

Transcript

00:00:01 Speaker 1

Hello, everyone.

00:00:03 Speaker 1

Welcome to our seventh meeting of our Israel Studies seminar.

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We have the honor to host Dr.

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Adi Sapir from the University of Haifa.

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Dr.

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Sapir is a senior lecturer in the Department of Leadership and Policy in Education of the University of Haifa.

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Her research focuses on higher education and its social, cultural, historical, and organizational contexts.

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She had studied early academic entrepreneurs, the evolving meanings of basic and applied research, and the commodification of universities' public role.

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Her current work examines equality in higher education, focusing on the experiences and challenges of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the institutional barriers they encounter.

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The floor is yours.

00:00:57 Speaker 1

Thank you very much for coming.

00:01:00 Speaker 2

Thank you, David, and thank you, Jacob, for inviting me to come here and to share my research with you and your colleagues.

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And thank you for coming.

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And as David mentioned, my main area of research is higher education in Israel.

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And I have a PhD in organization studies.

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So I'm interested in the organization and management of universities in higher education policy and the way that it is translated into organizational practices.

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and in the changing roles and missions of universities as organizations and as social institutions.

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However, I'm also very interested in combining historical methods and perspectives with sociological theories, because I strongly believe in the importance of historical analysis for challenging unreflective historical perceptions of the present.

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So in my earlier studies, I explored the emergence of academic entrepreneurship in Israeli universities.

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And Israel is an especially interesting case study in this regard, because Israeli universities were among the first in the world to initiate organizational structures for the commercialization of research.

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For example, the Weizmann Institute of Science established its own subsidiary technology transfer company

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called Yeda Research and Development as early as 1959.

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And Israeli universities are considered until today to be at the forefront of technology transfer and relations between academy and industry.

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So in my earlier studies, I explored such topics as the tensions between basic research and applied research in the context of the new Israeli state or an archival research of

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the narratives that universities tell to themselves and to others about their engagement with intellectual property or the commercialization of publicly funded research throughout the years.

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But in recent years, I shifted the focus of my studies to issues of equity and access in higher education.

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And I studied both policies of widening participation and diversity in higher education.

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as well as the lived experience of students from underrepresented groups in the Israeli context as they navigate academic and social integration.

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And in my presentation today, I would like to discuss the history and the present landscape of student volunteering in Israeli higher education, and I hope to show you through this case study

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some of the complexities as well as the distinctive characteristics of the higher education system in Israel.

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And I will draw on findings from two separate research projects.

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The first is an historical archival research about the origins and historical trajectories of the public mission and social role of universities in Israel.

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And student volunteering emerges from this study as a significant aspect of the way that universities define their social engagement with society.

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The second research project is a qualitative, interview-based research with students who come from low-income families and are currently studying in Israeli universities and colleges.

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And in this study, student volunteering appears as a core component of the current financial aid regime in Israeli higher education.

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And I think that the combination of those two research projects also allows us to see some of the unintended consequences of policy decisions made decades ago.

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So I'll begin with some background about higher education in Israel.

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The first three institutions were established in the pre-state period, the Technion, the Hebrew University, and the Daniel Ziff Research Institute, later inaugurated as the Weizmann Institute of Science in 1949.

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Five more institutions were founded following the establishment of the state, mainly in the 50s and 60s, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv University, the University of Haifa, and Ben-Gurion University.

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And finally, the Open University was established in 1976.

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So until the 1990s, the system was composed of seven elitist, highly selective research universities, an Open University, and a few colleges.

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But in the 1990s, following growing demand for higher education, the system went through structural reform.

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that allowed for the development of a college sector.

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So new academic colleges were founded.

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Existing teacher training colleges went through academisation process, and the older, mainly private colleges, received formal recognition.

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So the system was expanded, it was diversified, and following that, we see a remarkable rise in increase in the number of students.

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Today in Israeli society, about 50% of young people have tertiary education, either post-secondary or academic education.

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So the system today comprises of eight public research universities, one private university, the Open University, and 49 academic colleges.

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Most of them are public.

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So there is a binary system with the first tier of research universities and a second tier of public and private academic colleges.

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Those colleges are teaching-oriented, they offer mainly undergraduate studies, and they are less selective than the universities.

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Universities and colleges are regulated by the Council for Higher Education, which is the state body responsible for everything concerning higher education.

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And over the last three decades, in line with global trends, the system embraced A neoliberal policy agenda that includes processes of corporatization, privatization, managerialism, reflected, for example, in the change of the governance structure of

universities that places all the power in the hands of the president and the executive committee, in the growth of precarious employment,

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among academic staff and in the growing importance of ranking in other performance indicators.

