'Anarchy, democracy and dictatorship'
By Naomi Darom


When lawyer Dror Linn comes home after a long day at the office, he sits down at the computer and opens the Hebrew Wikipedia site to see what's new. Until the wee hours of the night he edits entries, adds information of his own and conducts lively correspondences with his Hebrew-Wikipedia friends, editors and writers at the largest online encyclopedia in the world.

The Hebrew Wikipedia, which like its English sister is created entirely by surfers, celebrated its fifth birthday two weeks ago. During the month of May, 35 million pages were viewed and, according to Alexa, a company that monitors traffic on Internet sites, it is in ninth place on the list of Web sites viewed in Israel. (In the new ranking by Google Trend, it does not appear among the top 20 sites). The possibility of anonymous access to the site makes it impossible to know who uses it exactly. It is supposed to serve as an educational tool for students at schools and universities, but a review of the most frequently searched subjects indicates that the pursuit of educational knowledge is not always what motivates users: The most popular search in Hebrew is "sex," followed by "girls" and then "sports." In 14th place is the bus cooperative Egged.

The Hebrew Wikipedia's partner is a nonprofit organization called Wikimedia, a branch of an American NPO of the same name, which owns the servers on which Wikipedia materials are stored, as well as the name and trademark. Currently the Hebrew version comprises some 78,000 content pages, and 50,000 surfers are involved in writing them on a volunteer basis. In charge of all this knowledge is a rather small core group of 150 editors and writers, like Linn, who also work on a volunteer basis. They describe their work as an addiction and spend many hours on it at home and sometimes, clandestinely, at work. For some of the Wikipeds, as they call themselves, this involves a real sense of mission.

"Wikipedia is tremendously important," explains Harel Cain, a software engineer and translator, who is one of the country's senior Wikipeds. "This is where people look for information. It is a huge responsibility. Let's suppose that I've
written an entry on Gustav Mahler, and I made a mistake in the year of his birth. Fifty years from now, who is going to rummage about in the literature to find out about him? They will go straight to Wikipedia.”

"This is a conscious attempt by a great many people to establish and to organize existing information in a format that is accessible to people and in readable language, to make the information available to the general public," says Prof. Uzi Vishne of the mathematics department at Bar-Ilan University, who writes and edits site content. "As a lecturer, I receive my salary from public funds and this is a successful way of returning the investment."

Vishne mostly writes in the area of his expertise: algebra. "There is a desire to expose people to what is beautiful in mathematics, and do some popularizing of the field. This is a need that many mathematicians feel, just like a person who goes into a museum and wants to share with everyone the beauty he encounters. These are things that are also taught at the university, but here the potential audience is much broader." He also uses the site to assist in teaching: He directs his students to texts he has written for the site, and gives them assignments to write Wikipedia entries themselves as part of their homework. A pedagogical spirit prevails among the Wikipedia writers. For some of them this is also manifested in their daily work as teachers or professors; for some it is manifested only in Wikipedic activity.

Wikiped Liat Levy, 29, of Tiberias, has cerebral palsy and also manages a forum about the disorder on the Tapuz Hebrew Web site. She became involved in Wikipedia in order to educate people.

"The Hebrew Wikipedia didn't have an entry on cerebral palsy and this seemed impossible," she relates. "At first, at the site, they insisted that is wasn't a disease, but rather a condition or a disability, because that is what was written in the Wikipedia in English. I insisted, I argued and because of all the arguing they blocked me temporarily. But I didn't give up. In the end it was accepted and CP has been defined as an illness."

The sense of mission did not end here: Levy also makes a point of writing and editing entries about Judaism, because of what she defines as the secular bias of the site. Many Wikipeds, some of whom are autodidacts, write about subjects close to their hearts. The collaborative nature of the encyclopedia enables them to contribute, in the knowledge that someone else will fill in what they don't know.

Communal dimension

"You don't have to write a whole entry," says Wikiped and linguist Dror Kamir. "It is possible to insert information into an existing entry. I know all kinds of things about all kinds of subjects, and this is very handy in a project like this. I don't have the patience to write a book from beginning to end, and I don't need to commit myself and can write about anything I want to here." Kamir especially enjoyed writing an entry about "linguistic experiments in anthropoid apes."

