

## Israeli teenagers: Racist and proud of it

Ethnic hatred has become a basic element in the everyday life of Israeli youth, a forthcoming book finds.

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Members of right-wing organization Lehava protesting the wedding of a Jewish-born woman and a Muslim man in Rishon Letzion, August 17, 2014. Photo by Ofer Vaknin



Authors Idan Yaron (right) and Yoram Harpaz. Photo by Emil Salman

“For me, personally, Arabs are something I can’t look at and can’t stand,” a 10th-grade girl from a high school in the central part of the country says in abominable Hebrew. “I am tremendously racist. I come from a racist home. If I get the chance in the army to shoot one of them, I won’t think twice. I’m ready to kill someone with my hands, and it’s

an Arab. In my education I learned that ... their education is to be terrorists, and there is no belief in them. I live in an area of Arabs, and every day I see these Ishmaelites, who pass by the [bus] station and whistle. I wish them death.”

The student’s comments appear in a chapter devoted to ethnicity and racism among youth from a forthcoming book, “Scenes from School Life” (in Hebrew) by Idan Yaron and Yoram Harpaz. The book is based on anthropological observations made by Dr. Yaron, a sociologist, over the course of three years in a six-year, secular high school in the Israeli heartland – “the most average school we could find,” says Harpaz, a professor of education.

The book is nothing short of a page-turner, especially now, following the overt displays of racism and hatred of the Other that have been revealed in the country in the past month or so. Maybe “revealed” isn’t the right word, as it suggests surprise at the intensity of the phenomenon. But Yaron’s descriptions of what he saw at the school show that such hatred is a basic everyday element among youth, and a key component of their identity. Yaron portrays the hatred without rose-colored glasses or any attempt to present it as a sign of social “unity.” What he observed is unfiltered hatred. One conclusion that arises from the text is how little the education system is able – or wants – to deal with the racism problem.

Not all educators are indifferent or ineffective. There are, of course, teachers and others in the realm of education who adopt a different approach, who dare to try and take on the system. But they are a minority. The system’s internal logic operates differently.

Much of the chapter on racism revolves around the Bible lessons in a ninth-grade class, whose theme was revenge. “The class starts, and the students’ suggestions of examples of revenge are written on the blackboard,” the teacher told Yaron. A student named Yoav “insists that revenge is an important emotion. He utilizes the material being studied to hammer home his semi-covert message: All the Arabs should be killed. The class goes into an uproar. Five students agree with Yoav and say openly: The Arabs should be killed.”

One student relates that he heard in the synagogue on Shabbat that “Aravim zeh erev rav” [“Arabs are a rabble,” in a play on words], and also Amalek, and there is a commandment to kill them all,” a reference to the prototypical biblical enemy of the Children of Israel. Another student says he would take revenge on anyone who murdered his family, but would not kill them all.

“Some of the other students are outraged by this [softer stance],” the teacher reported. “The student then makes it clear that he has no love for Arabs and that he is not a leftist.”

Another student, Michal, says she is shocked by what she is hearing. She believes that the desire for revenge will only foment a cycle of blood; not all Arabs are bad, she adds, and certainly they don’t all deserve to die. “People who decree the fate of others so easily are not worthy of life,” she says.

Yoav himself claims to have heard Michal say: “Too bad you weren’t killed in a terrorist attack.”

“The students all start shouting,” the teacher says, according to Yaron. “Some are personally insulted, others are up in arms, and Michal finds herself alone and absorbing all the fire – ‘Arab lover,’ ‘leftist.’ I try to calm things down. The class is too distraught to move on to the biblical story. The bell rings. I let them out and suggest that they be more tolerant of one another.”

In the corridor during the break, the teacher notices that a crowd has gathered from all the ninth-grade classes. They have formed a human chain and are taunting Michal: “Fie, fie, fie, the Arabs will die.” The teacher: “I contemplated for five seconds whether to respond or keep going down the corridor. Finally I dispersed the gathering and insisted that Michal accompany me to the teachers’ room. She was in a state of shock, reeling under the insult, with tears to come instantly.”

Six students are suspended for two days. The teacher reports on his conversation with Michal: “She continues to be laconic. This is what always happens, she says. The opinions are racist, and her only regret is speaking out. I just want to hug her and say I’m sorry I put her through this trauma. I envy her courage to say aloud things that I sometimes am incapable of saying.”

### **Leftists as ‘Israel-haters’**

In his research, Yaron spoke with Michal and Yoav, with other students in the class and with the homeroom teacher and the principal. The multiplicity of versions of the goings-on that emerge suggest a deep conflict and a lack of trust between the educators and the pupils. Each world functions separately, with the adults exercising little if any influence on the youngsters. It’s hard to believe that the suspension, or the punishment inflicted on some of the students – for example, to prepare a presentation for the ninth-grade classes on the subject of racism – changed anyone’s opinion.

The same goes for the principal’s unequivocal declaration that, “There will be no racist comments in our school.” Even the essay Michal was asked to write on the subject was soon forgotten. “The intention was to launch an educational program, but in the meantime it was postponed,” the homeroom teacher admits.

