

NEW TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF HAREDI CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Edited by
David N. Myers
Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe

Casden Institute
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Volume 22

Steven J. Ross, *Editor*

David N. Myers and

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Foreword

From antiquity until today, Jews have been continuously forced to disperse throughout the world. But how did Jews in motion adapt to their new countries and their customs? The answer is complex because Jews have worshiped in many ways and manifested their Judaism in multiple fashions. There are significant differences in the ways Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Haredi Jews adjusted to life in their new lands. Those differences, however, have not been fully documented by scholars. Volume 13 of the *Jewish Role in American Life: An Annual Review* explored the history of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in America.

Our latest volume, #22, *New Trends in the Study of Haredi Culture and Society*, edited by David N. Myers and Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe, is devoted solely to examining the multiple experiences and complex histories of ultra-Orthodox Haredi Jews as they settled in the United States, Europe, Russia, and Israel. The word “Haredi” translates into “tremble” before God or “fear God.” The volume’s introduction and nine essays look at two major aspects of Haredi life. Part I is devoted to Haredi Culture and Society, while Part II examines Haredi Politics in Historical Perspective.

In Part I, Daniel Staetsky uses creative demographic techniques to estimate that in 2023 Haredim numbered 2.3 million or about 15% of the world’s Jewish population. Put another way, roughly every seventh Jewish individual today is Haredi. Galina Zelenina looks at the adjustments and accommodations made by Jews in Russia’s Chabad community and the ways in which the Haredim managed to survive and even thrive under often hostile circumstances. Chaya R. Nove examines how Hasidim arriving from post-Holocaust Eastern Europe relied on popular culture and language to help adjust to life in New York City. Shuki Friedman switches our focus to Israel and how Haredi used state law and communal pressure to confront modern threats like cell-phone use among youth. Lea Taragin-Zeller analyzes how Israeli Haredi’s gendered education system maintains strict differences between what boys and

girls are taught—secular and religious—and the subsequent roles they are expected to fulfill.

In Part II, Nathaniel Deutsch dispels the idea that Haredim in Palestine and then Israel were always on the political right. Haredi Judaism, he argues, “also possessed a complex historical and ideological relationship with radical Jewish politics—and with socialism and communism, more generally.” Itamar Ben Ami contrasts Israeli Haredi’s evolving relations to the state to that of their American counterparts. Benjamin Brown surveys the awakening public interest in Haredi Judaism in both academic and political spheres and how three post-1977 events shaped the current Israeli landscape. Nissim Leon steps back in time to chart the evolution of far-right Haredi political parties from 1948 to 2022. The final article by Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe, David N. Myers, Mark Trencher, and Chaya Lehrfield-Trop uses recent polling results to compare Haredi political attitudes and identity in the United States and Israel.

Taken collectively, the essays presented by David N. Myers and Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe offer us a comprehensive examination of multiple aspects of Haredi life in multiple parts of the world. We also want to acknowledge that this issue of the *Casden Annual Review* was inspired by Nomi M. Stolzenberg’s and David N. Myers’ pathbreaking work, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (2022). Our hope is that this will be one of many volumes to explore the important yet under-written history of the Haredim.

Steven J. Ross

*Myron and Marian Casden Director
Distinguished Professor of History*

Introduction

by David N. Myers and Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe

There is perhaps no other group of Jews in the world today that is less understood or elicits more negative reactions than the Haredim or ultra-Orthodox. Often cast by less religious Jews as culturally backward, clannish, and self-interested, Haredim, in fact, represent a diverse collection of individuals and sub-groups who vary in ethnic origin (Ashkenazi and Mizrachi), religious and ritual disposition (Hasidic and non-Hasidic), and positioning in the world (self-defined traditionalist and modern flanks).¹ The internal diversity is often masked or glossed over by the common image of a sea of identically dressed, black-clad men swaying in lock-step at a religious event or political protest.

There is a clear tension between the image of inviolable uniformity (and conformity) among Haredim and the largely unrecognized diversity within the Haredi world. And there is, of course, a clear tension between the desire of Haredim to live their lives as they see fit—not as objects of curiosity, scorn or ethnographic inquiry—and growing public interest in their lives, mores, and attitudes. Indeed, tension is built into the very idea of “Haredim.” The term “Haredi,” which has biblical roots (Isaiah 66:5), has come to connote one who trembles or fears God in ways that are different from other Jews, including other self-described Orthodox Jews. Although Hasidism, a pietist movement that rebelled against the Lithuanian rabbinic elite, emerged in the late eighteenth century, a distinctive religious, social, and even political identity that we might call “Haredi” emerged in East and East Central Europe later in the nineteenth century—even if use of that linguistic designation became common only in the latter half of the twentieth century.

What was it that gave shape to this nineteenth-century phenomenon? It was not only a redoubled commitment to scrupulous observance of *halakah*, Jewish law, but also a new awareness of the challenges and outright threats that modern life posed to a Haredi or “ultra-Orthodox” lifestyle.² Haredim sensed that the secular world around them was filled with contaminants that could easily dissolve their way of life. As such, they sought both to push back against and insulate themselves from the ever-lurking ills of modernity. At times, they made use of modern modes of communication and organization in order to wage battle against these threats. In doing so, a core defining tension was revealed: Haredim belonged to a proudly anti-modern movement directed against and yet born of modernity.

This form of conservative innovation has ample precedent in the secular era; scholars ranging from Peter L. Berger, Charles Taylor, José Casanova, Talal Asad, William E. Connolly and Saba Mahmood have demonstrated that secularism spelled not the demise but rather the transformation of religion into new forms.³ Consistent with this point, the competing impulses of preservation and adaptation to shifting circumstances have led to the “invention of tradition,” as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger famously titled their book.⁴ That is, Haredim developed new forms of Jewish religious and ritual expression that they regarded as both legitimate and continuous with prior practice. The tendency to project back into the past their own innovations was a strategy of validation, consistent with the oft-expressed desire to walk in “the path of the Elder Israel (Jacob) (*derekh Yisra'el saba*).”

Such a perspective challenges the widespread external perception of Haredim as frozen in time, insulated from both temporal and spatial change. At once, it cracks open the image of Haredim as a cloistered community sealed off from the rest of society and grants far more agency to Haredim in shaping their communities in response to trying social conditions. In fact, for all of their professed desire to live at a remove as an “enclave culture,” Haredim are both far more masters of their own fate *and* embedded in the midst of a wider society than they often have cared to admit.

This is not a novel insight. The historian of Hungarian Jewry, Michael Silber, followed in the path of his mentor, the great scholar of modern Jewry and Orthodoxy, Jacob Katz, by suggesting more than thirty years ago that Haredi Judaism was “not an unchanged and unchanging remnant of pre-modern, traditional Jewish society, but as much a child of modernity and change as any of its ‘modern’ rivals.”⁵ Later scholarship has refined this line of argument, focusing on the dynamic relationship between Haredi communities and the

societies in which they reside. For example, Kimmy Caplan and Emmanuel Sivan suggested in 2003 that Haredim interact with the host Israeli society in which they dwell via a process they call “integration without assimilation.”⁶ More recently, Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers offered a different analytic frame by referring to the “unwitting assimilation” of a self-described Haredi “shtetl” that also operates as a self-regulating municipality; that is to say, while the community (Kiryas Joel) regards the “idea” of assimilation as a grave threat to its existence, there is a constant process of absorbing and adapting to political, economic, social, linguistic, and cultural norms from the broader American society.⁷

The impulse to situate Haredim as part of American, Israeli or any other society—rather than beyond their bounds—marks a healthy degree of de-exceptionalizing that has animated scholarship in the last decade or so. As Haredim have become more publicly visible, numerous, and diverse, scholars have expanded the repertoire of research interests beyond the once dominant model of a Haredi “society of learners,” as the pioneering sociologist Menachem Friedman described the cloistered lifestyle of Haredi men in Israel committed to a life of constant and all-consuming Torah study.⁸ Other eminent sociologists of Friedman’s generation including Samuel Heilman and William Helmreich probed deeply into “the world of the yeshiva,” as Helmreich titled a 1982 book.⁹

But as this volume’s contributions suggest, contemporary research has expanded well beyond the habitus of the yeshiva and its routinized praxis of study. Scholars today explore the multifaceted lived experience of Haredi Jews, focusing on new themes including gender relations, the clash between traditional Jewish and secular educational norms, receptivity to scientific and medical knowledge, the relationship to the state, and an increasingly open and bold range of political activity. As topics of research have diversified, so too has the community of researchers engaging them, which is not a causal accident; there are more scholars today who bring novel perspectives that emanate from beyond the world of traditional Jewish observance *and* there are more scholars who came from or currently live in Haredi communities, and thus offer an illuminating new angle on participant-observation.

The novel perspectives of this new scholarly generation de-exceptionalize the study of Haredim both by understanding their daily experiences inside and by situating them within the larger societies of which they are part. It is worth dwelling on this point, because it stands in stark contrast to a competing impulse to exceptionalize Haredim in popular culture in recent years. Author

Deborah Feldman wrote in 2012 a rather sensationalist account of her rearing in and exit from a Haredi community, *Unorthodox*, that was later turned into a widely watched, four-part television mini-series.¹⁰ In addition, there has been a spate of memoirs written by other “exiters” from Haredi communities, as well as lightly fictionalized accounts of life within them and a number of television series that depict Yiddish-speaking Haredi characters. Even when the best among them—for example, Shulem Deen’s *All Who Go Do Not Return* or the Israeli television show “Shtisel”—present textured accounts of life within a Haredi community, the public attention that they generate has more than a whiff of prurient exoticism.

It is this exoticizing impulse that makes the work of scholars today all the more important in refusing to reduce Haredim to a uniform, monochromatic collection of people slavishly beholden to archaic laws. What also makes this work germane to the moment is the growing share of the Jewish demographic pie held by Haredi Jews. As one of this volume’s contributors, Daniel Staetsky, has recently demonstrated, Haredi Jews today constitute 14% of the world’s Jewish population—and are constantly growing. By 2040, that share may rise, Staetsky estimates, to 23% of the global Jewish population.¹¹ If that were to occur, Haredim—then one of every four Jews in the world—would have a far more decisive role in shaping Jewish communal institutions, education, and politics.

Apart from that future prospect, one of the catalysts to the new burst of public and scholarly activity has been the “Haredi moment” of 2020.¹² The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 and the tumult of the US presidential election produced a new degree of Haredi activism and visibility that, in turn, attracted greater public scrutiny, bewilderment, and anger, especially in the two main sites of Haredi concentration: Israel (1.2 million) and the United States (700,000). What the wider mainstream population understood to be blatant defiance of vital public health norms in an unprecedented time, many Haredim comprehended very differently—as an existential need to preserve their way of life by congregating to pray, learn, mourn, and celebrate. These activities were not optional or deferable, but so essential as to generate fierce resistance when the state sought to restrict them. While public protest by Haredim against state action was common in Israel, it was rarer in the United States, both because of the belief that the American government was a *malkhus shel hesed* (a kingdom of grace) and because of the deeply ingrained attitude of deference toward state power by diaspora communities rooted in the ancient precept of *dina di-malkhuta dina* (the law of the kingdom

is the law). But in 2020, Haredim in New York took to the streets to protest COVID restrictions introduced by Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Meanwhile, in Israel, Haredim continued to protest against government restrictions into 2021.¹³

The taking to the streets by Haredim in 2020–2021 occurred in a particularly intense political environment. In the US, Donald Trump’s presidency galvanized religious conservatives across the denominational spectrum, including Jews. Trump and the Supreme Court that he had a major role in crafting emboldened this cross-denominational group to assert ever wider claims to religious liberty, which it came to regard as the paramount right afforded by the Constitution (in the First Amendment clause on free religious expression). For many of these conservatives, including Haredim, the COVID crisis put to the test their right to religious assembly and practice, weighed against the demands of public health. Thus, when government leaders, principally at the state level, sought to restrict such assembly and practice, religious conservatives, Haredim among them, were outraged—and expressed their objections through public protest and frequent litigation.¹⁴

The willingness to demonstrate in public—and against the state—seemed to mark a new chapter in the history of Haredi politics in the United States. It was, as Carl Schorske described it in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (1981), politics in “a sharper key” than before—that is to say, sharper than the mode of intimate, backroom negotiation with key figures—or even the pressure brought to bear by bloc-voting—that has marked Haredi political engagement in the United States. This sharper key has also been evident in the fierce push-back by Haredim to redoubled efforts by New York state in 2022 to insist that its religious schools meet “substantial equivalency requirements”—especially in terms of the provision of secular education to boys, who are typically given a curricular diet far more focused on Jewish studies than the education provided to girls.¹⁵

The new and sharper tone of Haredi politics in New York corresponds to the perception of a new assault by the state on the Haredi way of life. And yet, the Haredi alignment with a conservative political perspective is longstanding. A survey of Haredi political attitudes and behavior in the US from 2023 showed that 63% identified themselves as Republicans (as distinct from 29% of Modern Orthodox Jews). Even more revealing was the longitudinal evidence that more than 80% of Haredim have voted for Republican presidential candidates in every election since 1980 except for 1992 (Bush-Clinton) and 1996 (Clinton-Dole).¹⁶ If then political alignment between Haredim and a conservative political identity not be new, what does seem novel is the crafting

of a language of struggle for religious liberties shared by Jewish and Christian religious conservatives.

At first blush, the condition of Haredi politics in Israel would seem to be different. After all, many Haredim define themselves as anti-Zionist or, at least, non-Zionist. They relate to the State of Israel not as a “kingdom of grace,” but rather with contempt, regarding it as woefully inadequate in its defense of Jewish values, if not as an outright theological abomination. They steadfastly resist ongoing efforts to compel men from within their communities to join the Israel Defense Forces, believing that the men’s pursuit of Torah study is a vital form of national service—and, by affirming God’s commandments, of national security.

And yet, there is a parallel process of accommodation to state power in Israel akin to what occurs in the United States. With only a few pockets of outliers such as Neturei Karta, Haredim rely on state support to maintain their way of life, which includes large families in which men often devote themselves to full-time study while women are the household’s major wage-earners. Similarly, they do not abstain from participating in the political process but rather leverage their demographic power and relative cohesion to support parties such as United Torah Judaism and Shas that represent their interests. And while there is no direct parallel to the shared agenda between Jewish and *non-Jewish* religious conservatives as in the US, there has been a growing alliance between Haredim and political conservatives *within* the dominant Jewish sector of Israel politics. Of course, Haredi pragmatism and mutual interest prompted the *status quo* agreement of 1947 by which David Ben-Gurion committed the future state of Israel to observe the Sabbath and maintain the laws of *kashrut* and the religious adjudication of matters of personal status. Ben-Gurion also committed the new state to exempting Haredi yeshiva students (around four hundred at that time) from the military draft.¹⁷

The issue of draft exemption has been a hugely contentious one in Israeli political culture for decades, often pitting two groups of religious Jews—religious Zionists and Haredim—against each other. At the same time, there has been a growing alliance of interests and ideological affinity between Haredim and the more secular branch of the Zionist right, epitomized by the Likud party, which has been the dominant force in Israeli politics since Menachem Begin’s electoral triumph, known as the “mahapakh” (overturning), of 1977. This affinity marks a tectonic shift in Israel politics, as the erstwhile dovish quietism of Haredim has given way to a louder and more assertive political voice, especially among younger Haredim who increasingly identify with far-right political figures such as Itamar Ben-Gvir.¹⁸

This development calls to mind a key supposition that stands at the heart of this volume. Haredi lives, communities, and politics are not static; they never have been. Change is a constant, set against a profound commitment to constancy, to preservation, to the “path of the ancient Israel.” The ambition of this volume is to capture that process of change in two major domains. Part I offers a variety of illuminating perspectives on important changes in the cultural habits, social norms, and demography of Haredim today. The perspective is transnational, focusing not only on Israel and the United States but also Russia and other parts of Europe. Part II trains its attention on the ever-shifting world of Haredi politics over the course of a century, with a particular interest in the two major population centers, Israel and the United States. Each of the essays in this volume offers novel and deep insights into the study of Haredim at a moment of heightened scholarly and public attention, which together provide a key rationale for devoting a book to one of the most interesting and important groups in Jewish life today.

PART I: CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The volume opens with an article by Daniel Staetsky, “A ‘Demographic Hybrid’: Haredi Demography in the Early Twenty-first Century.” Staetsky’s paper examines the demographic trends of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews globally. It observes that Haredim currently comprise about 15% of the world’s Jewish population (2.3 million out of 15.7 million), with projections suggesting this could rise to 23% (4 million) by 2040. The article explores the factors behind this rapid growth, primarily high fertility rates (averaging 6.5 children per woman) combined with modern longevity. The author describes Haredim as a “demographic hybrid,” maintaining traditional fertility patterns while benefiting from contemporary life expectancies. The paper also discusses the phenomenon of “switching” or leaving the Haredi lifestyle, noting that while it occurs, its impact on overall demographic trends is limited. Case studies of Haredi communities in Belgium and the United Kingdom are presented to illustrate these demographic shifts, showing how Haredi populations have grown from small minorities to significant proportions of these countries’ Jewish populations over the past few decades.

The next article in the volume, Galina Zelenina’s “Serving the Jews, Serving the Empire: Discursive Hierarchy and Messianic Temporality in

Russian Chabad,” examines the complex political positioning of Chabad Lubavitch in Russia, particularly focusing on the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR). The author analyzes how Russian Chabad leaders navigate multiple, often conflicting, discourses aimed at different audiences: Russian authorities, the general Jewish public, the international community, and their own adherents. The study reveals Chabad’s remarkable adaptability in balancing loyalty to the Russian state with its role as part of a global Jewish movement. It explores how Chabad connects its past, present, and future, linking Lubavitcher messianism with Russian national aspirations. The article also discusses Chabad’s response to recent events, including Russia’s actions in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict, highlighting the movement’s careful maneuvering to maintain its position in Russia while supporting Israel. Zelenina argues that Chabad’s approach in Russia represents a form of “modern traditionalism,” combining traditional religious values with pragmatic engagement with contemporary realities.

Shifting focus from Russia to the US, and from politics to culture, Chaya R. Nove explores in “Innovation and Conservatism in Hasidic Pop Culture and Language” the emergence and evolution of Hasidic pop culture in New York since World War II, with a particular focus on theatrical performances, music, and literature in Yiddish. The author traces the development of these cultural forms from their modest beginnings to the current vibrant scene, highlighting how they reflect the community’s adaptation to American culture while maintaining religious values. The article also explores recent sociolinguistic studies on Hasidic Yiddish, revealing both conservative and innovative tendencies in the language. These linguistic shifts are seen as mirroring broader cultural developments in the community. Nove argues that both Hasidic pop culture and language use demonstrate a nuanced balance between tradition and modernity, challenging the notion of Hasidic society as static or isolated. The essay concludes that the Hasidic community is more diverse and adaptable than commonly perceived, as it selectively incorporates aspects of modern culture while preserving its distinct identity.

One of the key barometers of change and adherence to established authority in the Haredi community is the use of cellphones. In “Communal Self-Regulation and State Law: The Case of the “Kosher Cellphone in Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox Community,” Shuki Friedman discusses the “kosher telephone” system in the ultra-orthodox community in Israel as an example of the use of state law to preserve communal identity. He describes how the “Committee of the Rabbis on Communications Affairs” created a monitoring

system for mobile phones in the ultra-Orthodox community that relied on agreements with cell phone companies and community enforcement monitors. The article presents the challenges that digital technology poses to the ultra-orthodox identity and the measures taken to address them, including blocking certain content and services. Friedman also raises questions about the legality and ethics of the Committee's actions, and notes attempts to undertake reforms. He claims that this is an example of how a traditional community uses democratic laws to preserve an undemocratic community structure, and emphasizes the tension between preserving traditional identity and adapting to technological advancements in a modern society.

