

The Ultra-orthodox Community in Israel: Between Integration and Segregation

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Over the past few years the ultra-orthodox (haredi) population in Israel has experienced many changes in lifestyle, challenging it with many new issues. One of the main questions accompanying these changes is the extent of the haredi sector's integration into general Israeli society in all aspects of life. In this article I will present two different and conflicting trends that can be seen in the various responses to these changes.

Growing Closer or Growing Apart?

In recent years we have witnessed significant changes in Israel's haredi society: in job market participation, in enlisting for army and national volunteer service, and in enrollment in vocational and academic studies. Some of these processes—the decisive ones—are influenced by economic factors, and others by political, social, technological ones.

Haredi society has expanded relative to the rest of society as a result of natural increase, and this has raised many questions regarding

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the image and future of the state of Israel in terms of politics, security, economy and the nature of its society.

Historically speaking, it seems that since the establishment of the state until recently, it is possible to point clearly to an active process of isolation and segregation of haredi society (by its choice) from general Israeli society. This is expressed in all areas of life: places of residence, education, media (newspapers, radio, internet sites), and more. Therefore, the expectation was that the changes of the past few years in haredi society's employment, enlistment and education patterns would bring about a greater involvement in Israeli society and greater closeness between the haredi community and general Israeli society. In this article I will examine whether this has indeed transpired. To this end I will bring examples from the fields of housing, employment, IDF enlistment and vocational/academic studies.

Housing

In the past, most of the haredi population lived in proximity to national-religious and secular populations, especially in the cities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Petah Tikva and Bnei Brak. However, over time, separate haredi neighborhoods were established, followed by new all-haredi cities. National-religious and secular residents left some neighborhoods, turning them into haredi enclaves, and haredi residents left neighborhoods with secular majorities. Today almost all of the haredi population lives in distinctly haredi concentrations. In mixed neighborhoods, tensions and disagreements often surround various issues such as driving on Shabbat, installing an *eruv* (ritual enclosure), allocating buildings for synagogues and schools, control of community councils, and the like.

Despite the above-noted processes of change in haredi society, there seems to be no change in the trend towards geographic segregation. The dominant trend in housing is the establishment of separate neighborhoods

and towns for each sector, and it seems that none of the parties is interested in living in integrated housing. Should haredi residents seek to live in a mixed neighborhood, or secular and religious Zionists wish to live in a haredi neighborhood, this act will likely be interpreted as part of a plan to take over and alter the existing character of the neighborhood or town.

In complete opposition to the above-described situation, are the activities of *Adraba* and *Netiot*, two organizations that for the past several years have been encouraging the establishment of communities of orthodox Zionists and newly religious haredi populations. These organizations apparently prefer to establish communities in mixed neighborhoods and towns. Two such communities have been established, one in Haifa and one in Ma'alot, and it seems that they have managed to integrate well into their surroundings.

Employment

During the past decade the Israeli government, in partnership with public and philanthropic organizations, has initiated programs to encourage employment in the haredi sector. These are intended to create jobs and encourage employers to hire haredi workers, and concomitantly to train haredi personnel for required professions and employment fields. This initiative has significantly increased employment rates within the haredi community, among both women and men.

One of the most successful programs was carried out in the haredi town of Upper Modi'in and has since become a model for other places. A center was established that employs thousands of haredi women in various fields: computer programming, call centers, document scanning, preparing legal briefs, and more. The center strictly enforces a religious work environment, e.g., separation between men and women, no work on in-between holiday days (e.g., during the festivals of Sukkot and

Passover), allowing workers to leave early for Chanukah candle lighting, strictly kosher food in vending machines, and the like. This model shows how raising employment levels can exist in parallel to the continued trend towards segregation.

On the other hand, many young haredi people who graduated from vocational and/or academic studies have found jobs in the general job market, in either the private or public sector, despite initial challenges in being accepted into an integrated work place and the need for a period of adaptation.

It can therefore be seen that there are differing approaches towards integration of the haredi sector into the general job market among those involved in increasing employment. The core issue is whether it is preferable to retain segregation between the haredi and other sectors, or to integrate them in employment. At this point it seems most sensible to state that both approaches are correct, since it is not really possible to create enough separate jobs for all haredi people seeking to enter the job market. On the other hand, if we do not find separate solutions for those haredi people who prefer them, we will not be able to maximize the full potential of this work force.

Enlistment in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

As part of the steps taken to increase the enlistment rate of young haredi men into the IDF, the military has set up two designated tracks. One is *Netzach Yehuda*, better known as the *Nacha"l Haredi*, and the other is the *Shachar* track (Hebrew acronym of "haredi integration"). These differing tracks demonstrate the two approaches described above.