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Higher education in Israel also has some unique characteristics.

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It is embedded in a protracted national conflict and internal political tensions, which place considerable pressure over academic freedom and work to shape an academic culture

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which is characterized by declared apolitical stance and some self-censorship among academics.

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And following the October 7th massacre and the war in Gaza, we see an increase in political pressures on universities and on academic staff from the government, from government supporters, right-wing movements, as well as internal

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ideological gatekeeping within higher education institutions against faculty and students' freedom of expressions.

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And of course, there are increasing calls to boycott Israeli academia.

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In addition, and this also happens in several other countries, Hungary, for example, over the last three years, there are anti-democratic initiatives on the part of the government, the judicial overhaul,

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that place universities among the government's main targets, which raise considerable concerns regarding the future of academic freedom and academic autonomy in Israel.

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So that's the introduction, and I will turn now to discuss student volunteering.

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If we are looking at the current research literature about student volunteering,

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We can see that there are growing expectations in Western countries for students to volunteer, and there's a rise in the number of national and institutional programmes that encourage volunteering.

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We see a growing significance of skills and employability agenda in this context, a shift in universities towards the formalisation of previously informal volunteering activities, as well as a shift among students

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towards the adoption of utilitarian motives for volunteering, for personal development or for career growth.

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And studies also point on that the aims of student volunteering, its meaning, its constitutive components are subject to ongoing debates over what type of activities should or should not be included, what should be the structure of these activities, for example, should it be formal or informal?

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And whether volunteering, as the name implies, should indeed be voluntary or perhaps it should be compulsory.

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We know that in the United States, for example, it is common to demand that students would volunteer as part of service learning models.

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There's also a perspective that argues that even if volunteering is not formally made compulsory, students, and especially students who study in elite institutions,

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have a moral obligation to volunteer and contribute to their communities.

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However, there are relatively few studies that study the historical development of student volunteering.

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There's the research of Brewis about volunteering, the history of volunteering in the UK.

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There are some studies about the development of service learning in the US.

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And my study contributes to this stream of research.

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I was interested in understanding how Israeli universities have been setting the agenda and the organizational structures for volunteering, and what are the implications of this process for present-day institutional structures and common understanding.

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So I conducted archival research at the historical archives of two leading Israeli universities, the Hebrew universities and Tel Aviv universities.

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And there are significant similarities between those two universities in their mission, structures, and academic prestige.

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So the archival sources that I used were mainly meeting protocols, internal and external reports, memos, letters, and correspondences.

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And the earliest archival records that I found that relate to student volunteering are from the early 70s.

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And I found that student volunteering was introduced in Israeli higher education in the early 70s and it was introduced as part of a larger process of the development of organized social engagement activities and structures in both universities.

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And in both cases, volunteering was a cornerstone, an essential element in the way that universities defined for themselves their social role and their engagement, organized social engagement with society.

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It's important to think also about the historical context of the period, late 60s, early 70s, a period of

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social awakening in Israel also influenced by global trends.

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We see social tensions within the Jewish population following the devastating effects of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, as well as social protest movements, mainly of young Mizrahi Jews protesting against the social discrimination and social inequalities in the Jewish society.

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These protest movements were also influenced by social change movements,

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in the USA, in Europe.

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This is a period in which universities became sites for greater social and political awareness and sites for social protest, which also influenced the expansion of service learning in the USA and students' community action in the UK.

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So in my research,

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I found similar trajectories and shared dilemmas surrounding the development of student volunteering in both universities.

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And I found that the introduction and development of volunteering activities was framed by three major debates.

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The first debate was over the purpose of volunteering.

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What should be the purpose and nature of student volunteering activities?

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The second debate was over the question of volunteering and obligation.

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Should volunteering be mandatory?

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And if so, for whom?

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And the third debate was over the question of accreditation for volunteering.

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Should students receive academic credit for their volunteering work?

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So let's begin with the first debate over the purpose of student volunteering.

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I found that from the early 70s there was a lively debate surrounding this question involving academic managers, academic faculty members, administrative faculty members, representative of student associations, as well as individual students, all discussing what should be the purpose and nature of volunteering.

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And 3 separate yet interrelated visions emerged from this debate.

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The first was that volunteering should be part of the civic engagement mission of the university.

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The second was that volunteering should be part of a larger social justice and social action agenda.

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And the third was of volunteering as an act of individual altruism.