One of the main sites of tension between traditional and modern values for Israeli Haredim is in the realm of education. Lea Taragin-Zeller addresses this tension in "Stuck in Neutral: Some Ethnographic Reflections on Haredim, Education, and the State." Her article highlights a growing trend among young Haredi parents seeking extracurricular secular knowledge for their children, particularly in English and science. She discusses new initiatives, such as a Haredi-oriented science magazine, *Niflaot Olam*, that attempt to bridge the gap between traditional Haredi education and modern secular knowledge while respecting cultural sensitivities. These developments are framed within the context of broader challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which have highlighted the need for scientific literacy. The article argues that these changes reflect a gradual but significant shift in Haredi-state relations and attitudes towards secular education. This shift suggests, in turn, a slow but steady social transformation within the Haredi community as younger generations seek to balance traditional values with practical modern knowledge.

PART II: POLITICS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The second part of the volume engages the theme of politics in Haredi life, where one also notices ample instances of dynamism and transformation. Far from being a thoroughly segregated community committed to a hands-off approach to the wider world, Haredim have consistently been open to engagement with the secular (or, as it is often described, gentile) political world. This engagement, often effected through communally designated intercessors, is deemed essential in order to deliver the requisite financial resources, educational autonomy, and legal authority that undergird Haredi communities. The

papers in this section mainly discuss the complicated currents through which Haredim passed in Israel as they developed from a community dedicated to the ideal of “a society of learners” to one with a diverse array of ideals and aspirations, including more robust activity in the secular world.

But before entering the world of Israeli politics, this part begins with Nathaniel Deutsch’s “Kosher Socialism? A History of Haredi Judaism and the Left,” which offers a transnational perspective on the little-known relationship between Haredi Judaism and radical Jewish politics, particularly socialism and communism. While Haredi Judaism is often associated with political conservatism, the article explores a more complicated history. It begins by tracing the opposition of many rabbis to radical politics in the early twentieth century, which led to the formation of the Agudath Yisrael (also Agudas Yisroel) in 1912, while also highlighting figures who sought to harmonize socialism with Judaism. The article discusses the founding of the Poale Agudas Yisroel in Poland and explores the views of thinkers such as Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Hillel Zeitlin, who saw the potential holiness of socialist ideas. It also notes the contemporary paradox of Haredi communities’ increasing reliance on government aid programs typically associated with left-leaning policies, despite their right-leaning conservative voting patterns. The article concludes by suggesting that many modern Haredim might be characterized as social conservatives and economic socialists, a position that reflects the ongoing complexity of Haredi political and economic positions.

The next paper by Itamar Ben Ami, “Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and the State of Israel: New Perspectives,” also suggests new ways at looking at Haredi politics by examining anew the relationship between Haredi Judaism and the State of Israel. In highlighting the state’s crucial role in the development and operation of Israeli Haredism, Ben Ami identifies two key moments that capture vectors of power that move in opposite directions: first, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, which transformed non-Zionist Orthodox communities into a distinct “Israeli Haredism”; and second, more recent years, when Israeli Haredism has transformed itself into a “public ultra-Orthodoxy” with the aim of incorporating its values into the state. Unlike its American counterpart, Israeli Haredism can be seen as a statist phenomenon, a point that calls into question the notion of Haredim as an “exilic” group. Moreover, Ben Ami points to the emerging concept of “Haredi citizenship” that reflects a discourse of ultra-Orthodox political involvement with the state in an illiberal form. Ben Ami concludes that the evolving Haredi-state relationship calls for a nuanced understanding of how different Orthodox visions engage with

the state, potentially leading to renewed synergy between the Israeli state and ultra-Orthodoxy.

In the next paper, “From a Negligible Minority to a Rising Force: Three Formative Events in Post-1977 Haredi History,” Benjamin Brown explores the growing academic and public interest in Haredi Judaism in Israel. Brown identifies three key events that illuminate the Haredi community’s relationship to broader Israeli society: first, a famous speech by the leading Haredi authority, Rabbi Elazar Shach, in 1990; second, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s 2003 economic reforms; and third, a controversy involving the Haredi newspaper, *Yated Neeman*, in 2012. These events highlight the ideological challenges posed by Haredim to secularism, the community’s pragmatic responses to economic pressure, and internal dynamics within the Haredi world in Israel. The article also discusses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, despite initial expectations, did not significantly alter Haredi ideology or social structures. These events reveal the complex interplay between Haredi and secular Israeli sub-cultures—and bring into focus both Haredi resistance to change and periodic internal reform within the Haredi community.

The next article by Nissim Leon, “The Haredi Parties and the Rightist Camp in Israel 1948–2022: From Preference to Default,” offers a *longue durée* perspective on the relationship between Haredi political parties and the Israeli right-wing from 1948 to 2022. Leon argues that this alliance was neither eternal nor inherent but evolved over time. Historically, Haredi political parties partnered with *both* left-oriented and right-wing governments based on practical interests, primarily to secure economic resources for their communities. The rise of centrist parties opposed to Haredi interests in the 2000s, coupled with their shared criticism of the judicial system, pushed Haredi parties closer to right-wing parties. While core right-wing sentiment exists among Haredi voters, their parties’ alignment with the right is more a “political default” due to circumstances than a matter of ideological conviction. An important result of this alliance has been a strengthening of the Haredi-right partnership but at the cost of limiting Haredi political options.

The final article in this volume, “Politics, National Identity, and Democracy: A Comparison of Haredi Political Attitudes and Behavior in the United States and Israel,” is based on research conducted by two teams, an Israeli team of Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe and Chaya Lehrfield-Trop and an American team of Mark Trencher and David N. Myers. The paper presents results from online surveys of Haredim that not only shed light on their political tendencies and voting preferences in Israel and the United States; it also

examines how Haredim in both settings define themselves and their identity vis-à-vis the state. Do Haredim regard themselves as American or Israeli? How significant is democracy to them? What are the most important issues that guide their voting tendencies? How often do they vote—and from whom do they receive guidance in advance of elections? The paper offers responses to these and other questions in both American and Israeli contexts; as such, it provides the raw material for a rich profile of Haredi political actors in the twenty-first century. It takes an additional step by comparing findings from Israel and the United States, which surface differences in degree of identification with the state, appreciation for democracy, extent of Zionist affiliation, and the relative importance of a bond with Jews elsewhere in the world.

As a whole, the data from this paper affirm a point around which the entire volume revolves. That is, it is necessary to resist the impulse to treat Haredim—either in transnational or local contexts—as a singularly uniform body of people. Close study reveals an impressive degree of difference across (and within) borders in terms of political identity, socio-economic status, and attitude toward the state. It is our hope that future research will capture the diversity within the unbending commitment to Torah that defines Haredi communities today.

Notes

1. This point is made by Kimmy Caplan and Nissim Leon in their recent collection of essays on contemporary Haredi life in Israel, where they note that “‘Haredi’ is essentially a family name, not a first name”—that is, it consists of “many streams, groups, and sub-groups.” See Caplan and Leon, “Introduction: Haredim and Israel, Haredim in Israel, Israeli Haredim,” in *Contemporary Israeli Haredi Society: Profiles, Trends and Challenges*, ed. Caplan and Leon (London: Routledge, 2024), 1.
2. The English-language term “ultra-Orthodox” has often been used to describe Haredi Jews, though it is decidedly not favored by many in that group. See, for example, the plaint of Avi Shafran, director of public affairs of the Haredi group Agudath Israel of America, who argues that the preposition “ultra” bears the negative connotation of “extreme, beyond normal or beyond the mainstream.” See Shafran, “Stop Otherizing Haredi Jews,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/haredi-jews-ultra-orthodox.html>. A number of scholars, particularly Menachem Keren-Kratz, make use of the term “Extreme Orthodoxy,” which strikes us as a term of opprobrium, to refer to Haredim. See, for example, Menachem Keren-Kratz, “Maramaros, Hungary—The Cradle of Extreme Orthodoxy,” *Modern Judaism* 35, no. 2 (2015): 147–74, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/580978>. In a similar vein, see also Elk Dödtmann, “Haredi Fundamentalism in the State of Israel: How the Status Quo between State and Religion Provides Ground for a Modern Religious Counter-collective” [in German], *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 7 (2023): 1, doi:10.1007/s41682-022-00139-8.
3. See Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
4. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Michael K. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 26.
5. Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy,” 24.
6. Kimmy Caplan and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *Israeli Haredim: Integration without Assimilation?* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2003).

7. Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022). See Chaim Waxman's criticism of that framing in his review in *Contemporary Jewry* 43 (2023): 177–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-022-09473-8>. In a similar vein, Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman refer to Haredi Judaism as a “contra-acculturation movement,” Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, “Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim,” in *Fundamentalism Observed (The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 1)*, edited by Martin E. Marty and Scott R. Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1991), 204–5.
8. Menachem Friedman, *Ha-ḥevrah ha-ḥaredit: Mekorot, megamot ve-tahalikhim* [The Haredi Society: Sources, Trends, and Processes] (Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim le-ḥeḳer Yisra'el, 1991). See also his earlier *Ḥevrah ve-dat: Ha-Ortodoksiyah ha-lo-tsiyonit be-Eretz-Yisra'el 1918–1936* [Society and Religion: The Non-Zionist Orthodoxy in Eretz-Israel, 1918–1936] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitshak Ben-Tsevi, 1977). And see also Yosseph Shilhav and Menachem Friedman, *Hitpashtut tokh histagrut: ha-ḳehilah ha-ḥaredit bi-Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim le-ḥeḳer Yisra'el, 1985).
9. See William B. Heilman, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1992), as well as Samuel C. Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra-Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992). An earlier cohort of scholars, including George Kranzler and Solomon Poll, offered up holistic accounts of the communal life of Hasidim in New York framed around the notion that they constituted an “island in the city,” according to the title of Israel Rubin's book on the Satmar community. See Rubin, *Satmar: An Island in the City* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972).
10. Deborah Feldman, *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of My Hasidic Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).
11. L. Daniel Staetsky, “Haredi Jews around the World: Population Trends and Estimates,” report of the Institute of Jewish Research, March 2022, <https://www.jpr.org.uk/reports/haredi-jews-around-world-population-trends-and-estimates?id=18073>.
12. It was this moment that prompted the creation in 2021 of an international consortium of scholars devoted to the study of Haredi culture and society, the Haredi Research Group, <https://www.harediresearchgroup.org>.
13. For the United States, see Faygie Holt, “Turmoil Engulfs NY Haredi Community amid COVID Restrictions, Protests,” *Israel Hayom*, October 9, 2020, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/10/09/turmoil-engulfs-ny-haredi-community-amid-covid-restrictions-protests/>; for Israel, see “Ultraorthodox Extremists Protest Coronavirus Enforcement in Jerusalem,” *Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/ultra-orthodox-extremists-protest-coronavirus-enforcement-in-jerusalem-658417>.

14. See James G. Hodge, Jr., Hanna Reinke, and Claudia Reeves, “Balancing Religious Freedoms and Public Health Protections during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Religious Freedom in the Age of COVID-19 Series, Berkely Center, Georgetown University, June 3, 2020, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/balancing-religious-freedoms-and-public-health-protections-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>; and Ryan Houser and Andrés Constantin, “COVID-19, Religious Freedom and the Law: The United States’ Case,” *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 49, no. 1 (2023): 24–40, doi:10.1017/amj.2023.14.
15. For a critical perspective on this development, see Michael A. Helfand, “Substantially Uncertain,” *City Journal*, July 22, 2024, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/nyseds-legal-battle-with-orthodox-jewish-schools#:~:text=NYSED%20has%20fielded%20numerous%20allegations,the%20demands%20of%20substantial%20equivalency>. A catalyst to new public attention to Haredi private schools was a series of lengthy articles in *The New York Times* beginning with a block-buster four-page story by Eliza Shapiro and Brian Rosenthal, “In Hasidic Enclaves, Failing Private Schools Are Flush with Public Money,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/11/nyregion/hasidic-yeshivas-schools-new-york.html>.
16. See Mark Trencher and David N. Myers, “A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors: Haredi and Modern Orthodox Sectors,” Nishma Research Report, September 2023, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Orthodox%20Jewish%20Political%20Attitudes%20and%20Behaviors%20September%202023.pdf>.
17. Eli Askhenazi, “How Ben-Gurion’s Pragmatic Decision Led to Haredim Draft Exemption—Analysis,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 26, 2024, https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-807773#google_vignette.
18. See Ilan Ben Zion, “Haredi Voters Drift Hard Right in Leadership Vacuum,” AP, October 30, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-religion-jerusalem-israel-29fa429e432e87bdb2f62f7a5a1d95d7>. See also Dani Statman, “Ke-khol she-haredim yithazku politit hem yizmu pegi’ot be-demokratyah,” Israel Democracy Institute, January 23, 2023, <https://www.idi.org.il/articles/47523>.

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*PART I: CULTURE
AND SOCIETY*

A “Demographic Hybrid”: Haredi Demography in the Early Twenty-first Century

by *Daniel Staetsky*

INTRODUCTION

This essay presents and interprets the fundamentals of Haredi demography. How many Haredi Jews exist? What forces account for the change in size and relative weight of this population among Jews, on the global scale? How is Haredi demography different from the demography of other Jewish and non-Jewish populations? This is not the first time that these questions have been addressed systematically but, really, that very first time was not that long ago. In 2022, the first assessment of the size and distribution of the global Haredi population was published—a development long overdue.¹ It contrasts strongly with the fate of the estimates of Jewish population as a whole. From the end of the nineteenth century till this very day, estimates of the number of Jews globally and in individual countries, have been published in a special chapter of the *American Jewish Year Book*. Haredi population accounts are therefore about 120 years behind the general Jewish ones!

Arguably, better late than never. Yet it is worth devoting a few words to explain how Haredi demography found itself in such an unambiguous position of a “low priority.” This is for two reasons. First, religiosity in the West has declined over the past 120 years among Jews and non-Jews alike, and strong and committed religiosity has become very marginal in many Western and European societies. This was reflected by the diminishing centrality of religious institutions in public life and by the reduction in intensity of religiosity at a personal level, as expressed, for example, via the reduced attendance of places

of worship. Steven Bruce's choice of a title for his book presenting the secularization thesis ("God Is Dead") is very telling.² More moderate assessments exist, yet a drift toward a lesser role of religious ideas and institutions, both in the broadly defined West and beyond, is a matter of wide consensus.³ In view of this decline, monitoring the population dynamics of the Haredim did not feel like a high priority. What would be the point of monitoring the numerical fate of a vanishingly small and diminishing population? Such would be the logic of the realization that religiosity was in decline, as documented across the fields of sociology and political science.

Second, creating estimates of the Jewish population as a whole is not a simple task to begin with. In Israel, population statistics of Jews are unproblematic. They are routinely produced by the Israeli statistical authority, based on input from the national population registration system. The system, which has operated from the very first days of the modern State of Israel, allows identification of Israelis by religion. In the Diaspora, the situation is very different. Some countries hosting Jewish populations (e.g., the United Kingdom) have population censuses asking about religion or ethnicity, which allow for the identification of their Jewish populations. Others (e.g., the US) do not have such censuses. Not all sample surveys of the population ask about religion or ethnicity either. Those surveys that have been developed to compensate for the shortcomings of the national censuses and that ask a religion/ethnicity question, often contain only a small number of Jews, in proportion to their population share. For this reason, they are often unusable. And where estimation of the total number of Jews is difficult, estimation of the size of a subgroup within the larger Jewish population is even more complex.

But the realities of social and scholarly life have been changing, introducing some correctives. One significant corrective to the "secularization thesis" view came from the field of demography. In 2010, Eric Kaufmann pointed out the existence of a counterforce to secularization, namely the relatively high birth rate of the religious segments of the world population.⁴ As Kaufmann highlights, religious people can reasonably be expected to increase their share of the population notwithstanding the deepening disengagement from religion among others, as a matter of arithmetical necessity. Having more children translates into relatively greater numbers of religious versus non-religious in the next generation and, if the process continues, also in the subsequent generations. If in the long run "desecularization by demography" outpaces ideational secularization, society is bound to become more religious over time. Admittedly, the long-term prospects are unclear: when differences in fertility

between religious and non-religious are modest, continuing secularization (conversion out of religion, i.e., reduction in scope and intensity of religious behaviour and faith) may well outpace the demographic "desecularizing" influence.⁵ Still, in the medium-term religious segments of a population are not expected to diminish in size, let alone disappear. For Haredi populations, this is especially true, as will be shown shortly. As Haredi populations grew, the visibility of Haredi Jews, in political and cultural terms, increased. Some commentators have defined this new visibility, or their own awareness of it, as the "Haredi moment."⁶

Estimates of the Jewish population in the Diaspora have not become easier but, arguably, some things have changed for the better. This is the second corrective: developments in data collection and storage. With the passing of time, censuses that included a religion question were repeated resulting in a sharper view of religious and ethnic groups comprising populations. Some survey samples grew in size, leading to the more reliable estimate of subgroups in a population. These developments had little to do with Jews or Haredim for that matter. Progressive diversification of Western societies caused the demand for population estimates of religious and ethnic groups to go up. Yet, Jewish demography has benefited considerably from them. In parallel, data processing and storage became cheaper and simpler than ever. Two large-scale surveys of Jewish populations in Europe, conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in 2012 and 2018, would not have taken place without new online platforms of data collection. The old style "pen and paper" surveys would not have been suitable for that task. Finally, important changes happened with regard to the availability of administrative data on many Haredi populations—a development propelled by the maturation and growth of Haredi communities and technological changes. Haredi communities, united by intense religiosity and a lifestyle, produce communal address and telephone directories that have become increasingly easy to compile, maintain and, when it comes to the research process, investigate.

The very possibility of producing global estimates of Haredi population, such as those offered in this paper, arises from the convergence of the new realities, lines of inquiry, and technological changes.

The rest of this essay is structured in three substantive parts. The next section presents the "big picture": the most recent estimates of the number of Haredi Jews across the globe, with some consideration of future developments. Large amounts of data gathering and significant methodological work underlie these estimates. These are reported elsewhere; readers with technical

demographic interests are encouraged to consult these sources.⁷ The section that follows focuses on two case studies, the Jewish populations of Belgium and the United Kingdom, looking in greater depth at the demographic fate of these populations in recent history and the role that Haredi play in them. The last substantive section maps the demographic origins of Haredi growth, placing the discussion in a broad comparative context. It shows the uniqueness of the Haredi demographic experience. In the concluding section, some thoughts on the very meaning of the Haredi demographic experience in the framework of modernity are offered.

Who Is Haredi?

There are many ways to define a social group. Belonging to Haredi Judaism, in particular, can be defined with reference to some shared ideology.⁸ Yet, shared ideology is not something that is easy to capture unambiguously in quantifiable terms. In more empirically measurable terms, Haredim can be defined (and often are defined by scholars) through self-identification as “Haredim” in surveys of Jewish populations, in response to a question offering a choice of labels starting from “secular” or “just Jewish” through “Traditional,” “Reform,” “Orthodox” and then “strictly Orthodox/Haredi.” Other empirical options include identifying Haredim as persons who (1) use the administrative infrastructure of known Haredi communities: e.g., membership lists, address and telephone directories, intra-communal newsletters and/or (2) send their children to Haredi schools and/or (3) live in relatively homogeneous geographical clusters, facilitating development of services and facilities tailored to strictly Orthodox lifestyle.

