

Israel's Next Major Social Challenge – Haredi Internal “Aliyah” –

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The issue

The relationship between the State of Israel and its Haredi population is of concern to the entire Jewish world. From the economic and social instability of an exponentially growing community of non-productive citizens, to the unsavory headlines about extreme and violent behavior, it is clear that a policy of laissez-faire can no longer be tolerated.

Yet how might we characterise the problem facing us? Is this a fundamental issue threatening the Jewish and liberal identity of the State of Israel? Or is this an issue of failed public policy that needs to be re-thought?

Clearly the way we choose to define a problem will also dictate the way we need to tackle it. It is our judgment that if we choose to address Israel's relationship with the Haredi community as a fundamental issue of Jewish identity, we will find that both sides have no room for compromise and will spiral swiftly into cultural war.

While Western norms might suggest no society should brook women's exclusion and monist approaches to religious observance, so too the Haredi world cannot engage head-on with all that the State of Israel represents. The blasphemous establishment of the State prior to the revelation of the Messiah, and the prohibition of cooperation with sinners (as Zionists are defined) place direct negotiation with the government entirely out of the question. Confronting the Haredim on issues of mutually exclusive principle will lead to deep and lasting conflict.

As an inheritors of 120 years of Zionist tradition, we would suggest that this is not the Zionist way. Israel built itself through its ability to reach workable solutions to intractable problems within the Jewish People and the Zionist movement, from the now-much-maligned Status Quo to this day. Our way is not the way of internal Jewish confrontation and conflagration. We must see the issue with Haredim as a problem that policy has a chance of affecting. Hence the choice to approach these issues in the light of what may now be called multi-culturalism, and what was once called the spirit of pragmatic politics.

Internal Aliyah

What might a pragmatic, multi-cultural approach look like? How might we begin to characterize the selective integration of Haredim into the educational, economic, and social fabric of Israeli society? We recommend using the metaphor of "internal aliyah". Of course unlike other previous waves of aliyah, Israeli Haredim already live here. But similar to other waves of aliyah, the State will be required to invest heavily in the absorption of significant numbers of Haredi Jews into Israeli society. The metaphor of "internal aliyah" embodies the hope of Jewish reunification and eventual strengthening of the State of Israel, at the same time as focussing the mind on the size of the challenge that lies before us.

How many haredim are there? Questions regarding Haredi demography are not straightforward. The definition is so complex that Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) gave competing evaluations that vary somewhere in between 750,000 to 900,000. The challenge is not in the gathering of data but rather in the blurry borders of Haredi identity itself. Few Haredim will choose to define themselves as such, not all Haredi children study at specific Haredi educational institutions, their lifestyle and choice of housing are not easily pinpointed. All these parameters only partially capture the complexity of the group's identity.

Bearing in mind the extremely high Haredi birth rate, a good working assumption for the Israeli government is that the entire population could potentially be close to, if not more than, a million people!

The Challenge

The challenge of selectively integrating nearly a million Haredim through adjustments to the welfare state and social policy infrastructure is huge, and the risks are high. The process and the outcome bear the risk of turning into a *Kulturkampf* for a Haredi collapse into state of anomie, putting immense pressure on the welfare state and redefining the place of religion in public life. One Haredi political leader frankly represented both the government's fear and that of the Haredi leadership, saying: "we are one size too big for our community; maybe too large in terms of Israeli society". The process of the Haredi community adapting and selectively integrating into the social economic realm is a defining moment in Haredi and Israeli history.

Despite the size of the challenge, success will not emerge through wholesale solutions. Nuance and attention to detail will be critical, since contrary to popular assumptions, the Haredi community is far more diverse than other social groups. One size will not fit all.

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Beyond the obvious differences between Hassidim and Mitnagdim, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, there are many different groups and subdivisions: Anglo-Saxon Haredim, Ba'alei Tshuva, the Jerusalem zealots organized within the Eda Haredit, neo-Breslav Hassidim, Chabad, and more. Some Haredi communities are situated within secular cities. Others live in new Haredi towns (Elad, Beitar and Kiryat Sefer) while others still reside in the historic Haredi centers of Jerusalem and B'nei Brak. As a matter of fact, the majority of Haredim live outside of the historical centers. Amongst Sephardic

Haredim, there is a subdivision between those who identify with the Shas party and the more conservative integrated Haredi households. Another example of these intricacies is the substantial difference between being a hassid in a large community and being a hassid in a small community. This process of selective integration has already created a powerful new Haredi middle class: a group that might play a crucial mediating role in the coming years.