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The first vision was a shared and undisputed mission among all parties involved in the debates.

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And they considered that the mission of universities was to instill and cultivate values of civic values and values of civic engagement among its students.

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For example, this report of the Social Engagement Unit at the Hebrew University from 1983, Before Our Eyes, is an educational developmental process where social involvement is a kind of a complementary education within campus life.

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We believe that this involvement is a tool for instilling values, for fostering voluntary motivation to move from the realm of narrow individual interest to the public domain.

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But alongside this shared consensus, a growing tension emerged in this period between the two other contrasting visions of volunteering as part of a social justice agenda and volunteering as an act of individualized altruism.

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The social justice agenda was there from the start.

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In the early records of student volunteering, we see records of students who went to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv, in student apartments, and began to work with youth at risk, with children and their families, and established youth clubhouses.

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And those informal volunteering activities were adopted during the '70s, first by student associations and then by the dean of student offices in both universities, and became part of the formal first pioneer social engagement activities of universities.

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In addition, in the same period, we see a few academic departments

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mainly the Department for Psychology, Department for Social Work, who established volunteer-based service learning and fieldwork models.

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And the guiding logic for these models was of engagement with marginalized communities and raising students' awareness of social inequalities.

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And some of the ideas that were raised as part of these models

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were rather radical.

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For example, this lecturer from Tel Aviv University writes in a report from 1981, The university must expand the concept of excellence, not only excellence in studies and research, but also excellence in social awareness, concern, and involvement.

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Should we train physicists and mathematicians whose only interest is science?

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without showing them that when they sit with us, there are serious social problems in the country?

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Do we expose students to these problems or do we not?

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The standard approach of the university is similar to that of high schools.

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There are topics to learn, ideas to convey and absorb, and that seems to be enough.

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That is, by choice, we do nothing about issues of values, recognition and social conscience of the scientists

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teachers and future leaders.

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But these ideas that really challenge accepted understanding about academic teaching and academic excellence remained in minority positions in the 70s, in the 80s and until today.

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And towards the late 70s, we see a shift in the nature of volunteering activities as well as in their guiding logics.

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From hands-on social action, we see a shift into...

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individual altruistic activities, because a new model was introduced and widely adopted of volunteering through one-on-one tutoring of children from low socioeconomic background.

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And this new program called PERACH, maybe some of you know it, was first introduced as the initiative of a graduate student at the Weizmann Institute of Science.

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In the early 70s, it was adopted as a formal program at the Weizmann Institute of Science and then in other universities.

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And the tipping point in making it the dominant model of student volunteering was in the early 80s when it was integrated into the national tuition fee framework.

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That is, students who volunteered 4 hours a week

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in tutoring were eligible to receive scholarship that covered about half of their annual tuition fee, which made it, of course, very popular.

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But it's important to consider that volunteering was framed here as an act of charity focused on individualized help.

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For example, this report distributed by the program in 1976,

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The tutorship is based on the assumption that individual help for a pupil in need of care will be far more beneficial than any help provided in existing frameworks.

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The relationship is mainly based on help with studies, but in addition, the tutor gives the child confidence in his ability, encouragement for effort and perseverance in studies, and a desire to expand his horizon.

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And this tutoring program and the perception of individualized volunteering work detached from a wider social context, and therefore with the potential of neutralizing and trivializing social inequalities, became the dominant model in the Israeli higher education field until today.

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We see towards the late 90s new bottom-up initiatives focused on social actions, and they do exist today, side by side, the dominant model of one-on-one tutoring.

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The second debate was over the issue, or the paradox, of mandatory student volunteering.

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In the early 70s, university management strongly opposed initiatives from individual students, from the Student Association, of making volunteering a compulsory requirement for all university students.

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For example, this letter from the Dean of Students at the Hebrew University, it was sent in 1987 to a student who reintroduced the idea, and he writes, The compulsion of such an activity, as you suggest,

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misses its purpose.

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Adding an obligation of personal commitment seems unfair and may lead students to do things out of coercion only, which will miss the point of education for good citizenship.

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However, in the late '70s, universities' management in all universities in Israel decided to condition the receipt of need-based grants

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on students' participation in organized volunteering activities.

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And this was agreed, it was a consensus among academic management, academic faculty members, students' associations.

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As we can see here from a statement of the Students' Association at the Hebrew University from 1979, students receive significant financial assistance from society, but are not required to give anything in return.

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In recent years, a number of universities have begun to realise that there is no justification for society to support students who are not willing to work for that society in return.

