

# LEARNING TOGETHER

Perhaps the best kept secret of Israel's education system is the existence of 200 schools which offer enriched Jewish studies programs, including 20 schools where religious, secular and traditional children study together / Ilana Kraus



A survey commissioned by Tzav Pius to coincide with the recent conference they sponsored to promote the Integrated Education Stream Law showed that 71% of the 500 parents who responded had never heard that such a possibility exists. When asked if they would consider sending their children to a mixed school, 47% of the participants, a representative sample of Israel's Jewish population, said yes - including 58% of the secular parents and 57% of the traditional ones, but also 34% of the national-religious, 17% of the religious and 4% of the ultra-Orthodox respondents. (The survey was conducted by Mutagim Research.)

"These findings confirm what we are seeing in the field," says Aliza Gershon, director of Tzav Pius, an organization that encourages dialogue across the religious-secular spectrum. "In the past two years, the number of school starts and interested communities has doubled." This potential prompted Tzav Pius to organize the conference.

More than 250 parents and educators gathered in Jerusalem on January 17th to press for immediate implementation of the Integrated Education Stream Law. Passed more than a year and a half ago, "it has two aspects," Gershon explained: "To promote enrichment of Jewish studies, particularly in the state educational system, and to encourage the establishment of schools where children from secular, religious and tradi-

tional backgrounds study together while retaining their distinct identities."

So far only eight schools have become part of the Ministry's pilot program and are receiving the support the law provides, such as a Jewish studies coordinator, teacher training and curriculum development. A public council, stipulated by the law, has yet to be established. Although the conference focused on founding new schools, Gershon noted that more than 200 schools and networks are already carrying out its vision. These include 90 TALI schools, and the Morasha, Be'eri (Hartman Institute), Yahalom, Ma'arag, and Shorshei Yisrael (ORT) schools and programs, which offer enriched Jewish studies models that emphasize democratic, humanistic and pluralistic values and tolerance.

## Morning prayers or discussion

Yet the idea of integrated education is not new. Three integrated schools - Kfar Adumim, Tekoah and Beit Horon - all under state-religious supervision, were established 30 years ago, when these mixed settlements were founded. Like the other schools and tracks around the country, a broad range of Jewish identity and life styles are represented in the Kfar Adumim School.

"We have 600 students from 1st through 8th grade," said principal Amira Perlov. "The children grow up attending the same preschools and kindergartens, so integrated education is the most natural thing in the world for them. Only in high school are they divided into secular and religious. In our school, everyone is together for all classes and activities until 3rd grade. In 4th grade pupils have to decide to start the day either with morning prayers or morning discussion." They are also given the option of attending classes in Jewish law, Mishna and Gemara, or comparable classes, where Jewish studies are taught from the cultural perspective.

"Our structure is modular," the principal explained, "a student can study Gemara and not participate in prayer, for example." Most classes, such as math, science, language and literature, are mixed. "The children do their homework, go on field trips and annoy their teachers together," said Perlov. So why aren't there more mixed schools?

At the conference, fear and bureaucracy were cited as the main obstacles. Parents fear that mixing with students from other



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types of Jewish homes will somehow confuse their children and weaken their sense of identity, whether religious or secular. The new law is also supposed to urge local government authorities to encourage the development of these schools, but the Meitarim School in Ra'anana, for example, with 90 students from 7th through 12th grades, has still not received official recognition even though it has been open since 2003. "The municipality knows we exist," explained principal Michael Greenberg, "but they do not publicize it. They consider us a private school." The school receives support from the Meitarim network.

Explaining the school's credo, Greenberg said that "We want all our students, regardless of how they identify Jewishly, to feel empathy, not alienation, toward Judaism." As an example of the Jewish pluralism the school strives to foster, he mentioned the panel of Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, and Haredi leaders and rabbis that would be talking about different approaches to conversion. Also, "the 9th and 10th grade students will be going on a Shabbat retreat at Kibbutz Hanaton, where different approaches to Shabbat will be the theme," Greenberg added.

Yachad Modi'in, another school in the Meitarim network, appears to have much more support. Its elementary school principal, Lisa Levy, participated in the panel discussion at the conference. She read two poignant essays written by 6th grade pupils who talked about how they are connected to their Jewish identity and enjoyed the atmosphere of tolerance in the school. At Yachad Modi'in, about 1,000 children from 650 secular, traditional and religious families study together from kindergarten to 11th grade. They also offer special education classes.