"I started writing text," he relates. "I saved it, I continued the next day, and I saw that someone had corrected something. I went back to my notes from my university days, I conducted debates on the subject - and all in a non-pressured environment."
The communal dimension, the feeling that somebody is reading your entry and cares enough to respond, is one of the addictive aspects of working on the site. Wikipeds represent all segments of society - Ashkenazis and Sephardis, Arabs and Jews, retirees and high-school students - and nearly all are curious and intelligent people, who in their youth read encyclopedias for pleasure. These common characteristics, the tiny size of the Wikipedia community in Hebrew, and the fact that its members are all concentrated in a relatively small geographic area, allow them to have fairly lively connections, relative to its foreign sisters. Dozens of members meet every few months, and among some of them friendships have developed.

"At the first meeting I expected to see a bunch of kids with runny noses, but in fact I lowered the average age," relates Vishne. "There are a lot of Wikipeds in their 50s, mature people who take the matter seriously and are committed to the mission and the desire to share knowledge."

One group under-represented in the community is women. They are hardly present in site-related discussions and arguments. This could be because "women have better things to do," as Kamir says, or because of a fear of technology or a distaste for the editing wars, which require "a surplus of virtual testosterone," as he defines it. A new participant has to learn the rules of writing, editing and conduct at Wikipedia - most of which are detailed on the site - otherwise his contribution is headed for swift excision. The fact that most of the veteran Wikipeds know one another and have friendly relationships makes entry into this select world even more difficult.

Kamir: "The initial experience can be pretty traumatic. You go into Wikipedia with a lot of energy, but if you haven't written the entry correctly, people will ask, 'What is this doing here?' and will reconstruct the previous version. This isn't a closed community, but you have to get into it." Though the editors and writers share the basic values of Wikipedia, they disagree about nearly every other issue: from the criteria that an entry must fulfill to the question of the legal status of Palestinians in the territories (for purposes of writing the entry on "settlements").

The arguments surrounding every entry can be accessed by simply pressing the "discussion" tab that appears at the top. The discussion pages for religious and political entries tend to be particularly charged. In those relating to the entry "Sabra and Chatila," for example, there is a heated debate over the number of people who participated in the "demonstration of 400,000" at Kikar Malchei Yisrael, now Rabin Square, in Tel Aviv in 1982.

"A sentence like, 'In the estimation of the number of participants, there was apparently a great deal of exaggeration,' is subjective," writes a user named Ronald. "Do Wikipedia and its writers have the right to decide on exaggeration of the number of participants in demonstrations?"

When a surfer called Lish writes that the information on the number of demonstrators is based on the police estimate, top Wikiped David Shai replies: "Can you provide any proof that this is ‘the police estimate’? Perhaps the name of the police official who takes responsibility for this estimate?"

'Terrible wrongs'

It is hard to think of any other place, apart from academia and the press, where there is such lively debate every day on the question of the objectivity of the information, out of a total belief in its importance.

"I must say that this sometimes amuses me very much," says Wikiped Karni, who prefers not to use his real name. "There are people who feel that these
are acute issues, terrible wrongs. I am active in a different context in the real world, and I know that there are far more important and disturbing things in the real world - real wrongs in which one must invest energy."One of the hottest disputes at Wikipedia involves what in fact ought to be included on the site. This issue splits the community in two: the "inclusivists," who support inclusion of as many entries as possible, and the "excisors," who support separating the wheat from the chaff.

Harel Cain: "This is an ideological issue. Should Wikipedia be very broad or an elitist encyclopedia?" Entries from popular culture are treated very skeptically: Britney Spears has already won a place on the Hebrew site, but what about the television program "Kochav nolad" ("A Star is Born")? One stormy debate took place on the question of pornography: Do actors like Jenna Jameson and John Holmes deserve entries on a site that has educational pretensions? In the end it was decided that only actors who have left a mark outside the porn movie industry would be accorded entries. Jameson received an entry by virtue of her activity as a businesswoman, and Linda Lovelace, the star of the pioneering film "Deep Throat," got in because of the public controversy she aroused on the issue of pornography. Not everyone is pleased with this decision.

"Children too have to roam the Wikipedia world of information, and therefore pornography is unsuitable," argues Levy. "This derives from too great a desire to be like Wikipedia in English."

Surprisingly, an enterprise that is supposed to represent the new democracy and the power of the masses conducts itself from within a thicket of rules and bureaucracy that a small public organization could boast of.

"Chaos and anarchy are beautiful concepts, but these have to be regularized," says the chairman of Hebrew Wikipedia Shay Yakir. "In spirit Wikipedia is a little chaotic, but practically speaking, when you sit down to work, you try to converge around shared values."

