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Cultural challenges of the Israeli library – case study of the Bloomfield Library

(Wyzwania kulturowe izraelskiej biblioteki – studium przypadku The Bloomfield Library)

Słowa kluczowe: Izrael, biblioteka uniwersytecka, wyzwania, organizacja, różnorodność

Abstrakt: Izrael jest krajem zróżnicowanym kulturowo, etnicznie i religijnie. Taki stan rzeczy w połączeniu ze skomplikowaną sytuacją polityczną niesie ze sobą wiele wyzwań i problemów na polu kształcenia akademickiego. Biblioteki mierzą się tam z wieloma przeszkodami, które utrudniają dostęp do zasobów wiedzy na równych prawach, dla wszystkich zainteresowanych. W artykule zaprezentowano wyzwania stojące przed bibliotekami w Izraelu. Zaprezentowany materiał został zebrany podczas Tygodnia Międzynarodowego odbywającego się na Uniwersytecie Hebrajskim w Jerozolimie w listopadzie 2022 r. Wiele informacji statystycznych zostało przytoczonych z prezentacji przedstawionych przez pracowników tamtejszych bibliotek podczas ich wykładów. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie przekroju społecznego wśród studentów oraz działań, jakie podejmuje Biblioteka Bloomfield we współpracy z Uniwersytetem, aby jak najlepiej zrealizować swoją misję.

Keywords: Israel, university library, challenges, organization, diversity

Abstract: The State of Israel is characterized by a rich tapestry of cultures, ethnicities, and religious affiliations. This multifaceted landscape, combined with a complex political environment, poses significant challenges in higher education. Academic libraries in Israel face considerable obstacles in ensuring equitable access to knowledge resources for all interested users. This article explores the challenges encountered by libraries in Israel. The material was gathered during the International Week held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in November 2022. A substantial portion of the statistical data is drawn from presentations delivered by library staff members during their lectures. The aim of this article is to present a cross-section of the student body and to highlight the initiatives undertaken by the Bloomfield Library, in collaboration with the university, to fulfil its mission as effectively as possible.

The State of Israel

Following the expiration of the British Mandate on May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was officially established. Its capital, Jerusalem, is also the largest city in the country. Nevertheless, Tel Aviv-Jaffa – often mistakenly regarded as the capital – is in fact the second-

largest city in Israel (see Image 1). The Tel Aviv metropolitan area encompasses Ben Gurion Airport, the Port of Jaffa, the headquarters of most major companies, and the country's entire high-tech sector. Israel is widely recognized as a nation of innovators – a global hub for start-ups [9] and a source of ground-breaking ideas across a broad spectrum of disciplines. In this respect, it is often compared to countries such as Japan, India, and South Korea. This status can be largely attributed to its young and rapidly growing population.

The modern political movement advocating for the establishment of a Jewish state is known as Zionism, which dates back to 1884. That year, a congress of Zionist associations from across Europe convened in Katowice, Poland. During this meeting, a resolution was adopted to support the repatriation of Jews to Palestine and to provide financial assistance to emigrants [3].

The State of Israel declared its independence in accordance with the 1947 United Nations Partition Plan, which called for the establishment of both a Jewish and an Arab state within the territory of Palestine. However, this decision was not recognized by the neighbouring Arab states [12].

