“SHARED CITIZENSHIP” IN ISRAEL: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Mike Prashker
December 2006

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the concept of “shared citizenship” has increasingly entered Israeli educational, social, and political discourse. This is a potentially important development, but in order for the concept to really matter it is essential for it to have substance and a clear meaning. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the concept of shared citizenship as employed in the work of MERCHAVIM. The paper discusses MERCHAVIM’s “shared citizenship” model and its utility to the cause of society-building in Israel. The model builds on the commonly held legal identity of “Israeli citizenship” and aims to create a substantive shared civic identity without threatening other valued identities. It proposes a consensual civic language that can be used by Israeli citizens of all backgrounds. The five core concepts of the model—identity, access, fairness, spaces of agreement and active shared citizenship—are elaborated in the paper. The value of the model for softening some of the most apparently intractable and threatening societal challenges in Israel is demonstrated with reference to two major ongoing disputes: over primary sources of authority and definitions of statehood. Some of the major challenges to advancing shared citizenship in Israeli society in general and through the education system in particular, characterized as it is by separate school streams, are also addressed. Finally, the article summarizes MERCHAVIM’s eight years of experience in advancing shared citizenship education in Israel.

INTRODUCTION

Israel’s approximately seven million citizens represent a diverse collection of humanity that agrees on very little. Even basic issues such as definitions of statehood and primary sources of authority are subjects of intense disagreement. Israelis also have great difficulty identifying their shared values and interests. This adversely impacts Israeli society in many ways.

A particularly troubling example of this is the lack of social agreement over the meaning of the term “Israeli” and its application to different groups of citizens. The terms “Israeli” and “Jew” are often used interchangeably in Israeli-Jewish discourse, though these are overlapping not identical categories. Twenty percent of Israeli citizens are Muslim-Arabs, Christian-Arabs and Druze, many with a strong sense of Palestinian national identity. About half of the Jewish people are not Israeli citizens, but rather citizens of other states. Many Arab-Palestinian-Israeli citizens also struggle with the title “Israeli.” This is a result of their troubled history as a

---

1 Mike Prashker is founder and director of MERCHAVIM – the Institute for the Advancement of Shared Citizenship in Israel. This article has benefited from the generous help of Professor Dov Waxman. Professor Waxman is an assistant professor in the Political Science Department at Baruch College of the City University of New York and a member of MERCHAVIM’s International Advisory Committee.

2 Hence forth collectively referred to as “Arab-Palestinian-Israelis” conveying both national and civic aspects of identity.
marginalized minority, further aggravated by the ongoing regional struggle between their state - Israel, and their people - the Palestinians. The linguistic confusion about “who is an Israeli” also encompasses Israel’s large Jewish immigrant minorities. We often hear about tensions between “Russians” or “Ethiopians” and “Israelis,” rather than between veteran and immigrant Israeli citizens.

In order to build a sustainable and strong Israeli society, it is essential that we address these issues, which have been neglected for far too long. There are a number of priorities in this regard: We need to help Israelis become more comfortable with their fellow citizens who are different from themselves. A lot of this is about helping overcome fear of largely unknown “others.” We need to help identify shared values and interests, often obscured by distinct cultural languages. We need to help Israelis become more comfortable accommodating some deep and even fundamental disagreements. Basic differences should be understood as normal among large groups and virtually inevitable among such diverse groups as share Israeli citizenship. We need to create a common civic awareness; a familiarity and comfort with our fellow citizens and an understanding that whether based on ones own values or interests, there are things you should not say or do to fellow citizens.

The task of developing a greater shared civic consciousness and with it the prospect of building a more cohesive society can and should be undertaken in many different ways. Such society-building efforts can be advanced through a wide range of positive human interactions, political, social and economic activism, through the media, the courts, and, not least, through education.

The non-governmental organization MERCHAVIM was established in 1998 to advance the cause of society-building in Israel. Its approach has been both conceptual and educational. MERCHAVIM has developed the concept of “shared citizenship,” and collaborated with educators of diverse backgrounds to introduce and promote the concept through the Israeli education system in cooperation with Israel’s Ministry of Education.

