

The University of Cafés

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Tel Aviv at 100 years old is bustling with culture. A large research university is situated north of the Yarkon River. Although I am a member of the faculty of that university, I feel like I belong to another wonderful institution established by the first Hebrew city: "The University of Tel Aviv Cafés". It is the only place where I can sit for long hours, sink into contemplation without interruption, write, delete and think.

Not every Tel Aviv café is included in our university. The criteria for acceptance are complex. First of all, it is matter of light and shade; not too dark, not too bright. You need to feel that the place cuddles you in a homey pleasantness. Ideally, there is a tree to shade the windows on a sweltering day. It is important for there to be a small window to allow a refreshing breeze, rather than large openings for gusts of wind. The acoustics are also important: The conversations should converge among the interlocutors. The music must not be too loud, and of course the annoying newscasts should not resound every hour.

A sophisticated Italian espresso machine is not necessary in order to be part of our campus, and there is no need for the coffee beans to arrive via express mail from the coffee barons in Colombia. It is important that sitting in the coffee house does not require a binge of gluttony. It should be expected that the patrons of the place will remain even after slowly finishing the salad and drinking three mugs of coffee.

Some accuse our university of lacking research laboratories. Not exactly. We are located in the heart of the laboratory of life. Our researchers, primarily from the fields of social sciences and humanities, directly observe reality and are updated in real time. It would be an exaggeration to claim that we are connecting with the people, but we are certainly not sequestering ourselves in an ivory tower.

Our departments have names like Bugsy, Birnbaum, Beta, Sucar, Book Worm and Tamar, and are not named for mysterious donors. We engage in celebrating life and not in memorializing the dead. Our university does not pay salaries, but offers the ideal work setting for many. As for me, I have written more pages of satisfying work in the coffee houses of Tel Aviv than in my opulent office.

In the The University of Cafés, no one demands that research must be useful. From the outset, there is an atmosphere of apparent idleness and lack of purpose at the coffee houses, which is the suitable atmosphere for basic research. The system of promotions at our university is based on the breadth of the smiles of the café employees. There are no appointments committees. There are no rectors or deans. Every young person is gladly accepted, at least as readily as a tenured professor. There is a real interdisciplinary tradition at our university. Only here can you find a true encounter between a mathematician, economist and historian.

Our motto is: Freedom, Education and Openness. Academic freedom is a reality and not just an empty slogan unfathomed by many of those who recite it. We have absolute independence in our establishment. With us, there is no attempt to separate academia and politics, and there is no demand for political correctness. Instead of keeping the door of the office open when someone of the opposite sex enters the room, it is considered inappropriate behavior in our coffee houses to ignore flirtation from the opposite sex.

It is said that the universities in Israel are deteriorating. This crisis is bypassing the University of Tel Aviv Cafés, which continues to prosper according to any international criterion. Perhaps our sister cafes in Berlin and Vienna measure up to us. London and New York definitely fall short in comparison. In brief, we are placed well within the top ten, a status that no Israeli university dreams of attaining.

Sometimes, as evening approaches, I pass by a Tel Aviv Café, see the regulars, with or without a laptop, alone or in a group, and look enviously at them. But then I remember that I am one of them. What a good feeling.