Anyone can write or edit a Wikipedia entry in Hebrew, but not everyone can influence what happens on the site to the same extent: For this one must prove veteran status and industry, and it is preferable that regular participants know your name, or at least your online handle. Anonymous users (who have not signed up for the site) are at the bottom of the pyramid, above them are the registered users, and above them a group of about 40 "admins" - short for "system administrators." The main power of the admins derives from two privileges: they may erase entries or block them from being edited, and they can block users temporarily - i.e., to determine the site's profile and to expel from the Wikipedia community anyone perceived as harmful. This is a great deal of power and therefore the admins must be users who are acceptable to other members of the community. Dror Linn and Dror Kamir are admins.

Admins are appointed by editors who are called "bureaucrats" - a title imbued with a measure of irony. In Israel there are three bureaucrats: David Shai, the most veteran Wikiped, who initiated the site in Hebrew, Alon Borman and Harel Cain.

"The admins are supposed to guard the site against vandalism," says Cain, "but what occupies the community politically is the blocking of problematic users. Wikipedia in Hebrew is a combination of anarchy, democracy and dictatorship."Issues that are particularly controversial undergo consideration by a neutral mediator, but more often they are put up for a vote on the site. As in the polis of ancient Greece, at Wikipedia, too, not everyone can vote: A Wikiped can make their voice heard only if they've carried out a given number of editorial actions during the previous month. However, from the moment permission is granted, one person's vote has the same weight as that of any
other person who can vote - whether they are an admin, a bureaucrat or just
an active Wikipedia user.

Predictably, the established editorial board is subject to considerable criticism:
There is something a little weird about having some 100 active users
determine, to some extent, the "knowledge landscape" of generations to come.

A user named Asbl, who has left the site, began the announcement of his
departure with these words: "It has already been clear to me for some time
that the Hebrew Wikipedia is being run like George Orwell's 'Animal Farm.' I
have tried to fight this phenomenon to the best of my ability, but I have found
that the game is fixed against me. The situation has degenerated to the point
where they are saying that all Wikipeds are equal, but some are more equal
than others."

When word spread in the community that a journalist was interviewing
Wikipeds, some voices came my way from what is apparently an angry
opposition - two Wikipeds who preferred not to identify themselves, so as not
to get in trouble in the real world.

Explaining his decision to remain anonymous, one of them, who called himself
Yossi - and added only that he is studying toward an advanced degree in
social sciences - says: "At Wikipedia, powerful people are in charge: directors
of large companies, successful lawyers, university professors, police and
maybe even judges. Of course, you can't identify yourself by your full name,
express criticism in public - and everything said in Wikipedia is public - of such
powerful people and expect not to be hurt by this in your private life." His
criticisms mostly concern the Wikipedia hierarchy and the limits it imposes on
people when it comes to making decisions.

"At first, when Wikipedia was founded, everyone was equal," Yossi wrote in a
personal e-mail. "Then they started to determine that there are users who are
not allowed to take part in votes and decision-making, and as time passes
these restrictions are becoming more and more stringent until we reached the
current situation, in which out of hundreds of thousands of Wikipedia readers
and tens of thousands of writers, only a few dozen are actually running the site
and doing with it what they like.

"This is like passing a decision via a national referendum, with a majority of 51
percent, that henceforth most of Israel's citizens will lose their right to vote in
elections and only those who pay more than NIS 20,000 in taxes will be
entitled to vote."

Another Wikiped, who refused to be identified at all, argues: "The encyclopedia
is not operating in an egalitarian way, nor is this a matter of a meritocracy.
This is like an oligarchy, in which the power and the influence are put into the
hands of a group of 'system administrators.'"

He says that information is being blocked at the site and that the admins are
using their considerable power - which has no time limitation - to suppress any
opposition to the consensus. The bureaucrat Cain is not upset by these claims:
"This dynamic is part of any human group. Wikipedia is so central that people
become embittered when they feel that they haven't succeeded in becoming
insiders. There are camps, but this is born of conflicts that are based on
worldviews - what to put in and what not - from which social outlines develop.
To gain respect you have to work, to show that you are a serious Wikiped, but
there are always wise guys who come in and immediately propose a new
constitution for Wikipedia."

"People quarrel a lot on the Internet," Linn says, offering his own explanation.
"It's like on a highway: People quarrel because they don't know one another;
they honk because they can't talk. The moment they meet and get to know
one another, it's a lot harder to quarrel."

"When you come right down to it, that's part of the fun," says Cain. "If there
weren't scandals, some of the people would probably get bored and leave. The
arguments are part of Wikipedia and if we make a change that will lead to
calm, it's likely to become terribly boring for us."

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