

Ariel Rubinstein's Remarks at the 2010 Rothschild Prize Award Ceremony

April 15, 2010

The first time I heard about Yad Hanadiv was around Purim 1979. I was about to complete my doctorate and was called for an interview that led to a Rothschild Fellowship for post-doctoral studies. I was serving in the army reserves in the south. The commander agreed to release me on Thursday afternoon. On Friday morning, I faced an intimidating group of interviewers, headed by the late Aryeh Dvoretzky, whose seriousness and wisdom I feared more than anything. Lord Rothschild sat on the side and, as I remember, he remained silent. Dvoretzky was proud to note at the end of the interview that I had come to the interview straight from reserve duty. That day made such an impression on me that I even remember what I did that Friday night and that the commander, for no apparent reason, ordered me to return to the base on Saturday morning. I was a bit late in returning, supposedly because the bridge to Tse'elim was closed due to flooding.

"Fifteen years later, I sat on the other side of the table as a member of the committee that selects the fellowship recipients – a parade of sparkling and intelligent eyes. One after another, young men and women enter the room. They all glance in the mirror before entering, having meticulously chosen what to wear. This usually entails the best of Jerusalem-elegant fashion: something like jeans and a loose flannel shirt. Nearly all of them have talents that extend far beyond the professional field from which they are chosen as candidates. Some are musicians, some write stories, some are simply addicted to science. All of them harbour academic dreams. Their ambition is almost uniform: to return to Israel after the post-doctorate if they are fortunate enough to get work here. The Rothschild Foundation grants generous post-doctoral fellowships to 18 of them each year. This is a privilege of the outstanding Israeli student. There are few students in the world who receive comparable fellowships.

"For 120 years, the Rothschilds have assisted the Jewish settlers after they have chosen to live in the Land of Israel. To the best of my knowledge, 'the Benefactor' [Baron Edmond] did not offer incentives to settlers who grew tired of life here and left the country. The Rothschild Foundation carries on this same spirit of correct Zionist action. The academic activities of Yad Hanadiv are intended to assist and encourage Israelis who have chosen Israel as a base for studies and as an academic home. The Rothschild Foundation does not engage in enticing 'yordim' [expatriate Israelis] to return to Israel. I say this in unconcealed criticism of the programs designed to encourage fleeing brains to return to Israel, programs that in my view are completely contrary to the spirit of Zionism. It is doubtful whether these programs are effective and they are certainly not fair. Academia in Israel will survive – not because of an exemption on sales tax for refrigerators or extravagant salary bonuses for several shining stars, who will fade away or disappear from here shortly before the benefits expire. Academia will flourish if it succeeds in allocating its resources equally for the benefit of the young people with the brilliant eyes who live here and will continue to live here, no matter what.

"These young people are here simply because this is their home and in any other place they would feel that they do not belong. They are here not because of the tax benefits but because of the familiar brand of instant coffee. They are here because they are actually dying to do reserve duty, even if only to have the opportunity to refuse to serve in the territories. They are here as long as they feel a sense of belonging to this society. They do not despise the pleasures of life. Many of them are torn between the desire to continue in research and the lack of academic jobs in Israel. They 'only' expect to work under reasonable conditions. True, there are Israelis who have decided not to live here, including some of my good friends. And they have remained my friends even though I call them 'yordim'. I wish them well and hope they realize their dreams, even if their dreams are different than mine. What surprises me is when someone worries about them instead of tending to those who did not wait for a payoff.

"And another important matter: The young people with the beautiful and clever eyes are here thanks in no small measure to the Hebrew language. I mention this as we engage in a new war of languages at the universities, in light of the trend led by a certain school of business administration that has decided to teach the MBA program in the English language. Allow me to quote from the speech of 'the Well-known Benefactor' during his last visit to Tel Aviv in 1925, the year in which Hebrew University was founded: 'The language of instruction in The Hebrew University will be Hebrew. When I first visited our settlements and saw the schools, I noted happily that Hebrew had already become a living language. Coming from different lands, Jews are able to converse with each other in one language and the language has become a bond between them and one that links the present with the heritage of the past.' I hope that Yad Hanadiv will lead a movement to help universities in Israel insist that teaching be conducted in the Hebrew language only.

"Israeli society has given us, the prize recipients and members of academia, an amazing privilege. It enables us, at the public's expense, to devote our lives to matters of the spirit, to theoretical research that is not necessarily associated with material benefit, and to teach anything we wish to teach. This is not at all a self-evident privilege. This is a privilege for which we must thank Israeli society day and night. Any serious academia that I know in the world is based largely on public support, with a little help from tuition and philanthropy. Yad Hanadiv is careful about not replacing the state. It knows to extend assistance in places where the state is faltering. It is one step ahead of the state, but an important step. Yad Hanadiv is an exemplar of philanthropic action that is thoughtful, modest and, in particular, the most Zionist I know. To the leaders of the Foundation and to the entire Israeli society – thank you!