Image 1. Tel Aviv city centre
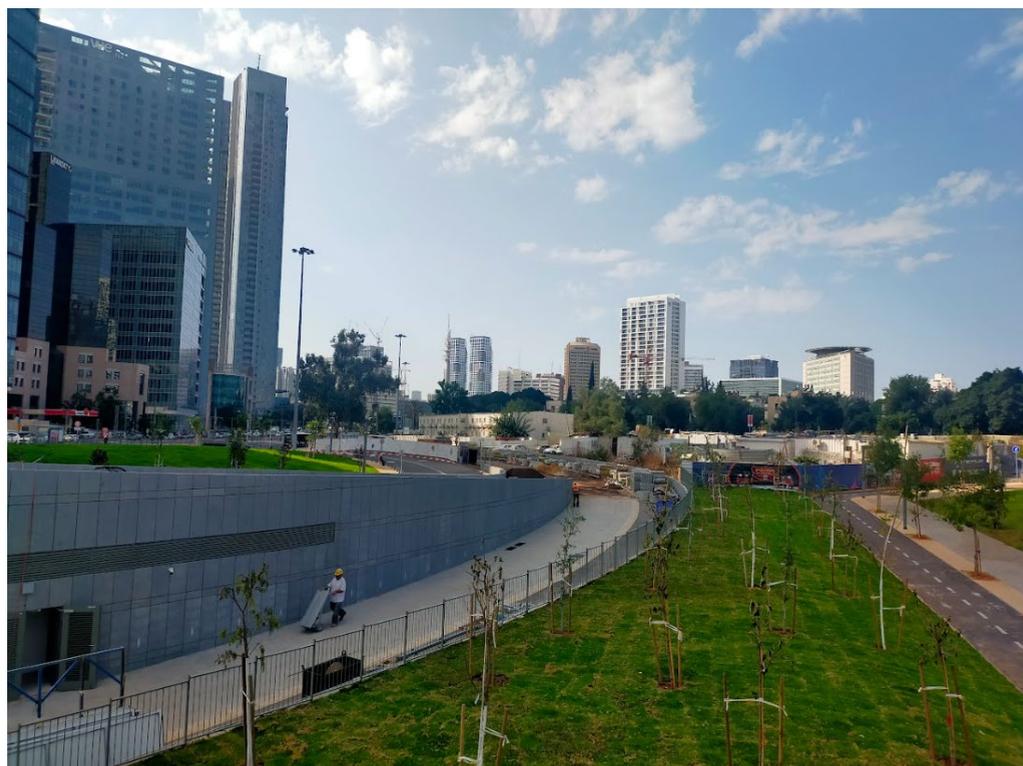
Source: author's collection.

The current political and social climate is characterized by considerable tension, and it is within this context that the education system faces a range of significant challenges. Institutions of higher education – and, by extension, academic libraries – are contending with issues that will be outlined in the following sections of this article.

In light of its historical and geopolitical context, the State of Israel remains in a state of ongoing armed conflict with several neighbouring countries. Mandatory military service constitutes a fundamental component of the national educational and social framework. This obligation applies to all citizens, with certain exemptions granted based on factors such as ethnic origin, religious affiliation, age, or specific social circumstances. The length of service differs by gender: men are required to serve for three years, while women serve for 21 months [4]. Additionally, the military accepts volunteers. On a daily basis, it is common to see young individuals in uniform – often armed – on public transportation or in the streets. Some may also appear in civilian clothing while still carrying weapons. This situation means that a segment of the youth population, who aspire to pursue higher education and develop knowledge and skills essential for a successful adult life, must suspend their academic trajectories in favour of military training. Although the army makes efforts to facilitate the continuation or completion of education during service, this is not always feasible for various practical reasons. Furthermore, Israeli law mandates that newly settled citizens over the age of 18, after residing in the country for 12 months, are subject to regular or abbreviated military service, depending on individual circumstances [11]. Following the completion of compulsory service, reservists are required to participate in annual training programs totalling up to 39 days, with the possibility of extension when necessary [5].

According to the CBS, the territory of the State of Israel includes:
- East Jerusalem (since 1967), unilaterally annexed by Israel;
- the Golan Heights (since 1982), also unilaterally annexed;
- the West Bank, with the exception of East Jerusalem, is not included in the defined territory [1].

The CBS defines the Israeli population as follows:
- It includes non-Israeli Palestinians (as well as Israeli Arabs/Palestinians) residing in East Jerusalem who hold Israeli residency permits;
- It includes Israeli settlers and other individuals with Israeli residency permits living in the West Bank;
- It does not include Palestinians, Arabs, or other residents of East Jerusalem who do not possess Israeli citizenship or residency status;
- It excludes unregistered individuals (since 2008), those residing in the country illegally, and foreign workers [2].

The total population of Israel exceeds 9 million, comprising a diverse range of ethnic and religious groups. According to demographic data:
- Jews constitute approximately 74% of the population. Among them:
  - 75% are Israeli-born,
  - 25% are immigrants, including a significant number from Russia (Russian-speaking Israelis represent the largest Jewish minority in the country [10]).

- Within the Jewish population:
  - 70% identify as secular,
  - 16% as religious,
  - 14% as Orthodox.
- Arabs account for approximately 21% of the population, forming the youngest demographic group. Children of Arab origin represent 28% of all children nation-wide. Among the Arab population:
  - 83% are Muslims,
  - 9% are Christians.
- Druze constitute approximately 8% of the population.
- Others make up around 5% [8].

The challenges

The education system in Israel exhibits considerable variation depending on the ethnic and religious group in question. Within the Jewish community, for example, the degree of orthodoxy significantly influences the structure and content of education. The more orthodox the environment, the greater the presence of religious rules, restrictions, and hierarchical orders that may interfere with or shape the course of formal education.