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So the guiding logic here was that students who receive need-based grants should give something back to society that allows them to attend higher education.

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And this new policy of volunteering in exchange for financial aid scholarship required the coupling of administrative structures of financial aid and organized student volunteering, which made the recipient students the subject of institutional monitoring.

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This report from the Dean of Student Office at Tel Aviv University, they write, This policy required the social involvement unit

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to establish a special system for finding places for involvement, as well as for supervision and control.

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So students' free choice in relation to volunteering became entangled with socioeconomic vulnerability.

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And while the archives are generally silent about the potential tensions associated with this new policy,

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We can find here and there traces of uneasiness.

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For example, this is the Dean of Students at Tel Aviv University speaking at a meeting of the Central Committee in 1987, and he says, Today we, in fact, are obligating each recipient of financial aid scholarships to participate in social engagement activities, whether he wants to or not.

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We have an ideological debate on this issue.

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Should a person who is entitled to a financial aid scholarship be burdened with social activity?

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Keep in mind that he has to spend 52 hours plus travel time, et cetera.

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And this may lead to, and perhaps already leads to, the fact that some students are reluctant to seek financial assistance.

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And perhaps in order to deal with this ambiguity and potential moral dilemmas,

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we find several discourses of justification for the new policy in the archival records.

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There's the discourse of educational motives, right?

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We are educating students for civic engagement.

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There's the discourse of moral obligations.

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These students should give something back to society.

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And there's a very strong discourse of empowerment.

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These students from low-income families are in fact empowered

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by their obligation to volunteer.

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For example, this internal report from the Unit of Social Engagement at the Hebrew University from 1982, they write, Already last year, we concluded that the inclusion of students from developing and distressed areas in social activities contributes to their self-empowerment and prevents a sense of public support.

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And this obligation

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to volunteer in exchange for need-based grants has become institutionalized, neutralized, and taken for granted in the Israeli higher education field.

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And we will return to some of the implication of this policy when I'll present the finding of the second study about the experience of students from low-income families today.

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So thinking about those first two debates about the purpose of volunteering

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and the obligation to volunteer in the context of Israeli society of the '70s and early '80s, we can see the influence of the ethos of collectivism that characterized the pre-'77 political culture in Israel, the influence of a very strong nation-building logic of mobilization of citizens who should contribute to the state,

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And also the expectation of service is a hallmark of being a good citizen, being a good Israeli.

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Turning to the third debate over academic credits for volunteering work, during the '70s and the '80s, student associations in both universities initiated some low-key attempts to argue that giving academic credits will motivate students to volunteer.

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but they were met with vigorous resistance of academic management and faculty, which silenced this debate.

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However, in the late 1990s, following a general national student strike, following the rise in tuition fees, the National Student Association launched a new campaign to boost this initiative of providing academic credits for volunteering work.

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And this time they had the support of some academic faculties and the dean of students offices.

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But more importantly, in 2003, members of Israeli parliament began to draft bills seeking to integrate academic credits for volunteering work.

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And this made, this fear of external intervention, made the Council for Higher Education decide to accept the principle of academic credits for volunteering.

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but they left the decision of whether to implement it or not to the discretion of each academic institution.

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This was in 2004, and in a report that was submitted 14 years later, in 2018, it was revealed that only 12 out of 60 higher education institutions decided to accept this principle of academic credits.

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And when reading the replies of the representative of the other academic institutions who rejected this idea, we can see that they felt that they faced a double threat.

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First, a threat to the dilution of academic standards.

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But second, and most profoundly, a threat to academic autonomy from external intervention.

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And from the three debates, this one was the most heated debate.

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because it touched on issues that were very sensitive for academics, academic excellence and academic autonomy.

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So we have three debates that shaped the development of student volunteering in Israel.

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Each of them also reflected a wider issue considering volunteering in general.

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The purpose of volunteering, the question of free choice as a dimension of volunteering,

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and the association of volunteering with the reception of benefits.

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Each one of these debates also reflected a wider debate in the Israeli higher education field, a debate over the role of university in society, a debate over social inequalities within the student body, and a debate over academic autonomy.

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So turning now to the finding from the second research project about the experience of students from low socioeconomic status background.

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This is a research project I conducted with Professor Roni Streer from the School of Social Work at the University of Haifa.

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And we were interested in understanding the experiences of low-income students who are studying today in universities and colleges in Israel, and what policy tools can be used to support these students.

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We conducted semi-structured interviews with 88 students who come from low-income families and with 18 professionals who work in the higher education field in relevant positions, for example, at the Dean of Student Offices and at the Council for Higher Education.