This paper will discuss MERCHAVIM’s concept of “shared citizenship” and its utility to the cause of society-building in Israel. Now that the concept of “shared citizenship” is coming into wider use in Israeli educational, social, and political discourse, it is essential to clarify the specific meaning of the term as understood by MERCHAVIM. In doing so, it is hoped that this paper will provide additional background for teachers using MERCHAVIM’s growing range of programs in their classrooms, as well as inform those within the Israeli and international citizenship-education and conflict-resolution communities about MERCHAVIM’s shared citizenship model. More broadly, this paper seeks to make a modest contribution to the ongoing debate over how to shape a more “civil” and sustainable shared future for Israeli society.

Part I of this paper provides an overview of MERCHAVIM’s “shared citizenship” model, explaining why and how it came into being. The five concepts that are central to the model will also be elaborated: identity, access, fairness, spaces of agreement and active shared citizenship.
Part II will illustrate how the model can help soften some of the most apparently intractable and threatening societal challenges in Israel. This will be demonstrated with reference to two major disputes over primary sources of authority and definitions of statehood.

Part III will address some of the major challenges to advancing shared citizenship in Israeli society in general and through the education system in particular.

Finally, the conclusion of the paper will summarize MERCHAVIM’s eight years of experience in advancing shared citizenship education in Israel.
PART I –
The Shared Citizenship Model

Historical and Conceptual Background to the Development of the Shared Citizenship Model

Two pivotal events in recent Israeli history shaped the development of the shared citizenship model. The first was the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish-Israeli extremist. The second was the civil unrest of October 2000, following the outbreak of the second Intifada, in which twelve Arab-Palestinian-Israeli citizens were killed in clashes with Israeli Police. Both these events severely strained the fabric of Israeli society—the first between Jewish-Israelis and the second between Jewish and Arab-Palestinian-Israelis. These domestic events spawned a number of new “society-building” initiatives, among them MERCHAVIM.

Unlike most initiatives that focused on specific tensions—between secular and religious Jews, Jews and Arabs, new immigrants and veteran Israelis, etc.—MERCHAVIM’s approach focused on citizenship-building.

Informing this alternative approach is the belief that the best foundation on which to build a shared identity for all Israelis is their commonly held citizenship. Given the extraordinary lack of agreement among Israeli citizens, it is necessary to encourage a consensual “thickening” of the “thin” legal fact of shared citizenship in order to create a strong civic glue. This can only be effective, however, if done in ways that do not threaten the many other legitimate and valued identities of the different groups sharing Israeli citizenship. An appeal to a greater sense of shared citizenship, for example, should not compromise the legitimate identification of Jewish-Israelis with the Jewish people, Arab-Palestinian-Israelis with the Palestinian people and Russian-Israelis with Russian culture.

Together with an appreciation of the need to foster a more robust civic identity, the shared citizenship model was also developed with a view that traditional binary approaches to conflict-resolution and society-building can often inadvertently perpetuate what they seek to overcome. Israelis often feel confronted by a series of binary, zero-sum, internal struggles: Jewish vs. Israeli, Jewish vs. Arab-Palestinian, secular vs. religious, Left vs. Right. While not ignoring harsh tensions and real dilemmas, the shared citizenship model stresses the multiple aspects of each individual’s identity as better representing the reality of human complexity and better-suited to building understanding, empathy and civic solidarity.

The Underlying Principles of the Shared Citizenship Model:

The model is grounded on three principles that are essential to good citizenship education in a diverse and conflicted society.

Firstly, it is values-based. Good citizenship education has to be based on values as opposed to interests in order to prevent “uncivil” behavior driven by shifting interests and capabilities. For this reason, the shared citizenship model is based on the idea of thinking about and developing “fairer” attitudes and behaviors at every level, from family, through classroom and community, to the level of national policies. For the
idea of “fairness” to be practically helpful in a diverse and divided society, it is essential to reach broad agreement on what “fairness” specifically means. The model therefore proposes a practical and consensual mechanism for assessing and agreeing upon “fairness.”

Secondly, good citizenship education has to be contextual, connected to the time and the communities for which it is designed. This is all the more true when designing educational activities that need to be relevant to young lives.

Thirdly, good citizenship education must involve actively “doing” citizenship, and not just passive learning. As well as being more effective pedagogically, this is the difference between schools producing active “citizens,” as opposed to passive “subjects.”

Constructed on these three principles, the shared citizenship model is designed to lead young Israelis through a learning process that includes: reflection on key concepts, knowledge-acquisition, attitudinal change, and civic activism. It aims to achieve these goals in ways that respect and value the many distinct cultures and identities of students and those of their fellow citizens.