The Palestinian education system in East Jerusalem operates separately from the national education system in the rest of the country. It does not include instruction in the Hebrew language, nor does it follow the standard Israeli matriculation (Bagrut) framework. As a result, students who wish to pursue higher education in Israeli institutions may face significant gaps in what is considered core or basic education. Moreover, they often lack proficiency in Hebrew – the primary language of instruction at most universities – which further hinders their academic integration and success.

In light of the compulsory military service described above, disparities arise in the age at which individuals begin higher education. Jewish students typically undergo military training first, resulting in a delayed start to their academic studies compared to the Arab minority in Israel, which is largely exempt from this requirement. Until recently, ultra-Orthodox Jews were also exempt from military service; however, a recent court ruling has initiated changes to this longstanding exemption [7].

Nevertheless, Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews constitute the smallest demographic groups within the academic community. Following them are individuals who are the first in their families to either pursue higher education or to begin it at all. The final group comprises the Falashas[1].

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[1] The Cushitic people, also known as „Kayla", or Beta Israel, are an ethnic group native to Ethiopia. They have been dispersed worldwide, with the majority of the diaspora residing in Israel. This group is often referred to as „Ethiopian Jews".

The Bloomfield Library

The Bloomfield Library, situated on the Mount Scopus campus (see Image 2), provides a valuable case study in the management of complex educational challenges by librarians. It is one of eight libraries affiliated with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which accounts for nearly 40% of all civilian research conducted in Israel. The university began its scientific activities on April 1, 1925, and counted among its co-founders the renowned physicist Albert Einstein [6].

In accordance with established customs and the weekly schedule, the library is open from Sunday to Wednesday, from 8:30 a.m. to 9:45 p.m., and on Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., thereby concluding operations before evening in observance of Shabbat.

The library is housed within a university building that was previously converted and used as a military base due to its strategic location. After Israel's independence and the subsequent reestablishment of control over the area, the library's book collection was returned to the university building.

Image 2. Mt. Scopus – campus

Source: author's collection.

The primary solution to the challenges outlined above is the establishment of a dedicated library space (see Image 3). As Daniella Michaeli, Student Secretary for the Administrative Faculty, notes, first-generation students – those whose families have either pursued or are currently pursuing higher education within the domestic environment – often face a lack of understanding or even reluctance from family members to support their academic endeavours. Instead, family expectations may prioritize household chores or other community obligations. It is primarily these students who require a quiet and supportive space for study, as well as access to relevant academic resources and tools.

Accordingly, a large portion of the library is dedicated to readers. Reading rooms are spread across multiple floors, offering a variety of seating arrangements and access to a curated selection of books. Some rooms are equipped with shelves, while others are designed specifically for focused, quiet study. Additionally, the library provides designated cubicles for individual or small group work, as well as a separate enclosed area intended for relaxation.

Those entitled to use the library are able to borrow, among other things:

- phone chargers – for a maximum of 3 hours;
- laptops – for the whole day during library opening hours;
- headphones for the computer – for the whole day during library opening hours;
- calculators – to be borrowed for the whole day during library opening hours;
- white board markers and sponge – borrowed for the whole day during library opening hours, for use in individual and group work cubicles;
- Hebrew, Arabic, English and Russian computer keyboards available – on loan for the whole day during library opening hours;
- USB computer mice – for the whole day during library opening hours.

The printers, distributed throughout the library, are connected to an online cloud-based system. Payments can be made either with cards purchased from the company operating the printers or with traditional payment cards.

The catalogue computers, located in the lobby, are accessible to everyone. Remote access to the resources is available only to members of the University after logging in via Samba[2].

All information about the use of the collection and access options, both traditional and remote, is provided to users at the beginning of each year. During the first few weeks, users can also visit the library, where a librarian will explain how to use the resources. Master's students are required to take a course on how to navigate the library's resources, which are available on the Moodle platform and conclude with a compulsory test.

Another challenge to address is the language barrier, which is particularly problematic for first-year students from East Jerusalem. These students, educated within the Palestinian educational system (as well as other ethnic groups subjected to prolonged educational neglect due to religious and social prejudice), often do not speak Hebrew – the language in which the entire educational process is conducted.

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2   Samba – a free file and printer server, available for virtually any system. It is available under the GPL (GNU General Public License). Samba uses an implementation of the SMB (Server Message Block) protocol.

Image 3. Bloomfield Mt. Scopus Library – reading room, ground floor


Source: author's collection.

A summer 'Step Ahead' programme is offered for these individuals. It includes special courses and training designed to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate the university and utilize its resources, including the library. Students also participate in mentoring programmes. Additionally, individual courses and scholarships are provided as needed.

