

Ten Comments on Transparency

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1.

Try this mental exercise: Imagine ten figures that represent the human landscape of your campus. Among these figures, I assume that you will see a few stuffy distinguished professors and perhaps an eccentric one, some students lolling on the lawn while others are in the library, university employees delivering sacks of mail, a financial officer checking out expense forms, and perhaps some colorful character representing 'public opinion' for most of us because he sells newspapers or pretzels,.

A figure representing thousands of other workers employed on our campuses will probably be absent from this human mosaic. None of the people who clean our buildings, prepare our food, guard our gates or tend the flowers in our gardens will be mentioned. At best, we glance at them distractedly as we rush to our offices or perhaps charitably give them a child's outgrown clothing, items we want to get rid of anyway. We do not identify these workers as one of "us" even though they spend more hours on campus than we usually do. Contract workers, they are present but transparent.

2.

A is 30 years old and single. He lives in a village that disappeared from official maps years ago. Home is an hour's drive from campus when there's no traffic. A works 9 hours a day, including Friday. After six years on the job, full time, his gross salary is NIS 2300. But the

minimum wage in Israel is NIS 2800. During the holy month of Ramadan, A was docked two days' pay because of absence for religious reasons. According to his terms of employment, he is entitled to 3.5 days of paid vacation, which he has probably never enjoyed. A was fired because he was absent on *Id-el-Fiter*, the Moslem High Holy Day. He bottles his anger, which is waiting to erupt. The expression on his face is blank.

N is 50 years old, married, the mother of two children, one of whom is seriously ill. A new immigrant from the former Soviet Union, N lives more than an hour's bus ride from where she works. She does not receive the legally required bus fare; her contractor has promised to look into the matter once again — regarding next month's pay. N works six days a week, cleaning offices. Her pay is slightly below minimum wage. Wearing her constantly stained apron, she apathetically wipes dust with lethargic motions.

L is young. She works afternoons and evenings, sometimes almost until midnight, cleaning class rooms and offices. It is against the law to employ adolescent girls at those hours, but L miraculously turned 18 on her 15th birthday (no one bothered to verify her age). Her monthly pay is probably about NIS 1200. She doesn't know because she has never received a detail pay slip — her wages are paid directly to the contractor 'in charge,' who then pays her in cash. She wears no apron, nor gloves. Social benefits are unheard of. When you hear her giggling among her friends, it's hard to believe fate decreed her to be transparent to her employers.

3.

A historian will one day write: "The story of contracted workers employed in our institutions is part of the narrative of change experienced by Israeli society." Universities, like most

public institutions in Israel, fill some service jobs through contracting rather than direct hiring. Thus, instead of being regular university employees, these workers are responsible to contractors. Contractors providing services for money; labor rights and benefits rarely enter into the exchange. The fact is, universities don't really care under what conditions these services are provided, as long as they are. Yet, contract workers often receive instructions from both their contractor bosses and university personnel. To all extents and purposes, contract workers are university employees in all but their rights.

Contractors win contracts through bidding, which allows universities to reduce the cost of purchased services. Contractors claim that the bidding system pressures them into making offers so low that they cannot pay minimum wages. But standard contracts include clauses compelling contractors to abide by the laws of the State of Israel. So what?!

4.

A university is a huge, complex body; its administrators are over-burdened. Thus, university delegation some services provision to external suppliers is seemingly a blessing. And, like other large organizations, public as well as private, universities have accumulated too much power. Decentralization of such organizations, including reduction of their size — especially in government — may serve democracy.

But even if the shedding of some responsibilities by governments and organizations may not be negative in itself, it remains unclear as to why responsibility for the negative consequences of 'privatization,' decentralization's bedfellow, should also be shed. Privatization rationalizes employment of workers under unacceptable conditions. It is far from coincidental that only some sectors have embraced privatization. Where it has been adopted, change is easily made;

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the easiest changes are made at the expense of the weak. Contract workers are weak. Thus, although privatization may make a marginal contribution to reducing the size of university staffs, its costs are borne by the weak.

5.

I have heard colleagues on campus claim that there is nothing wrong with the existing situation since contract workers receive the wages they deserve according to the play of market forces. Those who dare make this claim are usually the same individuals who believe their own wages are too low — just because they are determined by those same market forces.

