

# Religion, in liberal terms

By Yair Sheleg

In the days and weeks after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, many Israelis sat around their living rooms pondering the question: "What do we do now?" In most cases, they did nothing. But the friends who gathered in Shlomo and Zahava Fischer's living room in the Har Nof neighborhood in Jerusalem did do something. They founded Yesodot, an organization that promotes the teaching of democracy in the national religious sector. Among the founders were Prof. Benny Ish-Shalom, head of Beit Morasha, the Academic Center for Jewish Studies and Leadership in Jerusalem (for a while, Yesodot operated as part of this center); Yisrael Yehuda Ben-Dor, a Jewish philosophy researcher; Yaffa Gisser, the wife of the rabbi of Ofra and Fischer himself, the director of the organization until today. All of them are religious Jews.

Yesodot specializes in democracy programs for both teaching staff and students at religious schools, anchored, in part, on democratic values in Jewish sources. Today Yesodot is running these programs in 40 schools, although Shlomo Fischer says the subject is approached in the religious sector with a high degree of suspicion.

"They don't say they don't want to teach it, because it's not something you talk about. But they argue that there are things that come first, like teaching their students to observe Shabbat. We sneak in through the back door, so to speak, mainly when a school expresses an interest in becoming more democratic itself, with greater rights and respect for students. We turn the school into a model for society as a whole."

For Fischer, founding Yesodot was an opportunity, at long last, to combine his religious identity with the liberal outlook he brought with him from the United States, a combination he has not encountered very often since moving to Israel. Fischer, 53, was born in New York and raised in the modern Orthodox world. He went to Yeshiva University High School, and then yeshivas in Israel- the hesder yeshiva at Kerem Beyavneh and the ultra-Orthodox Itri Yeshiva. A few months before the Yom Kippur War, he went back to the States and pursued an undergraduate degree in history and English literature at Columbia University.

After graduation, he immigrated here, began a master's degree in sociology at Hebrew University, dropped out in favor of a Jewish studies program at Touro College and founded Yesodot. Only now, considerably older than his fellow students, is he about to complete his doctorate in sociology. The topic of his thesis is taken straight from what he does in real life "Democracy in National Religious Schools in Israel." ("I realized that if I didn't write about something I worked in, I'd never get this Ph.D. done.")

He describes his liberal approach as "a synthesis of my American upbringing and the basic experience of growing up as a Jew in the Diaspora. The protection of liberalism is essential when you belong to a minority." In Israel, too, he is accustomed to being in the minority, to the extent that he almost seems to enjoy the distinction. He belongs to a national religious minority in the largely ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Har Nof (he lives next door to Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef); he is the only religious person on the editorial staff of the radical magazine *Theory and Criticism*; and he belongs to the small band of liberal doves in the national religious sector. Smiling, he says he used to be a member of Meimad because "sometimes I felt like praying with people with whom I had something in common besides prayer."

To his analysis of the deep-seated trends in the national religious community today, Fischer brings not only his biography and outlook, but his academic training in history and sociology. He sees the root of the problem in the changes in mindset of the young people (as opposed to the older generation) after the establishment of the state. "The Six-Day War took hopes and desires that existed before the merger of religion and nationality and cemented the hegemony of the messianic approach," he says. "This is the supra-narrative that religious Zionism has been telling itself since then, and it's not only the rabbis of Gush Emunim who are part of it; it's ordinary people, too.

"If you want proof, look at the 'Weekly Torah Portion' bulletins they give out at synagogues. They're all written in this spirit. These bulletins have a built-in success index, the advertisements. The motivation

for placing ads is commercial, and apparently these bulletins are what the religious Zionist community wants to read. Meimad stopped putting out its bulletin, and Netivot Shalom [another dovish religious movement, to the left of Meimad YS] relies entirely on donations.”

In this respect, Yesodot is no different. After being subsidized by the Education Ministry for a while, the organization operates today solely on the strength of donors, the AVI CHAI Foundation, and a few liberal Jews in the United States.