The approach adopted here is to allow the sources used for the estimation of the Haredi population to define the term. The underlying estimation relies on all sources listed above: surveys of Jewish populations, data from Haredi schools, data from administrative sources maintained by Haredi communities, and geographical data mostly coming from the national censuses. In most countries containing Haredi populations, more than one source is available for estimation. Where several sources exist, they are all used for estimation and the impressions rendered by different sources are then compared. As a rule, estimates arising from different sources agree well with each other. Thus, the question of how to define Haredi can be, metaphorically speaking, “put to bed.” Being “Haredi” is a solid fixture of social reality, quantified in a very similar way irrespective of the exact approach to the method of quantification.

The way people define/label themselves as Haredi corresponds well to the ways in which they behave, as reflected by different sources that, independently of each other, register their behavioural patterns (schools, membership lists, residential patterns). There is not much of a definitional problem or ambiguity for the purposes of a demographic inquiry.

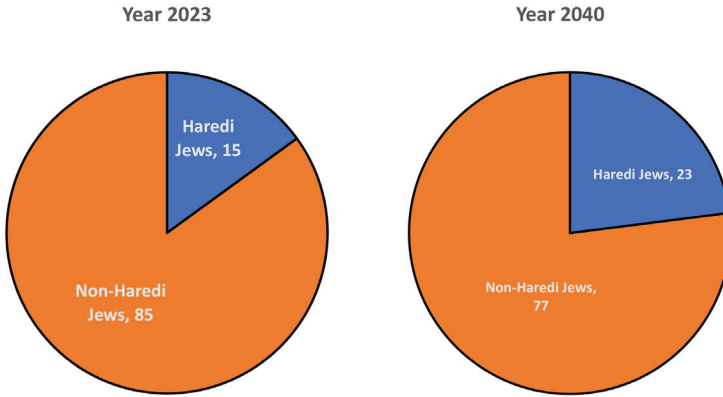
THE GLOBAL HAREDI POPULATION: TODAY AND TOMORROW

Sometime in the late 2010s, the author of this essay became a witness of a verbal exchange between a Haredi communal activist and a representative of a local authority in the area of Greater London containing a significant population of Haredi Jews. At the end of the discussion on housing policies, the representative of the local authority proposed a date for the next meeting. The proposed date was several months ahead. “The date works for us,” replied the Haredi communal activist. “Take into account that by that time our community will grow a little more,” he added with a smile. This was a light-hearted communication of a serious point, analytically and policy-wise. Whenever an estimate of Haredi population is published, be it at a global or a country-specific level, it is already out of date by the time of publication. Haredi population grows very rapidly, so much so that no published estimate can keep pace with it.

When the first estimate of the global Haredi population was published, it related to the year 2020 and was best understood as a mid-year estimate. It put the global Haredi population size at 2.1 million.⁹ If one pushes this estimate to the middle of 2023, using an annual growth rate of 3.0%–3.5%, the Haredi population reaches 2.3 million. Haredim comprise about 15% of the total Jewish population in the world estimated at around 15.7 million at the end of 2022.¹⁰ This is another way of saying that every seventh Jewish individual today is Haredi. The continuing high rate of Haredi growth, alongside low growth in the non-Haredi segment of the global Jewish population, means that the Haredi share of the total Jewish population is destined to grow in the future. Should the current rates of growth persist, the Haredi population is expected to number close to four million people around 2040, coming to about 23% of all Jews (fig. 1).

Rates of growth of Haredi population are well-documented. Haredi populations grow at approximately 3.5%–4% annually. In the projection offered here the level of 3.5% is adopted to be on the side of caution. The meaning

Figure 1. Proportion of Haredim in total Jewish population of the world, around 2023 and 2040, %



Note: projected to year 2040 using a 3.5% annual growth rate for the Haredi population and a 0.2% annual growth rate for the non-Haredi population.

of this rate of increase is that it causes a doubling of the population size every eighteen to twenty years. The non-Haredi segment of the global Jewry, in striking contrast, is growing at a rate of 0.2% per year. This is a greater rate than that seen in Western populations today given that the rate of growth of the Israeli non-Haredi segment is high, but is still very low compared to that of Haredi Jews. Doubling this sector of the population at this rate would take 350 years!

The critical question, of course, is: can the application of the 3.5% annual rate of growth all the way to 2040 be justified? Population projections rely on the assumption that future demographic realities are known. In this case, the assumption is that the observed rates of growth of the Haredi and non-Haredi Jews will persist. How can one be confident of that? Simply put: the pace of demographic change is typically rather modest. The projection horizon adopted in this case is under twenty years, which is less than a demographic generation. This is a considerably less ambitious and more careful horizon than some projections use. It is not unusual for national statistical offices to project populations fifty and even a hundred years ahead. Such strategy is consciously avoided here. As a consequence, it can be reasonably assumed that a significant, truly game-changing reduction of Haredi growth during this period of time is not very likely.

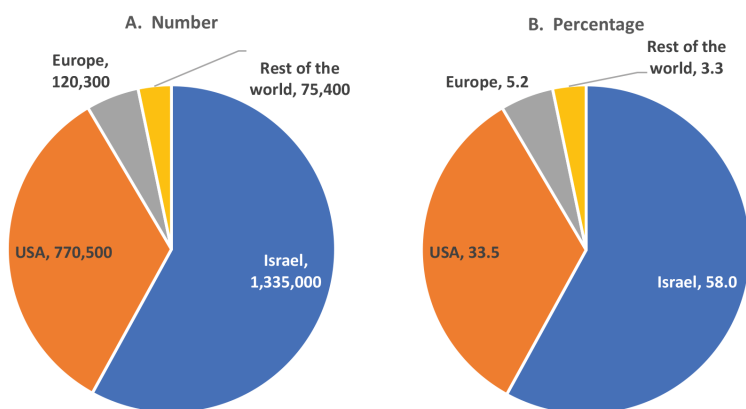
First, in the absence of political and economic upheavals (including those caused by natural disasters, major wars and epidemics), political, cultural and technological developments impact fertility and mortality, two processes

that underlie the rates of growth, yet they tend to do so gradually. Furthermore, it is not just fertility and mortality rates that matter for growth. Population structures are important as well. Long-term high fertility, such as that observed among Haredi, tends to lead to very young age structures. Following a drop in fertility, large young cohorts continue to move into adulthood and have children of their own. The number of children per woman may be relatively small at that stage but the number of children in a population will continue to be rather large just because the number of mothers is large. This is a phenomenon called “population momentum” in the field of demography: a significant deceleration in population growth is something that happens only with some delay relative to the drop in fertility.

THE GLOBAL HAREDI POPULATION TODAY: IN GREATER DETAIL

The majority of Haredi Jews live in Israel and the United States, which, combined, account for about 92% of the global number of Haredi Jews. This pattern of Haredi concentration in just two countries resembles in broad strokes the pattern shown by the Jewish population as a whole. Europe hosts 8% of

Figure 2. Haredi population by geographical area, around 2023



Note: percentages and numbers are rounded for readability.

Source: for Israel, see L. Cahaner and G. Malach, “Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel” (The Israel Democracy Institute, 2023); for data on all other locations, an update on 2020 estimates appeared in Staetsky, “Haredi Jews around the World.” An update was produced through the application of 3.0%–3.5% annual growth rate (applied exponentially).

the global Jewish population and 5% of the global Haredi population. Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia, combined, host about 6% of the global Jewish population and 3% of the global Haredi population.

Today, Israel hosts the largest Haredi population in the world. In 2023, the Haredi population in Israel was estimated at about 1,335,000, or nearly 19% of its Jewish population. The United States of America contains the second largest Haredi population. In 2023, its estimated size was 771,000, about 12% of all Jews in the US (fig. 2).

If we look at the profile of Haredi population in greater detail (Table 1), the five countries with the largest proportion of Haredi Jews out of the total Jewish population (20% or above) are Belgium, UK, South Africa, Austria and Mexico.

Table 1. Haredi Jews: an overview of the largest numbers and proportions by country, around 2023

	Number		Percent of all Jews in a country
Israel	1,335,000	Belgium	38
USA	771,000	UK	25
UK	78,000	South Africa	22
Canada	33,000	Austria	21
Argentina	15,000	Mexico	21
France	13,000	Israel	19
Belgium	11,000	Switzerland	18
South Africa	11,000	USA	12
Australia, Mexico	circa 8,000 (each)	Argentina, Australia, Canada	7%-9% (each)
Switzerland	3,000-4,000	Germany, France	2%-3% (each)
Austria, Germany	2,000-3,000 (each)		

Note: percentages and numbers are rounded for readability.

Source: for Israel, see Cahaner and Malach, “Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel”; for data on all other locations, except the UK, an update on 2020 estimates appeared in Staetsky, “Haredi Jews around the World.” An update was produced through the application of 3.0%–3.5% annual growth rate (applied exponentially); for data on the UK, an update of 2021 estimate appeared in Staetsky, “Strictly Orthodox Jewish Population in the United Kingdom.”

Israel and Switzerland are only a little behind. Belgium is an unambiguous leader in that group. Note that three out of these leading five countries where the proportion of Haredi Jews is highest are located in Europe. Unless a major reshuffling of the Haredi Jewish population in Europe takes place, for example, as a

result of migration, then the total Jewish populations of the UK, Austria and Belgium can be expected to grow after many years of stability or decline.

HAREDI JEWS IN BELGIUM AND ENGLAND: TWO CASE STUDIES OF POPULATION TRANSFORMATION

Haredi populations in Belgium and England deserve special attention for two reasons. First, the demographic development of these communities is well documented. Censuses of Jewish populations took place in Antwerp, Belgium in the mid-1960s, and in 2001–2021 in the United Kingdom. In the Belgian case, it was a scholarly and communal initiative; in the British case, it was the result of a decision made by the Office for National Statistics to include a question about religion in the census questionnaire. Second, given how far along Jews in Belgium and England are on the path of demographic desecularization, social scientists and historians would be correct in regarding these sites as laboratories of social and cultural processes that accompany and run counter to such desecularization, particularly the phenomenon known as "Haredisation."

The total number of Jewish households in Antwerp was estimated at 2,750 around 1965, with about 316 being Haredi.¹¹ Given the average number of persons per Haredi household (5.5), one is led to the conclusion that in the mid-1960s Antwerp was home to 1,700 Haredi individuals. The Jewish population of Belgium as a whole stood at about 35,000 at that time, with Brussels and Antwerp being the main Jewish population centers. No Haredi Jews, then or now, chose to live outside of Antwerp in any significant numbers. Therefore, in the mid-1960s Haredi Jews accounted for 5% and non-Haredi Jews for 95% of Belgian Jewish population. About half a century later, when the numbers of Haredi and non-Haredi were surveyed again, the picture was dramatically different. This time the Haredi population of Antwerp stood at about 10,000, accounting for 34% of all Jews in Belgium.¹² A spectacular rise of nearly 500% in the number of Haredi was accompanied by a 43% decline in non-Haredi population (Table 2). The latter declined due to a relatively low fertility rate, advancing age, and a significant migration of Jews out of Belgium, to Israel and other locations.

Given that Antwerp and Brussels are very different in the nature of their respective Jewish populations, it is worth looking specifically at the transformation of the relationship between these two localities over time. Today,

Table 2. Haredi and non-Haredi Jewish population of Belgium: half a century perspective

	The mid-1960s	Around 2020	Change
Haredi Jews	1,700 (5%)	10,000 (34%)	488% increase
Non-Haredi Jews	33,300 (95%)	19,000 (66%)	43% decrease
Total	35,000 (100%)	29,000 (100%)	17% decrease

Note: numbers are rounded for readability.

Source: Gutwirth, “Antwerp Jewry Today”; and Staetsky and DellaPergola “Jews in Belgium.”

Antwerp Jews are predominantly Haredi (63%). Indeed, a strong Haredi presence has become a hallmark of life in Antwerp. In the mid-1960s, Haredim were a small minority of Jews there (16%). There has also been a remarkable change in the relative numerical power of Brussels and Antwerp too. In the mid-1960s, Brussels was the undisputed population center of Belgian Jewry (other areas around Brussels are included in the counts of Brussels but these are numerically rather marginal). In the half a century since then, the Jewish population of Brussels decreased by close to 50% while the Jewish population of Antwerp has experienced growth on a similar scale. As a result, in the 2020s, Antwerp become the Belgian city with the largest number of Jews (Table 3).

Table 3. Jewish population of Belgium: Antwerp versus Brussels in the past half a century

	The mid-1960s	Around 2020	Change
Antwerp	10,500 (1,700 Haredi, 16%)	16,000 (10,000 Haredi, 63%)	52% increase
Brussels and other areas	25,000	13,000	48% decrease
Total	35,000	29,000	17% decrease

Note: numbers are rounded for readability.

Source: Gutwirth, “Antwerp Jewry Today”; and Staetsky and DellaPergola “Jews in Belgium.”

The demographic development of the Haredi population in the UK is traceable for a shorter period. Still, even the two decades covered by the British census are very telling. The British Haredi population doubled in size between 2001 and 2021: from 37,000 to 73,000. Its share of the Jewish population in England and Wales increased from 13% in 2001 to 24% in 2021. At the same time, the non-Haredi segment decreased a little (Table 4).

Both Belgian and British Haredi population experienced outmigration and grew at a pace which is lower than Israeli Haredim: 3.2%–3.5% per annum

Table 4. Jewish population of England and Wales: two decades perspective

	2001	2011	2021	Change 2001-2021
Haredi Jews	37,000 (13%)	53,000 (18%)	73,000 (24%)	97% increase
Non-Haredi Jews	239,000 (87%)	235,000 (82%)	237,000 (76%)	decrease of -0.8%
Total	276,000 (100%)	288,000 (100%)	310,000 (100%)	12% increase

Note: (1) numbers are rounded for readability. (2) the total number of Jews in England and Wales and in the UK is being assessed continuously following the release of the 2021 Census results. Thus, discrepancies between different publications are possible. In particular, the total number of Jews in 2021 proposed here is somewhat different from the numbers suggested by: DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2023”; and Staetsky, “Jews in the 2021 Census of England and Wales.” Source: estimates appearing in Staetsky, “Strictly Orthodox Jewish Population in the United Kingdom”; earlier estimates appearing in Staetsky, “Jews in the 2021 Census of England and Wales.”

in contrast to 4% per annum observed among Haredim in Israel. Even with this clearly trimmed rate of growth, the Haredi population is highly significant for both Belgian and British Jewry. In Belgium, Haredi growth is the only factor that has prevented the Jewish population from numerical collapse. Without Haredim, Belgian Jewry would have been approximately half of the size observed in the 1960s. With Haredim, its decline has dramatically decelerated to 17%. The population of British Jews without Haredim in the first two decades of the twenty-first century would be in slight decline or at a level of numerical stability. It is only due to Haredi growth that British Jewry as a whole grew by 12% in this period.

Both country studies showcased here highlight the state of the non-Haredi component of the Jewish Diaspora populations. The demographic story of the non-Haredim in Belgium and the UK is typical of many, perhaps most, Diaspora communities. Due to low fertility and advanced aging the non-Haredi Jewish populations cannot grow on their own. Where Haredi Jews are absent, growth and/or stability still can be observed in a country’s Jewish population, but this would be due to the arrival of immigrants, not natural replenishment. In Europe, a textbook example of this is the Jewish population of the Netherlands, a population with few Haredim, that managed to maintain its size since the 1960s despite the negative balance of births and deaths due to immigration of Israelis.¹³ Across the Diaspora, vigorous growth attributable to a preponderance of births over deaths is only seen where Haredi Jews are present.

The situation in Israel is different. The non-Haredi Jewish population in Israel is growing on its own. The natural increase of non-Haredi Israeli,

estimated at about 1% per year, is considered rather high on the contemporary demographic landscape. Still, Haredim matter even in Israel: Haredi growth accounts for about 40% of the total natural increase among Jews in Israel, boosting Israel's Jewish natural growth to 1.5% per year. To conclude, depending on the exact situation of the non-Haredi segment, the Haredi constituency can (1) prevent a collapse, (2) generate growth of a country's Jewish population, where otherwise there would be none, and (3) boost the natural growth of Jewish population (a scenario clearly identifiable only in Israel).

THE MIRACLE OF HAREDI GROWTH

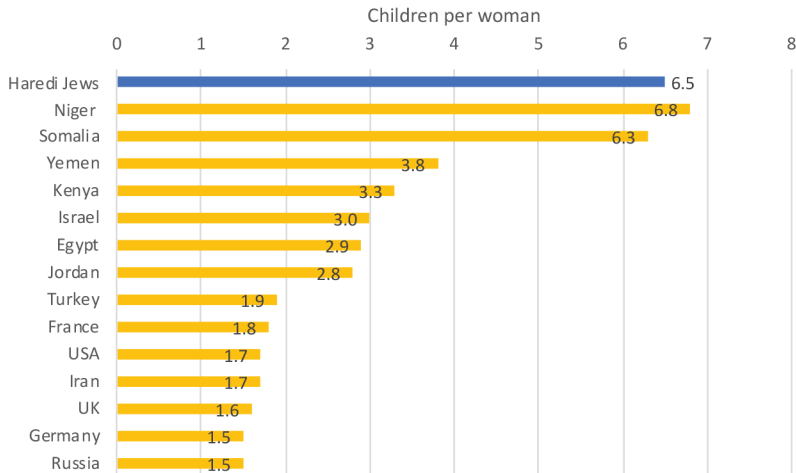
What makes Haredi populations grow so fast is the combination of several factors: high fertility, high longevity, and high rates of lifestyle retention. The role of high fertility can be well understood by a layman; it is sufficiently intuitive. An image of a pregnant mother pushing a stroller in front of her and, in addition, surrounded by a group of children is one of the most readily recognizable markers of Haredi society. Two aspects are often overlooked and deserve some elaboration. First, although Haredi fertility is correctly understood as being high, there is not a full appreciation of just how high it actually is, both from contemporary and historical perspectives. Second, high fertility cannot generate the observed Haredi rates of growth on its own. It is very considerably helped along the way by very high rates of longevity. Below is an elaboration of these points.

Haredi Fertility

The total fertility rate of Haredim is 6.5 children per woman, on average.¹⁴ There are no substantial differences in this respect between Haredi populations across the globe. This is, of course, very high compared to the average of 1.5 children per woman in today's Europe, 1.7 in the US, and 3.0 in Israel.¹⁵ The more interesting and less familiar fact is that it is one of the highest rates in the world (fig. 3).

In the 2020s, the only country with a fertility rate higher than that of the Haredi population seems to be Niger. Other countries of sub-Saharan Africa have much lower fertility rates at this point in time, and the same applies to the countries of the Middle East. For many years, sub-Saharan Africa and the

Figure 3. Haredi fertility compared to selected populations, 2021–2022



Source: Haredi, an average of estimates based on studies cited in n. 14; comparator populations, “Fertility Rate: Children per Woman.”

Middle East were associated in the public mind with very high, traditional, levels of fertility. This is no longer so in reality. In Yemen, perhaps the most fertile country of the Middle East today, the total fertility rate today does not exceed four children per woman, while in Iran and Turkey, fertility rates reached sub-replacement levels (below 2.1 children per woman), i.e., levels that cannot support natural population growth in the long term. Iran and Turkey are now part of large group of countries, especially those in Europe, with sub-replacement fertility levels. This comparative framework highlights just how unusual Haredi fertility is at present.