This is not the place to argue with the disciples of the invisible hand. The only argument I know that proves that market forces lead to a fair outcome (or wage) is based on the definition of a fair outcome as the result of market forces. Isn't it outrageous to claim that a contract worker's wage is the benign outcome of market forces when Israel's labor market is so far from being competitive? On one hand, the government forbids the import of computer programmers whose added value is high, while on the other it allows thousands of foreign workers to flood the market for cheap, mostly manual labor. This is hardly a free market. It is more like a jungle, where political and social power make the strong stronger and the weak — weaker.

6.

Some say that low wages actually protect contract workers. We might consider such a statement to be valid if it were made by the workers themselves rather than by those whose interests are clearly threatened by a rise in the minimum wage. In any case we are talking about service workers for whom the elasticity of demand is low. A wage raise may cause the

transfer of sewing workshops to Jordan, where wages are 20% lower than in Israel, so, even Israel's hi-tech industry has no alternative for the non-virtual cleaning of their Tel Aviv offices by workers from Zarka. But contract workers have no one to speak for them; they are transparent.

7.

The question of solidarity has become crucial to our experience of the contemporary world. How willing are we to share with the less fortunate, with those far removed from us in race, culture and place? How much do we sympathize with those living elsewhere who provide for our comfort by the sweat of their brows? How much do we care about foreign workers coming to work in our country? How do we treat Palestinian workers still under our authority?

But the workers I am discussing here are Israeli citizens, just like us. These are hard-working people who give what they can to our society. They do not resort to false claims for unemployment benefits, to demonstrations or to hunger strikes. These people, despite their transparency, are supposed to be included within our definitions of ourselves.

8.

Stopping this shame requires no additional committees, debates, meetings or research institute reports. Nor does it require approaching the legal authorities. The law is not the correct standard to hold up when evaluating our treatment of contract workers. (I intentionally avoid addressing the legal aspects of hiring contract workers. Someone else should look into the legal standing of our indifference.)

First of all, we and the heads of our institutions must recognize our moral responsibility regarding the terms of employment of those working in the same place and at the same time we do. Once we do so, we would only have to make sure that contract workers receive the same minimal conditions guaranteed to other employees, specifically – minimum wages, social benefits, and respect for their dignity.

Contractors can and should be required to scrupulously abide by all wage and labor laws. Contractors can and should be effectively supervised. Universities already have all the means necessary for monitoring the terms of employment of their contracted workers. Workers abused by contractors can and should be defended. We are obligated to remind these transparent workers that we consider them to be human beings, just like us.

It appalls me that actions so simple have not been taken.

9.

Enforcing labor laws may reduce the contractors' gains. I presume that we have little sympathy for contractors who abuse their workers as a way to becoming rich. But let us assume the difficult assumption that rectifying existing evils will not only reduce contractors' gains but will lead to costlier contracts and a reallocation of current university budgetary resources in favor of these workers.

Wages determine the allocation of a pie that is more or less fixed. Are we willing to contribute our part for the benefit of those among us who receive only crumbs? Can we accept a situation where some of us earn more than 20 (!!) times more than many others who work beside us? Are we, who generally belong to the highest decile in Israeli society, really willing

to forgo 1 or 2 percent of our wages in order to generate a less outrageous allocation of the pie that we are in charge of distributing?

10.

These things are not taking place on the Gaza Strip border or in the backyards of Sharon area farms. To observe them we need not travel as far as a Bedouin camp having no electricity or Tel Aviv's Central Bus Station. These crimes are being committed under the fluorescent lights of the strongholds of Israeli enlightenment that we belong to.

I have written this article for *Bashaar* because many of its founders are civil leaders, present, past and future university presidents, rectors, deans, CEOs and their deputies. Their control of Israeli universities is almost absolute; they have no excuse for complacency. All our calls for amending the world and Israeli society mean nothing, morally or socially, unless we are able to rectify what is wrong here first.

In this article I have tried to be the advocate of thousands of those transparent people wandering about our campuses, working in the buildings where we work, near the entrances to our institutions, and in the kitchens where our food is prepared. The situation is simple. The remedy is straightforward.

There is only one question I do not know the answer to : Do we really want to?