology and neuroscience at Tel Aviv University, was some 4,000 kilometers west of Israel, vacationing with his grandmother in Rome. Raz and his grandmother were scheduled to fly home to Israel that evening.

“At 6 a.m. she woke me up and told me that something was happening in Israel,” he recalls. “She said that her Red Alert app, which provides notifications regarding incoming missiles, was issuing non-stop alerts.” Raz’s parents and his two sisters live in Sderot. His parents are observant and do not use their phones on Shabbat unless there is a security alert. “I spoke to my parents, who confirmed that missiles were being fired at Sderot, but they said that everything was OK.”

Shortly thereafter, Raz received a message from his IDF reserve unit commander, notifying him that he had been called up to serve. He replied that he was not in Israel and requested that his assistant be called up in his absence. His commander agreed, but told him that he might have to contact members of his Golani reserve unit to notify them to come in. Raz agreed.

Raz’s grandmother then showed him videos on her phone of terrorists roaming the streets of Sderot. At first, he thought that the videos were staged. He then recognized the areas of the city and realized that they were terrifyingly real. Raz called his family, but

this time, there was no answer. He soon received a text message informing him that they could not speak on the phone because they were hiding in their safe room from Hamas terrorists and were afraid of making any noises that might expose their location. Half an hour later, Raz’s unit was called up, and he began notifying members by phone of the call-ups.

On the second day of the war, Raz received additional messages from his family in Sderot. His parents told him that they had seen the terrorists on their home security cameras passing near their home. The area of the city where his married sister lives was the scene of difficult battles.

Raz’s flight back to Israel on Saturday evening was canceled, and he and his grandmother were stranded in Italy until they could finally return on Wednesday. Upon returning to Israel, he enjoyed a brief reunion with his family, who had fled Sderot and were living with family members in Rishon Lezion,



Raz Elkayam

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before joining his army unit in the north, where he served for most of the next four months, until the end of February.

Raz does have one pleasant memory from those early days in Italy – the calls that he received from officials at Tel Aviv University inquiring about his welfare. “Their personal concern was very

appreciated,” he says.

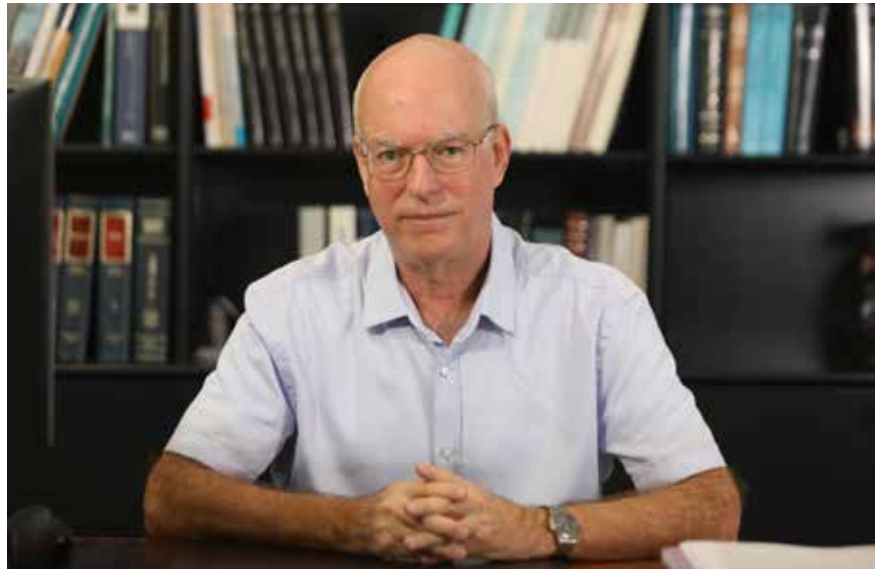
How have Israeli universities, most of whose students were eligible to serve in IDF reserve units, coped with the Hamas-Israel war since October 7? I spoke with students and academic officials at Tel Aviv University to get an accurate picture of the challenges that presented to students and faculty, and how they have managed to study and teach under these most difficult circumstances.

Tel Aviv University is Israel’s largest institution of higher learning, with over 30,000 students studying across nine faculties, 29 schools, and 98 departments. At the height of the conflict in Gaza, twenty percent of the

student body – 6,600 TAU students – were serving in the IDF. One-third of that number were women, and most were undergraduate students.

