Inclusion Is Not Enough: It Is Time for Pluralism with a Backbone

By Michal Muszkat-Barkan

Public debates in Israel keep returning to the same fundamental question: how can we sustain a shared society among groups with deeply different values and ways of life? The ongoing controversy surrounding ultra-Orthodox military enlistment makes clear that this is not only a political issue, but also a profoundly educational one.

Behind these disputes lies an even deeper question: what conditions make partnership possible when values collide? Can we uphold equality alongside difference, criticism alongside commitment, without dismantling the shared civic space itself?

For years, we taught that pluralism was the answer: expose students to diverse perspectives, encourage openness, cultivate respect. Yet something has eroded along the way. Increasingly, people struggle to identify a clear position within contemporary pluralism. A secular pre-military academy director told me last week: “In the name of inclusion and pluralism, we lost the ability to hold a position.”

In my view, the problem is not pluralism itself, but the way we have come to practice it. Genuine pluralism is not neutrality. It is an encounter between grounded commitments. When we attempt to include positions that undermine the very legitimacy of difference, or when we avoid expressing convictions for fear of conflict, pluralism itself becomes fragile.

The result is a paradox: extreme caution about offending others, coupled with a growing inability to define who we are. Without a strong sense of identity, every disagreement threatens the entire shared space.

This is why the language of inclusion alone is no longer sufficient. If we truly seek to sustain a shared society over time, we need a different kind of educational work. Not only learning to listen, but also learning to choose. Not only understanding the other, but also defining who we are within this larger mosaic.

A democratic society cannot exist within an identity vacuum. Democracy requires identities with depth and meaning, identities capable of meeting one another without dissolving. Such identity does not stand in opposition to democracy; it can deepen democracy by giving it a language of belonging, responsibility, and shared purpose.

For this reason, I propose the concept of a “Pedagogy of Responsibility.” This is an educational approach that connects identity, critical reflection, and commitment to action. It understands taking a position not merely as expressing an opinion, but as a willingness to bear responsibility for the consequences of that position.

What might a pedagogy of responsibility look like in practice?

- Cultivating a distinct yet dynamic Jewish identity: a living, interpretive identity that serves as an anchor for action.
- Practicing a non-neutral pluralism: encounters between deeply rooted perspectives while protecting the very possibility of difference.
- Educating for choice: helping students formulate positions and learn to hold tensions between competing values.
- Fostering responsibility through practice: learning through action, disagreement, and participation in shared civic life.

This must become a central mission of Israel's public education system, together with youth movements and pre-military academies. Their role is not only to expose young people to different viewpoints, but to cultivate citizens capable of taking positions, assuming responsibility, and acting within a complex reality.

The choice is not between pluralism and identity. A grounded identity is a precondition for a pluralism that possesses both depth and courage.

Inclusion alone is not enough. We must also choose, and act.

And as the next elections approach, the real question is not only whom we will vote for, but what kind of citizens we hope to raise.