**The Five Core Concepts of the Shared Citizenship Model:**

The model endeavors to promote values-based, contextual, and engaged citizenship education using five interlocking concepts: identity, access, fairness, spaces of agreement and active shared citizenship.

**“Identity”**

A common and mistaken understanding of identity frequently compels Israelis to think that they need to choose, for example, between being “Jewish” or “Israeli,” “Arab-Palestinian” or “Israeli,” “Russian” or “Israeli.” In contrast to this, the model emphasizes the multiplicity and fluidity of identity. People have a potentially unlimited number of identities, with the importance of each varying according to circumstances.

A person’s identity should not be viewed in quantitative terms, as having a finite composition like a pie-chart. Each of us has, in fact, many identities: civic, religious, national, ethnic, physical, gender, age, family, professional, socio-economic, and so on. The idea that each of us has only one identity, “Jew” or “Arab-Palestinian” “secular” or “religious,” “new immigrant” or “veteran,” is very limiting and blinds us to other identities that can help us identify commonalities with fellow citizens. This does not mean that we value each of our many identities equally. Some are certainly more cherished and central to our sense of self than others. Nor does it mean that there are never tensions between these different identities. While we all frequently face real tensions between our different identities, these are generally contextual rather than inherent. Regional peace, for example, will consign many of the long-standing tensions in Arab-Palestinian-Israeli identity to history.

Just as identity is multiple, it is also dynamic, not static, with the relative importance of our multiple identities in constant flux. When teaching, for example, the teacher’s
professional identity is, or should be, central. A moment later, on receiving news that a family member has been taken sick, the teacher’s professional identity is relegated and their family identity assumes greater importance.

Once we fully appreciate these attributes of identity, we are liberated from the “straightjacket” of one identity. We are free to think of ourselves and others as having many identities, whose significance and meaning may change according to time and circumstance. This awareness can have dramatic personal and societal implications.

“Access”

The shared citizenship model and the education programs designed to promote it are committed to ensuring greater access, in every meaningful sense, for all Israeli citizens.

The concept of access as developed in the model is fundamentally about the opportunity to participate, both as individual citizens and within groups of citizens. It is about the opportunity to realize individual potential, to belong, and to contribute towards the well-being of the collective.

Access is vital in many different respects: political, cultural, physical, socio-economic, geographical, linguistic, and so forth. These different areas of access are often inter-connected. To take one obvious example, if the physically handicapped have limited physical access to schools and municipalities – which is currently the norm - they will almost inevitably lack access to education and services.

Advocating fairer access does not mean advocating that “anything goes.” It does not promise high-paying jobs to the genuinely lazy and stupid or lucrative basket-ball contracts to the untalented. Rather, it is about optimizing opportunities and potential and doing away with obstacles that are clearly unreasonable and unfair.

“Fairness”

The model is morally grounded on the idea of encouraging “fairer” attitudes and behaviors, and thereby creating “fairer” classrooms, schools, communities and, ultimately, national policies and society. A fairer society is one with reduced levels of exclusion, allowing for the greater realization of human potential, and enjoying greater all-round success, solidarity, and cohesion.

For the idea of fairness to be practically helpful, it is necessary to apply it in specific ways and with respect to concrete issues. For this reason, the model encourages students to think about what is “fair” and uses examples to illustrate the concept. One example that has been especially helpful in illustrating the “fairness equation” is the case of limited wheel-chair access in our schools. With physical handicap one obvious aspect of the identity of hundreds of thousands of citizens, and with the great majority of schools lacking wheel-chair access, we can ask whether this situation is “too fair”, “just right”, or “not fair enough”? After eight years of asking teachers this question and through them students, we have yet to meet an Israeli of any background
who believes (or, at least, is willing to publicly admit) that the current situation is either “too fair” or “just right.”

In workshops, teachers are also encouraged to consider the *fairness* of their teaching. The vast majority admit that at various moments their teaching has been less than fair. They use the language of the model to share instances when they gave less *access* (to knowledge, empathy, attention, encouragement etc.) to students with certain *identities* (e.g., disruptive, bad-mannered, new-immigrant non-Hebrew speaker, “problem-family,” etc.). Consequently, teachers can determine how they will try to teach “more fairly” in the future.

Thus, the shared citizenship model encourages the exploration of *fairness* through consideration of the relationship between aspects of *identity* and *access*. One of the proven results of this exercise is that it can significantly expand the *spaces of agreement* among citizens from diverse backgrounds who had previously assumed that they agreed on little or nothing.

