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Are ethnic gaps still relevant in Israel?

• By YOSSI DAHAN

Imarried a Yemenite.” “Look at Yitzhak Tshuva.” “Who can see the difference these days?” These are some of the profound comments that are heard in today’s public debate about the gap between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Israel.

In a recent study in *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* titled “Mizrachi-Ashkenazi Gaps in the Third Generation,” Prof. Yinon Cohen (Tel Aviv University and Columbia University), Prof. Noah Levin Epstein, and Amit Lazarus (TAU) examine the gaps in higher education among Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in the third generation.

The research group is between the ages of 26 and 42. The research is unique because it is based on updated data that were collected between the years 2015-2017 from the European Social Survey. It is important to note that the Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel does not collect up-to-date data on the third generation Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Attempts by researchers and others to persuade the CBS to collect and publish such data have yielded nothing. We can assume that in their view, if there is no information, then there are no social and economic gaps.

The study defines “Mizrachi” as the third generation of all those whose grandparents were born in Asian or African countries, and “Ashkenazi” as those whose grandparents were born in European or American countries.

The study compared the gaps in higher education between



ARE THERE still wide ethnic gaps in Israel? (Reuters)

the second generation and the third generation. The findings were as follows: The rate of bachelor’s degree-holders among second-generation Ashkenazim is 63.9%, compared to 30.5% among second-generation Mizrahim in the same age group, a difference of about 33 percentage points.

Among the third generation, the rate of bachelor’s degree-holders among Ashkenazim is 56.4%, compared to 36% among third-generation Mizrahim. In other words, the gap in higher education has narrowed, but it is still high.

However, as the researchers

point out, half of the gap is due to a decline in the rate of higher education among Ashkenazim among the third generation, compared with the second generation, and not only as a result of an improvement among Mizrahim. It also emerges from the study that the third-generation ethnic gap among women has narrowed more than it has among men. And the mixed group (one of whose parents, or parents of his parents, is Ashkenazi and the other Mizrahi) is closer to Ashkenazim than Mizrahim, both in the second generation and especially in the third.

The authors write that according to these results, it will take the Mizrahim four or even five generations to close the gap with the Ashkenazim. The authors note that there are a number of explanations for these disparities. These include gaps in the social and economic backgrounds between the two groups, as well as the paving of the education system, which causes Mizrahim to study in lower educational tracks such as vocational versus humanities or sciences.

There are a very few NGOs that set a goal of narrowing the gap between Ashkenazim and

Mizrahim in Israel, but no governmental ones. In light of this research, the need to continue to invest in narrowing the ethnic divide, and the obligation of the State of Israel to invest public resources for this purpose – in the same way the state invests in other populations that are underrepresented in academia, such as Arabs, haredim (ultra-Orthodox) and Ethiopians – becomes an important reminder to us all.

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