

Subscribe to Print Edition

Thu., October 25, 2007



Israel Time: 12:16 (EST+7)

HAARETZ.com

Search

[Back to Homepage](#)

web haaretz.com

- [Print Edition](#) [Diplomacy](#) [Defense](#) [Arts & Leisure](#) [Real Estate](#) [Jewish World](#) [National](#) [Advertising](#)
- [Magazine](#) [Week's End](#) [Business](#) [Opinion](#) [Rosner's Domain](#) [Anglo File](#) [Books](#) [Travel](#) [Singles](#)

Talkback
[Read](#) [Respond](#)
 del.icio.us
 Digg
 It!
 NEW

Today Online

Shmuel Rosner: Going to Jerusalem by way of Baghdad
 Responses: 11

Aluf Benn: All talk and no deals make for very slow diplomacy
 Responses: 10

FM behind closed doors: Threat of Iran nukes is exaggerated
 Responses: 54

Shin Bet blocked Palestinian cancer patient from treatment
 Responses: 78

Israel Harel: The 'human shield' practice can save lives
 Responses: 12

Print

Send to a friend

Send response

More Headlines

07:28 U.S. official doubts ability of PA to police West Bank

11:15 Report: Militants using Google Earth to pick targets in Israel

11:33 Lebanese sources: Troops open fire on IAF planes over Lebanon

12:11 State to charge Israel Railways head over June 2006 accident

11:28 Prague to fight neo-Nazi march set for Kristallnacht anniversary

12:14 Protesters block Highway 443 to protest ban on non-Jewish traffic

11:07 Livni behind closed doors: Iran nukes pose little threat to Israel

12:05 T.A. University staff boycott campus coffee shop, back workers' strike



Last update - 22:47 24/10/2007

Ultra-Orthodox women, unite!

By [Tamar Rotem](#)

Last week 15 kindergarten teachers suddenly appeared at the office of the Education Ministry ombudswoman. Their excitement was obvious as they handed her a sheaf of papers: the Tel Aviv Regional Labor Court decision barring the Agudat Yisrael nursery school network from firing them. Chairs were brought in from other rooms, and finally they told their story, the story of the women who created the first ultra-Orthodox labor union.

For this group of teachers, who represent many others, the court decision was a victory in their difficult four-year battle. While it is still too early to declare it a complete victory, it is certainly an important achievement. The Labor Court issued its decision about two weeks ago, in response to the network's request to dismiss six veteran kindergarten teachers and cut the salaries of six others. Judge Neta Roth wrote in her decision that dismissing older teachers because they earn more is unacceptable age discrimination, especially when "nothing was done to ensure their social rights after their retirement," as the ruling states.

The decision will undoubtedly affect the terms of employment of all 500 teachers in the network, which started sending dismissal letters to all teachers with more than 25 years of seniority four years ago. Many of them threw in the towel and left, but others, including the 12 teachers whose case brought about the present decision, sued the network in the Labor Court. They have worked since then by virtue of a court order, for minimum wage and with no social benefits.

A shattered taboo

Advertisement

The ultra-Orthodox educational network, which runs 360 kindergartens all over Israel, is part of the "recognized and unofficial" state educational network. It is almost fully funded by the state. Its managers constantly point to the network's severe financial deficit, as if that were an excuse to dismiss and exploit employees. Yosef Bienenfeld, the director of the network, argued last week that due to the deficit, which an Education

Special Offers

Ministry report attributes to mismanagement, the ministry required the network to launch a recovery program. "In order to save the network, some people who will be hurt, but what can be done?" he says.

Judge Roth accepted the teachers' argument that the Education Ministry did not specifically obligate the network to dismiss veteran employees. "Agreeing to the request means tossing the appellants out on the street, leaving them with nothing after dozens of years of work," the judge wrote.

Bienenfeld already has said that the network plans to appeal the decision, but the teachers celebrated their victory with a large meal. After all, they have come a long way. In 2003, after they were dismissed, a large group of kindergarten teachers approached various rabbis, asking their permission to turn to civil courts. The community's leading authority, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Shteinman, let them do so. They later contacted a young, secular lawyer, Anat Shani, who agreed to work pro bono. In 2003, they obtained an order from the National Labor Court that preserved their jobs for another four years. Finally, in June 2007, their fight climaxed with the formation of their union.

The kindergarten teachers shattered a taboo in ultra-Orthodox society - fighting for one's rights. These women are all their families' sole wage earners, some are widows, and others are single parents. All have large families and worked devotedly for many years, when suddenly they were faced with the threat of dismissal, as if the rug were being pulled out from underneath them. Creating the labor union was a real fight for survival.

The initiative came from a group of several dozen kindergarten teachers who were determined to influence the decisions made under the recovery program. After they realized that the Agudat Yisrael's teachers union - where they had no representation whatsoever, as women and as kindergarten teachers - did not intend to help them, they decided to take action. The network argued in court that it is not halakhically acceptable for women to be elected and to represent workers, and therefore it is ignoring the organization. But the kindergarten teachers obtained rabbinic permission to form their union, and within a few weeks, more than 100 kindergarten teachers, both young and old, had joined their ranks.

