

27.6.11

### Racism in the Yellow Pages: we are all responsible

Ron Gerlitz

*When he needed a plumber, Ron Gerlitz was astounded to find out that in the Golden Pages (The Israeli Yellow Pages) there are ads declaring that the business does not employ Arabs. How can a public company support spreading racism?*

A few months ago, I came home from work and found out that the sink in the kitchen was totally clogged and my spouse was desperate because of the problem that popped up precisely toward the end of her ninth month of pregnancy. I let my fingers do the walking, and opened the Golden Pages to find a plumber.

I could not avoid noticing that among the professional descriptions presented by specific plumbers, were also the code words "Hebrew Labor". Since I work in Jerusalem, I am aware of businesses that use that code in order to indicate that they do not employ Arabs. Indeed, we did not invent racism and surely, there are societies far more racist than Israel, but encountering the "Hebrew Labor" advertisements in my kitchen in of a large and respectable company like Golden Pages was really shocking.

I decided not to bury the case at home but to use the tools available to me in the public arena: the Sikkuy NGO, which I head together with an Arab co-director and a member of the forum "**Shutafut Sharakah - Organizations for a shared, democratic, and equal society**". I told my friends at the forum about the ads in the Golden Pages and together we decided to launch a

campaign - the goals of which were to make them remove these disgraceful ads from their classified phonebook.

### **From the kitchen sink to the public arena**

Our campaign is based on personal responsibility for the society in which we live. It begins with the plumber we choose and ends with the responsibility of the Golden Pages for the advertisements in their telephone book. That is why we were deeply disappointed with the company's reaction to our request. The Golden Pages management completely washed their hands of any responsibility for the phenomenon. They claimed that they condemn discrimination and racism, however they see themselves as a platform that does not intervene in the content of the advertisements.

In addition to the problematic nature of their denial of responsibility, this is also hypocritical; would Golden Pages allow traffickers in women or body parts to advertise themselves in Golden Pages? Would a shopping mall display on its electronic board, announcements such as "we do not employ Arabs/Ethiopians/Russians"? There too, they could claim that it is only a platform.

The Golden Pages presented another argument, contradicting the previous one, according to which "Hebrew Labor" is not a racist code at all. That is disingenuous. In conversations we held with the businesses at the beginning of the campaign, we were told, clearly, that it concerned a policy against employment of Arabs. Only few months ago, we all witnessed the initiative of an extremist organization that advanced objection to employ Arabs in Jewish businesses under the same slogan. If more proof was needed then it was swiftly provided by the extremist Jewish organization "The Jewish Voice." They began a counter-campaign against me in support of the current policy of Golden Pages.

Apparently there is a need to remind the Golden Pages that the public declaration of the non-employment of Arabs is a racist act, illegal and even worse than that, its publication grants public legitimization to racism. It

conveys a horrible message to the Arab citizen- you are not welcome here!  
One cannot remain silent in view of the fact that such advertisements also remind us of other places and times in history in which businesses declared that they do not employ Jews or Blacks and it was considered a legitimate act.

This week we received another letter from Golden Pages with a threat to sue Shutafut-Sharakah if we do not "immediately stop all claims" against the conduct of their company. It was most disturbing to see the hypocritical attitude of Golden Pages toward the freedom of expression and advertising principle. Under no circumstances is the company willing to stop the publication of what is clearly a code for discrimination, and prohibited by law. However, it hurriedly tries to silence legitimate criticism about its policy, using judicial threats.

And so Golden Pages does not act only as neutral platform for the advertisers; it lends a hand to the contamination of the public space with blatant racism and chooses to hide behind judicial arguments. All we expect from it is public responsibility. At the Shutafut-Sharakah forum, an umbrella of the largest and strongest organizations for the advancement of equality and democracy in Israel, we will not rest and will not keep silent until the Golden Pages Company prohibits advertisements that are discriminatory or racist, in its telephone books. This is our responsibility as well as the public responsibility of Golden Pages toward Israeli society.

*The writer is a the co-executive director of Sikkuy, an NGO which is a member of the **Shutafut - Sharakah** Forum- organizations for a shared, democratic, and equal society.*