It is important to note that high fertility rates were present in Europe and the Middle East a century ago. Yet, even there, levels comparable to Haredi fertility today were not universal. In England, for example, fertility in the nineteenth century was close to five children per woman, on average,¹⁶ much lower than among Haredim today. Fertility comparable to Haredim was observed in Russia at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries and in Arab societies of the Middle East in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁷ Some commentators have noted that in Israel, where the fertility trajectory of Jews (by religion) can be documented in detail, there was a substantial drop in Haredi fertility between 2000 and 2021.¹⁸ While this is true, an important nuance should be added: the decline developed after a long period of increase. Fertility as high as 7.3 children per woman was registered among Haredim

around 2001. The more recent and rather gradual reduction in Haredi fertility only brings it to levels seen during the 1980s.¹⁹ So far at least, there has not been a sharp drop in Haredi fertility.

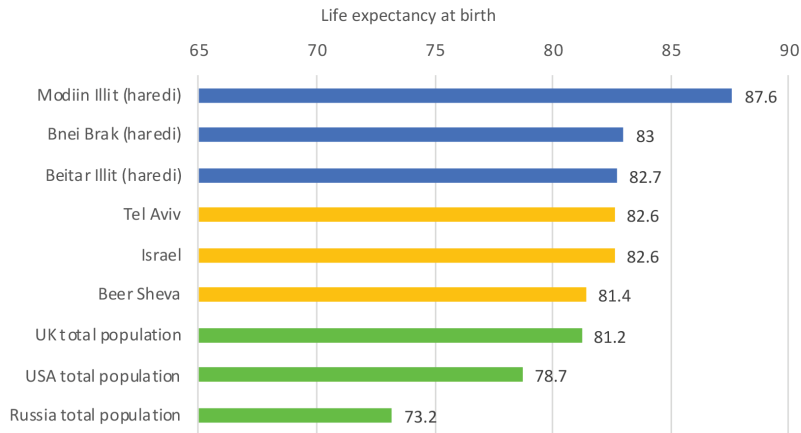
Haredi Longevity

High fertility is a necessary but insufficient factor for explaining Haredi growth. Haredi rates of growth are due to a combination of high fertility and high longevity. Historically, Jews have been a distinctive population with respect to life expectancy. Their status is no different today. Israeli life expectancy is among the highest in the world. Jewish longevity in the Diaspora is also, as a rule, higher than the longevity of the general populations in which Jews live. Indeed, demographers consider Jewish longevity indicative of the maximal possible life expectancy under given socio-economic conditions. The reasons for high longevity of Jews are rooted in the cultural, economic and political conditions under which they have dwelt. The present account cannot do justice to all aspects of this phenomenon and all existing explanations. Suffice it is to say that various factors converged to generate what can be described, very broadly, as a health-protective lifestyle among Jews. This lifestyle, evident among men and women, young and old, translates into high longevity almost irrespective of time and place.²⁰

The life expectancy of Haredi populations today is at the same level or higher than the life expectancy of non-Haredi Jews. Around 2020, Haredi life expectancy stood at about eighty-three years for males and eighty-six years for females.²¹ This is clearly above the European and American rates: approximately seventy-six years for males and eighty-two years for females.²² Haredi longevity can only be measured indirectly. Certain localities in Israel (Modiin Illit, Bnei Brak and Beitar Illit) are Haredi-dominated sites, in the sense that an absolute majority of residents in them are Haredi. Official statistics on life expectancy in these localities gives the best approximation of Haredi life expectancy (fig. 4). Other localities in Israel as well as several national examples of life expectancy representing major Western and European countries are presented in fig. 4. Israeli Haredi longevity is notably higher than these examples.

One can be confident that the life expectancy of Haredi Jews outside Israel is similar. In general, Haredi demography across the globe is quite homogeneous. This should not come as a surprise. Connections via study, marriage, and business link Haredi populations to each other in different venues. Bearing

Figure 4. Haredi life expectancy at birth in comparison to selected populations (2019)



Source: Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel. 2019. Health and social profile of the localities in Israel, 2017–2021; UK, USA, Russia, OECD statistical database.

in mind this social and cultural interconnectedness, it would be appropriate to relate to the Haredi population in global terms.

It is the combination of high fertility and high longevity that is producing the phenomenally high rates of growth of Haredim. While high fertility existed in historical populations, it produced very low growth. With high mortality across all ages but especially among the young, high fertility simply could not generate as vigorous a growth as it does today. A child born in 1900, merely 125 years ago, could be expected to live to just thirty-two years, on average.²³ What does life expectancy of thirty-two years mean, in concrete terms? An important insight can be gleaned from the autobiographical account of Golda Meir, the fourth Prime Minister of Israel, when discussing the situation of her family in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century: “my mother had other troubles too. Four little boys and a girl fell ill: two of them died before they were a year old; another two of them went within one month. My mother mourned each one of her babies with a broken heart, but like most Jewish mothers of that generation, she accepted the will of God and drew no conclusions about child-rearing. . . . Then, right after the last of the babies had died, a well-to do family offered my mother a job as a wetnurse to their new baby. . . . So it was thanks to this . . . that I was born into relative order, cleanliness and health. Our benefactors saw to it that my mother always had enough to eat, and soon my parents had three children.”²⁴

With death following the birth so closely in historical populations, there is little wonder that fertility was so high. The role of high fertility was precisely to maintain population size—something that sometimes succeeded and sometimes did not. At the level of mortality as described above, fertility at a level of 6.5 children per woman would produce an annual growth of about 1% (not 3.5%–4.0% as it does among Haredi today), resulting in population doubling time of about seventy years. A lower level of fertility, for example five children per woman, would result in very low positive growth; fertility at a level of four children per woman would lead to a negative growth!²⁵ The shift from high to low mortality and, in close succession, also from high to low fertility is known as the “demographic transition” in professional jargon used by demographers.

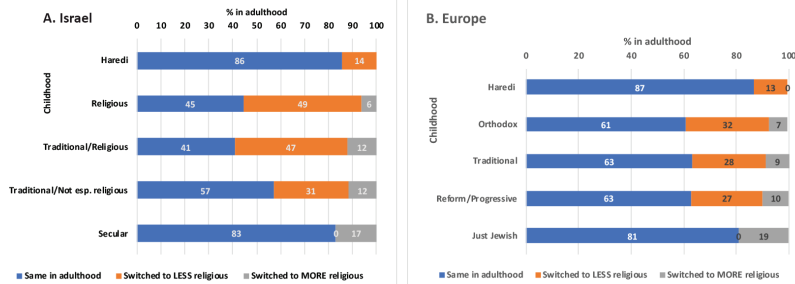
The demographic transition is also seen by demographers as a transition “from waste to economy.” A regime of waste is an old demographic regime where a lot of life is produced and a lot of it is wasted, so that large amount of production results in small output. A regime of economy is a regime of small-scale production with little or no waste. All this makes it easy to see how high fertility, being a mere population *sustainer* under a regime of waste, becomes a powerful, at times, explosive factor of *growth* under a regime of economy. This happens because under a regime of economy, high mortality no longer neutralizes the gains produced by high fertility. The Haredi demographic situation is an embodiment of this combination of “olden days” fertility and “modern days” longevity that yields phenomenal growth.

Lifestyle Retention and “Switching”

The last relevant point to mention is the retention of a Haredi lifestyle, which is very high. This is another way of saying that most people born into Haredi families remain Haredi when they grow up. Data from Israel and Europe indicate that, in proportionate terms, close to 85% of Haredi-born people remain Haredi in adulthood (fig. 5). This level of lifestyle retention is close, incidentally, to the level of retention observed among secular Jews: about 80% of Jews born into secular homes remain secular in adulthood and 20% or so adopt a more religious identity. In other groups, retention is lower. In traditional circles, for example, 40%–60% retain the childhood identity in adulthood, about 10% adopt a more religious identity and 30%–50% adopt a less religious identity.

This may come as a surprise to some. After all, life stories of Haredi individuals abandoning their traditional lifestyle in favour of secularism make headlines. The phenomenon, known also as “going off-the-*derech*/path” or

Figure 5. Retention of religious lifestyle among Jews, 2010–2020



Source: A. Hleihel, “Fertility among Jewish and Muslim Women in Israel by Level of Religiosity, 1979–2009,” Working Paper Series 60, Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel, 2011; 2018 survey of European Jews, conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7491).

hazara be-sheela (questioning one’s Orthodox lifestyle) with both terms expressing rejection of a Haredi lifestyle, is known even outside of Jewish cultural circles. Such identity change may be associated with many struggles, including estrangement from one’s family of origin, divorce, cultural curiosity or a struggle to obtain adequate education and employment necessary to function outside of the Haredi world. The story told by the data is that the described phenomenon is very real, yet it is much smaller in scope than the image circulating in popular culture. True, up to 15% of Haredi-born individuals no longer call themselves Haredi in adulthood, but how exactly do they see themselves?

Closer inspection of the actual journeys of Haredi “switchers” reveals that for the majority of them (about 65% to be precise), the change of lifestyle, in fact, is a change of a label and not something that suggests a partial or wholesale rejection of religiosity. While they no longer see themselves as Haredi, they still adopt a “label” compatible with a religious lifestyle that may be only marginally less intense than implied by the “Haredi label,” e.g., they call themselves “Orthodox” or “religious.” In view of that, it would be more appropriate to relate to the Haredi “switchers” as Haredi “drifters.” In sum, in Israel and Europe, just 4% of Haredi-born Jews become secular (arguably, these are the proper “switchers”), 9%–11% continue to self-identify as religious in some form, and 85% continue to self-identify as Haredi in adulthood.

What accounts, it seems, for the relative centrality of the “off-the-derech” phenomenon in public perception is better explained with reference to Tuchman’s Law than with any hard facts captured by social surveys of Jews. This is how Barbara Tuchman, the eminent popular historian, formulated it herself, semi-humorously: “After absorbing the news of today, one expects to

face the world consisting entirely of strikes, crimes, power failures, broken water mains, stalled trains, school shutdowns, muggers, drug addicts, neo-Nazis, and rapists. The fact is that one can come home in the evening—on a lucky day—without having encountered more than one or two of these phenomena. This has led me to formulate Tuchman’s Law, as follows: “The fact of being reported multiplies the apparent extent of any deplorable development by five- or tenfold (or any figure a reader would care to apply).”²⁶ The “off-the-*derech*” (OTD) phenomenon can be added to Tuchman’s list above. Popular press and, in our days, social media amplify the significance of the OTD phenomenon by focusing on the exceptional at the expense of the common and mundane.

As an aside, survey data also reveal that the proportion of Haredi-born Jews going OTD is rather close to the proportion of Jews raised in secular, Reform or traditional homes who adopt a Haredi or Orthodox lifestyle in adulthood. Given the fact that non-Haredi Jews are at present numerically dominant, a very modest flow coming out of this population (1%–3%) may look as negligible relative to their size. Adoption of Haredi lifestyle is hardly a factor of major population loss for non-Haredi Jews. Yet, it is not as negligible relative to the Haredi population size. For Haredim, this flow can be a weighty factor of population gain. Through it, Haredi are compensated, so to speak, for the loss of members going OTD by arrivals from other Jewish groups.

Understanding the scope of the OTD trend is important not just in sociological terms, as a window into the social realities of Haredi and non-Haredi Jews—nor in political terms, as an insight into which lifestyle “wins” among Jews. It needs to be accounted for in order to chart the fate of Haredi population growth with greater confidence. If a lot of Haredi-born Jews adopt a different lifestyle in adulthood, then Haredi growth would be limited by this process. It has been stated in the past that religious “switching” among Haredi is not powerful enough to change the conclusions regarding Haredi growth over the next twenty years or so. New estimates confirm this conclusion: even if 15% of Haredi-born switch completely to non-Haredi lifestyle, Haredi growth will be around 3% per year under contemporary conditions, suggesting doubling of population in twenty-three years’ time.

Demographic instruments are powerful tools allowing us to predict future populations owing to the certainty built into fertility and mortality rates and existing population structures. “Switching” in terms of identity and migration is far less predictable; it follows cultural and economic changes that can be rapid. We cannot be certain about the future. Yet, we can be quite certain about the past. It is clear, from the British and Belgian Haredi examples analyzed

in detail earlier in this paper, that to date Haredi switching has not become a factor of discernible impact on growth. The growth of these two communities was in line with expectations based on the well-documented realities of Haredi fertility, mortality and migration. Stated otherwise, there was nothing in their growth that suggested the presence of an unaccounted factor operating in the background.

CONCLUSIONS

This article opened with a presentation of the essentials of Haredi demography. 2.3 million Haredi Jew live in the world today, and 15% of the world's Jews are Haredi. Barring some totally unexpected developments, the number and the share of Haredi will rise to four million and 23% of the world Jewry in 2040. Haredi populations, it has been indicated, grow fast, at about 3.5% per annum. British and Belgian Haredi populations, whose numerical development is well documented, can be seen as laboratories of demographic transformation for Jewish communities. The Haredi share in British and Belgian Jewries came to single digits in the 1960s. It is very likely that a scholar of Jewish demography who observed these populations in the 1960s, registered the rate of expansion of Haredi communities, and named a date at which Haredi would become a majority of Jews, would have been dismissed, if not ridiculed, by laymen. Population growth follows an exponential trajectory, which means that a steep increase in population is a little delayed, from the perspective of the lay observer. At present, Haredim comprise 24% and 34% of the Jews in England and Belgium, respectively; a Haredi majority date is still in the cards for the mid-twenty-first century.

Will cultural change follow demographic transformation? Will Haredi and non-Haredi segments of Jewish communities drift apart in cultural terms? Or, on the contrary, will they come closer? Will Jewish politics change? Will the image and position of Jews among non-Jews be transformed? These questions are beyond the scope of this essay. It should be noted, however, that the Jewish communities of England and Belgium are the exact locations where such questions are most appropriate to explore. They are, after all, the most advanced in terms of demographic desecularization and can be treated as sociological laboratories. While the future is rather foggy, the recent past and the present are an open book. A good way for sociologists to begin figuring out the social

and political consequences of demographic change among Jews is to look at what already has happened in two Jewish demographic laboratories located in Europe.

Our purpose here is to elaborate further on the position of Haredi Jews in the demographic landscape of humanity. The speed of Haredi growth is something that both laymen and experts in demography are familiar with. Nevertheless, there is a degree of misunderstanding, on the side of the former, and lack of familiarity, on the side of the latter, as to what actually generates these phenomenal rates of growth. High fertility is seen as a force of Haredi growth, and correctly so. The role of low mortality remains underestimated. Without such high longevity, high fertility would not have been able to produce demographic gains that it has generated so far. Under the “old longevity regime,” a fertility rate of 6.5 children per woman would have produced very low population growth or no growth at all!

Thus, Haredi Jews are best understood as a “demographic hybrid.” Haredim are traditional when it comes to fertility patterns, but modern when it comes to longevity. While the traditional nature of fertility is a choice, modern mortality is inevitable, or almost so. Everybody who lives inside the cultural and technological space identified with the West shares what demographers call “a mortality regime”: modern clinical medicine, modern notions of healthy and unhealthy life and public health services, i.e., major factors in shaping how long we live. Being exposed to a mortality regime is a matter of embeddedness into modern life and cannot be modified easily.

Both Haredim themselves and many others around them, Jews and non-Jews alike, see the Haredi lifestyle as an embodiment of authenticity—as an authentic Jewish way of living in the “olden days” but transferred into the present. This authenticity is not defined in specific terms but rather softly as a mixture of deep emotional and intellectual religiosity, avoidance of certain types of modern technology (smartphones, internet use, etc.), and old-style family patterns. Contestation of the idea of Haredi authenticity occurs in the political domain but it is rarely fierce or relentless. Haredi patterns of fertility align well with understanding of the Haredi lifestyle as authentic, uncompromising, and traditional. At the same time, modern Haredi longevity demonstrates that it is impossible for any population to be entirely frozen in the past. Simple embeddedness in modern conditions results in uncontrollable modernization of many aspects of one’s life. The only feasible form of traditionalism is a “modern traditionalism.”

Notes

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2. S. Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Religion in the Modern World 9; Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002).
3. G. Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); R. Inglehart and C. Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
4. E. Kaufmann, *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth? Demography and Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Profile Books, 2010). Outside of the demographic field, voices pointing out the possibilities of desecularization are exemplified by the volume edited by Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).
5. This is shown, for example, by Lyman Stone, “America’s Growing Religious-Secular Fertility Divide,” Institute for Family Studies, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/americas-growing-religious-secular-fertility-divide>.
6. David Myers, ed., “The Haredi Moment: An Online Forum, Part I,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* (2021), Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, <https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/resources/blog/haredi-moment-online-forum-part-1>.
7. Of particular relevance is the methodological appendix of the following publication: Staetsky, “Haredi Jews around the World.” Further details on specific European Haredi communities (UK and Belgium) can be found in Daniel Staetsky, “Strictly Orthodox Jewish Population in the United Kingdom: Assessment of the Census Undercount Using an Alternative Estimation System,” 2023, https://www.academia.edu/108383380/Strictly_Orthodox_Jewish_population_in_the_United_Kingdom_assessment_of_the_census_undercount_using_an_alternative_estimation_system; Staetsky, “Jews in the 2021 Census of England and Wales: The Actual Number, the Actual Developments,” Daniel Staetsky: Jewish World in Data, January 22, 2023, <https://danielstaetsky.com/jews-in-the-2021-census-of-england-and-wales-the-actual-number-the-actual-developments/>; L. Daniel Staetsky and S. DellaPergola, “Jews in Belgium: A Demographic and Social Portrait of Two Jewish Populations (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2022).
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Serving the Jews, Serving the Empire: Discursive Hierarchy and Messianic Temporality in Russian Chabad

by *Galina Zelenina*

The last two years, since the beginning of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine in February 2022, have seen a surge in Jewish emigration from Russia—not to mention other destinations. Immigration to Israel alone amounted to 45,000 in 2022 as opposed to 7,600 in 2021 and 6,600 in 2020.¹ The few friends of mine who remained in Moscow repeatedly asked me: “What about your informants in Mar’ina Roshcha? Given their dual citizenship and Ukrainian origins, surely they have all left, haven’t they?”² Well, they have not.

In an interview taken about seven years ago, an informant of mine, originally from Odessa, the wife of a high-ranking member of the Moscow Chabad community, herself a rather open-minded woman, told me:

They [Moscow Lubavitchers] don’t plan to leave. I don’t know what should happen [to make them leave]. If [Aleksei] Navalny is elected and persecutes the Jews . . . Or if Putin leaves . . . So far, they are fine here. Their children can study [in Jewish schools], there are [Jewish] institutions where they can work. Moscow is a metropolis with a developed Jewish infrastructure. Everything is available, it’s comfortable here. . . . The fact that Putin is loyal to the Jews and advertises it is nice and no one is against Putin, there is no opposition here. The Jewish community is not an opposition. [My question: So no one is concerned about other political issues beyond Kremlin’s loyalty to the Jews?] Well, it’s bad enough that [free] parking was banned in the city . . .³

Apparently, this attitude persists, the “special military operation” and recent developments in domestic politics notwithstanding. However, since Russian Chabad is embedded in various networks and contexts, its political positioning deserves closer examination.

The bulk of research on the contemporary Chabad Lubavitch movement has focused mainly on the development of its mystical doctrine and philosophy,⁴ outreach activities,⁵ messianism, and coping with the so-called failed prophecy after the demise of the last rebbe,⁶ whose biography, including his rise to power, leadership qualities, and political views, never fails to attract scholarly attention.⁷ In all these respects, the Chabad Lubavitch branch in Russia is seemingly of little interest. Being a young community and, by their own admission, rather light in terms of observance and Hasidic spirituality, it neither demonstrates fervent messianism nor can it boast of new achievements in the field of religious thought. As for its remarkable and much celebrated outreach successes, it follows mostly, though not exclusively, strategies elaborated in the global Lubavitch movement and already discussed in scholarship. Yet what Russian Chabad is certainly notable for is its astounding growth from scratch, the ambitions of its leadership and its representation before Russian authorities, who recognize the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia (FJCR) as such. It is also notable for its skilled adaptability, its cleverness in maneuvering among Russian, Jewish and Western agendas and its ability to leverage local settings and sentiments to their advantage.

