



31/08/2005

These school gates are closed

By Yulie Khromchenko

One day before the start of the school year, Tamir Hasnin does not know where he will be starting the second grade. If the High Court of Justice accepts his mother's petition, he will attend the Zevulun Hammer school in Lod, a few minutes from his house, where he will be the only Arab student. If the petition is rejected, he will go to the Shalom Aleichem school, a 40-minute walk from home, where half of the students are Arab. Fathya Hasnin says she will fight for her son's right to attend the school closest to his house. She says she will go all the way, even keeping him out of school. "Other parents may give in, but I have no such intention," she says. "My child will go to the school close to home because that is his right, like any other child."

The petition, which has not yet been heard by the court, was submitted for the Hasnin family by attorney Abir Bakhar of Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel. It thrusts into the limelight an issue that is shrouded in uncertainty - the acceptance policy for Arab children to Jewish schools. Existing education laws ostensibly prohibit racial discrimination against children registering for school and determine area of residence as the only criterion for school registration.

The deputy director of the Education Ministry, who was in charge of the ministry's "five-year plan" for upgrading education in the Arab sector, Dr. Yitzhak Tomer, insists there is no policy preventing Arab children from registering at Jewish (or as they are known, "Hebrew") schools, and that such a policy cannot exist.

However, no small number of parents and activists in the area of education in the Arab sector say that either a quota with regard to Arab students exists in some schools and kindergartens in mixed cities, or that Arab children are clearly prevented from registering at certain schools. The quotas or prevention of registration are usually explained by bureaucratic reasons, such as lack of space. However, Arab parents see it as open policy.

In the case of Tamir Hasnin, the Lod municipality did not hide behind administrative reasoning, but in answer to a query by Haaretz, stated that "the good of the child requires that he continue studying at Shalom Aleichem school." The city even backed itself up with statements by the supervisor of Arab education in the Education Ministry, Dr. Abdullah Hatib, who "stressed unequivocally the preference that Arab children, especially in the lower grades, attend Arab schools, in order to preserve their language and culture."

Too young to know

Tamir Hasnin is still too young to know that he is walking the same path as another child, Linda Brown, who was going into the third grade when the Supreme Court case that bears her name created a storm in the United States. The year was 1954, and 13 petitioners from Topeka, Kansas,

including Linda's parents, asked the court to allow African-American students to study at whites-only schools.

The policies of racial segregation in various U.S. states at that time, including Kansas, forced Linda to walk a long way to the bus that would take her to school, when the white school was within walking distance. The Supreme Court ruling, under the leadership of chief justice Earl Warren, was a milestone in the history of the African-American community's struggle for equal rights. It stated in no uncertain terms that the principle of "separate but equal education" was discriminatory by its very nature.

Some 50 years after Brown versus the Board of Education, Adalah attorney Bakhar quoted from Warren's ruling regarding the damage done by segregation to African-American students. "To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."

Tamir Hasnin's story is not unique. According to Education Ministry data, in 2005, 3,722 Arab children are attending Jewish kindergartens and schools. Although this number represents only 1 percent of Arab students, it is on the rise: Last year's figure was 3,400.

The Education Ministry provides data on numbers of students only by town, but it can be assumed that most of the Arab students are going to school in mixed cities: Ramle, Lod, Haifa, Acre and Jaffa. Even in Jerusalem, although it is not considered a mixed city, a small percentage of Arab students attend mixed schools. According to parents and activists, the picture varies slightly from city to city, and the acceptance policy is defined differently, but the principle of segregation is the same: the vast majority of Arab students attend separate schools; only a small group is allowed to attend Jewish schools.

In Lod, for example, according to Arafat Ismail, who works for Shatil, which provides Israeli NGOs with advocacy services, there are schools where it is known Arab students are accepted, and those that are known not to accept them. The Ramle-Lod high school, where Ismail's son is a student, has a few Arab students, as does the Amal school and a number of elementary schools. At the Shalom Aleichem school, where Tamir Hasnin went last year, about half the student body is Arab. The Jewish elementary school in the Ganei Aviv neighborhood of Lod, on the other hand, is known not to accept Arabs.

The chairman of the Arab parents committee in Lod, Abed Zabarkha, says many young Arab couples migrate from the Arab neighborhoods of Lod to the Jewish neighborhoods because of construction limitations. When they start looking for a school, the closest one is Jewish. According to Zabarkha, the five Arab elementary schools in Lod are full and the overcrowding nudges parents toward the Jewish school system. Ismail conceded that he found the Jewish school to be the best possible educational environment for his son in light of the collapse of the Arab public school system and the high cost of Christian private schools in the city.