When Raz Alkayam returned to his studies after four grueling months at the front, it was difficult for him to return to class after experiencing incoming drones and anti-tank missiles from Lebanon. “Everything seemed unimportant. I had been dealing with a war, and now I had to return to a regular routine. I was afraid that I would lose an entire semester of school.”

Alkayam was delighted to receive assistance from the school administration, which offered to help him make up the material he had missed. Tel Aviv University was one of the first universities to provide numerous leniencies to returning soldiers, including changing certain exams to assignments and work projects, allowing other exams to be taken in a pass/fail format, and ensuring that the mark received would not be accounted in the student’s grade average. In some courses, students could take an exam two or three times, with the higher grade counting as their final mark. In addition, the school has offered numerous options for psychological treatment for returning soldiers and students who



Prof. Ariel Porat

were evacuated from their homes in Israel’s north and south.

Alkayam succeeded this year in his classes, despite the challenges and dangers of serving in the army for a good part of the year, due in part to the special allowances that the

school administration made for him and other reservists. “I will finish the year with my head held high,” says Alkayam. “I am proud of my results.”

Ayelet Beutum, 21, a first-year student at TAU from Ashkelon, had completed her



Students sit on the lawn at Tel Aviv University

regular military service before October 7 in IDF intelligence. Due to her proximity to the southern region, she could not report to the IDF until after the first week of the war. Beutum served for a full month of reserve duty and continued her reserve duty several times a week during the school year. She frequently worked night shifts in the army from 8 p.m. until 8 a.m. before returning to classes. Like Alkayam, she says it was sometimes diffi-



Prof. Drorit Neumann

cult to focus during class after serving in a war. “There are two different realities – studies and the army. There is a certain amount of dissonance,” she says. “Some of my friends who served said that it was hard for them to suddenly come back to school. To go back to university after being in the war feels like a privilege.”

Beutum’s experience with the Tel Aviv faculty has been positive. “Lecturers and students studying for advanced degrees provided private lessons to soldiers in *miluim* [reserves] to support them in their studies. They have tried to do everything for us – as much as they can.” She adds that each faculty appointed a staff member to handle the needs of returning students from *miluim* and opened WhatsApp groups for these students to ensure that their needs were met.

Dr. Drorit Neumann, TAU’s Dean of Students and the head of the Student Success Center, managed much of the university’s response to the war that began so jarringly. Neumann recalls that at 9:30 a.m. on that fateful morning, she received a WhatsApp message from the university’s provost to the university leadership alerting them to the event that was taking place. “When I saw the message,” says Neumann, “I called our head psychologist at the Student Success Center. That day, we opened a hotline at noon for the entire campus – employees and students. The psychological hotline received hundreds of calls that day, and TAU kept the hotline running for three months until it was transferred to the Eran Emotional First Aid organization.”

Neumann explains that the most immediate

TAU need was taking care of those affected at the war’s outset, even before the students went off to fight. Support involved not only psychological care but financial assistance as well.

University President Ariel Porat raised funds from TAU supporters, both in Israel and in the Diaspora, to assist students in need. One student who lives in central Tel Aviv was unable to live in her home when it was damaged by missile fragments that were

shattered by Israel’s Iron Dome defense system. Other students were forced to leave their homes in the south and north. “We didn’t ask for documentation,” says Neumann. “We just asked them to tell their stories in five sentences.” Neumann notes that TAU was also the first university to provide financial support to help cover tuition costs for students serving in *miluim*. The scholarship fund, known as the Uniform to University Scholarship Fund, is still active.

University studies in Israel, which were scheduled to begin after the Sukkot holiday, did not begin until January 31 as a result of the war. “Starting the semester was a great challenge,” says Neumann. “How do you do it with so many students still in the reserves? The university pushed it to the latest possible date, enabling the semester to exist, and provided an envelope of support for returning IDF reserve students.”

Tel Aviv University created a unique system for students returning from IDF service. “When you are returning from war,” says Neumann, “your state of mind is in fighting and survival mode, and not necessarily in study mode. We set up to provide personal support, according to the individual needs of the student. Each faculty appointed its own coordinator to provide assistance to returning students. The university established a “study buddy” system, in which students who assisted returning soldiers were provided with a modest stipend, group tutoring, and personal academic tutoring from students. Neumann adds that academic staff added additional hours for individual tutoring, and all classes

were recorded and available for remote access.