These divisions shape each community's positions vis-à-vis the state, other Israelis and, more importantly, its orientation towards participation in the labor market, education, housing and welfare.

Bearing in mind the scale of the task, and the sensitivities of the cultural issues, some might question our image of an "internal aliyah". Surely the most important factors in all other "external" waves of aliyah have been intention and commitment? Any person who has left their home country to set themselves up anew in Israel has already demonstrated a significant degree of commitment to integration. How can we compare this to the attitude of Haredim towards the State of Israel in which they already live? And if we sense at best ambivalence and at worse hostility towards the host country on the part of the Haredim, why would we work according to the model of aliyah, whose fundamental assumptions are built upon shared aims?

We would agree that had there been signs that Israeli Haredim were not interested in integration, or were mostly engaged in fighting it, State absorption would be counter-productive and wasteful. But any detailed look at the modes of Haredi engagement with the State, beneath the news headlines and high volume pronouncements of the minority extremes, tells a very different story. Israel's Haredim are in the midst of significant change; a change that points them in the clear direction of selective integration. Consumer habits are shifting, access to the internet is a radical fact, and traditional leadership structures are evolving.

From isolation to involvement

Haredi society is turning from modesty to mass consumption. When a society evolves from extolling the virtues of financial restraint to an unspoken surrender to the draw of consumerism, priorities alter inexorably and the middle class grows larger. The internet is now a feature in the life of the average Haredi family. Even inside Mea Shearim, there are 12,000 connections to the Internet. Internet firms recently commissioned research into the market potential of a form of limited, censored Internet, Koshernet. The results were unequivocal: Haredim are too ensconced in the regular Internet for them to buy into a more limited form, irrespective of what their rabbis may say.

Just as the internet and IT technologies have become the cradle of new Haredi public opinion, a new Haredi geography has created an alternative balance of power between local communities and traditional centers of religious-political power. What was once the centralized core of power, "Daat Torah," has been turned into many "holding companies" each with its own rulings. Rabbi Steinman has proven to be the last of the historical leaders that understands the burden of leadership in times of change and crisis. His ambivalence towards the introduction of new norms enabled significant change.

Two new centers of power concentrate around local Haredi government and the social political movement of the "light blue shirts." This group of working academic middle class Haredim is at the beginning of its political organization in form of a new party called *Toiv*. They are involved in business, non-profits and government. These emerging entrepreneurs will increasingly hold the key to mediating between government projects and ultra-Orthodox society.

The field of welfare has seen the most drastic change. Moving away from total suspicion of the State's social services, Haredim have become primary clients of services ranging from the needs of the elderly through children with special needs and at-risk youth, to sensitive issues of domestic violence and child abuse. Some of these problems were swept under the rug until very recently, much like in other conservative religious groups around the world. Such wholesale identification with the public system in such a vulnerable area of the community speaks volumes for the altered way in which the Haredi community now views the State. The strategies of gradualism, cultural sensitivity and use of mediators have proven fruitful, and as a result "reflective" professions, such as social work, psychology, special-needs education, are now taken seriously in the Haredi world. The impact of respectable reflection in a traditional society cannot be underestimated.

Thus while public pronouncements and occasionally televised flash-points may draw attention, underneath the media's radar the Haredi community is moving towards selective, careful, gradual integration.

State responses

How is the Israeli government responding to this wave of internal aliyah? As in its work in social service support, the government works through local government and Haredi entrepreneurs to supply the growing demand for services. The civil service, in general, is innovative and culturally sensitive, understanding the long-term implications of the new Israeli demography in which one third of all Jewish children now grow up in Haredi households. It is a coordinated pragmatic strategy of careful absorption.

Labor market

The coordinated effort on behalf of government would not be possible without the generosity and blessing of the Ministry of Finance, the Bank of Israel, and the rest of Israel's economic leadership. The consensus around the unbearable price of low male Haredi participation in the labor market has made investment in education, employment, military service and higher education a strategic decision. Hundreds of millions of Shekels been allocated to meet the challenge.

