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**Subject:** An Op-Ed from President Ben-Sasson: The Key to Israel's Future

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AFHU is pleased to share an op-ed by Professor Menahem Ben-Sasson, President of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, on the occasion of Israel's Independence Day.

 Times

April 15, 2013

## **The Key to Israel's Future: Education** by Menahem Ben-Sasson

Celebrating 65 years of independence, Israel can be proud that despite staggering challenges, today it is one of the world's most prosperous countries.

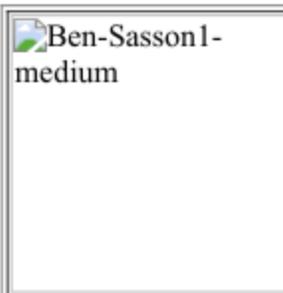
The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development recently ranked Israelis among the most content people in the Western world, scoring fifth in health and eighth in happiness among 36 countries. Israel is ranked 30th globally in GDP per capita, ahead of technology powerhouse South Korea and oil-rich Saudi Arabia. And Israel has more companies listed on the NASDAQ stock market than any country except the United States, Canada and China.

What explains the stunning success of a tiny country that fought multiple wars, absorbed millions of refugees and was until recently poor in natural resources?

Conventional wisdom says Israeli chutzpah, improvisation and risk-taking — the so-called “Start-Up Nation” effect — propelled it to beat the odds and become a breakout nation.

But the true roots of Israel's success can be found in a cultural heritage stretching back to the Hebrew Bible: an avid spirit of inquiry and the relentless pursuit of knowledge in the service of perfecting the world.

This unquenchable thirst was encoded in the very DNA of the fledgling Jewish state. Though formally declared in 1948, Israel's independence really began with the founding of centers of higher education. Decades before Israel declared independence, Zionist leaders proposed a Hebrew university in the land of Israel — an idea realized in 1925 with the opening of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



Menahem Ben-Sasson is the thirteenth president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Before assuming the role of president in 2009, Prof Ben-Sasson served as a Member of the Knesset and was chairman of its

Today this quest for knowledge, which made Israel a hothouse of research and innovation, faces real challenges. Among them is a “brain drain” caused by the emigration of academics and researchers in search of positions abroad with better research conditions. Israeli universities face ongoing cuts in government funding due to economic conditions. A further challenge is the ongoing effort abroad to boycott Israel’s universities — a dangerous and misguided attack on academic freedom.

At Intel Israel’s annual conference, CEO Mooly Eden questioned whether Israel’s remarkable success could be sustained: “Are we investing enough in Israel on a national level, so that in the future we will have ‘Israel: The Start-up Nation, Part Two’? Or will this be a history book?” he asked.

Last year universities in the United Kingdom received a record amount of philanthropic donations: 14% over the previous year and 33% more than 2009-10. The United States has a long tradition of philanthropic support for higher education. A similar commitment is needed to ensure the continued health of Israeli academia and research.

In Jerusalem last month, US President Obama said: Indeed, Israel is a global leader in brain sciences and agriculture, biomedicine and the humanities, nanotechnology and computer science. But we cannot take for granted its ability to forever sustain academic excellence and produce breakthrough innovations. On this milestone birthday, Israel’s friends everywhere can ask what they can do to ensure its continued independence and inventiveness.

In addition to exploring philanthropic opportunities, there are many creative ways to make a difference. Among them: help reverse the brain drain by spending time at an Israeli research center, offset budget cuts by sending your children to study at Israeli universities, or support academic freedom by helping promote ties between Israeli universities and their foreign counterparts.

These actions will not be for Israel’s benefit alone. As President Obama noted, Israel’s spirit of innovation “has led to economic growth and human progress: solar power and electric cars; bandages and prosthetic limbs that save lives; stem cell research and new drugs that treat disease; cell phones and computer technology that that change the way people around the world live.”

It is up to us all to ensure that Israeli academia and innovation continue to move forward, for the benefit of people everywhere.

Constitution, Law and Justice Committee; Prof Ben-Sasson previously served as Rector of the Hebrew University and as Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Humanities; In 2012 the presidents of Israel’s research universities appointed him the chairperson of the Committee of University Heads of Israel; A historian of the heritage of the Jews of Islam, he has written some fifty books and scholarly articles on a range of subjects, including Jewish Communities in Muslim Lands, the Relationship between Religion and Economics, and Law and Spirituality as Sources of Authority in Medieval Oriental Society; He also specializes in the study of Maimonides, social and intellectual history, Geonic responsa and texts, and Saadya Gaon’s works and leadership



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