

D stands for democracy

By Yair Sheleg

Three days after the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, Shlomo Fischer, a religious man with left-wing views, called Yafa Gisser. Gisser is the wife of the rabbi of the Ofra settlement and an educator who is well-known in religious Zionist circles. Today she heads the Bat Ami organization for national service.

At the time, Fischer was a member of the editorial board of the Hebrew-language journal "Theory and Criticism" and today he works as a sociology lecturer at Tel Aviv University. The two knew each other from their studies at the Mandel Foundation School for Educational Leadership, and despite their different political views, Fischer proposed to Gisser that they work together, in the wake of the assassination, on activities aimed at promoting education toward democracy among religious Zionists.

Gisser picked up the gauntlet, and on the seventh day of the mourning period for Rabin, they met for the first time in Fischer's living room, an encounter from which sprang Yesodot, an organization that seeks to inject the values of democracy in national religious education.

During its 12 years of existence, Yesodot's activity has mainly been low-key, without resorting to publicity. This is largely because of a sensitivity toward the suspicions harbored by the target audience on the issue of educating toward democracy. Now the group apparently feels sufficiently sure of itself. This year, the organization taught various programs in 64 schools that constitute some 10 percent of the religious school network. Tomorrow the organization

will hold its first public gathering at the Knesset (with the Knesset's 60th anniversary celebration serving as the official excuse), under the aegis of MK Yitzhak Levy of the National Union.

Political diversity

From its inception, the team at Yesodot has included a variety of people from the stream of religious Zionism. Until a few years ago, Fischer and Gisser directed the organization together and Fischer continued to do so until recently. Today, too, the staff includes people from both the right and left, graduates of the yeshiva world and followers of a liberal-academic educational path. According to Fischer, the diversity is "essential so as to be able to speak with those in the field, which is also very diverse. But there were times when I really felt that the concession I was making was too big - for example, in the argument that took place among the staff on the question of the gay parade. The atmosphere was so 'anti' that I said that there was no need for Yesodot. Later I understood that I had made a mistake, that it was my responsibility to take care of the subject gradually and over a period of years."

Gisser, for her part, describes a much more harmonious working relationship. "Sure there are arguments," she says. "But what counts is the friendship and trust between the people, which stem both from personal esteem and the feeling that in the long run we are all deeply committed to a way of life as laid down in the Torah."

"We are an organization trying to sell an

idea in which the public is not necessarily interested, or which it does not feel is of importance," says Eliraz Kraus, Yesodot's current director. Kraus, a resident of Efrat in Gush Etzion, admits that these suspicions exist mainly in the settlements in the territories. "It's quite natural, since this public views the democratic process as an existential threat," she says.

Gisser, who now moderates groups of teachers, believes the suspicions are even greater. To a certain extent she even understands these feelings. "Not everyone is suspicious," she says. "But it is true that there is a lot of suspicion, and in my opinion, it is justified. The word democracy is greatly distorted, as was evident during the disengagement from the Gaza Strip. But also in the basic, nonpolitical sense, there is a real fear that if democracy is taken to its extreme, it will deeply harm the basic values in which we believe. In exactly the same way as the secular world fears that if Jewish values are applied to an extreme extent, this will harm the values it holds so dear. On the other hand, I honestly believe that there are things and values in the democratic world that are very precious to us all - to say nothing of the fact that it is impossible to maintain the State of Israel without a democratic basis."

The disengagement, Gisser says, created a mixed bag of responses. "On the one hand, it certainly increased the suspiciousness of large sectors of the population about the accepted democratic discourse. But on the other hand, it also increased the desire to thoroughly clarify the basic values of democracy."

So how do they try to overcome the suspicions? First, through the name of the organization. Neither the word Yesodot (Basics) nor the organization's designation as a "Center for the study of Torah and Democracy" reveals its intention of dealing with the problematic term "democracy." Gisser admits that this was done on purpose,

"although as time went by, we became more confident to present the message of democracy explicitly already at the start of meetings at schools."

