

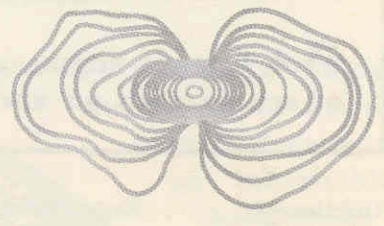
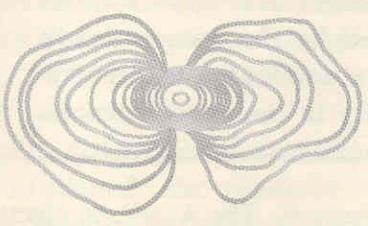
The
Forum



SPRING 1997

A Quarterly Publication of the
AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR BASIC RESEARCH IN
ISRAEL (AFBRI)

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HUMANITIES in a world of SCIENCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH: Professor Hayim Tadmor

"New voices from the past are continually being discovered and now, more than ever, the future needs to hear and understand them."

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What special challenges do the humanities face today?

TADMOR: Today, at the turn of the twenty-first century, people see science as essential to "progress," to improving things, to getting ahead. This means that the emphasis in education has shifted from the humanities to science and technology. Most of the best students are now going into science and computing, rather than humanities in the classical sense.

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Does support for the humanities suffer as a result?

TADMOR: Of course. Patrons have changed; tastes have changed. It is hard to use the language of exact science to justify basic research on Geniza fragments and medieval poetry or ancient history. Yet such studies have much to tell us about human nature, social structures, history, the achievements of the human spirit, things that are revealed in a unique way to each generation. New voices from the past are continually being discovered and now, more than ever, the future needs to hear and understand them.

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Can the Israel Academy help?

TADMOR: It does – by setting standards, providing personal examples, and by demonstrating the importance of excellence. Outstanding scholars and public figures like the Academy's late president, Ephraim Urbach, who helped reshape our understanding of rabbinic tradition, and our late vice-president, philosopher, Nathan

HUMANITIES in a world of SCIENCE

Prof. Hayim Tadmor, Vice President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and one of the world's premier Assyriologists, was born in 1923 to a Russian Jewish family in Harbin, Northern China. He arrived in Israel in 1935, and received his Ph.D. from the Hebrew University, where he is now Professor Emeritus.

Prof. Tadmor's lifelong career of scholarship on ancient



Assyria has led to visiting appointments at Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania and other prestigious institutions, and to honorary membership in many prominent learned societies.

Here he discusses the challenges and opportunities offered by the humanities in an era dominated by frenetic activity in the exact sciences.

Continued:

Rotenstreich, continue to dominate the nation's consciousness. The Academy elects Israel's top scholars to its governing bodies, publishes exemplary scholarly works, and runs long-term projects of scholarly research that far exceed the three-year project cycle of the Israel Science Foundation and similar organizations.

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What kinds of research?

TADMOR: For example, research on the Hebrew poetry found among the Cairo Geniza fragments. That effort has been ongoing for some 30 years now. The Academy's Hebrew paleography project has continued for 25 years; and its work on a Concordance for the Talmud Yerushalmi is drawing to a close after two decades. There is also exciting research, which the Academy is now publishing, on ancient Hebrew seals, one of the few extant epigraphic sources for the Biblical period, and on the historical geography of the Holy Land. The infinite patience and care invested in such projects are yielding basic building blocks for the construction of new appraisals of the history of human culture.

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What about the future?

TADMOR: We must strive to ensure Israel's "continuity of excellence," especially in those areas, such as Judaic and Near-Eastern Studies, in which Israel is, and should remain, a world center. There is a fine, but relatively small, cadre of new, talented scholars, and we must enable and encourage them to press forward with their research. This is harder in today's environment but, with the support of a judicious allotment of state funding and of patrons faithful to the humanistic tradition, I believe that this can and will be done.

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Finally, how do Humanists address the human condition?

TADMOR: Humanists seek the spiritual and ideological constants and transformations that define the human condition. In my own work, for example, alongside the reconstruction of ancient texts and historical *chronologies*, I have tried to reconstruct the ideologies and motivations that powered the great events of the past. Particularly where Israel and the Middle East are concerned, those ancient events and ideologies illuminate, and are partly responsible for, the ethos and the mythic structures that still motivate political behavior today. The tensions and diversities characteristic of modern Israel make it a natural place for such inquiry.