

No Israeli Nobel Prize

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Mathematician urges need for elite math, physics school

By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH

One of the world's most renowned theoretical mathematicians, Prof. Haim Brezis of the Pierre and Marie Curie University in Paris, urges the establishment of an elite science school for preparing a handful of top Israeli high school graduates for study and research in mathematics and physics.

The Hebrew-speaking Brezis, a top authority in partial differential equations (a mathematical field with close links to physics and the natural sciences) who has been named the Technion's current sole visiting distinguished mathematician, has warned in an interview with The Jerusalem Post that the gap between Israel and Muslims in these strategically critical fields has narrowed, with native-born and foreign Muslim students in Europe excelling at leading scientific universities.

Brezis describes the danger and suggests his solution in a full-page interview, which will appear on The Post's Science Page on Sunday, February 18 and on the Internet Edition.

"The number of fabulous French and foreign young people going into math and physics year after year is amazing. I have been the thesis adviser of 50 Ph.D. students so far. Many of them are now professors," he said. "But in Israel, in my field, it is basically a desert. There are a few excellent students, but they are specializing in limited areas of math."

He blames the Israeli higher educational system for this failure. "There are very good general universities, but what is missing is an elite university center of excellence for undergraduates," Brezis explained.

"Look where the Nobel Prize in Physics goes; no Israeli has won it. And while there is no Nobel in math, what is often considered its equivalent – the Fields Medal given once a year to the top minds under the age of 40 – has never in 50 years gone to an Israeli... True, Israel is a small country, but Belgium got it twice!"

Brezis has discussed the problem with the French Jewish community, whose Alliance Israelite Universelle owns the Mikveh Yisrael Agricultural School outside Tel Aviv and is willing to donate it to create an elite science school – but the French Jewish organization lacks the funds and staff to get it running.

He urges that the brightest math and physics graduates be exempted or given only minimal military service so they can begin their study in the elite school at 18 and be directed to doctoral studies and research a few years later when the "window of creativity" for math and physics is still open. But so far, Brezis said, his idea has fallen here on deaf ears because of the lack of funds, fear that the Israel Defense Force would oppose it,

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jealousy among the universities and concern that most of those who would be chosen would be Russian immigrants.