## An important ideological goal

Not yet recognized by the Ministry of Education or the Misgav regional council, the fledgling integrated school in Eschchar

has 30 pupils in two mixed-aged classes (1st/2nd and 3rd/4th grades). With 120 religious and secular families, Eschchar was started 25 years ago as a mixed community by a nucleus of North Americans. "We have been searching for many years for the right educational framework for our children," said Dudu Rosenblum, one of a group of parents who set up the integrated school last year. "You can't educate children together in pre-school and kindergarten and then separate them in 1st grade," Rosenblum asserted. "We're together in the army, the university, the workplace. Why do we have to separate in the education system?" he asked.

Eleven members of this community came to the conference to show their support for the Integrated Education Stream Law, "which should be giving us the backing we need. The entire community views this as an important ideological goal."

For the past two years, a group of parents in Shoham has also been attempting to start an integrated school, which they hope will be running by next year, with the approval of the local council. "We put up posters and held parlor meetings, and now 130 families have formed a community to promote integrated education," explained Eran Rom,

a member of this group. "We have 20 children signed up for 1st grade, and 20-30 for pre-school and kindergarten. We have adopted the Keshet model and are connecting with their organization."

Keshet started its first school in Jerusalem about 15 years ago. Eran Rom explained that whereas in Meitarim schools all the children are together for all activities, the goal of the Keshet model is to strengthen secular and religious identities. "If a child doesn't pray at home, why should he/she do so in school?" he asked. According to this model, when the religious pupils are praying, the secular children learn about prayer. "But there is no reason in the world why secular and religious kids should not study math, English, literature and physical education together, and no reason why they should not be playing together during recess," he declared. Aside from prayer and the study of *halakhah* and Jewish law, when the secular children learn about Judaism as culture, the classes are mixed.

## Decrying the dichotomy

All the conference speakers echoed the theme passionately expressed by popular artist Kobi Oz: "We came to this country to

be Jewish, to be together. Why are we divided?"

"The gentle Judaism of my grandfather is now extreme," Oz lamented in his song, part of the *Mizmorei Nevuchim* (Psalms for the Perplexed) concert he has been performing around the country. "In Sderot, we were all traditional," he said. "Some went to secular and others to religious schools; we didn't see the difference, but we became separated."

After his brief performance and speech, Oz was embraced by former MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, the initiator of the law, and Rabbi Menahem Furman, rabbi of Tekoah. Rabbi Melchior praised the coalition of lawmakers who worked together to enact this "historic law," but decried Ben Gurion's "original sin" of separating state education into religious and secular streams. This has led to continued "galutit" (Diaspora mentality), isolationism, separation, divisions. We are dividing ourselves into oblivion," Rabbi Melchior proclaimed. He cited the trend that led to the integration of Jewish studies in secular schools, which began over 15 years ago with TALI.

"Now more than 200 schools, pre-army courses, pre-schools and mixed communities are trying to break the isolationism barriers," he said, with dozens more seeking to join. Rabbi Melchior called for everyone to work together to implement the law, which is "vital for the future of Israel."

Ministry of Education Director General Dr. Shimshon Shoshani also condemned the growing compartmentalization of Israeli society, and the artificial dichotomy and fragmentation in our schools. He endorsed the spirit of the law, and declared that "integration is a matter of national interest."

Nonetheless, aside from stating clearly that integrated education is not a third stream in the educational system, he had little to deliver in the way of concrete plans or budgets, aside from saying that a committee was working on formulating suitable regulations. Calling for a nationwide "dynamic discourse on education," Dr. Meir Buzaglo, of the Hebrew University's philosophy department, declared that "this law is a window of opportunity for Israeli society to do away with the secular-religious dichotomy."

It's time to create a renaissance that will lead to open, tolerant education under one roof, he said. The grass roots initiatives, the Tzav Pius survey and the passionate words spoken at the conference seem to confirm the existence of a genuine desire and need for integrated education in Israel. ✕



Girls from the Meitarim school in Raanan performing at the Tzav Pius conference

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Children from the new integrated school at Eschchar

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