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The candle has been snuffed

The Ner Etzion school - filled almost entirely with Ethiopian students - closed at the start of this school year. A former student laments the loss of Petah Tikva's one-time 'melting pot'.

By David Harel

In 1950s Petah Tikva, Netzach Yisrael was the "right" school for moderately religious Ashkenazi children. Ner Etzion (literally, "the candle of Etzion") was an inner-city school, mostly serving children from the poorer neighborhoods. Nevertheless, my father, like a considerable number of other parents, decided to send us there.

It wasn't easy. The student population was heterogeneous, to say the least, and as very English children, who had made aliyah only two years earlier, we were naturally in a slight state of shock. The principal was gruff, and, as in many schools in those days, we often took beatings. Not from other children - from the teachers. In the fifth grade I received two huge, humiliating slaps from a teacher. Just so, for no reason at all.



The Ner Etzion fifth-grade class in 1961.

But Ner Etzion was an excellent school of hard knocks for us, when integration had still not become a dirty word. The diversity made us more mature, toughened us up, and broadened our horizons. We became aware and respectful of other traditions and customs, and were exposed to a stunning variety of accents and manners of speech, and also to abundant ways of dealing with daily life.

It may sound naive and old-fashioned, but a visit to a classmate's home became an unforgettable lesson about Israeli immigrant society and its melting pot. The

opportunity we gained, at such an early age, to understand the importance of tolerance and acceptance of others was priceless.

I loved Ner Etzion. The schoolwork, too. A special part of my love for the school undoubtedly had to do with Moshe Yedidia, our wonderful math teacher, who instilled in some of us the beginnings of a passion for the subject. Extensive extracurricular activities also contributed to a sense of togetherness and belonging - an excellent wind ensemble, diligently organized school plays, and demanding sports classes.

And today? Nearly half a century after I became a proud graduate, the school has closed.

It is heartrending to realize the lethal effect of the racist scourge among the city's parents. "Decent folks" will only send their children to "their own" schools. Those confident of their own self-worth turn their backs on the much more worthy - the beautiful and proud sons and daughters of Ethiopian immigrants.

One virtuous citizen who sent his son to Ner Etzion this year - where all the other students were Ethiopian - could not face down the city's racism on his own. An institution with a glorious past has vanished. Ner Etzion is no more.

It is hard to believe this is the fate of the place that symbolized, for me, all that is good in our small, difficult country.

As if we didn't have enough troubles, and as if we were perfect in our interpersonal relations. Is the cynical exploitation and abuse of social workers, resident doctors, the Bedouin population, and residents of outlying towns not enough? Is the cynical erosion of the middle class - hard-working, tax-paying, law-abiding, its sons and daughters obligingly serving in the army - our bleak vision?

As if that weren't enough, now we also have an "Ethiopian ghetto," an "apartheid school," and "quotas for blacks" - expressions that have come into use in relation to Ner Etzion. And we have a large public, in a major city, that shuns an entire community.

What about "love thy neighbor as thyself"? Where has true Jewish solidarity gone, the principle that was once the guiding light of the religious Zionist public? Did anyone address a public apology on Yom Kippur to the Ethiopian immigrants for the inconceivable humiliation they suffered in Petah Tikva?

Is the city's name - meaning an "opening of hope" - not trampled in the dust when such humiliation can be seen not only in the attitude of parents who scoff at Ethiopians, but also in the solutions proposed by the Education Ministry and the city's municipality - separate classes, unequal distribution of pupils, and bussing to schools outside the city?

It truly seems that every light contains a grain of darkness, and every good the seeds of evil. Thus it is with each one of us as individuals, and thus it is in

communities and nations. Confronting darkness and evil is the true struggle for all of us. In the case of Ner Etzion, the candle has been snuffed and darkness rules. The heart breaks.

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