## Rationalists and romantics

Fischer remarks on the troubling resemblance between religious Zionism and the romantic nationalist movements in Europe over the last 200 years: “Rousseau speaks of the ‘general will’ as something that the people may not want at the moment, but which is really in their best interest. This approach is accepted in principle by both rationalists and romantics. The question is, which ‘general will’? For the rationalists, it is dictated by the intellect; for the romantics it is the will of God. The philosopher Hegel talked about the ‘cunning of history.’ People intend one thing, but it comes out differently in the end. Only in retrospect, when you get to the ‘plateau’ stage, can you understand the process. In 1967, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook [the head of Mercaz Harav Yeshiva and the rabbi of Gush Emunim YS] thought we had already reached the plateau, and there were clear signs that we were on the road to redemption. It was only the government that failed to realize this.”

This is the point at which Rabbi Zvi Yehuda and his immediate successors part company from the generation of today, which has become more radical, says Fischer. “Rabbi Zvi Yehuda and his students understood that the battle was not about territory, but about making people aware that redemption was at hand. Changing the facts on the ground was meant to change the mindset, to ‘fire up the spirit of the people,’ as they put it. But they were constantly checking to see if the mindset had changed, and if not, this meant it wasn’t time to move on yet. The opposition of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda’s student, Rabbi Zvi Tau, to going against the ‘will of the people,’ and Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun’s emphasis on ‘settling in the heart,’ all have their roots here. The trouble is that while Rabbi Kook sanctioned changing reality in order to change the mindset, the extremists picked up on the reality and forgot the mindset.”

Is there any basis for comparison between the “romantic nationalism” of religious Zionism and the violent side of European nationalism?

Fischer: “Of course there’s no comparison to Nazism. The Nazis were more than a romantic nationalist movement. There was an admiration of violence there, which you may find among the students of Rabbi Ginzburg, but certainly not in religious Zionism as

a whole. Religious Zionism never went through the experience of mass murder, the way Europe did in World War I, which paved the way for mass murder in World War II. The attitude toward minorities here is nowhere near as demonic as the attitude toward Jews in Europe. But it is troubling to hear the rhetoric in nationalist circles about ‘not being like the rest of the world,’ when they are in fact more like the rest of the world than anyone else.

“Dov Schwartz [an expert in national religious theology at Bar-Ilan University YS] is right in saying that religious Zionism has its own theology, which differs from the theology of ultra-Orthodox Jews,” Fischer observes. “It goes beyond attitudes toward the state. It’s an attempt to give religious meaning to the materialistic side of life. In the past, they sanctified the state and the army, but in the future, I think their alienation from the state may lead to a decline in motivation to join combat units. Religious feelings toward the country as opposed to the state will remain, as will the religious-spiritual feelings toward the land. But attitudes may differ from place to place. In a settlement like Itamar, for example, there will be more emphasis on land, whereas in an urban environment like Ramat Gan, the spiritual accent will be more personal and people-centered.”

Will alienation from the state be only passive, or will it inflate to revolutionary activist proportions?

“Rebels in the national religious world constitute a small minority, and this group is aware of the limitations of its power, although I wouldn’t put it past people like Yehuda Etzion to try anyway.”

But Fischer does not rule out a more optimistic scenario, in which the current clash with the state will end up promoting liberal discourse in the religious Zionist sector: “I come from a tradition of suspicion against the government and those who wield power. Until now, this hasn’t been the case for the national religious public. The state and the government were an instrument for redemption not the institution Lord Acton warned against when he said ‘power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.’”

“But maybe something good will come out of the disengagement,” Fischer says. “Over the past few months, the number of religious schools calling us has definitely gone up. A teacher from Kiryat Arba told us that some of her students went to a shopping mall wearing orange ribbons and got thrown out. This has triggered her interest in the conceptual world of democratic-liberal discourse, because she would like to channel this ‘experience’ into something positive rather than something that inspires hate. So maybe all this will boost liberal discourse, although I’m not sure it will be applied to other population groups, like the Arabs.”