In addition, the organization adopted a top-down approach in its activities in the religious school network, understanding that it would first and foremost have to convince the heads of the system. Sometimes marginal reasons were enough to persuade schools to accept the program, not necessarily in the name of the importance of democratic values. Nati Goldfinger, the man responsible for marketing Yesodot (his job is to persuade the schools of the program's importance), says: "We use the desire of the religious Zionist school system to be part of Israeli society and explain that it is impossible to become seriously integrated in society without understanding democratic discourse." Kraus adds: "We also explain to the schools that it is essential for deepening the religious identity of their pupils. After all, we are talking about youths who are exposed to the democratic discourse. They need to feel that on their own turf, too, there are tools for dealing with this discourse. Otherwise, they will either close themselves off or they will take off their skullcaps."

As for the actual program, Nevo stresses that none of the work actually involves facing the students themselves. Instead, Yesodot prepares the principals, and especially the homeroom teachers, to deal with the subject, "out of a recognition that it is important that the values of democracy be taught by the teachers who meet the students all the time and not via some 'democracy expert' who comes there from Jerusalem." Therefore, the main focus is on providing training for the teachers. "We hold eight to 10 meetings during the year in which they discuss the 'core values' of democratic life - the dignity of man, majority and minority, how to treat others. The aim is to openly confront the tension that exists between Jewish values and democratic values, and to show how all democratic values also find expression in

Jewish values," Nevo says. An example of this is provided by one of the study program's chapters, which stresses the resemblance between the statements made by former Supreme Court president Aharon Barak on the issue of human dignity, and what was written by Rabbi Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk - an important rabbi in Lithuania 100 years ago who composed a commentary on the Torah known as Mesekh Hochma. In this way, Barak's comments are made "kosher" by the rabbi from Dvinsk.

Ladder of tolerance

In addition to the teachers' training program, Yesodot offers the schools study programs intended for the students themselves. One of the most prominent programs of this kind is the Beit Hamidrash program, aimed at the higher grades of elementary school and which discusses democracy by way of its reflection in the Jewish sources - respect for others, treatment of gentiles, relationship with the regime. In addition to the texts, this program stresses the way these values are reflected in the life at school, based on the premise that the students will find it easier to internalize issues of rights and dignity which they face every day at school.

Another problem in dealing with the materials for elementary school concerns the transition from an example to a subject of comparison - that is, from dealing with democratic values in the classroom and the school to the broad political and social conclusions of respecting the rule of law, majority decisions and tolerance for those with different opinions. "This transition is one of our biggest challenges, one which we have yet to meet," Fischer admits. He is even willing to grade the levels of difficulty

experienced by various population sectors when it comes to accepting a liberal-democratic value system. "It's easiest for the secular sector. Most of the national-religious public is raised on the Torah teachings of Rabbi Kook, which say that the secular public must be respected as a partner in the process of redemption. The greater difficulty lies with the leftwing, followed by the Israeli Arabs, and at the end, at the bottom rung of the ladder of tolerance, are the Palestinians."

In this respect, he points out that Yesodot takes pains to avoid taking a stand on whether settlement in the territories constitutes an anti-democratic act. "But we also stress the parallel legitimacy of the leftwing's opinions. The result is that some schools have reported to us that because of our activity, pupils with leftwing views suddenly felt they had the ability to express themselves."

Nevo emphasizes the moments of satisfaction. "When I hear that teachers internalize the terms we spoke about, such as 'the dignity of man' or Martin Buber's concept of dialogue, and that they also find examples of this in their daily life, such as meeting a secular uncle at a bar mitzvah, then that is a moving moment." For her part, Gisser not only stresses specific moments of success but the entire program. "With all the suspicions and the sensitivity, the secular educational system does not have an institution like ours. You will not find a teachers' room in a secular school that deals for an entire year or two consistently with issues of education for democracy, certainly not with the combination of Judaism and democracy."