

Alone on the barricades

By Meron Rapoport

The shock wave that hit Israeli academia last week, in wake of the boycott declared by Britain's Association of University Teachers (AUT) against Haifa and Bar-Ilan Universities, found Dr. Ilan Pappé, the Israeli protagonist in the whole uproar, on a trip to Thailand. With his wife and two children, Pappé was climbing mountains, riding elephants and whitewater rafting. Only when he returned to his quiet home in Tivon on the weekend did he begin to understand the magnitude of the fuss. On his answering machine, he found at least a dozen death threats. "We're from the Russian mafia," said one voice. "We'll come to whack you." "We'll get Yigal Amir out on furlough - and not so he can be with Larisa," promised another.

But despite the trip to Thailand ("People were sure that I'd run away. They didn't believe that I'd planned the trip a year before," he says), the AUT's decision didn't really catch Pappé by surprise. In fact, he had been in continuous contact with the association and regularly updated his friends in it about his confrontations with Haifa University (its harassment of him, according to Pappé; Pappé's lies, according to the university's president), and knew that they were about to make a decision.

Pappé actually supported a sweeping boycott of Israeli academia, as he wrote in an article in the British daily *The Guardian* a few days before the AUT made its decision. In the end, the organization decided to call upon its 40,000 members to boycott Bar-Ilan University because of its ties with Ariel College and Haifa University because of its harassment of Pappé and Teddy Katz, a master's student who wrote a thesis containing testimonies about a massacre in Tantura in May 1948. Pappé - unlike what has been written in many places - was not Katz's thesis adviser, but he came to his aid after veterans of the Alexandroni Brigade filed a libel suit against Katz.

Pappé wasn't very popular among the Haifa University faculty before the AUT decision, and now that's all the more true. The university's president, Prof. Aharon Ben-Ze'ev, has called on him to leave the university and "to implement the boycott" that he supports himself. Members of the faculty are organizing to boycott him in the hallways and not to speak to him.

Even among the faculty members affiliated with leftist circles, it's hard to find anyone ready to defend Pappé. "He's spitting in the well from which he drinks," was the reaction of several lecturers. The head of his department, Dr. Uri Bar-Yosef, who describes himself as a personal friend of Pappé's, wrote to *The Guardian* that "there is no basis" for Pappé's claims against the university.

Outside the university walls, some have even called Pappé a real traitor, a public enemy. In *Maariv*, Ben-Dror Yemini called him "one of the biggest new anti-Semites," no less. "If he's coming toward you on the street, cross to the other sidewalk. Don't sit next to him on public transportation. Don't exchange a word with him, good or bad. Treat him as Jews throughout the generations treated those who removed themselves from the community," wrote Erel Segal, also in *Maariv*. "Just

do not do him any physical harm, heaven forbid."

In an interview at his home in Tivon, Pappé says that he is "perplexed" as to why the British professors used him as a reason to impose a boycott on Haifa University, since he would have preferred a more general declaration. Perplexed, but unapologetic. Pappé thinks that a boycott should be imposed on Israeli academia, but not because of him; he's just an excuse, a tactical ploy on the part of the British professors ("a legitimate ploy," he says). A general boycott is necessary because there is a moral imperative to end the occupation and only outside pressure, like the pressure that was exerted on the apartheid regime in South Africa, can perhaps achieve this. And why academia? Because Israeli academia, in Pappé's view, is also a mouthpiece of the establishment and is used to enable Israel to present itself abroad as "the only democracy in the Middle East." Therefore, he believes, it is both permissible and ethical to impose a boycott on it.

Beyond the basic struggle, Pappé's personal battle with Haifa University could be called "the battle for Tantura." Teddy Katz, a master's degree student in the university's Middle East Studies department, submitted a thesis on "The Exodus of the Arabs from Villages at the Foot of Southern Mount Carmel" and received a grade of 97 on it. In this paper, Katz described the battle for Tantura, a coastal village of 1,500. In the battle, Katz wrote, 10 to 20 villagers were killed, but "by the end of that day, no less than 200-250 men had been killed, in circumstances in which the villagers were without weapons and totally defenseless."

Katz did not use the word "massacre," though this word was used in an article published in Maariv in January 2000. Veterans of the Alexandroni Brigade, which had conquered Tantura, filed a libel suit against Katz; the university refused to defend him and then Pappé rallied to his side, even though he'd had nothing to do with Katz's work. But Katz, after he was questioned in court and presented with contradictions between what was said to him in recordings and the written material, agreed to retract the assertion that a massacre was committed in Tantura. The next day, Katz changed his mind again and sought to retract his retraction, but it was too late. The court refused to consider the matter again and left his denial of the massacre intact.

