

# Disabled youth want the right to best serve their country

• By SAM CROSS

Integrating young people with disabilities into society was the subject of an annual conference devoted to social justice, held this week by Bema'aglei Tzedek, Bet Ami, and Gvanim.

High on the program's agenda was the right of handicapped youth, who generally can't serve in the army, to serve their country in other, formally recognized ways.

"My service was the best two years of my life," said Amit Samesh, 24, who worked with kids with special needs as part of her national service. "I want every person to have the option of serving their country in the

way they can."

The conference has become a tradition for Bema'aglei Tzedek, whose mission is to empower young Israelis to build a brighter future for the country.

"We have made this day a time when people from different backgrounds come together to found a more just Israel," said Dyonna Ginsburg, the group's executive director.

Hundreds of Israelis from all parts of society came to the Jerusalem International Convention Center Tuesday evening to think critically about the handicapped community. Speakers included Education Committee Chairman MK Zevulun Orlev, and Rabbi Dr. Benny Lau, director of

the Center for Judaism and Society as well as the Institute for Social Justice at Beit Morasha.

"I will not rest until the law that grants every young person the right to serve passes," Orlev told the audience.

Bema'aglei Tzedek maintains a unique commitment to action, according to Ginsburg. Two concrete action items – a petition that asks the Treasury to fund more civilian service opportunities for people with disabilities and a take-home guide – provided conference participants not just with talk, but with substance.

"We want each person to apply the lessons that learned here at home," Ginsburg said.

For Edward Omansky, 21, who works at a youth center in Ashdod, his civilian service has given him a greater perspective on his role as citizen. Two years after he left the army for medical reasons, he says that he has his national service to thank for his rehabilitation.

"I can see the fruits of my labor when these kids thank me and love me and give me warmth," Omansky said.

Becky Seidman, who has spina bifida, works for the city of Netivot, helping young people find employment or educational programs. She says she does not regret her decision one bit.

"I chose to do something more, and I love it," Seidman said.