**“Spaces of Agreement”**

The shared citizenship approach seeks to expand possible areas of agreement while clarifying, legitimizing, and managing inevitable disagreements. Clearly, some basic agreements are essential to maintaining all positive human interactions over time, whether within families, communities or states. At the same time, disagreements are inevitable in any society, certainly one made up of such diverse elements as Israel’s. A longing for total, all-encompassing agreement is not only unrealistic, but also as dangerous to social stability and sustainability as a lack of any fundamental agreements. The purpose of a democratic system of government is not to produce absolute consensus among citizens, but rather to peacefully manage and accommodate citizens’ disagreements in relatively satisfactory, fair, and sustainable ways.

The concept of *spaces of agreement* can be imagined as a flexible band stretching beyond minimum essential areas of agreement (all agreeing to drive on the same side of the road, for example) and ending where agreements are no longer possible or necessary (for example, how different citizens feel about certain historical events).

The model helps to clarify *spaces of agreement* among Israeli citizens and, equally importantly, to expand them. To begin with, the shared citizenship model requires all Israelis to recognize the legal citizenship of all “other” citizens, and subsequently encourages a commitment to building a shared civic language using the five core concepts of the shared citizenship model.

The model’s concept of *fairness* can be used to reveal many previously obscured areas of significant agreement. The examples already given about the need for fairer *access* for the physically handicapped and fairer teaching strategies are indicative of these *spaces of agreement*. Many more *spaces of agreement* among Israeli citizens are just waiting for recognition.

The model’s usage of the concept of identity also helps to expand *spaces of agreement*. Once we think of ourselves as having multiple, dynamic identities, we can become more aware of identities that we share with others—as educators, parents,
residents of the same area, women, consumers, tax-payers, citizens, and so forth. Appreciating our common identities helps us to identify the values and interests we have in common.

It is equally important not to ignore or obscure deep disagreements and differences. For this reason, the model encourages the full exploration of deep and sometimes inevitable disagreements and differences in ways designed to increase understanding, empathy, accommodation, and legitimacy among conflicted groups. At the same time, it discourages frustrating and generally futile attempts to reach unnecessary agreements.

The model therefore respects and legitimizes cultural differences. This is not done merely as a “concession” to the existence of unbridgeable cultural differences, but rather on the basis of a democratic acceptance of natural and enriching cultural difference among Israelis.

In sum, while some aspects of our identities may generate disagreements, other aspects foster agreements. While seeking to expand possible areas of agreement, this approach does not deny or avoid existing and sometimes fundamental disagreements. Instead, it attempts to encourage greater understanding, empathy and accommodation, not resolution of the irreconcilable.

“Active Shared Citizenship”

Just as good citizenship implies civic activism, good citizenship education encourages student activism and does not make do with just passive learning. The model advocates **active shared citizenship** in order to help create a fairer reality, whether through changes in our personal behavior, teaching, schools, communities, and national policies.

Undoubtedly, building a fairer, more cohesive society requires actual changes. Hence to change reality, “doing” shared citizenship is an essential part of effective shared citizenship education. In the realm of education, once school communities, teachers, students and their families, have become aware of and dissatisfied with unfair practices and situations, as defined by the model, practical plans for change need to be made and implemented. The wide range of possible teacher and student projects in this regard is only limited by such factors as school priorities, the curriculum, age-appropriate appeal, resources, and relevance to students. To avoid disappointment and to encourage the habit of active citizenship, it is desirable that such projects have the potential of achieving some tangible results.
PART II –
Contribution to Addressing Broad Societal Disagreements

In addition to the potential benefits for society-building already described, the shared citizenship model can help to soften some broad and threatening disagreements. This can be demonstrated with reference to two major contemporary disagreements in Israeli society: over primary sources of authority (God or Knesset), and definitions of the state (National Homeland for the Jewish People or State for all Citizens).

Disagreement over Primary Sources of Authority

The debate and events surrounding Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005 was a reminder that in Israel the struggle between primary sources of authority is not merely theoretical. Many young religious-Jewish soldiers felt that they faced a stark choice between obeying their military orders, whose authority derives from the Knesset, and their rabbis, whose authority is religious. Nor is it only religious Jewish-Israelis who face this tension and potential conflict between competing sources of authority, so too do members of Israel’s other faith communities. Indeed, this is often true of members of religious groups all around the world.

