

Reconciling Judaism and democracy: *An educational process*

• BY DANIELLE ZIRI

The perception that Judaism is only about obeying religious laws has created a conflict in the Jewish identity of secular Israelis, said Ron Margolin, a professor with more than 30 years of experience in Jewish thought and education.

According to Margolin, who heads the Posen Foundation's Ofakim program at Tel Aviv University, "most Jews in the world, and of course those who send their children to public state schools, don't live according to the religious laws of Halacha."

"So if Judaism is perceived only as the religious laws, then this society finds itself in a conflictual position," he explained. "A secular person cannot build a positive Jewish identity if he or she lives with this conflict."

Reconciling the ideas of Judaism and secularism has been Margolin's main focus over the past years. As the head of a professional committee on Israeli culture, he has worked on formulating the Education Ministry's new Jewish-Israeli culture curriculum for grades three to nine, announced last month.

The new program seeks to introduce pupils to the world of multi-faceted Judaism, adapting its relevance to fit the context of modern Israeli society and presenting it as culture rather than only religion. Margolin told *The Jerusalem Post* that his work with the Posen Foundation and the Ofakim Program has helped shape this new program.

"The Posen Foundation has engaged for years in teaching Judaism as a large culture in which the religious aspect is only a part of something much larger," he explained. "This was also our idea with Ofakim."

Ofakim, which runs as an undergraduate program at Tel Aviv University, strives to educate and train a new gener-



RON MARGOLIN works with students in the Ofakim program. (Courtesy)

ation of Jewish educators to teach Jewish philosophy in public secondary schools throughout Israel.

"In reality the graduates of Ofakim are our best experiment in the field," Margolin said. "A lot of the ideas that constitute the base of the new [national Jewish-Israeli culture curriculum] came from the experiences and the feedback we get from Ofakim students."

"The contribution of the Posen Foundation is immense," he added. "You can see that all these 10-20 years that they have been working in Israel are now bringing fruit."

According to Margolin, working to introduce Judaism as culture to young students is a field that has been very much neglected by the education system in Israel over the years and the Posen Foundation was almost the only one to take the task seriously.

As a result of the neglect, he explained, students' views of Judaism are "narrow and full of conflict" and they can't relate to it.

"What happens in Israel is that the central message is that it's a Jewish democracy," he said. "But in this message, Jewish and democracy are two opposite worlds and in the Israeli view, [a Jewish democracy] is a compromise."

This perception, he told the *Post*, creates a gap between secular and religious

sectors in Israel.

"It's the perception that the secular sector is in favor of the values of democracy and the religious sector is for Judaism," he explained. "This is a catastrophe, Israel is in crisis because of this view. There are a lot of humanistic values that democracy is bound to and that come from Jewish sources."

The goal in presenting Judaism as a culture, Margolin said, is to show that some of the values of Judaism – such as respecting parents, valuing human life, the idea of *tzedaka*, and empathy toward the other can be relevant to young people's lives today.

"These are values that are relevant for a lot of different people but we want the students to appreciate these values as Jews," Margolin said. "Judaism has a whole tradition made of these values."

According to him, the students of today are very open to learning this because they feel the conflict in their identity and they are looking for answers.

"It's not that the questions are not there, but because they are not being addressed, [the students] get their answers from the media, from arguments in the Knesset, which is something we don't want," he explained. "There is no substitute for education. Education is something you invest in for years and you see the results later on." ❖