Following the court ruling, and after a careful inquiry of its own, a Haifa University committee determined that Katz's work "failed at the stage of presenting the raw material for the reader's judgment, both in terms of its organization according to strict criteria of classification and criticism, and in terms of the apparent instances of disregard for the interviewees' testimony" and asked him to resubmit it. Katz submitted a second version, but this, too, was rejected by the reviewers.

Throughout this time, Pappé was almost the only one who stood by Katz. He said that despite its inaccuracies, Katz's work proved that there was a massacre in Tantura and therefore the university should approve his thesis. Now the Alexandroni Brigade veterans directed their criticism at Pappé. They maintained that he was spreading lies by supporting a fundamentally false piece of work and demanded his dismissal from the university.

The clashes grew increasingly harsh until eventually, in May 2002, Prof. Yossi Ben-Artzi, then the dean of the faculty of the humanities and today the rector of Haifa University, submitted a request to the university's disciplinary committee that it throw Pappé out of the university. Nothing of the sort had ever occurred in the history of Israeli academia. The committee chairman found flaws in Ben-Artzi's request and no discussion of the request ever took place, but ever since, Pappé's relations with the university haven't known a moment of peace.

People who can be called "sympathetic to the matter" read Katz's thesis and said it truly was done on a low level and poorly written, regardless of any inaccuracies in it.

Pappe: "The first thesis was without blemish. They gave it a grade of 97. I would have given it 100 - even though I wasn't involved in the first thesis. I wasn't the adviser on it, as people are always writing. But in the second version that he submitted he was so cautious. They compelled him to quote entire testimonies to the point where it became not a good work. Teddy showed me the second version before he submitted it and I told him that I'd let him write it again.

"True, in the first work they found six instances of discrepancies" (according to the committee's report, there were actually nine cases of "highly serious discrepancies"). Pappe continues to minimize greatly the seriousness of the committee's findings: "Out of these six instances, two are significant. In one place, he quotes a soldier as using the word 'Nazis' instead of 'Germans.' In another place, he wrote that a Palestinian witness saw the incident and didn't hear about it. In other words, he turned a hearsay witness into an eyewitness. It was an innocent mistake. I heard all 60 hours of those recordings and that part was in a village dialect of Arabic and it was very hard to understand, though that doesn't make it okay. If he were to publish the thesis as a book, I would definitely tell him to fix it, but that doesn't change the essence."

And what is the essence as you see it?

"For me, as a historian, what the Jews said, what the Arabs said and what the hints in the IDF archive said - are enough for me to be able to say with deep conviction that there was a massacre in Tantura. Not everyone has to accept it, but that's true in regard to every historic event.

"By the way, when the whole affair blew up, I proposed that the university convene a panel of experts to say what they would conclude from Teddy Katz's materials, to discuss the question of whether it is possible to conclude from them whether or not there was a massacre. Instead of an affair that brought a boycott upon them, they could have turned it into an affair that would have burnished their reputation in the world.

"But Ben-Artzi, and Yoav Gelber especially, saw themselves as defending Zionism and they weren't interested in questions of history. And by disqualifying Teddy's thesis, they sent a message to every research student, to every professor without tenure, that if they research the 1948 story in a way that contradicts the Zionist narrative, they will not be able to advance. I had an Arab student who wanted to research '48 and told me: Look what they did to a Jewish student. Imagine what they'll do to me. He dropped the research topic."

The AUT decision says that the harassment directed at you has continued since then. The university president says that there is no harassment, that it's all your lies and that the complaint against you is of no importance because the disciplinary proceeding was canceled. So what has happened since 2002?

"The trial against me was an attempt to use a legal proceeding to get rid of me, and it failed because of the international support that I recruited from the same group of lecturers that has now issued the boycott request. Since then I have been subjected to a de facto boycott. Anyone who wanted to invite me to a conference or seminar received a phone call from the rector or the president telling them it was better not to invite me, given my views and opinions."

You know this from first-hand testimony?

"I know it from first-hand testimony. Still, there were two or three brave people who invited me despite everything, but they had some very, very tough experiences. It reached the point where people were questioned about having been seen having a cup of coffee with me in the teachers' lounge. To break the boycott atmosphere, I tried to arrange several conferences. A year ago, I tried to arrange a conference on Arab and Israeli historiography about '48. I was told that I couldn't hold the conference but I still tried to do it. And then, using physical force, they sent 10 security men to prevent me from entering the auditorium and the university's chief security officer grabbed me by the hand and told the president over his walkie-talkie - the president was Yehuda Hayot then - 'I got him,' as if they'd caught Osama bin Laden. I stirred up an international outcry and then they approved the conference.

