

Haaretz

Any Book for a Buck

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A few days ago, I went into one of the big bookstore chains to buy a book. Right away, salespeople were all over me, urging me to buy more books that I really didn't want so that I could get the one I did want for only one shekel. Only one shekel? I asked. Right, one shekel, if I buy another book - whether a worthwhile one or a worthless one, at full price or at a reduced price. There were so many sales going on that I couldn't figure out what I would have to pay.

What I did understand was that the cutthroat competition raging in the book business today is liable to confuse readers, because it introduces foreign elements that belong to other markets, which are based on clear-cut economic principles, and where the laws of supply and demand and of the free market and unfettered competition prevail.

The assumption that market forces can indeed control an economy properly has been severely tested this year. But in the culture market in general and the book market in particular, that assumption was never correct. "Free" competition has never strengthened culture, only dragged it down - just look at the fatal blow dealt to television in this country after the launch of the commercial channels and the medium's exposure to so-called free competition.

Of course, business considerations and finance do play an important role in the book market. However, unlike in other most other branches of business, when it comes to books, what matters most is the cultural value of the products. Culture is different, in that the significance of its output lies not in its profitability, but rather in values whose creation may well entail financial loss. The state and society have an interest in maintaining this "market," and this market requires their protection - in the form, for example, of legislation along the lines of the French law that protects book prices from falling too low.

The bill proposed by MK Nitzan Horowitz (Meretz) would ensure that the price of a book would remain steady for two years after publication, in order to protect businesses that are unable to play the market game, but whose importance to the book industry is vital: for example, investment-intensive publishing enterprises, or independent bookstores, as well as the smaller publishers that often supply the book market with its added value, and in so doing take risks with the publication of every book.

Also deserving of protection are the authors, whose royalties are based on the price of each book sold and who are therefore harmed by price-slashing, and other employees of the publishing industry like translators and editors, whose earnings are already rock bottom, and who will be the first to suffer if competition forces publishers to cut expenses.

The book trade has always been built on a delicate balance between highbrow and lowbrow, and on enabling the different and the "alternative" to exist. If adequate protection is not forthcoming, the book business will not die altogether, but it will lose its important balances and become shallow and superficial.

Ronit Kan of the government's Antitrust Authority has been quoted as saying that competition in the book business has been beneficial and has led to "more titles and lower prices." Ostensibly, this is a welcome process, a "democratization of literature," something that places it within reach of every home. But this view springs from a lack of understanding of the nature of the publishing industry and its unique characteristics.

The Knesset should overlook narrow political considerations, reject the lobbying of commercial interests and vote Horowitz's bill into law. If it doesn't, Israeli bookshops will become "everything for a dollar" stores, perish the thought.