The kindergarten teachers claim that the network persecutes those who want to join the union. Several teachers joined and later recanted, after they said that they, or daughters of theirs employed by the network, were threatened with pink slips.

Bienenfeld denies that teachers were pressured for joining the union, which "as far as I'm concerned, does not exist anyway." And yet, the Labor Court did indeed recognize the union as a representative organization (at least temporarily) and asked the Education Ministry and the network to include it in meetings on the recovery plan. One of the kindergarten teachers' demands, as presented at one of these meetings, was that they decide which teachers would leave as part of the recovery plan, and that departing teachers receive compensation totaling 150 percent of their salaries. The union says there are enough teachers interested in retiring with such reasonable terms.

Ministry waverings

It is not easy for a religious woman such as Yehudit Klein, the scion of a rabbinic family from the small Krachniev Hasidic sect, based in Rehovot, to lead a social campaign. But Klein, who becomes short of breath every time she begins talking about the injustice done to her, says she cannot remain silent any longer. Now 47, she has been working as a kindergarten teacher for the network since age 19. After her marriage, she moved to Be'er Sheva, where she opened her first kindergarten with the mission of bringing the weak population there closer to Judaism.

One might object to Klein's ultra-Orthodox worldview and her advocacy for the Agudat Yisrael movement, but when it comes to the network, she is undoubtedly an efficient and dedicated worker. She and her husband ran the kindergarten as a business, and sent its profits to the network. They handled registration themselves, and purchased the toys and equipment with their own money. The network's role was limited to transferring the budget



07:51 IDF kills two Hamas militants, two Islamic Jihad rocket launchers

09:00 Olmert and Abbas to meet privately on Friday for pre-summit talks

Previous Editions

Select Day

Advertisement

learn Hebrew online
with israel's best teachers.
Sign up for a trial lesson today

Invest in Macedonia
New Business Heaven in Europe

Long-term Israel programs

MASA is your gateway. More programs. More grants.

Eidan Rent a Car
Israel's leading car rental company offers you a 20% discount on all online reservations

JOIN FREE AT JDATE.COM

The most popular online Jewish dating community in the world! Explore the possibilities! Click Here!

Dead Sea Salt

Beauty and skin care from the Dead Sea. Coupon code HAARETZ for 10% off!

Junkyard

Junk a car - get free towing nationwide and a tax-deductible receipt.

Holiday Inn and Crown Plaza Israel

Lowest internet rate
Guaranteed at
ichotelsgroup.com !



from the Education Ministry.

Twenty years ago, her rebbe asked her to set up kindergartens for their Hasidic sect. She moved to Rehovot, where she opened kindergartens in the city's Hasidic neighborhoods. But starting 10 years ago, she says, the network hinted to her that it wanted to dismiss her.

"They spilled my blood with regular threats of dismissal, random salary cuts and inhumane treatment. It's abuse. This is not a matter only of a livelihood, but a blow to my professional dignity. I invested many years of work. I really tore myself apart when the kids were young, and thanks to me the kindergarten always thrived. And now that I'm older, they toss me out?"

Simha Bussi, a veteran kindergarten teacher and Klein's partner in leading the fight, is a mother of five children, including one who has Down Syndrome and hearing difficulties. Her kindergarten is located in Moshav Tslafon, near Beit Shemesh, where she lives. Bussi first took on the establishment in order to mainstream her son, a battle she won. With time, she learned to fight and hold her ground, she says. Bussi says she is in dire financial straits, and cannot buy food or clothing. This stems from her salary cut and dismissal, she says. "It's impossible to live this way, in financial anxiety," she says.

It seems that the chronic lack of jobs that characterizes the ultra-Orthodox sector gave Klein and Bussi's employers the impression that they could dismiss unwanted employees and hire new ones without a problem. After the regional labor court's decision and the judges' statement that the Education Ministry should supervise the kindergarten network, the kindergarten teachers began looking to the ministry, hoping it would assume responsibility for them. Ministry officials even have said off the record that they support the kindergarten teachers in their struggle.

But the teachers have had to drop even this distant hope. Several days ago, it came out that the ministry told the National Labor Court that it would conduct negotiations on a recovery plan only with the network, and not with the employees, and that it would not intervene in the network's decision to cut salaries to the minimum wage.

Despite their disappointment over the Education Ministry's response, Yehudit Klein says she and her friends intend to continue fighting for inclusion in the negotiations over their terms of employment.

[Subscribe to Print Edition](#)

 [Bookmark to del.icio.us](#)
 [Digg](#)
 [It!](#) [new](#)



An unhealthy obsession

12 years after Rabin's death, the public discourse is mostly concerned with his killer.



Angel in hell

For two weeks last winter, German immigrant Raphael Angel lived a nightmare.

Talkback

 [Send your response](#)

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|----------------------|----------|
| 1. | is it really necessary to say this... | 00:13 Jewish State | 25/10/07 |
| 2. | Ultra orthodox power | 01:19 Sorah Leah | 25/10/07 |

 [Top](#)

[Home](#) | [TV](#) | [Print Edition](#) | [Diplomacy](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts & Leisure](#) | [Sports](#) | [Jewish World](#) | [Underground](#) | [Site rules](#) |

© Copyright 2007 Haaretz. All rights reserved