A significant effort is being made in the realm of labor policy since poverty is rampant in the community due to the decision of many Haredi men to leave the yeshiva. This deep shift had to be supported by generous financial assistance. The idea that it is acceptable for Haredi men to work is gaining legitimacy in the community and a wide variety of support services that accompany the job seeker have been developed. The current data show only a modest four percent growth in labor market participation but does not represent the absolute numbers of thousands of Haredi workers, or the new climate that has developed.

Haredi women participation rate in the labor market is at approximately 50 percent, which is extremely high for a conservative society with large families. The next step the state has to take will be to empower families to reassess the gender division of labor in the household.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has decided to play a central role in the effort to raise Haredi participation in the labor market. This serves to lower tension regarding the military model of a nation-in-arms and offers solutions to high demand in technical personnel. The IDF's project, called *Shahar*, which was short for *Sherut Haredim* or "Haredi Service," gave married men, age 22 or more, excellent vocational training during their short service, combined with attractive compensation and the opportunity for further support in the future. While this arrangement is under review following a Supreme Court ruling, the return on this large controversial investment is the nearly 100% participation of the graduates in the labor market, most within the profession they acquired in the army.

Education

A parallel change took place over the last decade, as a handful of Haredi students in higher education now number some 10,000 graduates and students, most fully subsidized. The Haredi male student opts for studies in law, accounting and hi-tech, while women study education and social work. Israel's Council on Higher Education and some universities met the challenge, allowing different models of Haredi polytechnics, Haredi campuses, Haredi colleges, Open University courses and special programs for Haredi students in regular institutions. Since Haredi Israelis will, within a decade, make up one third of every Jewish age cohort, universities will have to adapt, as other social institutions have, in order to compete.

The field of education is the most sensitive and volatile in political terms. Current policy, shaped for the first time in almost sixty years, aims at gradual, cautious absorption. There is latent agreement that this long process will start from the envelope of services and support for teachers, avoiding the sensitive issue of a core curriculum. The recruitment of Haredi school supervisors has accompanied the development and adaptation of many services addressing the needs of students and schools.

The big questions of so-called "secular studies" among boys, and the opening of alternatives for high school age boys who cannot cope with the demands of yeshiva studies, are built on a local basis through compromise and agreement. The Government has recognized the Haredi claim that the "little yeshiva" that caters for 75% of Haredi high school boys is fundamental to the community's identity, and in so doing relinquishing claim upon this institution. However the rest

of this age group, at-risk youth and under achievers who have not succeeded in traditional little yeshivas, study in institutions that teach secular curriculum in a variety of models.

Haredi girls' education is in good shape and resembles Beit Yaakov in the Diaspora or good parochial school education in the U.S. Shaped historically as a teachers college, Beit Yaakov is evolving as a polytechnic semi-academic institute where almost half of the girls take vocational training that is heavily subsidized by the state. The moral question with regard to acceptance of Sephardi girls is pressing, but it does not reflect the general integration of these schools and seminars into public education.

A Picture of the Future

All this efforts combined represent a path of relatively smooth selective integration. According to this scenario, one third of Israel's Haredim will become active participating middle-class citizens while maintaining their Haredi identity. A second third will remain organized in a more sector-like mode, dependent on welfare and subsidies. The remaining third may well find its social frameworks breaking down in the face of modernity and technology, sliding into a state of Haredi *anomie*. While this prediction is by no means utopian, it still represents a hugely significant improvement for Haredim and for Israel as a whole.

Potential obstacles

In order for this differential scenario to play out in as healthy and positive way as possible, we must take care to prevent extremism and legal generalizations.

First, we must work to stifle a toxic combination of extremist nationalism and Haredi life-styles (known as Hard"al). This phenomenon, assimilating latent racism, anti-democratic traditions, and militarism, must be caught in the bud. Recently the government has blocked all funding for Haredi integration that had instead reached Hard"al youth. This is a significant move in the correct direction.

Second, we need to shift Haredi policy into government ministries and away from the Supreme Court. As we have pointed out, the infinite intricacies of the Haredi relationship with the State demand a piecemeal pragmatic approach that will always be at odds with a legal body seeking to set national norms. The Supreme Court works at an entirely different level of resolution than required for the detail and convolutions of a policy of selective integration. At the high-resolution level of local services, exceptions and compromises are the tools of the trade; tools that are anathema for a Supreme Court.

As for Jewish philanthropy, this is hard, complex terrain demanding know-how and caution but it is also an opportunity to bridge divides in communities abroad. The best investment might be in the new emerging Haredi middle class.

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