

## **The University of Cafés**

Ariel Rubinstein

Tel Aviv at 100 years old is bustling with culture. A large research university is situated north of the Yarkon River. Although I am a member of the faculty of that university, I feel like I belong to another wonderful institution established by the first Hebrew city: "The University of Tel Aviv Cafés". It is the only place where I can sit for long hours, sink into contemplation without interruption, write, delete and think.

Not every Tel Aviv café is included in our university. The criteria for acceptance are complex. First of all, it is matter of light and shade; not too dark, not too bright. You need to feel that the place cuddles you in a homey pleasantness. Ideally, there is a tree to shade the windows on a sweltering day. It is important for there to be a small window to allow a refreshing breeze, rather than large openings for gusts of wind. The acoustics are also important: The conversations should converge among the interlocutors. The music must not be too loud, and of course the annoying newscasts should not resound every hour.

A sophisticated Italian espresso machine is not necessary in order to be part of our campus, and there is no need for the coffee beans to arrive via express mail

## **The University of Drinking Beer in My Basement**

P.J. Healy

My house, being suburban, is devoid of culture. A large research university lies 15 miles south along the Olentangy River. Although I am a member of the faculty of that university, I feel like I belong to another wonderful institution established by generations of Midwesterners: "The University of Drinking Beer in My Basement". It is the only place where I can sit for long hours, drink my beer without interruption, sip, watch TV, and think of things that later appear to be totally incoherent.

Not every basement is included in our university. The criteria for acceptance are complex. First of all, it is a matter of couches; not too hard, not too soft. You need to feel the couch cuddles you in a homey pleasantness. Ideally, there is a TV to provide sports, sit-coms, or some Brazilian game show at 2am. It is important that there be no window, with the temperature controlled entirely by central air conditioning. The acoustics are also important: The subwoofer should dominate whenever desired. The TV should be pretty loud, and of course intellectual things like newscasts or French movies should not be present.

A sophisticated draft system is not necessary in order to be part of our campus, and there is no need for the beer to arrive via

from the coffee barons in Colombia. It is important that sitting in the coffee house does not require a binge of gluttony. It should be expected that the patrons of the place will remain even after slowly finishing the salad and drinking three mugs of coffee.

Some accuse our university of lacking research laboratories. Not exactly. We are located in the heart of the laboratory of life. Our researchers, primarily from the fields of social sciences and humanities, directly observe reality and are updated in real time. It would be an exaggeration to claim that we are connecting with the people, but we are certainly not sequestering ourselves in an ivory tower.

Our departments have names like Buggy, Birnbaum, Beta, Sucar, Book Worm and Tamar, and are not named for mysterious donors. We engage in celebrating life and not in memorializing the dead. Our university does not pay salaries, but offers the ideal work setting for many. As for me, I have written more pages of satisfying work in the coffee houses of Tel Aviv than in my opulent office.

In the The University of Cafés, no one demands that research must be useful. From the outset, there is an atmosphere of apparent idleness and lack of purpose at the coffee houses, which is the suitable atmosphere for basic research. The system of promotions at our university is based on the breadth

express mail from Belgian monks. It is important that the spouse be accepting of drinking that lasts until early hours in the morning. It should be expected that the beer drinker will remain even after all sensible individuals would have gone to bed like two or three hours ago.

Some accuse our university of lacking any sign of intellectual activity. Not exactly. One time we figured out how to eat a jar of peanuts without using our hands. Our researchers are not confined by the typical constraints of reasonableness or decency. It would be an exaggeration to claim that what we are doing is "science", but at least we can thump our chests about how we couldn't possibly drive right now to some ivory tower.

Our departments are supported by names like La-Z-Boy, Sierra Nevada, Stone, Bells and Founders, and nobody's ever wanted to donate to our cause. We engage in drinking alone and not in socializing with others. Our university does not pay salaries, but does offer an escape from reality. As for me, I have come up with more bizarre \$%&!& while drinking in my basement than in my opulent office.

In the University of Drinking Beer in My Basement, no one demands that my mumblings be interpretable. From the outset, there is an atmosphere of apparent idleness and lack of purpose, full stop. The system of promotions at

of the smiles of the café employees. There are no appointments committees. There are no rectors or deans. Every young person is gladly accepted, at least as readily as a tenured professor. There is a real interdisciplinary tradition at our university. Only here can you find a true encounter between a mathematician, economist and historian.

Our motto is: Freedom, Education and Openness. Academic freedom is a reality and not just an empty slogan unfathomed by many of those who recite it. We have absolute independence in our establishment. With us, there is no attempt to separate academia and politics, and there is no demand for political correctness. Instead of keeping the door of the office open when someone of the opposite sex enters the room, it is considered inappropriate behavior in our coffee houses to ignore flirtation from the opposite sex.

It is said that the universities in Israel are deteriorating. This crisis is bypassing the University of Tel Aviv Cafés, which continues to prosper according to any international criterion. Perhaps our sister cafes in Berlin and Vienna measure up to us. London and New York definitely fall short in comparison. In brief, we are placed well within the top ten, a status that no Israeli university dreams of attaining.

our university is based on the number of empty bottles and reruns of CHiPs. There are no dry campuses. There are no crusty old deans. Every sad, middle-aged man is gladly accepted, at least as readily as a hardened alcoholic. There is a real sense of isolation at our university. Only here can you find a seemingly rational man involved in thoughtful discourse with an empty bottle.

Our motto is: Indulgence, Indifference and Whistfulness. Academic freedom is a given, because nobody really cares. We have absolute independence in what we do in our basement, which is probably a bad thing. With us, there is no attempt to separate consciousness from unconsciousness, and there is no demand for coherence. We have long given up on the opposite sex, instead fixated on the simple pleasures of a well-stocked fridge.

It is said that universities in the Midwest are deteriorating. This crisis is bypassing the University of Drinking Beer in My Basement, which continues to prosper according to anyone who completely lacks regard for self-worth. Our sister campuses in Belgium and the Czech Republic would provide healthy competition, if only they had basements. In brief, we are alone in the rankings, a status that no real university dreams of attaining.

Sometimes, as evening approaches,  
I pass by a Tel Aviv Café, see the  
regulars, with or without a  
laptop, alone or in a group, and  
look enviously at them. But then I  
remember that I am one of them.  
What a good feeling.

Published in Yedioth Achronot  
16/3/09

Sometimes, as morning approaches,  
I realize I've been drinking all  
night. I see myself in the  
bathroom mirror as I hobble up the  
stairs, with or without a half-  
empty bottle, and I look enviously  
at my reflection. But then I  
remember that I am that guy in the  
mirror. What a good feeling.

Rejected for publication  
30/9/14

...and again 2/12/14