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And the reason that we wanted to explore this topic was because, and this is a place where Israeli higher education differs from other countries,

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Social class does not appear that is an absent category in Israeli higher education and widening participation policy.

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In the current policy, underrepresented groups in higher education are defined through ethnic and cultural categories.

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That is, the policy identified 3 target social periphery groups whose integration into higher education is considered a national mission.

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And these are Arab students, Ethiopian Jews, and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

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And students who belong to one of those three target groups are entitled to a holistic support programs that includes financial support, academic support, social support, and so on.

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Current policy does provide some support to young people who come from low socioeconomic status.

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areas such as development towns, peripheral towns, et cetera, but only for their initial academic enrollment.

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It does not extend this assistance through their actual period of studies.

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And we found in our study that there is a relatively low number of need-based grants in Israel.

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They are mainly provided through a philanthropic foundation.

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They have very, very strict eligibility criteria.

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And they are characterized by excessive bureaucracy and administrative burdens.

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So students from low-income families find themselves in an in-between position.

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They experience significant financial hardship.

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but they fail to qualify for need-based financial aid.

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They are poor, but they are not poor enough.

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For example, this student says, The woman in charge of scholarship was very unempathetic, and all she said was that she couldn't help me and that there were people worse off than me.

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And I told her, I don't want to tell you that I'm worse off, but I'm not surviving.

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I'm not surviving the studies.

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And this sentence, There are other people who are worse off than you, kept repeating in the interviews.

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That was something that those students heard again and again when they applied for financial aid.

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And of course, we found that most financial aid programs in Israel condition need-based grants on volunteering.

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So what began within the small, selective, elitist higher education system of the 1970s

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when only a limited number of students from low-income families attended higher education, has since evolved into a general rule across today's expanded and diversified system.

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And in the interviews with low-income students, they consistently talked about doing scholarships or working in scholarships.

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And indeed, we found that volunteering is a sugar-coated term for work, only work without social benefits.

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And for the students, it was less worthwhile than other types of jobs.

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So financial aid in Israel today, because of mandatory volunteering, is essentially not suited for the needs of low-income students.

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As this student says, many scholarships require a significant number of volunteering hours.

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And that's a problem, right?

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Because when you want to work full-time, these scholarships are not relevant.

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They are suited for students who only study and don't work, but when you are both working and studying, you don't have time for anything else.

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Furthermore, we found that mandatory volunteering...

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is institutionalized today as a taken-for-granted, unquestioned component of the financial aid system, both among professional staff working in higher education as well as among low-income students.

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For example, this manager from the Dean of Students says, I see it as a wonderful thing.

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How great.

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It's a two-way contribution.

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You give and you receive.

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And this student says,

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Beyond the compensation I received, it was important for me to do it out of a commitment to giving back to society.

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So the same discourse from the early '70s, the obligation to give back in exchange for financial aid, persists until today.

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And I think that it is useful to think about mandatory volunteering

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with the conceptual length of disciplinary poverty governance, which is a concept taken from critical sociology and critical public policy studies, defined as the use of

disciplinary or coercive measures to regulate and control the behavior of people living in poverty.

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Because grant-giving bodies in Israel today exercise discretionary power,

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to define appropriate behavioral values and identities.

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And this reflects A paternalistic approach that constructs low-income students as recipients of charity who incur a moral debt and must give something back to society.

00:37:33 Speaker 2

So financial aid is framed in moral terms.

00:37:37 Speaker 2

Poverty is a moral deficit that must be compensated through service to society.

00:37:45 Speaker 2

So, summing up.

00:37:47 Speaker 2

First, in contrast to critical literature on student volunteering today, which focuses on tensions that are embedded in the current neoliberal climate, the use of historical lens reveals that significant characteristic of contemporary framing and structures of volunteering

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such as individualization, monitoring and control, the demands of benefits, and of course, mandatory volunteering, are all based on and shaped by debates that took place decades in the past.

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And finally, in Israeli higher education, poverty is governed through reciprocity, service, and self-regulation.

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Mandatory volunteering

00:38:34 Speaker 2

fits well with the ethos of collectivism and nation-building of the 70s when it was first introduced, but also with current neoliberal philanthropic ethos in which aid is tied to activation, that is, the obligation of those who receive aid to demonstrate effort or responsibility and change their behavior.

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And this results in a moral economy in which financial aid is never free, but embedded

00:39:03 Speaker 2

in reciprocal obligations.

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That's it.

00:39:07 Speaker 2

Thank you very much.