'Educational ghetto'

In Acre, according to the city's Hadash city council member, Ahmed Oudeh, the segregation of Jewish and Arab students is almost total. Three thousand of the Arab students - most of the city's schoolchildren - are concentrated in one educational complex that Oudeh calls an "educational ghetto." Only in isolated cases, he says, does the city allow interested Arab students to register at Jewish educational institutions, and in every case the city will try to convince the parents not to do it. "They come to the parents and say that such a transition would not be good for the child," Oudeh says. "They try to scare them by saying that the child will not acclimate, that he will not learn and that he will lose his traditional culture."

The situation in the kindergartens is slightly different. Because there are almost no Arab kindergartens in Acre, and because Arabs reside throughout the city, city hall cannot ignore the parents' demand to send their children to the kindergarten closest to home. However, according to Oudeh, every kindergarten has a quota for Arab children. "Although it is not open policy, parents know it very well. Usually it's about seven Arab children in a kindergarten class of 53. After the quota is filled, parents are simply told there's no more room."

Do the kindergartens that have seven Arab children adjust their curriculum?

Oudeh: "There are teachers who are aware of the Arab children and try to involve something for them in their teaching, but as a rule nothing much comes of it," Oudeh says. "In the final analysis, they go according to the Jewish curriculum."

In Jaffa, according to the chairman of the Association for the Arabs of Jaffa, Gabi Abed, there is a 20 percent quota for Arab children in the two Jewish schools (the Weizmann elementary school and City High School # 7), which Arab students attend. Here too, no one will admit it openly, but the parents know it nevertheless. "The accepted idea in the education system is that if the Arabs come in, the Jewish students drop out," Abed says. "That's what happens in housing, too. When Arabs come, Jews leave."

And what happens when an Arab child goes to a Jewish school? Buthania Dabit, from Shatil in Lod, whose nephew goes to a Jewish kindergarten, says he came back from school one day singing "Mashiach, Mashiach." Abed says his daughter came home from the Na'amat day care center wishing them a happy Purim, and Zabarkha says he knows of a mother whose child announced he was going to pray on the Temple Mount.

Losing tradition

Zabarkha sends his son to an Arab school, although he recognizes the advantage of the Jewish education system, because he is opposed in principle to Arab children attending Jewish schools. "Elementary school is the last chance for my son to study his own tradition in his own language," Zabarkha says. "In high school he will go to a Jewish school and everything will be in Hebrew. It's important to me that he learn Arabic, even though we speak more Hebrew than Arabic at home.

"Children who grow up in a Jewish school will not speak Arabic well to their children, or be able to help them with their homework, and the problem will move to the next generation." Still,

Zabarkha says he understands parents who, when forced to choose between a higher standard of education and preserving their tradition, chose the former.

Fathya Hasnin is herself a graduate of the Jewish school system. Born in Rehovot, she went to a Jewish elementary school and was accepted at a religious public high school. She says she wants to send Tamir to a Jewish school not only because it is close to home, because the classes are less crowded and there are more ancillary services, but rather because as a graduate of the Jewish school system, it will be easier for her to help him in his studies if he attends a Jewish school.

Ahmed Oudeh says he believes the solution to the dilemma of preserving culture and language versus a higher level of education would be solved by establishing a dual-language school in Acre, which would also lessen the overcrowding in the existing schools. He brought up the subject recently with the mayor, but he doesn't believe his proposal will get much attention. "The Jews in Acre are not enthusiastic over the idea of their children studying together with Arabs," he says. "Even some of the Arabs, at least the religious ones, won't want their girls to go to school with Jewish girls who wear midriff blouses."

Dual-language solutions

Dual language schools elsewhere in the country, one in Jerusalem, one in Kfar Kara, and one in the Misgav Regional Council, and the Arab-Jewish school at Neveh Shalom, have a good reputation and attract students, although they suffer from bureaucratic difficulties. For example, the Kfar Kara school had to start a public campaign before the Education Ministry would allow it to open, and the Jerusalem school had to petition the Supreme Court recently to allow it to open a seventh grade.

Abed, who opposes registering Arab children in Jewish schools for fear they will lose their identity, says he believes the solution is to establish good Arab schools, which will attain or even surpass the level of the Jewish schools. The Yaffa democratic school, opening this year with the assistance of the Association of Arabs in Jaffa, has yet to be officially recognized by the Education Ministry, but it has already attracted a large number of students. The association also founded a daycare center years ago. "The Yaffa school makes it possible for parents to stop wavering between good education and heritage," Abed says, adding that in Jewish schools attended by Arabs, consideration for them is minimal. For example, there is no recognition of Arab holidays; the students have to choose between observing the holiday and missing important tests.

Education Ministry deputy director Tomer says he knows nothing about a policy of quotas in mixed cities, and that he is sorry parents do not come to the ministry to complain. He believes a school with a large Arab student body should make allowances for their needs, but as far as he knows, the ministry has never been asked to build a model for a mixed school, and no such model exists.

One year after Linda Brown's parents took her case to the U.S. Supreme Court, the Topeka school system annulled divisions in schools along ethnic lines. Will Lod follow its lead?