A significant proportion of the student body consists of first-generation college attendees, accounting for 13% of total enrolment. These students often reside far from campus, which frequently imposes financial constraints related to commuting, accommodation, and living expenses. Besides the linguistic challenges posed by language barriers, cultural and religious differences can also contribute to a sense of alienation. Consequently, in addition to offering programmes, activities, and training specifically aimed at this demographic, meetings are organized with the broader university community to raise awareness of these students and their needs, with the goal of enhancing the university experience for everyone. In this regard, collaboration is fostered with local authorities, non-profit organizations, cultural events, joint celebrations, and the facilitation of various holiday observances. A notable example of this is the installation of a menorah at one end of the hallway outside the library, with a Christmas tree at the other.

In an effort to support the endeavours of the library and the university, "diversity ambassadors" have been appointed. These students, who come from minority ethnic or religious backgrounds, have been selected to represent their communities. The role of these ambassadors encompasses a variety of functions, including mentoring first-year students, organizing cultural events, providing assistance on campus, facilitating guided tours, and promoting the university to prospective students from partner schools.

The measures outlined are producing the anticipated results. Figure 1 presents summaries provided by Daniella Michaeli, Student Secretary of the Administrative Faculty. The first summary shows the proportion of students of Arab origin who commenced and completed higher education at each level.
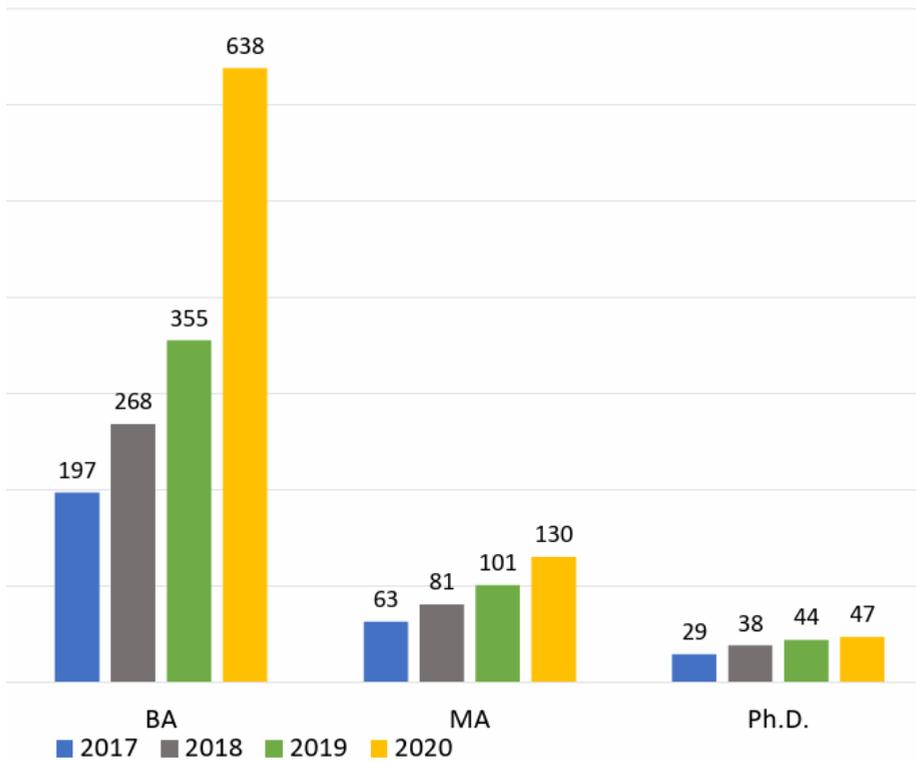
Figure 1. The percentage of graduates of Arab origin by type of study
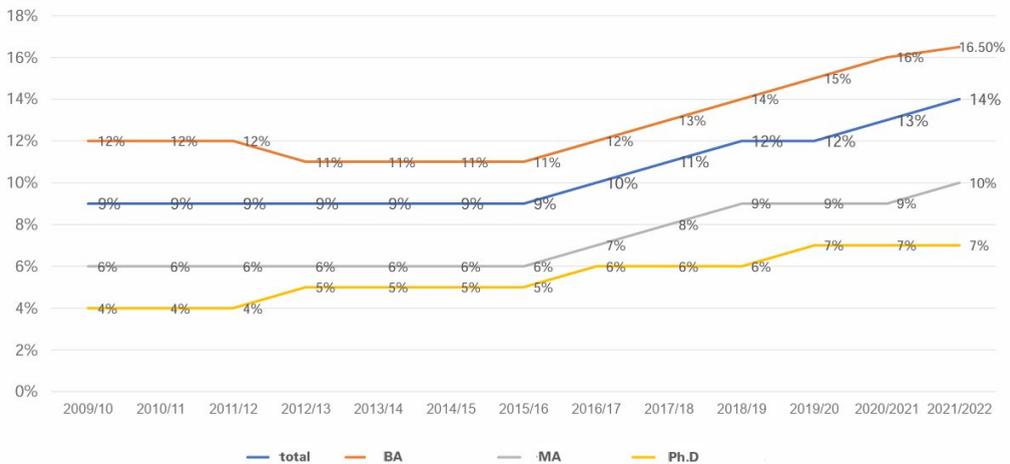
Source: own work.