In what follows, I will elaborate on different FJCR discourses and at the same time the internal integrity of its policy; on how Russian Lubavitchers balance their loyalties, being both heirs to a long tradition of devotion and close alliance with authorities⁸ and a part of world movement with headquarters in the United States; and on how they connect their past, present and future and link Lubavitcher messianism with a Russian national sense of mission.

MULTIFACETED HASIDIC DISCOURSE

Various Russian Chabad speakers and authors in their memoirs, interviews, and mission statements have portrayed the past of the movement in Russia in a similar vein. They emphasize its nativeness and even its leading role as a flagship of late imperial Russian orthodox Jewry and, in the era of Soviet atheism, its pivotal role as the only true keeper of Judaism.⁹ Contemporary issues are

reflected differently depending on the audience. Close reading of dozens of interviews, addresses, statements, official greetings, Torah commentaries, and social media postings delivered and published by the FJCR leadership and other Russian Chabad rabbis suggests there is no single Chabad discourse; in different situations and for different purposes, Lubavitchers choose different tones, themes and emphases.

1. The first type may be referred to as a loyalist, official, or domestic discourse. This includes speeches of Chabad leadership during meetings with the president, interviews given to national media, statements to the press on various occasions and events, greetings to Russian Jewry on major holidays, including the secular New Year (which is intended to emphasize the unity of religious Russian Jews with non-Jewish Russians).¹⁰

Official discourse focuses on similarities and even the symbiotic relationship between religious Jewish and Russian state values, designated as “traditional values” focused on the family and patriotism. The latter might be expressed as a simple appreciation of support and emphasizing that, unlike “godless” Soviet power, the contemporary state authority in Russia is neither anti-Semitic nor atheist, and contributes to the prosperity of the Jewish community and religion. In more complex and specific expressions, personalities (the president) or values (loyalty or stability) may be fitted into Jewish, biblical, or Hasidic context. Thus, the FJCR leadership regularly explains its alliance with the Kremlin through a “traditional Jewish approach”: if the State is good, that is, if it guarantees three things: “spiritual freedom, material freedom, and freedom of movement,” then Jews “should work, assist, and cooperate with State authority [. . .] to care and support, fight in wars—do all the right things.”¹¹ The author of the above quote, Rabbi Alexander Boroda, President of the FJCR, appears to be an heir to the tradition of loyalty and close ties with the authority that existed regardless of one’s religious disposition or even the nature of the regime to which one expresses loyalty (Russian or Soviet, traditionalist or socialist). Boroda, for example, proudly mentions his “distant relative” General David Dragunsky,¹² a WWII hero who later served as head of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public (1983–1994), notorious for its vilification of Israel, Refuseniks, and Zionist activists, both secular and religious.¹³

Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, besides justifying his loyalty to the Kremlin through Rabbinic injunctions,¹⁴ adds a prominent Hasidic theme which tends to interpret any coincidence and unexpected luck as miracles sent down from on high.¹⁵ The ongoing progress of Russian Jewry and the benevolence of the

Russian authorities are seen as precisely such a miracle,¹⁶ and in fact, predicted by the late Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson and as such, a sign of imminent messianic redemption.¹⁷ Lazar likes to recount how President Yeltsin never wanted to talk with Lubavitchers, never had any interest in or sympathy for them whatsoever, whereas the new Premier Putin was more than willing to cooperate. One month after their very promising first conversation, it just so happened—miraculously, of course—that the Premier became the Acting President.¹⁸

In his columns in a non-Jewish media outlet, Dovid Karpov, the rabbi of one of many Moscow Chabad communities, advocated loyalty to the authorities using biblical analogies. In particular, he compared the Maidan uprising in Kyiv, Ukraine, with Sodom, or a revolt against the divine order imposed from above.¹⁹ He also supported a statement saying that “Putin is Russia”²⁰ with reference to a medieval rabbinic biblical commentary,²¹ and identified the president with “the good pharaoh” featured in the Book of Genesis (“two fat years of prosperity have passed since the beginning of the new term of our Pharaoh . . . I mean, our President”). This Pharaoh could lead the whole world to Messianic redemption, no less: “If we believe Scripture, we are at the threshold of the great . . . turmoil . . . Russia, and the whole world, are entering a new era that may end, if we manage to go through this whole ordeal, in the global Exodus.”²² This equation is remarkable in the light of the well-known comparison in an earlier era of Soviet authorities who would not “let my people go” to “the bad pharaoh,” the pharaoh of Moses. As a prominent Moscow refusenik of the 1970s had put it, “we view our fight for emigration as a continuation of the great Exodus that was the crucial moment in the history of our people, and it is with great surprise that we recognize in the biblical story the familiar elements: hatred of Jews and an unwillingness to part with them, stupidity, anger, and the treachery of the Pharaoh.”²³

Never failing to emphasize the consonance of a “Jewish way of life” with the “Russian State’s traditionalism,” Chabad speakers enthusiastically juxtapose that image to the “corrupt” West with its individualistic values, “unnecessary” freedoms, “liberalism and overindulgence” that are allegedly responsible for the growth of anti-Semitism.²⁴ The overtones of this Westernphobia are also discernible in accounts of personal experience, which is especially impressive in the case of Berel Lazar, given that he and his spouse are of Western background: “When I go abroad, I feel quite a stranger in that culture. [My children] were born here, they feel completely Russian, sometimes they see what is happening in the West, and they say: ‘It’s definitely alien, strange, incomprehensible.’”²⁵

Loyalty to Russia coupled with rejection of the global West naturally lead to the anti-emigration stance of the FJCR leaders who have been building Jewish communities in Russia and have a legitimate interest in ensuring that Jews remain. They have repeatedly asserted, not without satisfaction, that “Russian Jews are no longer packed and ready to go” and, even if some do go, “certainly the majority of Russian-speaking Jews do business in Russia” where it is easier to “fend for one’s family.”²⁶

Referring to Judaism and Jewry in their official addresses, the FJCR leaders rarely make mention of Hasidism, Lubavitch, the Messiah or the late leader of the movement. Seeking to represent not only a Hasidic “sect” but Russian Judaism as a whole, they are careful to blur distinctions and speak on behalf of the Jewish people.

The same position is clearly manifest in the representational strategies chosen in the much-advertised Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow.²⁷ Opened in 2012 by the FJCR which succeeded in raising significant funds and receiving support from the country’s leadership, the large multimedia museum has become a true success, attracting a steady flow of visitors and the constant attention of the press drawn to its many temporary exhibitions and cultural events.²⁸

Most of the museum’s permanent exhibition is dedicated to the history of Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry, presented—contrary to the usual victimization narrative—as a story of multiple successes and achievements. One reads that “(i)n the entire history of Jewish wandering nowhere have the Jews felt as comfortable as in the shtetl”; that imperial Jews were “confidently asserting themselves” in the spheres of banking, journalism, and legal services; that the February Revolution saw “the revival of the Jewish political and social life,” while “nearly 400,000 Jewish soldiers were faithfully serving their country and demonstrated true heroism”; and that in the Soviet Union Jews occupied “leading positions” in the theatre and science. The Great Patriotic War is the pivot of the permanent exhibition—not the Holocaust. Accordingly, Jews are portrayed as war heroes and victors rather than victims of Nazi genocide. The section *From Perestroika to the Present*—through direct assertions and rich visual and video materials—claims that despite the mass emigration of Soviet Jews in the 1990s, “the current state of the Jewish community in Russia and its religious, cultural, and educational institutions is stable,” while the section *Judaism—a Living Religion* presents an overview of Russian Jewish religious life in all its “diversity,” “from Orthodox practices to the innovations of progressive Judaism.”

Hence, the museum seems to be sending two key messages to its visitors: (1) despite the hardships and tragedies that affected the entire Soviet nation and that plagued Jews alone—discrimination, persecution, and the Holocaust—the history of Russian and Soviet Jews is rich, diverse, and glorious. Jews have made significant contribution to Russian-speaking culture, literature, science, and the victory in Second World War. (2) Contemporary Russian Jewry is the rightful heir to all the good that the past held and is immune and free from all the bad. No longer the victim of state-sponsored anti-Semitism and atheism, it continues to contribute to the life of the country while at the same time evolving as a community with its various cultural and religious groups and institutions. Remarkably, in the whole museum there is not a single portrait of the last Lubavitcher Rebbe (present in every FJCR office) nor a single word about the history of Chabad in the Russian empire or the Lubavitcher underground in the Soviet Union. At the same time, one third of the exposition portraying contemporary Jewish religious life in Russia consists of the photos of Reform communities—non-existent in Russia, according to Berel Lazar, who repeatedly, from the beginning of his career till now, has turned a blind eye to them, asserting that, “(f)ortunately, despite all efforts, it has not been possible and, G-d willing, will not be possible to introduce the American invention onto the Russian-Jewish soil” (2005),²⁹ or: “There is no such thing *chas v’shalom* (God forbid) as a Reform, Conservative temple; it does not exist in Russia” (2023).³⁰ This kind of language suggests that while acting as an outward-facing national body (which it does in its role as the museum’s founder), the FJCR follows a different, more partisan route in its own communications.

2. There is another discursive tack that the FJCR intends for a foreign audience. Quite predictably this discourse emphasizes not loyalty to the Russian government and “traditional values” but rather Jews per se. A particularly revealing element of this discourse is the issue of emigration which is presented here quite differently than elsewhere. In an interview given to an Israeli media outlet in 2018, Rabbi Lazar said he supported *aliyah* (immigration to Israel) with all his heart and considered it a performance indicator of his mission of awakening Jewishness in Russian Jews: “I do believe that any Jew who moves to Israel is a big success for us. We can make a checkmark and say, ‘Thank God, one more Jew made it to Israel.’”³¹ Whereas for Russian audiences, Chabad leaders present their community building as a means of preventing emigration, for Israeli audiences it is framed precisely as intended to stimulate *aliyah*.

3. A similar narrative is aimed at the general Russian Jewish audience (not identical to the community) which is traditionally close to—or overlaps

with—the liberal intelligentsia and is often critical or suspicious of state-sponsored agenda. Accordingly, this discourse is mostly devoid of loyalist and anti-Western declarations; quite the opposite, it attempts to maintain distance from politics.³² In a number of interviews, the FJCR leaders are asked for an explanation of their loyalty to the unvirtuous Putin regime—from the perspective of the interviewer and, presumably, the audience—and of their accepting donations from criminal businesses. In the course of this explanation, the cornerstones of the first discourse, including the common struggle for “traditional values” and the miraculous relationship with the sovereign, turn out to be merely a means to an end—the development of Jewish community. Rabbi Lazar explained his “friendship” with the president as nothing more than “a tool that allows me to achieve certain goals for my community”³³ which is his true mission in life for the sake of which he allows himself to ignore undemocratic governance, human rights violations, and a host of other problems. Rabbi Boroda argued in a similar vein that since there were Jews in need, he should not be too picky when dealing with donors.³⁴ In light of this frankly stated pragmatic approach, sensational conspiracy theories that link Russian Chabad with efforts to affect the US presidential election of 2016³⁵ come to mind: we cannot assess Chabad’s capabilities in this regard, but in theory doing Russian authorities a favor seems justified seen as serving the good of Jewish community.

4. The fourth type is an insider discourse meant for members of Chabad communities. In Torah commentaries and video lessons, community periodicals, communal and personal blogs, and news digests devoted to community life, political issues are mostly absent, with a few notable exceptions. Instead, Hasidic specificity is back, starting with a multitude of stories about the last rebbe and earlier *tzaddikim* (righteous leaders), questions of Halachah (Jewish law), twists and turns of Torah exegesis, and moral lessons. This discourse reduces Russian Jewry to the bounds of the Chabad community. For instance, the *Jewish Moscow* video digest³⁶ is devoted exclusively to the events of the Lubavitcher congregations, with no coverage whatsoever of either secular or even non-Chabad Jewish milieux. In contrast to the colorful images intended for the general public and aiming to emphasize inclusivity and diversity, the digest presents Chabad the way Hasidic communities are usually presented: as an exclusively mono-gender and monochromatic society—males in black suits and hats.

When external news does infiltrate this internal discourse, it tends to interpret actualities as a repetition of archetypal biblical events, pouring new wine into old vessels,³⁷ and sometimes in a messianic vein. The 2018 opening of the Crimea Bridge connecting Russia with the Crimean

Peninsula via the Kerch Strait, was covered in a community newspaper.³⁸ The piece talks about a secret prophecy allegedly given by the Vilna Gaon back in the eighteenth century, tying the annexation of Crimea by Russia to the coming of Messiah: “When you hear that the Russians have captured Crimea, you should know that these are the bells of the impending Redemption.” The author rejects an obvious interpretation that Gaon must have been talking about the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783. The piece is illustrated by a photograph of the Kerch Strait Bridge with a caption “*The Way to Moshiach!*”

The scheme I am proposing categorizes Russian Lubavitcher rabbis’ public utterances into four distinct discourses, which can be grouped into two pairs: domestic/global, and internal (Hasidic community)/external (Jewish public); apparently, there is yet another internal discourse, untraceable in open sources. This scheme seems to support and complicate the concept of “double standards” developed by several scholars who argue that Chabad for a long time has been operating on two levels: the level of its observant community and the level of the general Jewish public, which it seeks to involve but not overburden with strict observance.³⁹ In Russia, for a number of reasons, Chabad managed to establish itself in many eyes as the representative body of Russian Jewry, which required a more differentiated system of discourses comparable to a concentric circles system.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: PEACEMONGERS, *MESIRAT NEFESH*, AND THE CHOSEN PART OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

Leaving aside the tightening strictures of the regime, which the FJCR leaders have long identified as none of their business, two major events have occurred recently that, one might assume, would expose discrepancies between the positions of the FJCR and the Russian government: Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, where a significant part of the Moscow Lubavitcher community comes from, and the Israel-Hamas war. The sympathies of Russian Hasidim, of whom many have Israeli citizenship and immediate family members in Israel, clearly lie with Israel, while in Russian media coverage of the war Israel is portrayed (somewhat moderately) as an occupier and aggressor. In fact, the Russian government has repeatedly received Hamas delegations since the October 7 attack.

In Chabad media, from the Telegram channels of regional communities⁴⁰ to the official FJCR website, these topics have been almost entirely ignored. The first one is especially taboo. Communities go on with their routine: they celebrate the sabbath, educate children, help the elderly. Chabad leadership keeps extending good wishes to Russian Jewry on the holidays and preaching universal values: peace, light, goodness, happiness, freedom—all the while eschewing controversial topical issues. In general, they receive much less media coverage compared to the peak period of the 2010s at the time of the opening of the Jewish Museum and frequent meetings of Rabbis Lazar and Boroda with the president. Notwithstanding a small number of publications and a certain evasiveness, we can still detect opinions on both subjects, as expressed both in internal and external discourses.

In official statements, the FJCR leaders have repeatedly called for peace, somewhat contrary to what they might be expected to say,⁴¹ while at the same time asserting their loyalty and gratitude to Russia, for its much-praised lack of anti-Semitism as well as its harsh treatment of terrorists, which Israel should follow because “peace with murderers is impossible.”⁴² Rabbi Lazar could not have been unaware that the Foreign Ministry was welcoming a Hamas delegation on the same days that he was making this statement. Nonetheless, he focused on similarities between Russia and Israel rather than the contradictions.

Addressing foreign audiences, Russian Chabad leaders speak differently. For one, outside of the Russian and/or Russian language space, their support of Israel is much more energetic. During his visit to Israel Berel Lazar spoke before a group of IDF soldiers telling them, in Hebrew: “you are *haganah le-Israel* (a defense of Israel) not just *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel), but all of *Am Israel* (people of Israel) and we all read *Tehillim* (Psalms) and pray for you daily.” Quite predictably, this short video was reposted by Russian YouTube channels, including a Russian Islamic YouTube channel, where it received extremely hostile comments,⁴³ and even made it into the official Russian news.⁴⁴ Given the backlash, the chief rabbi had to explain that he addressed the IDF soldiers and blessed them “with the desire for peace and the fight against terrorism,” thereby, naming goals legitimate in Russian political discourse.⁴⁵ This episode demonstrates how the transgressing of boundaries between domestic and global discourses immediately causes tension.

Repeatedly asked about their position on the situation in Ukraine,⁴⁶ Russian Chabad leaders have justified themselves by resorting to traditional arguments. “We don’t get involved. It makes no difference who is right,—says Lazar.—We have a goal here: to bring Jews closer to Torah and mitzvos

(commandments), to support the mosdos (institutions), to provide humanitarian aid. . . .⁴⁷ We don't have a role in this story. . . . It's not our game. . . . Show me one ruling from our long history in exile that when the nations of the world battle with one another, the Jews need to state an opinion."⁴⁸ As a result of this non-interference the community does not feel threatened. Russian Jews may be emigrating, but it is business as usual in the synagogue: "We haven't seen a wave of *aliyah* (immigration to Israel)—there hasn't been a decline in the number of community members." In support of his position, Lazar quotes Hasidic lore, Elie Wiesel and the last Lubavitcher rebbe via Elie Wiesel. Wiesel quoted to Lazar a piece of advice he himself had received from the Rebbe; do only what relates to the Jews, let other people deal with other issues.⁴⁹ It is a long-stated position of Russian Chabad, which already twenty years ago adopted a stance opposed to that of another Jewish body—The Congress of the Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia and its leader Rabbi Adolf Shaevich—which allowed itself to take sides in Russian politics.⁵⁰ Other speakers for the FJCR have voiced this position as well, as did the head of the FJCR PR department Borukh Gorin. In his column published during the 2011–2013 protests of the so-called Snow Revolution, Gorin asserted that Jews were guests and, as such, they should "keep their heads down" and not teach their hosts how to live.

A further rationale for non-interventionism engages the concepts of *auctoritas*,⁵¹ self-sacrifice (*mesirat nefesh*), and the eradication of egocentricity (*bittul ha-yesh*), all key concepts in Hasidic discourse: "I think the first step is to put your own ego aside, and not focus on [. . .] what will be best for you personally. Rather, consider the *ratzon Hashem* (will of God) and the good of the Jews." In this interview, as well as elsewhere, Lazar constantly downplays his own role; he has not seen the president for ages, he does not influence anything, all the decisions made are either "decisions of the Russians" or the Rebbe's will which he, as an emissary, tries to capture and embody.

Hasidic rabbis are working hard to ensure that their decision to stay in Russia is regarded not as being opportunistic, keeping their sinecures, or even supportive of military action, but as self-sacrificing for the benefit of the community that they and they alone have been building for twenty years. The Convention of Lubavitcher Rabbis in Russia, *Kinus rabanei Rusia*, in September 2022 declared it their duty to continue working for Russian Jewry and solicited support from major figures in Israel.⁵² Alexander Boroda condemned non-Hasidic chief rabbi of Moscow Pinhas Goldschmidt who had left Russia in the spring of 2022 as the sort of a rabbi who comes not to invest

in his community “but only for the job contract.” Claiming that “those who remain in Russia support the war and he is the only one who opposes the war,” Goldschmidt is “wrong and disrespectful” towards the local Jews whom he views “as subhuman.”⁵³

None of the FJCR leaders mentions—perhaps to avoid unwelcome political analogies—that the last rebbe repeatedly discouraged Lubavitchers from leaving Russia in Soviet times: “Those who want to flee the battlefield with the excuse that they cannot stand up to the government should remember that they are abandoning many Jews to their fate” (1981).⁵⁴ He opposed sending invitations to emigrate to active community members, directly prohibited emigration for some Hasidim, and condemned those who left without consulting him:

Those who came to Israel did not ask for my opinion. . . . Not long ago, ten shoykhetim (ritual slaughterers), ten rabbis and ten mohels (ritual circumcisers) expressed a desire to leave, and they were, of course, helped to do so. But every Jew thus saved saves himself at the expense of hundreds of other Jews! Nothing would have happened to him or his Jewishness if he had lived there for another ten years! Hundreds of people would have been influenced by him, if only by simply seeing his beard in the streets!⁵⁵

According to the principle of *mesirat nefesh*, personal comfort must be sacrificed to the movement, to the Jewish future.