"Look, persecution in academia isn't a terrible thing. You don't die from it and you don't get physically injured from it. But within the academic world, if that's the world you live in, then you suffer. Suffer in the academic sense, of course."

And you reported about all of these things to the people abroad?

"I reported to the people abroad on every such incident. They asked me to and I reported. You have to understand that in these people's eyes, after the death of Edward Said, I'm considered one of the main people putting forward the Palestinian cry. Therefore, shutting me up isn't any ordinary shutting up of a professor, but a shutting up of one of the most effective voices in this struggle. I've always made clear that my personal situation is not difficult - I'm not in the Shin Bet cellars - but shutting me up has significance because I'm the only one in Israel who teaches a course on a subject that the Israelis don't want to deal with, on the ethnic cleansing of 1948. It's my most popular course: Unfortunately, many students write to me that they can't take it because there's no room left. That's why I think that what I'm doing is important."

The only one in Israel?

"Yes, who else is there? In Israel today there are two professional historians who are considered new historians - Benny Morris and myself. I'm not talking about a psychologist, like Benny Beit-Hallahmi, or about a chemist, like Yisrael Shahak, who wrote about '48. I'm talking about people whose profession is history, who are skilled in working with records and documents and oral history, who are considered for advancement based on the research they've done on '48. That's the significance of a book of mine on '48, which is only accepted for publication after it has been examined as a professional work of history, compared to a publicity-type article."

The option of silence

Ilan Pappé, 50, was born in Haifa, concentrated on Middle Eastern studies in high school and then served in intelligence in the army. He earned his doctorate from Oxford University, where he studied international relations and Middle Eastern studies. He has been teaching at Haifa University since 1984, first in the Middle Eastern Studies Department and then in the Political Science Department. Pappé is one of the founders of the "new history" in Israel, together with Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim, and is considered the theoretician of this group, which reexamined the history of the state's birth, relying on new documents discovered in the archives, among other things.

Pappé, who now calls himself an "anti-Zionist," has written many books, including "Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict" and "A History of

Modern Palestine," some of which were published by prestigious houses like Cambridge University Press. In 2002, he published a political biography of the Husseini family in Hebrew.

The British decision to call for the boycott, which is linked to you personally and mentions you personally, doesn't embarrass you? You don't ask yourself: Should this whole university be dumped on just because of me?

"It's not just about me. They wanted to add other things - harassment of Arab students, the closing of the theater department because of political plays. You'll have to ask them why they narrowed it down to just my issue. Yes, on the one hand, it does embarrass me. But on the other hand, I can't complain. In 2002, I first appealed to Israeli academia to help me, to not have me thrown out, and especially to not have Katz be thrown out. No one in Israeli academia came to my aid. So then I turned to the outside. I can't complain if a respected academic body has come to my aid."

No one came to Katz's aid?

"No one came to his aid. Why should they? He's a master's student. They're professors. What do they care? After I sat here and transcribed the tapes - I sat here for 60 hours transcribing, and I know Arabic - two or three colleagues changed their mind and helped. But they didn't endanger their careers. I knew that when I went to help Katz, I would get it in return. But I didn't know how much."

You've been left almost completely alone. Not just from the right, which sees you as a traitor, but also from what could be called the "peace camp" at the university. Hardly a voice is heard in support of you.

"I don't see any drastic change. I've been in this position since 'Operation Defensive Shield,' ever since my break with the Israeli left. I had six supporters in the university. Now I'll have two. But you'll also see that the responses on the Internet, on y-net and nrg, show 20 percent support, which is very interesting, fascinating support that I didn't receive before. At the university, there are also at least two professors who, even if they don't support the boycott, support my right to support a boycott. I receive many letters of support. The question is if there is any debate about the issue among this left, and I think there is. You should know, I also wrestled with myself a great deal over the boycott. I agonized."

It's also said on the left that you fly solo, that you're conducting Ilan Pappé's foreign policy.

"The Zionist left is not my milieu. My milieu is the Palestinian milieu. My milieu is the progressive and leftist international milieu. I've reached the conclusion, though I could be wrong, that there is no chance that a significant movement that would end the occupation will arise from within the State of Israel. There isn't, and it doesn't matter how many good people there are in Israel. If we wait for an effective movement to end the occupation, what will happen in the end is the total destruction of the Palestinian people. Not today, not tomorrow. After the third or the fourth intifada.

"The Palestinian armed struggle has also failed. It has no chance. I also cannot support it because I am a pacifist. It may be that my way has no chance either. It may be that the Palestinians are doomed to extinction, but I don't want to live as someone who didn't do all he could to stop this. And the only thing that can stop Israel is outside pressure.