The shared citizenship model was consensually designed by religious and secular Israelis of all faiths in order to achieve broad legitimacy. The result is a model that accommodates disagreement over primary sources of authority in two main ways.

First, the five core concepts are designed to be broadly acceptable to Israelis, irrespective of their attribution of primary source of authority. The concept of fairness was selected as the best consensual values-foundation available, relevant and authoritative for both secular and religious. Unlike more secular terms like “equality” and “rights” or the religious language of “duties” and “obligations,” the concept of fairness is more neutral and can appeal simultaneously to both secular and religious Israelis.

Similarly, the modern concepts of identity and access, while apparently purely secular, actually have a solid foundation in the different religious traditions. All these religious traditions instruct their followers on how to behave (what access they must provide) towards different groups (identities). In doing so, they routinely call for the enforcement of fairness, often to a high degree in many areas that are vital to building sustainable shared citizenship (such as the treatment of “strangers/others” in matters relating to education, employment, welfare, healthcare, treatment of foreign laborers, etc.).

The concepts of spaces of agreement and active shared citizenship also have familiar counterparts in religious traditions. These include important texts that promote such ideas as a pluralistic culture of disagreement and call for direct action to fix injustices.

Second, the shared citizenship model can accommodate disagreement over primary sources of authority because, while it strongly endorses democracy as the best mechanism for managing shared citizenship, it does not demand its adoption as a core value. It is fundamentally undemocratic to demand that democracy be adopted by
everyone as a core belief or value. Instead, democracy should be accepted simply because of its proven superiority as a system of government that allows diverse and conflicted groups of citizens, secular and religious alike, to peacefully manage disagreements over time.

**Disagreement over Definitions of the State**

Another highly divisive and potentially dangerous disagreement in Israeli society today concerns the definition of the state. This disagreement is generally framed in terms of two competing definitions of Israeli statehood—as a “national home for the Jewish people” or as a “state for all citizens.” Broadly speaking, the “battle-lines” in this debate over the definition of the state are between Israel’s eighty percent Jewish majority and its twenty percent Arab-Palestinian minority. Having endured pervasive and longstanding discrimination, exclusion and neglect, much of the Arab minority in Israel is convinced that Israel’s definition as the “National Homeland for the Jewish People” is a fundamental obstacle to their civic inclusion and fairer treatment by the state. Likewise, many members of Israel’s Jewish majority believe that if the state were fair to all its citizens, this would necessarily undermine its status as the “National Homeland to the Jewish People.”

Both these widespread beliefs, however, are false and damaging. The approach of the shared citizenship model is to show that the manner in which a state treats its citizens is not necessarily tied to any particular definition of statehood. In reality, the fairness of a state towards all its citizens need have very little to do with the formal definition of its statehood. It actually has much more to do with the *fairness* of *access* it allows its citizens, irrespective of their national, religious, ethnic, gender and other identities. Around the world, there are cases of states with certain identities that favor a particular group of citizens, which are nevertheless consistently very fair to other groups of citizens. There are also many examples of states ostensibly for all citizens, which are consistently unfair to certain groups of citizens.

Israel’s particular identity as a Jewish state need not, therefore, prevent the development of a strong sense of shared citizenship and its realization through the systematic provision of the fairest possible *access* to Arab-Palestinian-Israeli citizens. Even the Jewish symbols of the state, currently seen by some to be symbols of inevitable exclusion, need not necessarily prevent non-Jewish Israelis from developing an emotional identification with the state and with their fellow citizens. The meaning of symbols can change dramatically with the experience of fairer *access* and inclusion. In the United Kingdom, for example, British Jews are comfortable with the Union Jack flag, despite its Christian motif, because they enjoy *access* and inclusion in the country. But if it should ever be used to symbolize exclusionary policies against British Jews, the same Union Jack flag would quickly become a frightening and alienating symbol.

