



## The Problem with the Wexner Program at Harvard

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Mixed up in the controversy between Netanyahu's supporters and opponents is the scholarship program of the Wexner Foundation, which finances a master's degree in public administration at Harvard University for young and promising Israelis (ages 30-45) in public service (including the defense establishment). The aim is "to provide Israel's next generation of public leaders with superlative training in public management and leadership development." What are the educational contents and nature of this training, and to what extent does the program serve Israel's unique national needs?

The Wexner Foundation sponsors a master's degree scholarship program at Harvard University to train young Israelis (ages 30-45) to serve as Israel's "next generation of public leaders," including in the defense establishment.

If the students were to be trained in technological studies, no clarification of this program's intentions would be needed. But because the program trains its students in public administration studies, its methodology and intentions need to be examined.

As David Ben-Gurion emphasized more than once:

The state of Israel is not like all the other countries.... The uniqueness of its reemergence results from the uniqueness of its mission. This state existed for thousands of years in the spirit, the heart, and the vision of the Jewish people.... The entire people carried the hope of redemption in its heart, and the state is just the beginning of the realization of that hope. And the ingathering of the exiles is the task, the destiny, and the mission of the state of Israel.

In Israel's early years, this uniqueness had a direct impact on behavior patterns in different areas of public administration. The prominent Labor Party politician and cabinet minister Shlomo Hillel, who was involved in the immigration of Iraqi Jewry, recounts that Levi Eshkol, who was in charge of immigrant absorption in the early years of statehood, told him, "Don't bring everyone at once. We don't have enough houses for them, or tents. Or work or food." Ben-Gurion summoned Hillel and said, "Everything Eshkol told you is true, but bring everyone immediately and all at once."

This is a case of a direct link between the Jewish State's sense of its own uniqueness and its public administration decision-making. It is here that the discussion of study programs in Israeli public administration must begin. The contention is that not only the top political leadership but civil servants, too, must bring to their desks a compass of a national sense of uniqueness and mission.

It is right to request that clarification not only from the public administration program at Harvard University, to which the Wexner Foundation's grant recipients are sent, but also from similar study programs in Israel that are often influenced by their prestigious counterparts in the West. Such critical scrutiny is also needed for the [Maoz](#) program, for example, which defines itself, not unlike the Wexner program, as "aiming to build a network of leaders for Israeli society through diverse programs that are developed in cooperation with governmental bodies."

In flight school, you learn to fly, and there is no agonizing over the purpose of the studies. The same holds true for engineering schools. True, public administration studies include the practical aspect of acquiring administrative skills. But senior civil servants involved in running the affairs of the state need something further: a shared compass guided by a sense of an overarching vision and purpose. And it is here that the root of the controversy resides: in the question of whether all advanced countries have a single purpose that stems from a foundation of universal values.

For the democratic state of Israel, established for the purpose of providing a national home to the Jewish people in its ancestral homeland, it is vitally important to emphasize the attributes of its uniqueness. But the need to focus on one's uniqueness is not a peculiar concern of the Zionist enterprise. The patterns and methods of work in public administration are always subject to the tension between the universal outlook and the one that is unique to the characteristics of the place. In the dialectical tension between the universal and the local, the key is to find the right balance, and here Israel is in need of a clarification and an improvement.

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