"The mechanism of the boycott on South Africa began with solo actions. It's not just me. You could say the same thing about Prof. Tanya

Reinhart. There are some more people whose adamant positions are considered problematic by the Israeli left. It's the price that I pay. You want me to tell you that it's fun? Do I sound calm to you? Inside I'm not calm. I'm not enjoying this. I very much want to be relevant in my society. I'm a person who loves people. I want to be loved. It's not easy for me with this position, with the hatred that is directed at me. There are people who live just fine with it. I don't. And it may be that one day I'll decide that the price is too steep and then I'll choose the option of silence or the option of leaving, which everyone wishes I would choose. Perhaps I will leave. But for now, I'm holding on."

In the classroom, I'm king

Why a boycott on academia? Prof. Baruch Kimmerling wrote that Israeli academia is under attack and weakening it will only increase its dependence on the government. And besides, of all the social entities in Israel, academia has been the one to raise a critical voice.

"The boycott on academia is part of a growing boycott that isn't reported on - of Israeli products, Israeli singers. The boycott reached academia because academia in Israel chose to be official, national. Prof. Yehuda Shenhav checked into it and found that out of 9,000 members of academia in Israel, only 30-40 are actively engaged in reading significant criticism, and a smaller number, just three or four, are teaching their students in a critical manner about Zionism and so on. Academia has chosen to be the official Israeli propaganda."

Is the situation really that extreme?

"Certainly. Academia is Israel's most important ambassador in making the claim that we are the only democracy in the Middle East. And there's another thing - which might make the Israeli elite think differently about its self-image as a Western society. If wherever an Israeli goes, he is told officially: 'You aren't really part of the West. You're not part of enlightened society. You really belong to the unenlightened world' - This is an important message to Israelis. They established this Western, or pseudo-Western, island in the midst of the Middle East, and it is very much dependent on what the Europeans, not just the Americans, think of us.

"Furthermore, I don't think that an academic can come and say, 'Impose a boycott on Polgat, or on the Israeli diamond industry.' Israeli laborers would suffer, factory owners would suffer. I think that it is fair when I say I'm ready to pay the price and I'm not demanding that anyone else pay it. If the academic boycott becomes sweeping, and I'm told by people from abroad, 'Ilan, we won't invite you to a conference, either' - to me, that's a very small price."

So you do feel some sort of vengefulness.

"Yes, especially because of Katz. I didn't suffer. Teddy Katz suffered a stroke because of this university. He almost died. And a master's degree student shouldn't almost die because of a university. So it will be a little uncomfortable for the university. So what?"

One of the most common reactions to your move has been to say that you can't spit in the well you drink from, that it's real chutzpah that you continue to work at the university. President Ben-Ze'ev told you that you cannot work at Haifa University because you are calling for it to be boycotted.

"Ben-Ze'ev has no idea what academia is. My master's students went and asked him why he doesn't understand that his job is to protect my right to criticize him. Then he told them that my job is to be loyal to the

institution.”

So you're deeply disappointed with Israeli academia?

“Very deeply - with academia and with the media. I think that academia and the media are supposed to be the most sensitive organs in the society, the parts with the most conscience. In secular society, they fill the role that belonged to the rabbis, to the clergy, in religious society. But in Israel, these are the people with the least conscience - I'm generalizing, of course. Instead of being the watchdogs of democracy they're turning into the rubber stamps of the ruling ideology. I travel a lot in the territories and I'm appalled by what I see. How is it possible to live with the horror of guard towers around cities like Tul Karm and Qalqilyah? How is it possible to see a soldier giving elderly Palestinian women a hard time day in and day out, sometimes the same old woman? How is it possible to ignore this when it's being done in your name? Can you just keep teaching about France in the Middle Ages when your job is to be an intellectual?

“I'm paid to be critical. They give you tenure so you won't be pressured. People here have forgotten what the universities were founded for. They gave a person tenure just so he would be able to come and say to Haifa University - I'm not afraid to tell you that you're taking an unacceptable stand on the matter of Teddy Katz. So what did the university do? It said: We'll take away your tenure so you won't be able to say that.”

Still, how can you stay in a place that you're calling to boycott?

“Do you think that Haifa University can get rid of me now? The intention isn't for people in Haifa to start to love me. The intention is for it to be impossible to touch me anymore. If I still think that Haifa University is an important platform, I'll stay, because Haifa University doesn't belong to the rector. It doesn't belong to the president. It also belongs to the 20 percent of the Arab students who are about to send a petition calling on me not to resign.”

So then, you're staying at Haifa University?

“I'm staying for the students. My classes are full to bursting. I'm not staying for my colleagues. It's unpleasant for me in the hallways. People look at me askance, as at a traitor, and now it will surely be worse. But in class I'm king. I'll leave when I feel that the students don't want me. There are also more of them. There are 13,000 students and 900 faculty.”

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