Clarifying his current position, Lazar regards the state of Jewish religious life in contemporary Russia as a credit to himself and other Hasidic emissaries: “had we left, just as there might not have been Passover in Russia back in 1993, there wouldn’t have been Passover this year.” This allows him to compare his own *mesirat nefesh*, which led him to stay in belligerent Russia, to that of Moses who “heeded the Almighty’s call and sacrifice[ed] the comforts of Midian, where he’d lived in peace, to return to Egypt and be with his oppressed brethren. It was this sacrifice for his people that enabled Moses to ultimately lead them to redemption.”⁵⁶ This seems to be in line with the last two rebbes’ idea that every Chabad leader is an incarnation of Moses: “each master of Ḥabad is an avatar of Moses [. . .] the ‘very same’ person (*der zelber moshe*), albeit reincarnated in a different body. As Moses was a mediator between God and the people of Israel, the Rebbe of Ḥabad is described both as the personification of godliness and as the intercessor through whom members of the community can receive the teaching of the Besht, the inner light of the Torah, so that they may cleave to the Infinite.”⁵⁷

The appeal to this classical Chabad theme of *mesirat nefesh*, central to the narrative of preserving Torah in the Soviet Union, allowed Lazar to inscribe himself—a foreigner, a newcomer—into the authentic Russian Hasidic tradition, that of persecution and resistance, and made him part of the Soviet Hasidic community that has always sacrificed itself in order to keep the flame of Judaism alive in this country. His account of his visits to the Soviet Union in the 1980s and of his early years as a *shaliah* in the 1990s is replete with hardships and miracles helping to overcome them, and it connects him to a community of local Lubavitcher “heroes” and allows him to take advantage of this symbolic capital.⁵⁸

So far there is no reason to believe that Lazar harbors his own messianic ambitions, but the undoubted growth of his authority is clearly visible. Non-Russian publications emphasize the “breadth and strength of Rabbi Lazar’s rabbinic leadership,” which they describe as “astounding,” as well as his “empire” of “over 200 shluchim and dozens of thriving kehillos.”⁵⁹ His name is accompanied by the designation reserved for rabbinic dignitaries *shlita*.⁶⁰ Some Russian-language publications are no less laudatory. On Sukkot 2023, upon receiving the news from Israel, Lazar said, “We know what we can do in this place on this day in this situation. It’s already happened—50 years ago. The Rebbe told us then that we must fulfill the custom of dancing with the Torah more than we always have—putting pain and hope, faith and confidence into the dancing, and so we will win!”⁶¹ And he himself danced until 3 a.m., and in the end fell and got a concussion. A community newspaper wishes “our spiritual leader” recovery, recalling the seventh Rebbe’s heart attack, which also occurred during the *hakafot* (the Torah processions during Sukkot) in 1977. Thus, Lazar has been likened to Schneerson twice—in his own speech and in the article.⁶²

The Jewry this “Moses” Lazar presides over is fantastically promising and fraught with miracles. Lazar claims there are a million Jews in Russia (as opposed to 82,000 listed in the latest census of 2020–2021), many of whom do not know they are Jewish but the FJCR will take care of it: “on the general list we have over 130,000 Yidden. In the next few months, we hope to visit 25,000 of these Yidden [. . .] go into their homes and make sure that there is a mezuzah, sefarim (religious books), candlesticks for lighting Shabbos candles, a kiddush cup and the like.”⁶³ This is a usual strategy of Chabad outreach to people who initially have no need for Jewish practice (unlike the majority of other Jewish congregations, which provide services on demand, accepting into membership those who need them), or, as the seventh rebbe had put it, “don’t even know

they're missing something."⁶⁴ Besides, Russian Jews are special and the minute they know they are Jewish, they take it very seriously and start learning Gemara.⁶⁵ Given the soteriology of the seventh rebbe, who repeatedly asserted that the more Jews got involved with Jewish practice and kept the commandments, the sooner the messiah would come, the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of Russian Jewry as presented by Lazar offer certain messianic prospects. The military situation reinforces such expectations. Answering the question "how should a Jew view the war between Russia and Ukraine?" Lazar quotes from Midrash: "If you see the great nations fighting with each other, look for the footsteps of Moshiach" (*Bereshit Rabbah* 42:4), adding: "There never was such a [level of tension]. [. . .] For sure I believe it is a sign of the *geulah* (redemption)."⁶⁶ The intensification of darkness (which might be expressed in the form of a military conflict, the battle of Gog and Magog) in the last phase of exile is a common idea in various Jewish sources that were said to have influenced the seventh rebbe.⁶⁷ Both the rebbe himself and Chabadniks in general, who constitute "a near ideal type of fundamentalist religious movement," perceive recent history as "the stage preceding total and final Redemption."⁶⁸

Publications and addresses intended for wider Russian Jewish audience are more distinctly pro-peace, calling the "military operation" a series of "regrettable events," urging "each of us to do whatever it takes to bring peace" and promising that "Torah will lead us to true peace."⁶⁹ They are also more emphatically and aggressively pro-Israel,⁷⁰ compared to "official" expressions. In addition, in recent years, Berel Lazar has honored three deceased liberal icons—politician Mikhail Gorbachev, economist Evgeni Yasin and poet Lev Rubinstein (the last two were Jewish)⁷¹—implicitly affirming liberal values and seemingly addressing himself to the Jewish liberal intelligentsia.

Much intra-community discourse is, for the most part, careful to refrain from politics beyond prayers for or collecting humanitarian aid to Israel. Yet some rabbis in their personal blogs emphatically praise the government, pointing to its alleged support for the process of winning the release of the Israeli hostages, while refusing to comment on the situation in Ukraine, saying that "only Hashem, blessed be His name, knows what is real and what is not,"⁷² which is an easily recognizable variation on the official Russian media mantra "everything is ambiguous."

One remarkable exception is the newspaper of a Moscow congregation headed by Rabbi Dovid Karpov (a Moscow-born *baal teshuvah* [a returnee to traditional observance], unlike most other Lubavitcher rabbis—either foreigners or natives of Ukraine or Belarus), which reacts directly to political news

and interprets it according to the official line and yet also in Hasidic categories. The newspaper entitled *Darkhei Shalom*, “Ways of Peace,” definitely supports the “operation” in Ukraine, likening the Ukrainian “neo-Nazis and Banderites” to Amalek, and Russia to Israel, which the whole world has commonly considered the aggressor.⁷³ In turn, the war in Gaza is likened to the war in Ukraine—“Israel has launched its own ‘special military operation’”).⁷⁴ Both wars are interpreted as *hevlei Moshiach* (messianic pangs) and in both wars “we” (Russia and Israel) will prevail “with God’s miraculous help” (*derech nes*).⁷⁵ In the wake of the war will come a “complete and final Redemption.” Most astonishingly, the Redeemer will be from the ranks of Russian Jews, which is special and uniquely worthy of it. Just as the Jewish people went down to Egypt to collect “sparks” and then were privileged to get to the Promised Land, so Russian Jewry:

having gone through the Soviet school of survival and hardened itself in hardships, coming out of this Soviet Egypt and taking with them all its priceless “sparks,” will be able to bring Moshiach. If our first Redeemer, Moshe, came out of Egypt, the last Redeemer will come out of the Soviet Union.⁷⁶

Using the kabbalistic concept of gathering the sparks of the divine light as a prerequisite for *tikun olam* (repair of the world) and the final redemption, the newspaper promotes a local version of messianism which would make a perfect argument for not leaving. Who would leave the country where the *geulah* is to take place?

An inseparable connection to Russia, replete with messianic overtones, is not foreign to global Chabad rhetoric and ideology. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the “evil empire” that allegedly sought to destroy Lubavitchers in particular, was seen as a sign of the coming redemption while the seventh rebbe’s persistent predictions of this collapse were considered proof of his power to bring it about.⁷⁷ It is a kind of Lubavitcher lore, ascribed to the last leader of the movement, that Russian Jews, most of whom are *baalei teshuva*, will have the honor of bringing Moshiach.⁷⁸

This idea is supported by numerous recollections of Soviet Chabadniks about how the rebbe tried to keep in touch with them and stay informed about them. Later, in the early 1970s, when immigrants from the Soviet Union appeared in Israel and the US, the Rebbe treated them with special attention, invited them to New York at the expense of the movement, spoke at *Farbrengen* (large Chabad assemblies) about their sacrifice, and demanded that *niggunim* (melodies) in Russian be performed in the first place.⁷⁹

Many Russian Chabadniks see the special value of the Soviet experience for Hasidim today, especially in terms of connecting with the Rebbe without his physical presence. Having never seen the Rebbe, they nevertheless thought of him incessantly and maintained a deep spiritual connection to him. Today, when the Rebbe is believed to have disappeared in order to return later, the Hasidim of Chabad must maintain constant spiritual contact with him. Just as their steadfastness led to their reunion with the Rebbe in the past, so it will lead to a reunion with him in the future.⁸⁰

In the countries with Russian-Jewish diasporas the movement presents itself as an authentically Russian brand of Judaism—one that grew up in a pre-Soviet Russian context, endured the repression of the Soviet period, and has since emerged as the dominant Jewish force in the Russian-speaking world.⁸¹ Some non-Russian Russian-speaking Chabad media, most notably the Kfar Chabad based *Moshiach.ru* website, avoid condemning the Kremlin and its master, seeing military events not as a cause for moral judgment, but as signs of imminent redemption: “If you are asked, whose side are you on in this conflict, you should answer—I am on Moshiach’s side!” “If you have seen these kingdoms fighting among themselves, you have seen the footsteps of Moshiach!” The flight of Jews from Ukraine and their emigration from Russia are seen as a fulfillment of the rebbe’s prophecy of thirty years ago that Jews would soon leave the countries behind the Iron Curtain, which was also perceived in messianic terms.⁸² Thus, it looks quite consistent that a group that miraculously survived persecution in the Soviet empire, miraculously contributed to the fall of that empire, and miraculously revived vibrant Jewish life in the territory of that empire, will be the first—either in Russia or beyond—to meet the imminent messianic moment, of which recent military conflicts are an unmistakable sign.

This sketch of Russian Chabad’s differing discourses addressed to different audiences confirms and complicates the concept of two circles, or levels, adopted in research on Chabad outreach efforts. It describes features much discussed by scholars of Chabad in other periods of its history: flexibility and adaptability, together with an emphasis on loyalty to the state power. The flexibility is manifested, in particular, in the ability of Chabad rabbis to alternate between representing the nation (Russian Jewry) and representing their religion. For instance, this skill was demonstrated on October 14, 2023, when the FJCR organized a public event in memory of Israeli victims of Hamas attack which was announced as “public prayer” and consisted exclusively of reciting and singing

prayers but which was held in the courtyard of the museum, not in the synagogue. The event attracted crowds of Moscow Jews, including some youngsters who came wrapped in Israeli flags. In this manner, the FJCR managed to act as the national representative body by giving local Jews an opportunity to express their support for Israel while officially appearing only as a religious body holding a prayer. In this way, they could avoid accusations of calling for support for Israel.

The way recent political developments are dealt with and covered makes clear that the premise that the good of the community justifies any means allows for endless adaptation to a variety of political conditions. The worse these conditions are, the more unmistakable are the signs of messianic times that Lubavitchers are constantly looking for. Nothing is new, everything that is happening now is seen as a repeat of previous events or as fulfillment of previous prophecies, including the Rebbe's predictions. As has been noted, "In Chabad, [. . .] in times of plight, the 'just as it was' credo constitutes a meaning-giving tool to grapple with disorientation and bewilderment."⁸³ The ability of some Chabad authors to root every event in a biblical archetype and color them in messianic tones is a source of consolation that must be extremely attractive to their readers.

As studies of millenarian movements show,⁸⁴ including those that deal with Lubavitcher Hasidism after the death of the last Rebbe, a "failed prophecy" does not entail immediate attempts to restore balance and harmony. Chabad tries to compensate for the loss in part both by creating the illusion of the Rebbe's presence (e.g., through regular presentation of his videos) and insistently proclaiming his imminent return—i.e., by blurring the boundaries between past and present and between present and future. But at the same time, it highlights that at the present moment, the Rebbe is not with us: this is painful, and Hasidim must simultaneously rejoice at his impending coming and cry out in anguish "until when?" (the unity of opposites).⁸⁵ The restoration of harmony and clarity does not appear to be a *sine qua non* for the survival of the movement. Prolonged deprivation and longing seem to keep the movement viable just as well. And under present political circumstances, allowing neither to act, nor to make clear statements on a number of issues, the articulation of messianic expectations, bringing them to the forefront, successfully annuls the need to make a moral choice and appears to be the optimal rhetorical and perhaps even psychological strategy. Messianic temporality is closely related to spatiality. Expecting the Messiah from among Russian Jewry seems to merge Chabad millenarianism with Russian ideas of chosenness, the "god-bearing people"

and its global mission.⁸⁶ Russian Chabadniks, both Soviet-born and emissaries, who position themselves and probably feel themselves no less Russian, are living through the period of vibrant revival (of Jewish community and religious life) that has been going on since early 1990s, regarding it as the fulfillment of God's and the Rebbe's will. They fervently hope that this prolonged culmination should move to the next culmination—the moment of redemption (*geulah*), here and now. The attachment to Russia is temporary and conditioned by messianic expectation: hastening the advent of the messiah is a job to be done in Russia, but the messianic future should unfold in the sacred space of the Holy Land. As an influential Moscow rabbanit (rabbi's wife) put it, "We are here for now because we are working for the community, but soon Moshiach will come and we will be in Israel along with everyone else."⁸⁷

Notes

1. Mark Tolts, "Emigration from Russia to Israel: Flow Dynamics and Its Components in 1990–2023," *Demographic Review* 10, no. 4 (2023): 57, table 3.
2. The neighborhood where the largest Moscow Lubavitcher community resides and Lubavitcher Federation of Jewish communities of Russia (hereinafter referred to as FJCR) main institutions are located.
3. Chana (b. 1978, Odessa), interview by Galina Zelenina, recorded in 2017, Moscow.
4. E.g., Elliot Wolfson, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Naftali Loewenthal, *Hasidism beyond Modernity: Essays in Habad Thought and History* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; Liverpool University Press, 2020).
5. E.g., Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York: Shoken, 2003); Elise Berlan, "Voices of Outreach: The Construction of Identity and Maintenance of Social Ties among Chabad-Lubavitch Emissaries," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 1 (2009): 69–85; Oren Golan and Nurit Stadler, "Building the Sacred Community Online: The Dual Use of the Internet by Chabad," *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 1 (2016): 71–88; Samuel Heilman, "Lubavitch and How and Why It Is Taking Over the Jewish World," in *Habad in the Twentieth Century: Spirituality, Politics, Outreach*, ed. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Press, 2018), 137–59.
6. E.g., Simon Dein, "What Really Happens When Prophecy Fails: The Case of Lubavitch," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (Autumn, 2001): 383–401; Yoram Bilu, "'With Us More Than Ever': Making the Late Lubavitcher Rabbi Present in Messianic Chabad," in *Leadership and Authority in Israeli Charedi Society* [in Hebrew], ed. K. Caplan and N. Stadler (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2009), 186–224; Michal Kravel-Tovi, "To See the Invisible Messiah: Messianic Socialization in the Wake of a Failed Prophecy in Chabad," *Religion* 39 (2009): 248–60; Michal Kravel-Tovi and Yoram Bilu, "The Work of the Present: Constructing Messianic Temporality in the Wake of Failed Prophecy among Chabad Hasidim," *American Ethnologist* 35 (2008): 64–80.
7. Avrum M. Ehrlich, *Leadership in the HaBaD Movement. A Critical Evaluation of HaBaD Leadership, History, and Succession* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 2000): 289–406; Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe. The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Chaim Miller, *Turning Judaism Outward: A Biography of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson the Seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe* (New York: Kol Menachem, 2014); Alon Dahan, "Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's Outlook on the Land of Israel, Zionism, and the State of Israel," in *Habad in the Twentieth Century: Spirituality, Politics, Outreach*, ed. Jonatan Meir and Gadi Sagiv (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Press, 2018), 105–36.

8. For the origin of this tradition see Hillel Levine, "Should Napoleon Be Victorious . . .: Politics and Spirituality in Early Modern Jewish Messianism," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 16–17 (2001): 66–83.
9. On the post-Soviet revival of the movement and its self-establishment as *the* Russian Judaism, on its historical vision, including the self-image of "arch-enemies of Soviet regime," see Galina Zelenina, "Our Community is the Coolest in the World': Chabad and Jewish Nation-Building in Contemporary Russia," *Contemporary Jewry* 38, no. 2 (2018): 249–79; Zelenina, "Nothing to Do with Melukhe? Two Jewish Alternative Milieus under the Late Soviet Regime: Between Defiance and Cooperation," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 62, no. 1 (2021): 42–50.
10. The President of the FJCR speaks of "the values that the Jews of Russia share with all peoples of the country": "The Rabbi Told Us How Russian Jews Celebrate the New Year" [in Russian], *Gazeta.ru*, January 1, 2024, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2024/01/01/22047295.shtml>.
11. Alexander Boroda, "The Purpose of the FJCR Is to Distance the Jewish Community from Political Intrigues" [in Russian], interview by Adam Nersesov, *Jewish Magazine*, October 1, 2017, <http://www.moscow-jerusalem.ru/intervyu/ravvin-aleksandr-boroda-cel-sozdaniya-feor-distancirovat-evrejskuyu-obshhinu-ot-politicheskix-intrig>.
12. "Rabbi Boroda on PFC CSKA Moscow, Stalin and Ivan the Terrible" [in Russian], *Mir24*, November 14, 2016, <https://mir24.tv/news/15302188>.
13. William Korey, "The Soviet Public Anti-Zionist Committee: An Analysis," in *Soviet Jewry in the 1980s: The Politics of Anti-Semitism and Emigration and the Dynamics of Resettlement*, ed. R. O. Freedman (London: Duke University Press, 1989), 26–50; Matvei Geizer, "General Dragunsky Life Story" [in Russian], *Lechaim* 98, no. 6 (2000): 24–31.
14. "Our strategy is written in the Talmud. Wherever a person lives, he must realize that the law of the land is also the law of the Jews. We must pray for the good fortune and success of the president and the authorities until, God forbid, they start acting against the Jews" (Berel Lazar, "Wherever the Jew Lives He Should Pray for the Good Fortune and Success of the President" [in Russian], interview by Ilya Azar, *Novaya Gazeta*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/05/02/72345-gde-by-evrey-ni-zhil-on-dolzhen-molitsya-za-udachu-i-uspeh-prezidenta>); ". . . in spite of corruption we should pray for the authorities, such is the tradition, the Mishna teaches us so" (Berel Lazar, "Prayer for the Kingdom" [in Russian], *Lechaim.ru*, November 15, 2015, <https://old.lechaim.ru/6679>).
15. Berel Lazar, "Is the Time of Miracles Over?" [in Russian], *Lechaim*, 2002, no. 1, <http://old.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/117/moscow.htm>.
16. Berel Lazar, "It Is Never Too Late" [in Russian], *Lechaim*, 2002, no. 5, <http://old.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/121/moscow.htm>.