Basic training in *Netzach Yehuda* takes place in a completely separated area (with canvas fencing all around) on a major army base, with no contact with any other soldiers, especially female military

personnel. The haredi soldiers are provided food under a very strict level of kosher supervision, engage in regular religious study classes, prayers, proper observance of the Sabbath and holidays. The soldiers in this track are highly trained combatants, who are then deployed into units that protect the Jordan Valley, and their third year of service is dedicated to study.

The *Shachar* tracks are designed to integrate young haredi men into the IDF's technical and technological units. At the start of their military service the soldiers acquire a profession in which they work throughout their time in the IDF. After training these soldiers are then integrated into various army bases where certain guidelines are observed, such as an immediate work circle of men only, regular religious study classes, strict kosher food, and crucially, they live at home and commute to the base daily.

We see that in one model, haredi soldiers become part of the fighting troops while remaining in segregated units, while in the other model haredi soldiers work in a semi-segregated team but within the general military environment. It is important to note that *Netzach Yehuda* is intended for unmarried men age 18 and older, while the *Shachar* track is aimed at married men aged 22 and up. It seems that the haredi world is more cautious and protective towards unmarried men in terms of contact with mainstream military personnel, which includes women and secular soldiers at all levels.

Vocational and Academic Studies

Among the steps taken to increase the rate of employment among the haredi sector are many activities aimed at encouraging both men and women to join vocational training programs and enroll in academic institutions. This population sector expresses an overwhelming

preference for separate programs designed to accommodate their needs and religious requirements, be it separate vocational training programs, separate academic institutes or separate haredi branches of colleges. The percentage of haredi students enrolled in general academic or training institutions is currently very low, although it is growing.

Creating separate professional and vocational frameworks for haredi students may adversely affect the quality of study at times. Specifically, it leads to a limited range of vocational and study courses. This, in turn, impacts employment options, especially for positions requiring advanced degrees that are not taught at haredi colleges.

"Being in a Diaspora Among Jews" or "Being Part of All of Israel"

The picture that emerges from the above indicates that there are two conflicting trends within the processes of change that the haredi sector is experiencing. The first is the desire to preserve segregation in the workplace, in the IDF and in higher education. The second is the desire to integrate into the general population in those very same places.

The first trend stems from the approach that describes the haredi situation within the state of Israel as "being in a diaspora among Jews". According to this approach, those observing the Torah and all its commandments must separate themselves as much as possible from the surrounding population in order to preserve their religious identity and beliefs. The second trend derives from the view that the people of Israel are one entity that includes those who observe the commandments and those who don't, and that these differences do not preclude mutual responsibility, as Judaism teaches that all Jews are brothers. This outlook also justifies living together, despite wide differences and disagreements in worldview.

Those in favor of segregation claim that without these barriers many may become somewhat negligent of religious observance. In contrast, those supporting integration see total segregation as an extreme approach that runs the risk of causing a serious rift in Israeli society. They fear it will also increase polarization and hostility towards the haredi sector by mainstream Israeli society. These differences in opinion have occupied internal haredi public discourse over the past few years, as can be discerned in the polemic regarding the "New Haredi". It seems that resolution of this issue is largely dependent on the ability of those who integrate to retain their identity while remaining fully committed to the haredi population's basic values and lifestyle, despite the lack of segregation.

Melting Pot versus Multiculturalism

The two conflicting trends mentioned here do not depend solely on the inner processes of the haredi world. They are also influenced to a great extent by the prevailing atmosphere in the general public. Ben Gurion's (Israel's first Prime Minister) concept of statehood and the melting pot were a real and tangible threat to the continued existence of the haredi lifestyle. Haredi Judaism had no interest in melting into secular, Western-oriented, Zionist society, and indeed, their cultural segregation and entrenchment has succeeded beyond belief, creating a sub-society numbering about one million.

The multicultural approach has replaced the melting pot concept and significantly reduced the haredi community's existential anxiety. This attitude recognizes the right of the haredi sector to maintain its unique culture, while at the same time it encourages their integration into all areas of employment, studies, military and volunteer service. This is what allows a haredi person to feel comfortable in a completely secular environment at work, in the IDF or in academic studies.

We are now at the point where Israeli society is being put to the test. Does Israeli society honestly wish to include the haredi sector while enabling them to preserve their cultural identity? Or is this only lip-service, concealing a wish to change haredi beliefs and life style?

Conclusion

I believe that for our future here in the Land of Israel and the state of Israel we must find the way to a full, communal life together, not just one in which we live alongside each another. This, to my understanding, is the only way we can survive as one Jewish people living together in their own state. For this reason we must become better acquainted, despite the vast differences between us. The changes taking place in haredi society today seem to me necessary and positive. Yet the most important task faced by all is to make sure that these processes do not include a slide into secularism, as this would leave no alternative but to renew haredi segregation. Our joint fate must have a shared purpose for the future of us all in this country.