In addition to scholastic assistance, TAU provided psychological services for those in need at a special discounted rate of NIS 50 per session. Neumann points out that in addition to returning soldiers, other Tel Aviv University students required assistance, including evacuees from Israel’s northern and southern regions, students whose spouses were serving in the army, or those whose relatives had been kidnapped, injured or killed.

Neumann is certain that the effects of the current war will continue beyond this current academic year in the future. “We are a nation that is hurting. We are trying to do our best, and we’ll help whoever we can to get to the finish line by the end of the academic year.”

The leader of Tel Aviv University’s efforts to manage its students during the war is its president, Professor Porat, who has been at the helm since 2019. Porat was in Australia when war broke out, and immediately upon his return several days later, he visited the families of TAU students who had been murdered. He then traveled to the Gaza envelope settlements to learn how the university could assist those in need. A few days later, Porat organized the first group of volunteers sent from TAU to help pick fruits and vegetables since most of the area’s foreign workers had left in the wake of the massacre. “We were the first entity in Israel that sent volunteers to help in the local agriculture and have continued with that,” he says.

Soon after the war began, notes Porat, the university opened its dormitories and sports center to evacuees from Israel’s southern and northern areas. Faculty members from the schools of Social Work, Psychology, Dentistry, and the Faculties of Health and Medical Sciences, and Law offered assistance, each unit in its own field, to those who were forced to leave their homes. Numerous faculty members from all disciplines gave lectures to both evacuees and wounded soldiers in hospitals. Perhaps most impressive was the university’s hosting of a school of 600 students from Kiryat Shemonah on the campus.

Porat cites the statistics of the financial assistance provided by the university to students, in terms of scholarships and other means, but he also lists far more sobering numbers. “We have lost seventeen students in the war, and there are seventy families in the Tel Aviv University community who lost immediate relatives.”

While the opening of classes at TAU was



MOSHE BEDERASHI/TAU

TAU students studying in the library

postponed numerous times, Porat says that the school and all of Israel's universities felt that it was critical to stay open. "We realized that if we postponed the opening of the university any longer, the academic year could be lost. This was something that we wanted to avoid – not only for the benefit of the students, but also because we believe that this is part of the resilience of Israel. We cannot stop everything for an entire year. We cannot stop the economy, and we cannot stop producing doctors, engineers, social workers, psychologists, and intellectuals. We realized that we should open the academic year, but at the same time, we declared that we would do whatever we could to enable the students to complete the academic year. We owe them a debt we can never repay, so at the very least, we had to do whatever we could to help secure their future."

As president, Porat's responsibilities have extended to setting policy at the university during this sensitive and difficult period. At the outset of the war, in early October, even before classes began, he managed, together with his colleagues, the delicate task of maintaining relationships between the Jewish and Arab students on campus.

"We had to prepare for potential tensions between Israeli Arabs and Israeli Jews," says Porat. "I declared very clearly that even in times of war, democracy and human rights

are not suspended. At the same time, under the law in Israel and at the university, it must be balanced against public safety and public order, and the specific time in which we find ourselves, which is a time of war." To date, there has been no violence or disorders on campus between groups.

"There are other challenges outside," says Porat candidly. "They are not directly about the war, but it's about the BDS that has become much more aggressive than before and the unwillingness of some organizations that have decided to boycott Israel."

He recounts an episode that took place recently at the University of Sydney, when Prof. Milette Shamir, Tel Aviv University's Vice President of international academic collaboration, was attending an academic fair with

leaders of universities from around the world. Shamir and another woman from TAU were trapped in a room with 30 pro-Palestinians shouting antisemitic slogans, with no intervention from the university. Porat wrote a letter of protest to the president of the university demanding an explanation, which was only answered some ten days later with a promise that the events would be investigated.

While the number of TAU students serving in the IDF has dropped substantially and is currently under 1,000, Porat realizes that it may rise again. "We know that many students have received army call-up notices for May and later. We don't know how the war may develop, especially in the North, and it is quite possible that many students who were drafted after October 7 and were discharged will be called up again."

While everyone hopes for a speedy resolution to the conflict, the students at Tel Aviv University are prepared for their dual roles. Says Raz Alkayam, "There is an integration between the Zionism that ensures Israel's security, and the Zionism of being a hi-tech nation that achieves intellectual breakthroughs. This is the beauty of balancing between these two worlds – of being a student and being a *miluimnik*." ■