17. Berel Lazar, "The Rebbe's Predictions Are Coming True" [in Russian], *Lechaim*, 2002, no. 8, <http://old.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/124/moscow.htm>.
18. Berel Lazar, "On Passover, We Take a Leap . . ." [in Russian], interview by Adam Nersesov, *Jewish Magazine*, April 1, 2017, <https://jewishmagazine.ru/articles/intervyu/glavnyj-ravvin-rf-berl-lazar-v-pesah-my-sovershaem-skachok-a-v-techenie-goda-objazany-uporno-dvigatsja-k-realizacii-sobstvennoj-missii/>.
19. Dovid Karpov's blog on Snob.ru, entry: <https://snob.ru/profile/27889/blog/83673> [in Russian].
20. Famously made by Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin.
21. Dovid Karpov's blog on Snob.ru, entry: <https://snob.ru/profile/27889/blog/83080> [in Russian].
22. Dovid Karpov's blog on Snob.ru, entry: <https://snob.ru/profile/27889/blog/85642> [in Russian].
23. Vitaly Rubin, *Diaries. Letters*, vol. 2 [in Russian] (Jerusalem: Biblioteka Aliya, 1988), 40–42.
24. Berel Lazar, "A Man Who Has Been to Auschwitz Once Thinks Differently" [in Russian], interview by Elena Loria, *Izvestia*, January 29, 2018, <https://iz.ru/700800/elena-loriii/chelovek-kotoryi-odnazhdy-pobyval-v-osventcime-dumaet-po-drugomu>.
25. Lazar, "A Man Who Has Been to Auschwitz."
26. Boroda, "The Purpose of the FJCR."
27. The Museum's website: <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/>.
28. Not much has been written about it from a scholarly perspective. See Eva Berar, "Moscow Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center," *Gefter*, June 18, 2014, <http://gefter.ru/archive/12535>; thematic volume "New Jewish Museums in Post-Communist Europe," *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, nos. 2–3 (2015).
29. Berl Lazar, "Don't Bargain with God, Gentlemen" [in Russian], *Lechaim*, 2005, no. 2.
30. Avraham Heschel, "Yiddishkeit under Putin: A Candid Conversation with Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar," *Hamodia* 26, no. 1285 (November 15, 2023): 31–37.
31. Yakov Schwartz, "As Chabad Emissaries Expelled from Russia, Chief Rabbi Sees a Friend in Putin," *The Times of Israel*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/as-chabad-emissaries-expelled-from-russia-chief-rabbi-sees-a-friend-in-putin/>.
32. Azar, "Wherever the Jew Lives."
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36. “Mevaser Tov Moscow,” Issue 37, May 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBajo0Vh_Q0.
 37. As Yosef Haim Yerushalmi famously defined traditional Jewish approach to contemporary history: *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 38 and passim.
 38. *Darkhei Shalom*, May 25, 2018.
 39. Fishkoff, *The Rebbe’s Army*, 12–14, 279–84; Berman, “Voices of Outreach.”
 40. Facebook had been banned in Russia, so community pages docilely migrated elsewhere. For example, see Telegram channels of Chabad houses in Kaliningrad (https://t.me/B_C_Kaliningrad), Rostov-on-Don (<https://t.me/EvreiRostov>), Irkutsk (<https://t.me/Jewishirkutsk>), Krasnoyarsk (https://t.me/shalom_krasnoarsk), and some of Moscow congregations (<https://t.me/baischabad>, <https://t.me/JewishNewMoscow>).
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 47. The FJCR claims to run humanitarian programs for 120,000 regular beneficiaries, including soup kitchens, food packages, medical care, children’s boarding house, etc. (as described in “Social Work” section on the FJCR website: <https://feor.ru/activities/soczialnaya-rabota/>).
 48. Aryeh Ehrlich, “Walking a Tightrope,” *Mishpacha*, September 28, 2022, <https://mishpacha.com/walking-a-tightrope>.
 49. Ehrlich, “Walking a Tightrope.”

50. Liphshiz, “A Russian Chief Rabbi Stands. . . .”
51. According to Lazar, “when I close my eyes and think about my mission, what HaKadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy One blessed be He) wants, what halachah says, what the Rebbe who sent me here wants me to do, I’m sure that I don’t need to issue statements and cause harm.”
52. “Russian Rabbis Convene Emergency Conference in Moscow,” *Chabad.org*, September 5, 2022, https://www.chabad.org/news/article_cdo/aid/5626135/jewish/Russian-Rabbis-Convene-Emergency-Conference-in-Moscow.htm.
53. Alexander Boroda, “Any Organization Operating in a Particular State Should Follow Its Laws and the Jewish Agency Is No Exception,” interview by Eldad Beck, *Israel Hayom*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2022/08/16/relations-between-the-countries-are-good/>. See also another comment saying that Chabad rabbis never took sides in Russian politics and are not running away from the ship, they are working for the good of Jewish people, and all the Jewish revival in Russia is their merit, while Goldschmidt ran away and is now besmirching all the Jews in Russia: Boruch Gorin, “Don’t Accuse Rabbis in Russia of Supporting the War,” *Foreign Policy*, March 17, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/17/rabbis-war-putin-ukraine-russia-supporting-the-war>.
54. Of course, this did not apply to his father-in-law, the previous rebbe, who had left the USSR leaving his Hasidim behind because “there was absolutely no possibility to stay” (1974).
55. Zusha Wolf, ed., *Diedushka: Ha-Rebbe mi-Lubavitch ve-Yahadut Rusyah* (Kfar Chabad: Yad ha-Hamishah, 2006). Cited by partial publication in Russian-language Lubavitch magazine *Svet Moshiacha* (The Light of the Messiah), republished online on Chabad.org: chapter “Those Who Did Not Leave the Battlefield” [in Russian], *Habad.ru*, https://ru.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1385376/jewish/- .htm.
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57. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 8–9.
58. Berel Lazar, interview by Andrei Eihfus, *STMEGI TV*, July 30, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcX_HVjYeCE.
59. Ehrlich, “Walking a Tightrope.”
60. This Hebrew acronym means that the honoree “should have a good and long life.” “*Hamodia* Features Interview with Rabbi Berel Lazar on Jewish Life under Putin,” *CrownHeights.info*, November 16, 2023, <https://crownheights.info/chabad-news/842868/hamodia-features-interview-with-rabbi-berel-lazar-on-jewish-life-under-putin>.
61. Alexander Rogoza, “Danced His Way to a Concussion” [in Russian], *Komsomol Pravda*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/27565/4834704>.
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63. Heschel, “Yiddishkeit under Putin.”

64. Heilman, “Lubavitch and How and Why,” 144.
65. Heschel, “Yiddishkeit under Putin.”
66. Heschel, “Yiddishkeit under Putin.”
67. Wolfson, *Open Secret*, 304 n. 13; 317 n. 23.
68. Menachem Friedman, “Habad as Messianic Fundamentalism: From Local Particularism to Universal Jewish Mission,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalism: The Dynamic Character of Movements*, ed. Marty E. Martin and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 329.
69. Berel Lazar, “The Gold We Will Take to the World to Come” [in Russian], *Lechaim.ru*, July 22, 2022, <https://lechaim.ru/academy/zoloto-kotoroe-mi-vozymem-v-gryadushtiy-mir>; Lazar, “To Find Torah, to Cling to Torah” [in Russian], *Lechaim.ru*, May 25, 2022, <https://lechaim.ru/academy/nayti-toru-derzhatysya-za-toru-zhity-blagodarya-tore>; Berel Lazar, address [in Russian], *Telegram*, May 9, 2022, <https://t.me/RabbiBerelLazar/205>.
70. Berel Lazar, “The War of the L-rd against Amalek from Generation to Generation” [in Russian], *Lechaim.ru*, October 23, 2023, <https://lechaim.ru/academy/voynau-g-spoda-protiv-amaleka-iz-roda-v-rod>.
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78. “Reb Motl Kozliner said that the Rebbe told him, ‘These Russian ba’altshuvkes, they are the ones who will bring Moshiach,’” Boruch Kuznetsov’s post on Facebook, January 14, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid021xZiT5SxBoudfkYqixMhc2QzVPuUGjL1ydh1ESMT19dXtza4CuRszMh9GPPVC3HfI&id=100009079367952.
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Innovation and Conservatism in Hasidic Pop Culture and Language¹

by Chaya R. Nove

I INTRODUCTION

I once interviewed a Hasidic Holocaust survivor who was only seventeen when the Nazis decimated her hometown of Pápa, Hungary, in 1944. By 1948, she had married a widower from Satu Mare, Romania that had lost his family to the war and resettled in Brooklyn. She explained her choice to marry someone nearly two decades her senior with a chilling brevity: “indz ho’mir nisht gevolt mer lakhn” (“We didn’t want to laugh again”). This admission revealed a premature pragmatism and jadedness, born from the harsh realities of war, and seemed to me to encapsulate the austere worldview of her generation.

When Hasidim arrived in New York from Eastern Europe after World War II, they focused on building an infrastructure to support Hasidic life. Their primary concerns were establishing livelihoods, raising families, founding institutions, and printing *sforim* (religious books). Popular entertainment was not on the agenda. Their resilience led to impressive communal self-sufficiency, but it also shaped a culture that was relatively somber.

In 1954, the Nitra Hasidic group staged the first post-Holocaust live theater for Hasidim, *Mekhires Yosef*, dramatizing the biblical story of Joseph sold into slavery. Immigrant parents, many with young children in tow, flocked to Williamsburg’s Eastern District High School to partake in this singular event. The cast, composed of community members who were Holocaust survivors rather than trained actors, infused the performance with heartfelt paths drawn from their own experiences. Their raw and poignant portrayal evoked recent memories of separation and loss. When Joseph wept at the grave of his

mother Rachel, many in the audience wept along with him. For some, it was the first time they had shed tears over their recent personal trauma.² The play, referred to as the *Yosef shpil*, served as communal catharsis and was recounted and recited for years.

Some twenty years after that production, in 1977, an advertisement for *Di letste gedank* (The Final Idea), one of the most well-known Hasidic theatrical performances of the era, ostensibly promised: “ir vet lakhn un lakhn, un nisht oyfhern tsu lakhn” (“You will laugh and laugh, and you won’t stop laughing”).³ This play, full of humor and levity, contrasted sharply with the somber tone of the Nitra *Yosef shpil*. In fact, to those familiar with the play, the main plot is almost tangential to the comedic vignettes that appear throughout the performance. *Di letste gedank* reflects the changing dynamics of a community that was now more at home, economically secure, and culturally integrated into American life.

As Hasidic society grew, so did its collective confidence. Moreover, out of the shared experiences, languages, and references of the native New Yorkers, a distinctly American Hasidic culture emerged that transcended the diverse roots of the erstwhile postwar population, the *sheyres hapleyte* (surviving remnants). The past three decades have seen enormous activity in the realm of Hasidic pop culture.⁴ Fueled by creative energy and technological advances, New York Hasidim have produced a robust corpus of cultural artifacts and expressions, including theatrical performance, lyrical music, literature, comedy, advertisements, games, and more—all with Yiddish as the primary linguistic medium. In these genres, the tension between traditionalism and modernity is apparent, as mainstream American trends (e.g., musical styles and cinematography effects) are rendered, refracted, and refitted onto traditional content (e.g., biblical verses, rabbinic tenets, and moralistic tales) to form a distinctive Hasidic style.

As a sociolinguist with lifelong roots in the Hasidic community, my initial foray into the study of Hasidic pop culture stemmed from my interest in the ongoing development of contemporary Hasidic Yiddish within its English-speaking environment. I have long noted the ways in which language in popular media both mirrors and diverges from everyday speech, and the subtle ways in which it has changed over time. Historically, the field of sociolinguistics has focused primarily on naturally occurring speech. However, there is a growing interest in the linguistic and cultural implications of variation and change in stylized and performative language, and a new subfield—Pop Culture Linguistics—is beginning to emerge in response to this. While I have not yet conducted a systematic analysis of the language used in Hasidic Yiddish pop

culture, this essay aims to pave the way for such research by providing an overview of the history and development of Hasidic cultural expressions, complemented by some preliminary observations about language use in this context.

A central theme of this essay is the interplay between preservation and change within Hasidic pop culture, which reflects linguistic tendencies observed by scholars studying Hasidic Yiddish.⁵ At the heart of this analysis is the proposition that the Hasidic community, as a minority subculture within a dominant superculture, is engaged in a continuous negotiation of its cultural narratives. This situation mirrors the dynamics between colonized societies and their colonizers and resonates with postcolonial themes of power and resistance.⁶ Such complex engagement often yields a novel cultural idiom, a counter-narrative that both reinforces community values and fosters the necessary adaptations for thriving in a modern context.

The following sections provide an overview of Hasidic cultural production, focusing on three key genres that are prominently represented in the mainstream canon: theatrical performance, lyrical music, and literature. In these genres, we observe countervailing trends of tradition and innovation, reflective of a community both preserving its distinct identity and adapting to mainstream American influences.

THE EMERGENCE OF HASIDIC POP CULTURE⁷

The dramatic rise in creative output from New York Hasidim in recent years can be attributed primarily to three factors: (1) The population growth of the Hasidic community, (2) new production technologies, and (3) acculturation to American codes of leisure. Following the immigration of its core population of refugees, the Hasidic community grew rapidly, mostly due to natural causes. With the swell in family size came a growing demand for entertainment that met communal religious and moral standards. This need was heightened by alterations in consumption practices that reflect the influence of American leisure culture. For example, while the older generation was primarily concerned with printing religious texts and newspapers, the younger generation displayed an appetite for pleasure reading material, including fiction. Advances in technology reduced costs, making content creation for this niche market feasible. Consequently, more resources have been invested in creative endeavors adhering to the community's religio-cultural standards.

HASIDIC YIDDISH THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

The first genre to be developed in postwar Hasidic communities was theatrical performance, Hasidim call them *sphiln* or plays,⁸ which is rooted in a rich pre-war tradition. For example, the *pirim shpil*, a relatively short dramatic interpretation of a biblical or other moralistic tale performed on the holiday of Purim, was a highly anticipated event in European Hasidic courts, typically performed on a makeshift stage in the synagogue, with the Rebbe and his followers in attendance. Groups like the Bobover and Munkatsher Hasidim continue this tradition in New York, presenting culturally significant amateur theatrical performances to predominantly in-group audiences at no cost.⁹

To my knowledge, the first ticketed Hasidic event in New York was the 1954 *Mekhires Yosef* performance referenced above, which was staged by former students of the Nitra yeshiva to raise funds for the school. The script was reportedly a slightly revised version of a 1934 production in Mukachevo (previously Muncács in Hungary and now in present-day Ukraine). Some of the updates to the script are obvious. For example, the lines of the comical character Yakhtsl, who plays Jacob's simpleton servant (a typical motif in such dramas) are filled with Yiddish-accented codeswitching to English. To the Yiddish-speaking immigrants in the audience, the incongruity of English spoken in the home of the patriarch Jacob was enough to provoke laughter, and these lines enliven the play. Interlingual homophones are used to similar effect. For example, when Jacob instructs Yakhtsl to summon his sons from the field, he uses the Yiddish particle verb *aheymkern* (return home). Yakhtsl's response plays on the phonetic similarity between *kern* and the English "care": "nokh a mol **kern**, vider a mol **kern**, I don't **care!**" ("Again **kern**, more **kern**, I don't **care!**"). Despite these lighter moments, *Mekhires Yosef* maintained a somber tone, with scenes like Joseph at his mother's grave deeply moving the audience, many of whom were Holocaust survivors seeking emotional release.¹⁰ The play was an iconic event in the community that remained etched in the collective memory of that generation.

A score of years passed before the next large-scale Hasidic theatrical event, *Di letste gedank*, which is obviously geared toward an American Hasidic audience. The English in this play was naturally integrated, unlike the self-conscious code-switching of the earlier Nitra production. The humor here derives from highly nuanced satirical vignettes of religious, Jewish, and American life, scattered throughout the performance, which are rendered legible through the audience's shared diaspora experience. These comedic scenes, well-known and often quoted within the community, overshadow its plot. In one sketch,

the comedic character Zeml turns on his battery-powered radio in a doctor's waiting room and the audience is treated to a lengthy parody of a radio broadcast that presumes familiarity with current events and mainstream media. For example, the 1010 WINS slogan is inverted in translation and misattributed to WEVD, the famous Yiddish radio station:¹¹ "Dos iz WEVD. Mir gebn aakh tsvey in tsvontsik minit, ets gets indz di velt" ("This is WEVD. We give you twenty-two minutes, you give us the world"). In the sports section, which mocks the American obsession with this pastime, a recent event regarding a brawl between baseball players Graig Nettles and George Brett is hyperbolized, suggesting that the scriptwriters expected the audience to recognize the names of the athletes and to have heard about the incident.

Commercial Hasidic theater saw sporadic growth until the late 2000s when the *Intern* series by Neuhaus/Steinhaus Productions gained traction, featuring plays with "intern" (beneath) in their titles, like *Intern bank* (bench) and *Intern shtil* (throne). Some years later, Epic Shpiel Productions began staging dramas characterized by mystery and intrigue. Each of these companies now puts on one major show annually. The performances are recorded professionally and are available, along with other Hasidic films, for purchase on DVD and online streaming.

In a recent lecture, scholar Wojciech Tworek, who has analyzed commercial Hasidic productions, noted the increasing sophistication of the stage elements and the distinctly American flavor of the content.¹² A striking example is *Intern rikn* (back), which highlights the status of the United States as a *malkhes shel khosed* (benevolent regime), and culminates with the colonial American flag hoisted high as the cast performs an amended version of the Star-Spangled Banner, in Yiddish. Tworek cites this production as evidence of the deep impact American national mythologies have on contemporary Hasidic identity, noting: "[. . .] forty years ago the Hasidic bard Yom Tov Ehrlich recorded a whole album called *Ameritshke*, or a 'little America'; and in this album he scorned American culture, its permissiveness and its hedonism. And today, we've got *Intern khavraye* (company), which praises the country in which [. . .] everyone can hold on to their faith, whatever it may be." Another example of transcultural influence is the recent film *Ibern fidl* (Over the Fiddle), which includes visual, formal, and thematic intertextuality tying it to the 1971 film *Fiddler on the Roof*.¹³

Tworek also emphasizes the constraints within Hasidic theatrical productions, noting their dependence on rabbinical approval for profitability. This necessity has led to a growing conservatism in the genre. Modern Yiddish plays

avoid not only provocative content but also elements previously deemed unacceptable, like weapons, mild profanity or references to women. For instance, the earlier mentioned radio parody wouldn't be permitted now, as Hasidim traditionally avoid radio exposure. On the other hand, given the nature of the medium, the dialogue, which can be highly formal, also reflects the everyday language of the audience. For example, in the play *Intermishn*,¹⁴ actors repeatedly praise each other by saying, "di bist fayne naves!" a relatively new expression in Hasidic Yiddish that translates literally to "you are good news" but is semantically equivalent to "You're awesome!" or "You rock!"