The next summary shows how well the measures worked by looking at a case study of East Jerusalem students (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Quantitative indicators of graduates from East Jerusalem

A similar approach has been adopted for the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community, with a training system, library space and course of study that have been adapted to suit their specific needs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Graduation rates among ultra-Orthodox Jews

Number of students	2017	2022	Change
BA/BSc	132	228	+73%
MA/MSc	165	256	+55%
PhD	31	52	+67%
Preparatory (Mechina)	51	80	+57%
Total	379	616	+63%

The measures and actions undertaken are of a long-term nature. The initiation of programs, the provision of assistance, the scholarships and the possibility of becoming an ambassador in later years have resulted in a gradual decline in the number of students who interrupt their education (see Table 2).

Table 2. Percentages relating to student drop-out and failure rates

Academic Year	General Student Population	Arab Students	Orthodox Students
1st year 2018/2018	10%	12%	13%
1st year 2019/2020	8%	9%	10%

Source: own work.

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem is committed to maintaining contact with its alumni and providing support where possible. A significant proportion of graduates choose to pursue employment opportunities at the university, including roles as ambassadors. Consequently, the library's resources and facilities are accessible not only to students and academic staff but also to:

- alumni by card, which is subject to annual renewal. The annual subscription fee is 480 ILS[3] equivalent to 631 PLN[4];
- Friends of the University – benefactors who support the library and its resources.

A noteworthy form of assistance is provided to students affiliated with the military. Upon completing their mandatory service and transitioning to the reserves – or, in cases where service is deferred during their studies but they still have army obligations – students are granted the opportunity to borrow a mobile/cellular modem from the library. This privilege is exclusively available to students called up for reserve training, for the duration of their training or service assignments, upon presentation of a valid student ID and a call-up notice. This solution is designed to facilitate student access to online classes and library resources.

A further challenge that must be addressed is to guarantee that library facilities and equipment are accessible to all users:

- a map of the campus with wheelchair access routes is available on the library's website;
- the magazine reading room is equipped with specialized computers that feature oversized screens;
- the library is equipped with tables that feature movable or liftable tops;
- the librarian can provide keyboards with oversized keys and a variety of computer mice, each with different degrees of customization.

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[3]   Israeli New Shekels, by ISO 4217 – ILS, symbol ₪
[4]   as on 03.12.2022.

In order to address the aforementioned challenges, the university has employed 18 librarians at Bloomfield (librarians' workroom see image 4). Additionally, the university is comprised of four campuses, with a total of 80 librarians serving 14,000 students[5].

Image 4. Bloomfield Mt. Scopus Library – Librarians' workroom

Source: author's collection.

Furthermore, students from the home university may be employed to assist in the library. These students undergo an apprenticeship period during which they are trained in their assigned tasks, including cataloguing.

Students are engaged for between 4 and 8 hours per day, with a maximum weekly allocation of 20 hours. The hourly rate of compensation is 29 ILS, equivalent to 38 PLN. It is important to note that students are not permitted to hold employment beyond the duration of their university studies. Individuals seeking employment must initiate the application process themselves by contacting the library. Candidates are then interviewed, and employment decisions are made based on these interviews.

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[5]   Number across the University on 03.12.2022.

Each student is assigned a librarian to supervise their work. When desk duties are required, such as at the circulation desk, students work in pairs with their supervising librarian. In the context of cataloguing, the librarian's role includes verifying the student's work before it is entered into the system.

Many of the library staff members who contributed to and discussed the institution during the material collection for this article initially began their careers at the library while studying, later choosing to apply for full-time positions.

Consequently, the institution is able to recruit staff who are well-prepared and experienced, capable of meeting the challenges they have previously encountered and that continue to affect the library in this culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse country.

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