The growing belief of many Arab-Palestinian-Israelis that substantive shared citizenship is impossible in Israel without a changed definition of statehood and new “neutral” civic symbols, though certainly understandable given their experience to date, hinders in practice the prospects for greater shared citizenship. It generates increasing levels of alienation and frustration, thereby reducing the motivation to work to progress substantive shared citizenship in countless attainable ways.
Another obstacle in the way of developing substantive shared citizenship is the conscious or unconscious fear among many Jewish-Israelis that a fairer society “for all Israel’s citizens” is somehow the precursor of a “state for all citizens” and the end of Israel as “national homeland for the Jewish People.” As the dominant majority, Jewish-Israelis apparently have the power to prevent fairer access to Arab-Palestinian-Israelis for the foreseeable future. Alarmingly, there is much evidence to suggest that many, perhaps most Jewish-Israelis think that doing so is in the best interest of Israel as a Jewish state. In fact, the opposite is true. Denial of much fairer civic access and opportunities to Arab-Palestinian-Israelis is actually one of the greatest strategic threats to Israel’s long-term well-being and sustainability, especially as the national homeland of the Jewish people, a fact that has now been acknowledged by successive Israeli governments.
PART III -
Challenges to Advancing Shared Citizenship

There are presently a number of major challenges to the advancement of shared citizenship in the Israeli education system and in Israeli society more broadly.

The structural separation of Israeli schools into four separate school streams represents a major challenge to promoting shared citizenship in Israel and to citizenship education in particular. Starting from kindergarten and continuing through high school, the Israeli education system separates young Israelis into four major parallel school streams: “Jewish state-secular”, “Jewish state-religious”, “Jewish Ultra-Orthodox” and “Arab-Israeli”. These broad streams themselves contain additional sub-streams, for example, between Ashkenazi and Sephardi streams in the Jewish Ultra-Orthodox system, and separate state Druze and Bedouin school streams that teach in Arabic but are not part of the “Arab schools Branch”.

In these circumstances, young Israelis of diverse backgrounds rarely meet. By learning separately, and generally living separately, young Israelis are deprived of opportunities to meet and become comfortable and familiar with Israelis of different religious and national backgrounds. The lack of such interactions is unfortunately highly conducive to the cultivation of stereotypes and the reinforcement of mutual prejudices.

In order to lessen this danger, a number of measures can and should be promoted within the educational system—such as mixed teacher-training, positive representation of the “other” in educational materials, and the encouragement of diversity “across school streams” in staffing schools. Such measures, however vital and important, can only go so far. The magnitude of the challenge that educational separation presents for the prospects of shared citizenship cannot be overstated. Simply put, a divided educational system clearly helps to create a divided society. The adverse impact of educational separation upon shared citizenship in Israel, however, has drawn little public debate or government attention. Indeed, after almost sixty years of systematic educational separation, the continued existence of separate education streams is widely considered to be natural and inevitable, despite the fact that it is clearly an anomaly worldwide. At the very least, therefore, a serious public debate about the implications of this policy for the character and sustainability of Israeli society is long overdue.

The systematic separation of Israeli students is not the only impediment to shared citizenship education within the educational sphere. Another impediment is the low priority that educational systems tend to place on values education, in contrast to the high priority given to imparting knowledge that has practical economic value. For this reason, schools’ curricula consistently devote more space to mathematics and sciences than to values education in general and democratic or citizenship education in particular.

Educational systems also display a preference for disciplines that are amenable to relatively simple measurement. This can easily result in the undervaluing of values education. Achieving positive attitudinal change towards “others,” which is one of
the central objectives of shared citizenship education, is notoriously hard to measure, especially when compared to other, more precise, disciplines.

Finally, principals and teachers are often reluctant to include shared citizenship education in their curricula because, like all values education, it is perceived to be too “political” and ideologically-loaded. Hence, it may be regarded as riskier to teach in an education system that is formally apolitical. This concern, however, ignores the fact that in reality every curriculum is inevitably ideological, containing preferences that reinforce dominant societal values. The preference of math to Jewish studies and English to Arabic, are just two such examples in the current Jewish-secular school curriculum.

Beyond issues concerning Israel’s educational system, shared citizenship education also faces broader social challenges. Perhaps the most fundamental is the discomfort of many Israelis with diversity. Like citizens of most multicultural societies, Israelis have yet to come to terms with the diversity of their society. This is evident in the nostalgic longing of some for an imagined homogeneous past, as well as in the outright hostility that is sometimes displayed toward those citizens belonging to other ethnic, national and religious groups.

Shared citizenship education, and all initiatives committed to creating greater comfort with diversity, has to contend with and tackle this deeply-rooted resistance to diversity. The price of failing to learn to live with diversity is high, most immediately for the weaker minorities, but eventually for all.

