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Precedent in Public Service: The Ministry of Finance Performed First Recruitment Campaign among Arab Students

Of the Ministry of Finance's 950 employees, only 33 are Arabs. Ministry representatives came to Tel Aviv University last week to reduce this disparity. Accountant General Shuki Oren stated: "We have become accustomed to recruiting people to work according to what they did in the military; This requires a change." Rajuan Grayeb, Deputy Commissioner of Insurance: "There is no glass ceiling at the Ministry of Finance"

By: Merav Arlozorov

Approximately 50 Arab students of economics and accounting participated in a special meeting held at the Tel Aviv University on Thursday. The meeting, held in cooperation with the University and organized by Kav Mashve, a non-profit organization that specializes in finding employment for Arabs with academic education, was a sort of historic precedent; For the first time, a governmental ministry in Israel, at its initiative, turns to recruitment of Arab employees.

The ministry is the Ministry of Finance, and the meeting was led by two of its most senior managers –Director General, Chaim Shani, and Accountant General, Shuki Oren. Two senior Arab employees at the Ministry of Finance also participated in the meeting: Rajuan Grayeb, Senior Deputy of the Supervisor of Insurance, and Anuar Chilaf, the Director General's assistant.

Grayeb and Chilaf are two of the 33 Arab employees employed at the Ministry of Finance, of the 950 Ministry employees. This represents only 3.5% of the Ministry employees, far below the governmental employment target of 10% minority employment by 2012. However, the 33 employees constitute a significant improvement in the number of Arab employees. The first Arab employee (Grayeb) was hired by the Ministry of Finance in 2000, and until 2007 there were only 18 Arab employees.

The increase in the number of Arab employees at the Ministry of Finance is indeed encouraging, though it cannot conceal the fact that the Ministry of Finance – as all other governmental ministries – has failed to meet the objectives defined by the Government. When the top officials at the Ministry of Finance noticed the significant lag behind the objectives, it was decided to actively seek out and hire Arab

employees. For this reason, the Ministry of Finance turned to Kav Mashve and the Tel Aviv University to hold the first employee recruitment meeting of its kind.

Biblical Hebrew in Employment Tests

The meeting was charged. The Arab students criticized the Ministry of Finance directors for the small number of Arab employees. "It's just a slogan," claimed one of the participants. "There is discrimination. The General Security Service (Shin Bet) controls all recruitment processes of governmental employees, and Arabs were and remain second-class citizens." Other students complained of the cultural and technical obstacles that prevented them from passing the [employment] tenders of the Civil Service Commission.

One of the students stated that he had sat for a test held by the Commission, but he failed because he was unable to understand one of the questions. As it turned out, the question was based on Biblical Hebrew and included Aramaic terms. In addition, the Arab students claimed that designated tenders – tenders for positions that are designed for Arabs only, as part of the affirmative action exercised by the Government in the attempt to reach the employment target of 10% Arabs – were very few and makes it difficult for them to gain employment. "We really want to be integrated," another student noted. "There are hundreds of economics and business administration graduates who are employed in construction contracting and flooring because they are unsuccessful in obtaining a respectable position."

However, during the meeting it turned out that the issue was not merely intentional discrimination: Arabs themselves were also to blame for the bleak situation of Arab governmental employees. It emerged that few Arabs responded to the designated tenders. "The barrier of mistrust causes you to refrain from responding," said Grayeb to the participants. "When the Ministry of Finance publishes a regular tender for new employees, 100 candidates apply for each position – and all of them are outstanding students. Everybody knows that the Ministry of Finance is an excellent springboard for the private sector, due to the nature of the work and the skills acquired while working at the Ministry. The Ministry of Finance is an enclave of excellence, and economics students have an intense desire to be accepted by the Ministry. In contrast, when tenders for recruitment of minority employees are published, only two or three people respond to the tender, and in some cases tenders were cancelled and the positions remained unmanned because an insufficient number of candidates responded."

At the meeting, the Accountant General said that once the Ministry of Finance learned there was an issue of insufficient response by Arab candidates to positions designated for them, the Ministry decided to hold the meeting, in order to remove the barriers preventing access to tenders. "It is important to us that minorities also apply to tenders that are open to the general population and not only to their designated tenders," said Oren. "We all need to "switch" our thinking: Over the years, we have become accustomed to hire people based on their military service, among other things. But

this cannot continue any longer. Today we know that a candidate's nature and personality are most important."

Oren emphasized that the Ministry of Finance was a liberal work environment that celebrates excellence and diversity of opinions. "It's OK not to agree with the boss at the Ministry of Finance" he said, "This is the way we are educated, and therefore it's important to have minorities at the Ministry of Finance – in order to diversify opinions. There may certainly be discrimination, and perhaps we are not doing enough to hire Arabs, but we are trying to change that now. We are here to convince you to apply to tenders for recruitment of employees."

Oren spoke of the affirmative action in recruitment of Arab employees – though emphasized that it ends the moment an applicant is accepted into the Ministry of Finance. "The Ministry of Finance demands excellence. Once an employee is accepted, he must prove himself, and anyone who proves himself is promoted without discrimination." Oren stated that two female Arab employees had been hired by the

Accountant General Division in recent years, but both did not remain. "One of them," he said, "was outstanding, though had a hard time because of the distance from her village, the family pressured her, and she decided to return. The other one was simply not good enough. Fortunately, however, most Arabs who are hired perform well."

"Unwilling to Serve as a Fig Leaf"

At least four Arab employees have succeeded to such extent that they hold relatively senior positions at the Ministry of Finance. These are Dia Asadi, Senior Assistant to the Supervisor of Wages, Hassan Ismail, accountant of the Central Bureau of Statistics, and at the top – Chilaf and Grayeb.

"I started in 2000," told Grayeb, "as a novice economist, the first Arab at the Ministry of Finance. I was hired under affirmative action and of course I had many concerns. It wasn't simple, and it would have been easy to give up. I also thought I wouldn't be promoted, though I quickly learned that I was wrong. I began competing in internal tenders for more senior positions, and was gradually promoted. I saw that the only matter taken into consideration in promotion decisions was whether or not you were good. There's no affirmative action once you're at the Ministry of Finance, only skills. Today, I am already Deputy to the Supervisor of Insurance and I can testify that there's no glass ceiling at the Ministry of Finance."

"I've been at the Ministry of Finance for ten years," continued Grayeb, "and I have never spoke about my Arab origin, and I am not willing to serve as a fig leaf for the Ministry. If I'm here, it's only because I believe that that is not the case. The Ministry is making a genuine effort to recruit Arab employees and there is a common interest to promote the acceptance of such employees, provided they have merit."

Grayeb urged the Arab students to submit their applications to the tenders, both the general and the designated. He said that minorities received from the State assistance

in rent in order to facilitate relocation to Jerusalem as part of the affirmative action policy.

In addition, the Ministry of Finance and Kav Mashve have opened a special email box, korothaim@mof.gov.il, where Arab students are requested to send their resumes. Arab students who send their resumes to this email will receive alerts of every designated tender issued for the Arab population.

According to Chilaf, 10 such designated tenders for recruitment of employees to the Ministry of Finance will be issued in the forthcoming months. Kav Mashve has promised to assist the Arab candidates in writing their resumes and preparing for the Commission exams held by assessment centers, which are part of the government recruitment process; Some concerns exist that these tests are culturally biased against Arabs.