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Shakdiel: half an odd couple

What's a nice girl like Leah Shakdiel doing in a place like Hatikva, the protest party led by *enfant terrible* MK Charlie Biton?

According to Shakdiel, she is helping establish the first political party in Israel to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots in a search for social justice based on genuine equality between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and men and women.

Political wags call Shakdiel and Biton "the odd couple", and not without reason. For one thing, Biton is not known for liking Ashkenazim, and Shakdiel is an Ashkenazia *par excellence*. For another, Biton is not known for liking the Establishment and Shakdiel was born into the Establishment.

Biton is also not known for liking bleeding heart liberals, which he defines as middle class do-gooders of the type that support Meretz. Shakdiel has many bleeding heart characteristics.

Yet Biton is essentially pinning his hopes of returning to the Knesset on his alliance with this middle-class Ashkenazia, and Shakdiel believes the two of them have a good chance of making it.

Shakdiel, 41, and the mother of three, has lived in Yeroham for the past 14 years. She became famous several years ago when she was the first woman ever elected to a religious council.

Her parents were Polish-born pioneers who immigrated to Palestine in 1934. Her father rose through the ranks of the Mizrahi movement and headed its educational system for many years. He was a deeply devoted Zionist who rejected Yiddish, spoke only Hebrew to his family, and Hebraicized his family name - Mandelbaum - decades before doing so became the vogue. At the same time, according to Shakdiel, he was a fierce oppositionist because he rejected the secularist, anti-traditionalist approach of the dominant Labor Zionist movement.

Shakdiel inherited the duality. "It was a peculiarity of my childhood home that I developed an establishment and an opposition mentality simultaneously." She said she also inherited "a life-long guilt complex. I feel that whatever I do for the people of Israel is never enough."

Shakdiel grew up in Ramat Gan and returned to Jerusalem in 1972. For the next three years she searched for her adult identity, immersing herself in strictly Orthodox Judaism, then being attracted to Gush Emunim and finally, starting in 1975, moving towards the Orthodox peace movement Oz Veshalom.

"I came around to the idea that it



Leah Shakdiel (Joel Fishman)



was a crime to sacrifice the People of Israel for the Land of Israel," she explained.

The common denominator in all three experiments was her rejection of the bourgeois life which she found "disgusting."

As a contra to Gush Emunim, Shakdiel began thinking of moving to a development town inside the Green Line; in 1978, she joined a nucleus of religious families and left Jerusalem for Yeroham. "It was the most important decision of my life," she said.

Living in Yeroham has created a proper balance between rarefied idealism and the application of those ideals in real life with real and diverse people, according to Shakdiel. She believes that had she remained in Jerusalem, she might never have come down to earth, and is certain that the Ashkenazi, middle class intellectuals who allegedly inhabit north Tel Aviv and vote Meretz know virtually nothing about anyone who is different from themselves. "I have a personal problem with such people because I'm religious," says Shakdiel. "They can't reach out to religious people in the same way they can't reach out to Sephardim."

So Shakdiel is not exactly the nice little Ashkenazi girl she was perceived to be, and Biton has known it all along. He believes he has finally found one good Ashkenazia who does not look down on him or the constituency he seeks to represent. In addition to her own talents, she may soothe him and make him less angry and more constructive.