In addressing the challenge of social diversity, it is essential to continually keep in mind the multiplicity of identities and tensions in Israeli society. All too often attention and resources are devoted to one tension or divide, at the expense of others. Since MERCHAVIM’s establishment eight years ago, events have called on us to focus on crises in secular-religious Jewish relations, new immigrant-veteran Jewish-Israeli relations, Sephardi-Ashkenazi relations, Jewish and Arab-Palestinian-Israeli relations, the economic divide and center-periphery relations. Despite the frequent pressures to concentrate on these binary divisions, MERCHAVIM has constantly sought to advance the notion of shared citizenship for all Israelis in order to deal with the multiple identities and tensions within Israeli society.

Another major challenge to the meaningful advancement of the shared citizenship vision is the existence of distinct interests that stand, or which are perceived to stand, in opposition to the material changes fairer shared citizenship prescribes. Promoting fairer citizenship for all Israelis involves policy changes as well as attitudinal changes. It requires concrete steps to ensure greater access to public goods for all citizens. It would be naïve in the extreme to imagine that some of the real policy changes entailed by a far-reaching societal commitment to shared citizenship, would not face staunch opposition from powerful interest groups. The contentious issue of land allocation, because of the quantitative and hence limited nature of the resource in question (not to mention its deep ideological significance), is clearly one issue in which there are conflicting interests. But many other issues, such as the provision of fairer educational and employment opportunities and health-care, are not necessarily zero-sum. What are initially perceived to be conflicting interests can actually be redefined and a much more constructive win-win attitude can prevail.
Finally, one cannot ignore the difficulty of advancing shared citizenship in Israel while Israeli-Palestinian violence continues and the conflict remains unresolved. For obvious reasons, the conflict with the Palestinians dominates the public agenda in Israel, drawing attention and resources away from a host of other issues. In the absence of security, both national and personal, it is all too easy to neglect or defer other pressing problems. This has been the tendency in Israel for decades. Shared citizenship education in Israel, however, cannot be postponed until an eventual resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Not only does the Israeli-Palestinian conflict consume public and political attention at the expense of the critical issue of “civic” society-building, it also generates severe tensions between different groups of Israeli citizens. This is most clearly the case with regards to relations between Israel’s Jewish and Arab-Palestinian citizens, characterized as they are by high levels of mutual suspicion and fear – in large part, a by-product of Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians. Relations between secular and religious Israeli-Jews have also been seriously damaged at times by disputes over the preferred final borders of the state, as was evident most recently in the domestic turmoil over Israel’s disengagement from Gaza.
CONCLUSION

Although the advancement of shared citizenship in Israel faces a number of major challenges, there is also now a great opportunity for its success. There is a rapidly expanding demand for shared citizenship education. This demand is powerful evidence of the desire of the overwhelming majority of Israelis to make shared Israeli citizenship work. Whether passionate or pragmatic, enthused or resigned, most Israelis accept the inevitability of the parameters of our shared Israeli citizenship. They know that even if the composition of shared Israeli citizenship is not exactly what they might have ideally hoped for, it is simply a fact that they must learn to live with.

MERCHAVIM’s eight years of experience of advancing the cause of shared citizenship also offers much cause for optimism. The language of the shared citizenship model, once learned, generally proves itself to be comfortable and useful, facilitating communication across distinct groups and broadening spaces of agreement. Admittedly, acceptance is not uniform. It is certainly easier for more secular groups of citizens to be more passionate about the language of shared citizenship than it is for more religious groupings. But passion is not a prerequisite for sustainable shared citizenship, and pragmatic acceptance of the language of the shared citizenship model is sometimes as much as can and should be expected.

Evaluation of shared citizenship education to date indicates that when successful it increases comfort levels between Israeli “others” and promotes attitudinal change. This happens, for example, within primary school classrooms where young Israeli class-mates have been found to become more accepting of their differences. It also happens among teachers who, after a series of training work-shops with teachers from other school streams, consistently report changes in their thinking about their fellow citizens.

The potential of the shared citizenship model extends well beyond the school system. By offering a common and consensually-held civic language, the shared citizenship model can positively affect public and political discourse in Israel. In this regard it is possible to imagine the adoption of a more consensual and inclusive discourse that acknowledges all Israelis and respects difference. It is also possible to imagine numerous policy reforms that are informed by the shared citizenship model. To the extent that public policy is formulated for the benefit of all Israeli citizens, aimed at giving them all greater access, the shared citizenship vision can truly be realized.