

Out of many, one

Readers of Hebrew can now browse a new Web site on Israel's social groups. 'People don't know a thing, not a thing, about Israeli society,' says one of the site's founders

By *Oded Yaron*

Even now when chefs' creations are hailed as significant cultural achievements, it's hard to find something cultural in the kibbutz kitchen. Nevertheless, the Web site "People-Israel: Guide to Israeli Society" (www.peopleil.org) dedicates over 10,000 words to the subject. Tamar Almog, who has a PhD in education, and sociologist Oz Almog created the site, which went on line two months ago after two years of work. It received support from Unesco Israel and funding from the Shmuel Neeman Institution.

Oz Almog, known for his work on Zionism in his book "The Sabra Image," decided to look this time at all sectors of society. This is clear during surfers' first minutes on the site, where they can search society's various sectors, with no hierarchy of any kind. Immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia, the religious, sabras, secular people and Arabs – all are equally important entries.

Some groups are still being written about, but Ethiopian immigrants, for example, already have a detailed and complex entry that covers relationships and the family, appearance and dress, food, religion and where they live. The kibbutzim, on the other hand, make do with that information about the dining room and a subentry on the newspaper *Hakibbutz*.

"I wanted to do a comprehensive guide to Israeli society based on the notion that we don't know enough about ourselves and we certainly don't know about other sectors," says Tamar Almog. "We know that in terms of research, as you learn more about the other, the intensity of prejudices decreases and tolerance toward others increases."

The uniform of Hassidim

The site focuses to a surprising extent on details in matters that do not necessarily fill lecture halls in sociol-

ogy departments. "There are fields that are not covered scientifically, even though they are a mirror of society," says Oz Almog. "I am interested, for example, in how a Christian young man and a Christian young woman meet and marry in Israel. Are they set up? What is the wedding like? What presents do they receive?"

Food also has not received adequate research coverage, Almog says, even though it "reflects the heart of the culture. There is something in the culture of food that combines within it many essential issues, living area, manners, tradition or not upholding tradition."

The situation is similar when it comes to clothes; whether the style of dress among the Russians or the ultra-Orthodox, every style has meaning. "This also has not been studied," says Tamar. "In Israel there is a notable lack of studies in ethnography and day-to-day life," adds Oz. "It's not rifts and it's not politics, the things that usually interest researchers."

The two are quick to offer in-depth descriptions of the different styles of dress among the ultra-Orthodox. "Thousands, thousands of nuances," notes Oz. "You can tell by the hat, the length of the socks, shoes with laces or without," adds Tamar. "The Hassidim wear clothes that really are in the realm of a uniform, but there are other issues that demand more analysis such as the Hardal [ultra-Orthodox-nationalist] stream. We have a complete guide of hundreds of pages just about them."

The yuppies guide

In addition to searching by sector, you can also view a photo gallery that occasionally leads to surprises. For example, the entry on names in the Ethiopian sector, or a short entry on the magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Why did they devote an entry to a magazine? Oz: "It's a yuppie magazine. There's nothing you can do; when describing the yuppie culture in Israel, you

have to mention it. This magazine is read by yuppies and reflects their culture."

The site has pages divided in two: The right column has text and the left column has elements such as a table of contents, charts and multimedia options. The objective was to make reading easier in the era of skimming. "We saw that people had a hard time reading a document, and they are still able to read a lot of text in a newspaper laid out in columns, so we tried to mimic this using a split screen," says Almog.

It's hard to compare the site to the local version of Wikipedia; for now the site has only 317 entries, some of them very brief, and others consisting of around 100 pages each.

Like the free encyclopedia, the Almogs write and edit the entries with the help of volunteers, including PhD and masters students; a few receive salaries, others only credit. But in contrast to Wikipedia, where anyone can change and add things, the volunteers at People-Israel work under Oz Almog, who

refers them to relevant academic articles.

"We cannot and do not want to reach the pace of Wikipedia," says Oz, who has plenty of praise for the free encyclopedia and hopes that he will be able to get his site translated into English and other languages. "We don't need 1,000 entries a year; it will certainly be nice if we have 300 entries a year."

Everyone and his poverty

Every entry goes through a lengthy process influenced by academics and people in the field. "We deal with society here," explains Oz, "and there are a lot of people who are very familiar with it, from their own life. An ultra-Orthodox man or an Arab knows what goes on in his backyard. The physicist cannot get a critique from a molecule, but I can get a reaction from my molecule," he says.

"I can also get reactions from thousands of people who enter the site and confirm or don't confirm the entry I wrote. When you



Above: Druze notables on a celebratory visit to the shrine of Nebi Sabalan in Hurfeish.

Photos by Yuval Tebol and Tess Scheffan / Jini

Below: Ethiopian immigrants celebrating the Sigd holiday in Jerusalem.

start cross-referencing testimonies and articles, you discover that there are a lot of inaccuracies and inconsistencies. A Druze clothing storeowner, for example, assisted us. The man's been in business for 20 years. When we wanted to know about the clothes of Druze people, he helped. After all, he knows every button.

"I'll tell you the truth: Until we started with this project, I didn't know what a boor and ignoramus I was," adds Oz. As an example, he offers the perception of ultra-Orthodox society as anti-feminist and one that oppresses women.

"As soon as you learn about ultra-Orthodox society, you discover that our concepts of feminism are not necessarily relevant there," says Almog. "The ultra-Orthodox man is not a 'macho man' in the Israeli sense. The ideal is a man who studies 12 hours a day, and the burden of supporting the family is on the wife. All the glorification of the culture of muscles is less present there."

The Almogs say that ignorance also exists among



decision-makers. "In our country, policy is determined without information," says Oz. "For example, poverty. The poverty of the Russian is not like the poverty of the Ethiopian or the poverty of the ultra-Orthodox. The Russians' poverty is temporary in most cases, while the poverty of the ultra-Orthodox is

by choice.

"The state wants to expand education in the Druze sector, but ignores the fact that there is no wedding in that community without the husband building a home for his wife," he adds.

"It's something that creates tensions, because while the husband must work to

meet basic needs, his wife goes to study, and very quickly after the wedding, the children are born and the husband must continue working to support the family, and can't study. I lecture at government institutions, in the highest forums. People don't know a thing, not a thing, about Israeli society."