A year later, however, the incident itself was still remembered in the school. The same student who told Yaron that she won’t think twice if she gets the opportunity “to shoot one of them” when she serves in the army, also said, “As soon as I heard about the quarrel with that leftist girl [Michal], I was ready to throw a brick at her head and kill her. In my opinion, all the leftists are Israel-haters. I personally find it very painful. Those people have no place in our country – both the Arabs and the leftists.”

Anyone who imagines this as a local, passing outburst is wrong. As was the case with the girl from the ORT network vocational school who alleged earlier this year that her teacher

had expressed “left-wing views” in the classroom – in this case too a student related that he cursed and shouted at a teacher who “justified the Arabs.” The students say that workshops to combat racism, which are run by an outside organization, leave little impression. “Racism is part of our life, no matter how much people say it’s bad,” a student said.

In the concluding discussion in just one such workshop, the moderator asked the students how they thought racism might be eradicated. “Thin out the Arabs,” was the immediate reply. “I want you to leave here with the knowledge that the phenomenon exists, for you to be self-critical, and then maybe you will prevent it,” the moderator said. To which one student shot back, “If we’re not racist, that makes us leftists.”

The moderator, in a tone of despair: “I’d like it if you took at least something small from this workshop.” A student responds to the challenge: “That everyone should live the way he wants, that if he thinks he’s racist, let him think what he wants, and that’s all.”

As an adjunct of racism and hatred, ethnic identities – Mizrahi (Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries) and Ashkenazi – are also flourishing. Yoav believes that there is “discrimination between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. We were severely punished for the incident [with Michal], but if it were the other way around, that wouldn’t have happened.” Yoav later told Yaron that he found the common saying, “What’s this, an [open-air] market?” offensive, because his whole family works in the local produce market.

“Our business has existed since the state was established,” he said. “I am proud of my father, who is a man of the market. What are they trying to say, that my father isn’t cultured? When people say something about ‘Arabs,’ it’s considered a generalization, but when they say ‘market,’ that’s alright. When people say ‘market,’ they are actually talking about Mizrahim. We need to change the prejudices about the market and about the Mizrahim. People say I am a racist, but it’s just the opposite.”

“There is no discussion about the topic of racism in the school and there probably will not be,” the principal admits. “We are not prepared for the deep, long-term process that’s necessary. Even though I am constantly aware of the problem, it is far from being dealt with. It stems in the first place from the home, the community and the society, and it’s hard for us to cope with it. You have to remember that another reason it’s hard to deal with the problem is that it also exists among the teachers. Issues such as ‘human dignity’ or ‘humanism’ are in any case considered left-wing, and anyone who addresses them is considered tainted.”

### **Threat of noise**

Prof. Yoram Harpaz is a senior lecturer at Beit Berl Teachers College and the editor of Hed Hahinuch, a major educational journal. Recalling the recent promise of Education Minister Shay Piron that classes in the first two weeks of the coming school year will be devoted to “emotional and social aspects of the summer’s events,” including

“manifestations of racism and incitement,” Harpaz observes that schools in their present format “are incapable of dealing with the racist personality and identity.”

He adds: “The schools are not geared for this. They can only impart basic knowledge and skills, hold examinations on them and grade the students. In fact, they have a hard time doing even that. In classes of 40 students, with a strict curriculum and exams that have to be held, it is impossible to engage in values-based education.”

Yaron, a senior lecturer in sociology at Ashkelon Academic College, emphasizes how important teachers and the principal (and the education system in general) feel it is to stick to the curriculum and the lessons schedule – two islands of quiet amid a risk-laden reality.

“Doing this makes it possible for the teachers not to enter a dynamic sphere, which obligates openness and is liable to open a Pandora’s box, too,” he notes. “The greatest threat to the teacher is that there will be noise – that someone will complain, that an argument will break out, etc. That danger looms especially large in subjects that interest young people, such as sexuality, ethnicity, violence and racism. Teachers lack the tools to cope with these issues, so they are outsourced, which only emasculates educational personnel even more.”

The demand for quiet in the schools is not only an instrumental matter, deriving from the difficulty of keeping order in the classroom. There is also an ideological aspect involved. In general, there is a whole series of subjects that are not recommended for discussion in schools, such as the Nakba (or “catastrophe,” the term used by Palestinians to denote the establishment of the State of Israel), human rights and the morality of Israeli army operations. This was one of the reasons for the warnings issued by Tel Aviv University and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev during the fighting in the Gaza Strip about “extreme and offensive remarks.”

Harpaz: “In Israel, the most political country there is, political education has not been developed as a discipline in which high-school students are taught how to think critically about political attitudes, or the fact that those attitudes are always dependent on a particular viewpoint and on vested interests.”

What, then, can be done? According to Harpaz, the solution will not be found in discussions between the homeroom teacher and the students. Nor is a condemnation, however late, by the education minister sufficient. A more radical change is needed.

“Values and outlooks are acquired in a lengthy process of identification with ‘significant others,’ such as teachers,” Harpaz explains. “This means that every aspect of the schools – patterns of teaching, evaluation methods, curricula, the physical structure and the cultural climate – has to change in the direction of becoming far more dialogical and democratic.”

And he has one more recommendation: not to flee from political and moral dilemmas, or from possible criticism. “Our leaders are so fearful of criticism, but they don’t understand that critical education is what generates close ties and caring. We get angry at those we love.