HASIDIC YIDDISH LYRICAL MUSIC

Music has always been a cornerstone of Jewish tradition, but professionally produced music is a comparatively recent phenomenon among Haredi Jews due to the relative novelty of the medium.¹⁵ In the postwar decade, Hasidim's exposure to secular Yiddish music through WEVD radio likely led them to associate the genre with secular Jewish culture. In 1959, Yom Tov Ehrlich (1916–1990), a well-known musician, composer, and lyricist, became the first Hasidic artist to release Yiddish music for a broad American audience, including children.¹⁶ Ehrlich was a keen observer of human nature, and his songs described and celebrated the everyday lives of people, including New World Hasidim (see e.g., his song *Vilyamsburg* [Williamsburg]). At the same time, he was wryly critical of secular American society and those who seek to imitate it, demonstrating a broad cultural awareness (see e.g., his songs *Luksus* [Luxury] and *Sandwich System*). Raised among Karlin-Stoliner Hasidim in Belarus, Ehrlich's Northeastern Yiddish dialect contrasted with the Central Yiddish of most Brooklyn Hasidim. While this dialectal difference may have alienated some listeners, his music filled an important niche and thus enjoyed immense popularity.

Haredi superstars Mordechai Ben David and Avraham Fried, who rose to fame in the 1980s, recorded some Yiddish songs (including some of Ehrlich's compositions), but it wasn't until the following decade that original music in mainstream Hasidic Yiddish began to arrive on the scene via native speakers of the dialect, most notably Yonasan Schwartz, Michael Schnitzler, and Lipa Schmeltzer. It is perhaps no accident that these artists had, like Ehrlich, honed their craft in *badkhones*, a traditional spoken-word art form whose subject

matter ranges from the lofty to the mundane.¹⁷ In 2015, Motty Ilowitz, another *badkhen* who had written lyrics for Schmeltzer and others, gained prominence with his debut album *Makhshoves* (Thoughts). Like those of Ehrlich before them, Schmeltzer, Schnitzler and Ilowitz's songs include lighthearted reflections on everyday life. But whereas Ehrlich reserved his criticism for secular culture, these Hasidic artists also cast their gaze inward, offering commentary on the Hasidic system. For example, the song *Yener* (The Other), composed by Ilowitz and released by Schmeltzer in 2008, critiques the societal pressures within Hasidic life. The lyrics in the chorus, which advocate for independent thought, signify a cultural shift in the attitude of this strongly collectivist community toward Western individualism.

While Hasidic artists engage in social commentary, they cautiously navigate the unspoken limits to avoid alienating their mainstream audience. Commenting on community idiosyncrasies may be acceptable, but direct challenges to the Hasidic establishment or rabbinical authority are off-limits. Some artists, however, tread these fine lines. For instance, Michoel Schnitzler's 2009 *Der bokher's tsvoe* (The Boy's Will) boldly criticizes the elitism in the Hasidic Yeshiva system. Similarly, Lipa Schmeltzer's *Ikh hob gekhapt* (I Was Whipped) addresses the contentious issue of corporal punishment in schools, softening its message with a verse reflecting on the innocence of childhood.¹⁸ These forays into sensitive topics are fraught with risk, yet they also reflect nuanced artistic expression within the community.

Hasidic music is also diversifying stylistically. A study by Weinberg and Dale illustrates the process through which the parameters of Hasidic music expand.¹⁹ The authors analyze how the music of Israeli pop star Ishay Ribo became integrated into the Hasidic canon, arguing that his recent collaboration with Hasidic superstar Motty Steinmetz, coupled with increased exposure to his music online during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated his crossover into the Hasidic mainstream. This process of pairing, akin to the "coalescence" or the merging of Jewish traditions and secular values that Yoel Finkelman identifies in Haredi literature, operates at all levels of cultural production.²⁰ Elements borrowed from contemporary secular pop culture (styles, formats, effects) become palatable when paired with familiar content (biblical verses, religious parables, traditional stories). In this way, the definition of what Hasidic culture is and can be keeps changing.²¹

Music production in the Hasidic community has become increasingly sophisticated. New releases often feature high-tech videos that, while culturally specific, showcase mainstream entertainment influences. For example, Motty

Ilowitz's popular music video *Yiddishe Taavos* (Jewish Pleasures) uses modern cinematographic techniques to depict everyday pleasures familiar to Hasidic men, like savoring morning coffee after a *mikve* (ritual bath), with lyrics clarifying how these earthly comforts align with the tenets of spiritual Jewish existence.²²

In 2018, Moshe Kraus of MK Studios produced the first major concert exclusively featuring Hasidic artists, attracting an audience of around 1500. In promoting the event the organizers refrained from calling it a concert, instead referring to it as a *muzikalische tsamkum* (musical gathering).²³ Reflecting on that project (which was repeated twice more, most recently in 2022 with double the attendance), Kraus explained: "I was always bothered by the idea that Hasidic music means compromising on quality, because I disagree. I want Hasidic music to be very high quality. Why should [a Hasidic person] need to go [elsewhere]? You like your style of music, embrace it" (translated from Yiddish).

In recent years, Hasidic music has witnessed a nostalgic turn, possibly mirroring a similar trend in mainstream pop culture.²⁴ However, while mainstream nostalgia tends to look back ten to thirty years, Hasidic music reaches further into the past. A prime example of this is the music video *Yidn in Amerike* (Jews in America) by Hershy Weinberger, featuring Lipa Schmeltzer and Dovy Meisels,²⁵ whose lyrics recall a well-known story about the *Minkhes Elozer*, the renowned rabbi of Mukachevo (1868–1937). Confronted with video cameras and machinery capable of transmitting sounds and images across oceans, the rabbi reportedly seized the moment to implore his brethren in America to observe *Shabbos*. Other notable examples include Moishy Schwartz's *Tentsele*²⁶ and Dovy Meisels's *Kretshme*, featuring Pinky Weber.²⁷ These music videos are period pieces that portray life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century shtetels, with *Tentsele* resonating with lively echoes of *Fiddler on the Roof*. In 2023, singer Levy Falkowitz released *A Ehrlicheh Lid*,²⁸ an album of Yom Tov Ehrlich's compositions, thereby bringing Hasidic popular music full circle. On his YouTube channel, Falkowitz describes the album as "nostalgic, yet fresh and new," and invites listeners to let the music transport them.²⁹

Researchers have observed that in times of uncertainty and change, people frequently find comfort in the familiar, with nostalgia serving to enhance psychological health and well-being.³⁰ The implications of this trend within the Hasidic community, and what it signifies in a broader cultural context, remain an intriguing subject for further analysis, extending beyond the scope of this chapter.

Music at the Hasidic Margins

Success in the music industry, unlike theater, doesn't rely on large audiences, and the digital turn has made music production cheaper and more accessible. Many mainstream Hasidic artists derive much of their income from live performance, mostly weddings, but a growing number is gaining popularity through social media and streaming services. An online presence allows these artists to explore content that might otherwise face scrutiny or require community approval. This is particularly evident in "wedding songs," a recent genre of personalized songs commissioned for weddings and shared online, often with the couple's first names and photos on the cover. Depending on the perceived audience, the lyrics in these songs can push the envelope in both content and language, with sly and subtle references to taboo topics (e.g., sex) and illicit activities (e.g., drug use).

The songs of Ari Samet who initially found his niche composing wedding songs, are a study in thematic and linguistic fluidity. For example, his Purim song *Lomir zikh tsifokhenen* (rendered in English on the song's YouTube clip as *Let's Get Tzifoched*), meanders between the sacred and the profane. It incorporates codeswitching, crude imagery, mild profanity, neologisms, new slang, references to current affairs, and finally, a plea for the Almighty to "zoom into" the hearts of people, recognize their good intentions, and send *moshiakh* (the messiah) to redeem them. A somewhat different model is singer songwriter Mendel Roth, maverick son of a Hasidic Rabbi, whose song *Libe nign* (Love Song) recently took the Hasidic world by storm. The single, which features a women's silhouette on its cover, uses decidedly conservative language to explore a topic that is strictly off-limits in the Hasidic world: romantic love. While such subversive artists may not receive broad Hasidic recognition, their music still finds an audience within the community.

HASIDIC YIDDISH LITERATURE

Publishing was among the first enterprises of Hasidic immigrants in the immediate aftermath of the war. While most of the materials they printed were Hebrew texts required for daily prayer and Torah study, many Yiddish *sforim* were (re)published during that period, as well. Beyond the religious realm, however, Yiddish publication was largely seen as the domain of secular Yiddishists, whose intensive cultural activity in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries centered around literature. Nevertheless, by the mid 1950s New York (Satmar) Hasidim had acquired their own newspaper (*Der Yid*) and were disseminating opinions, news, and information to the community in Yiddish. Below, I highlight some of the milestones in this process, drawing extensively on accounts by writer/translator Rose Waldman that deftly trace the rise of Hasidic literary output in the postwar period.³¹

In the early postwar years, Hasidic adults relied on *Dos yidische likht* (*The Jewish Light*), a Jerusalem weekly, and *Der Yid* for reading material meeting community standards. For children, there was little to supplement the school's reading regimen, which initially consisted of Yiddish primers published by the Hebrew Publishing Company. In the Satmar girls' school, these were later replaced by textbooks and *leyen-bikher* (reading books) produced in-house by Bais Rochel Publishers.³² The 1970s and 1980s saw the publication of new Yiddish books aimed at this demographic, many by the prolific author Menachem Mendel; and the establishment of a second major Hasidic Yiddish newspaper, *Di tsaytung* (*News Report*).

The most dramatic upsurge in literary productivity occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, when digital technologies made content creation for this growing community viable. Hasidic Yiddish book publishing virtually exploded with a diversifying range of genres including historical fiction, mysteries, and crime novels for adults and children. Early in this era, Sarah Jungreis launched *Maales* (Virtues), now widely regarded as the gold-standard of contemporary Hasidic periodicals. *Maales* carved out a unique position with its right-leaning religious tone, coupled with unexpected progressiveness in some areas, such as the diversity of genres it showcases and the array of topics it explores. A notable feature is its language-focused column, which cultivates a metalinguistic awareness among its readers. The editors' prescriptivist approach to language, unusual in this community, has established them as the gatekeepers of Hasidic Yiddish. Alongside *Maales*, a variety of Yiddish magazines, each with its unique style, circulate in the Hasidic community. These are complemented by news bulletins in various communities.

In the mid-2000s, Israeli writer and illustrator Shifra Glick introduced the first Yiddish comic books, which quickly captivated Hasidic children and sparked a surge in visual literature.³³ By 2014, educators in collaboration with acclaimed artist Gadi Polak launched *Kindlayn*, the inaugural Hasidic Yiddish children's magazine, which included sections on Jewish history, science, stories of *tsadikim*, and notably, serialized comics. This high-quality publication joined the burgeoning market of Yiddish-based merchandise, which includes

books, recordings, games, and puzzles, many produced by Kinder Shpiel USA Inc. Recently, the company Ner Mitzvah, producers of candles and Judaica, got in on the comics craze with a growing collection of trading cards, each featuring a panel from the “Izzy and Dizzy” comic series, becoming a hit among young collectors.

Perhaps due to its novelty and less rigid stylistic conventions, visual literature appears to allow for the subtle incorporation of mainstream cultural references. For instance, in the graphic novel *Di bund mit di pirotzn* (The Alliance with the Pirates), there is an apparent nod to *The Godfather* with a phrase that translates as “an offer [he] can’t refuse” (“a forshlag vos men ken nisht opzogn”). Additionally, the book features a variation of the classic “priest, rabbi, and minister” bar joke, reimagined with a Jewish rabbi, a fearsome pirate, and a sweet Jew on a deserted island (“eyn mol zenen gegangen a yidishe roy, a gefarfuler pirot, un a ziser yid oyf a farlozter inzl. . .”).³⁴

Pushing Boundaries in Hasidic Yiddish Writing

Writing has long served as a tool for dissent, and the ease of producing and sharing written content has been amplified by the internet, which provides a space for Hasidim whose views do not align with the establishment. The online forum *Kave Shtiebel* (Coffee Room) (kaveshtiebel.com), created by Hasidic men seeking an alternative to the increasingly conservative *iVelt* (ivelt.com/forum), is one such example. As linguist Isaac Bleaman notes, *Kave Shtiebel* offers a unique space for Hasidic men to hone their writing and openly critique their community.³⁵ The success of this forum led to the 2016 launch of *Der Veker* (The Rouser), a magazine adhering to similar principles of openness, which features contributions from Hasidic as well as secular and non-affiliated Yiddish writers.

Writing Conventions across Popular Literary Genres

Although Hasidic Yiddish has not been formally codified, the contours of a distinctly Hasidic Yiddish written standard are emerging.³⁶ This standard differs from the spoken register in some fundamental ways. For example, Hasidic writers typically use the formal first-person plural form *mir* in the nominative, whereas the spoken system has *indz*; and *ir/aakh* for the second-person plural (nominative/oblique), whereas the spoken Yiddish has *ets/enk* or *enk/enk*. Definite articles also are marked for gender and case, although this is often

highly inconsistent.³⁷ Moreover, the written language retains many Yiddish words that have been replaced by English in speech, such as *vagon* (train car), *trotuar* (sidewalk), and *shosay* (highway). This exposes young Hasidic readers to older lexical variants.

The rise of dialogue-rich graphic novels and comics has introduced a syncretic written style that deviates somewhat from the formal conventions previously described and is more consistent with conversational Hasidic Yiddish. For example, it's not uncommon to see pronominal forms from the spoken register, such as *enk*, appearing in these publications. Common English loanwords, as well as new words and expressions used by today's Hasidim, are also frequently incorporated.

Online Hasidic writing demonstrates even greater linguistic flexibility than that found in visual literature. Posts and comments on Hasidic forums are replete with English code-switching in Yiddish transliteration, as well as prevalent Hasidic slang. For example, in a thread on *iVelt* regarding the first edition of *Kindlayn*, one commenter writes approvingly: “Yups, oyvnoyf kukt es oys moyredik, super job, kh'hof zey veln es onhaltn oyf di nivo” (“Yups, on the face of it it looks amazing, super job, I hope they will keep up the level”). Another writes, “di oysgabe kukt oys gor fayne naves, nokh nisht gezen azans bay haymishe yidn!” (“The publication looks awesome, unlike anything I've seen in our community”).

CONCLUSIONS

While outsiders may view Hasidic, Haredi, and even Orthodox Jewish culture as static and out of step with the modern world—a portrayal frequently mirrored in secular media—scholars who have studied these communities have long recognized a dynamic cultural exchange. Rather than accept at face value the official narratives Hasidic communities repeat about themselves, which often downplay internal diversity and marginalize certain voices, we might instead read their stories through their expressive creations and language use, which inevitably encode the social circumstances of the group.

As the preceding discussion makes clear, Hasidic pop culture is very much in conversation with mainstream entertainment. Creators are expanding the parameters of performance, music, and literature by tapping into contemporary technologies and trends. Additionally, as illustrated by the examples

above, the language employed in these media mirrors the diversification. This openness to external influences demonstrates a receptiveness to the outside world that challenges the commonly held view of Hasidic insularity, suggesting a community with surprisingly fluid and permeable boundaries.

The widening scope of Hasidic performance, music, and literature reflects the ways in which the definition of what it means to be Hasidic is continuously evolving through the integration of elements from modern secular culture. This expansion has led to increased polarization within the community: while some factions lean towards greater conservatism, others are pushing the boundaries of traditional norms. Nonetheless, most Hasidim comfortably exist in the center of this spectrum. Although religiously conservative, they are adapting to their environment, selectively incorporating aspects of modernity according to their own criteria. Amidst the pressure to assimilate into American culture, Hasidim are preserving a distinct version of theirs, balancing traditionalism and innovation as they navigate a changing world.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the following people for their assistance with the research and writing of this essay: Isaac Bleaman, Yoelish Steinberg, Ety Goldberger, Moshe Krausz, Izzy Posen, Hadas Riviera-Weiss, Shaya Simonowitz, Devorah Spilman, Rose Waldman, and Chaim Weinberger. My sincere thanks also go to Ben Sadock and the editors of this volume for their editorial assistance.

In researching this topic, I interviewed eight New York Hasidim variously involved in cultural production, including two music producers, a Yiddish writer and editor, and an actor. Although I refrain from naming them for the sake of confidentiality, I am very grateful to these individuals for generously sharing their insights and experiences. To understand the ways in which Hasidic culture has changed over time, I also analyzed advertisements in *Der Yid*, the Yiddish newspaper run by Satmar Hasidim, from 1958 until 1978. Where no citations are provided, my information comes from my conversations with these Hasidim, insights gleaned from my analysis of the ads, and my personal experience with the genres described here.

Yiddish words are transliterated using a modified version of the YIVO system that reflects the Hasidic Yiddish pronunciation of the YIVO vowels /u/ (as /i/), /ey/ (as /ay/), and /ay/ (as /aa/), except when reproducing written content. For the vowels /o/ and /oy/, I have remained faithful to the Yiddish orthography (ֿ and ן, respectively), which doesn't reflect the phonemic contrasts of Hasidic Yiddish. When citing titles of works such as plays or albums that are published with transliterations, I have retained the original transliterations, even when they differ from the system used elsewhere in this document.

This essay does not discuss the popular culture produced by and for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic group, most of which is not in Yiddish and when it is, reflects the dialect used by Chabad-Lubavitch, which differs from that spoken by other modern-day Hasidim in New York. I have chosen to write about the cultural production of non-Lubavitch Hasidim because my linguistic research is centered on this group.

2. This is based on a 2012 report by writer on the online forum *Kave shtiebel*, who claims to have heard it from a survivor who attended the play (<https://www.kaveshtiebel.com/viewtopic.php?f=4&t=2631>). One reason the scene with Joseph at Rachel's grave likely evoked such strong emotion is that there are no graves for those murdered in the concentration camps. In Jewish culture, *kever ovoys*, the tradition of visiting family burial sites, holds profound significance. Thus, the fact that this generation, orphaned by the Holocaust, has no *kever ovoys* to visit exacerbates the sense of loss.
3. A 2012 post on the online forum *iVelt* mentions such an advertisement; my attempts to locate it have thus far not been successful (<https://www.ivel.com/forum/viewtopic.php?forms=0&t=13402>).

4. I use the term “pop culture” to refer to artistic output produced for commercial purposes for mass consumption.
5. See, e.g., Dalit Assouline, “Haredi Yiddish in Israel and the United States,” in *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present*, ed. B. Hary and S. B. Benor (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2018), 472–88; Zöe Belk, Lily Kahn, and Krista E. Szendroi, “Innovations in the Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish Pronominal System,” in *Contemporary Research in Minority and Diaspora Languages of Europe*, ed. M. Coler and A. Nevins (Berlin: Language Science Press, 2021), 143; Z. Belk, L. Kahn, and K. E. Szendroi, “Absence of Morphological Case and Gender in Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish Worldwide,” *Journal of Germanic Linguistics* 34, no. 2 (2021): 139–85; Isaac Bleaman, “Implicit Standardization in a Minority Language Community: Real-time Syntactic Change among Hasidic Yiddish Writers,” *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence* 3 (2020): 1–20, doi: 10.3389/frai.2020.00035; Chaya R. Nove, “Outcomes of Language Contact: Phonetic Convergence in New York Hasidic Yiddish Vowels,” in *Selected Papers German(ic) in Language Contact*, ed. C. Zimmer (Berlin: Language Science Press, Language Variation Series, 2021): 43–71.
6. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
7. Because of *halakhic* prohibitions against *kol isha* (the voice of a woman), women are not visibly represented in mainstream Hasidic performing arts, although some do participate behind the scenes (composing songs, planning events, etc.). Additionally, women have always performed in female-only spaces. The past half dozen years have seen the emergence of a cultural scene by and for Haredi females in which Hasidic women too are participating. While researching this topic I interviewed a handful of Hasidic women who are part of this scene (singers, composers, and producers), two of whom run their own production studios. Albums by female artists, shows hosted by women, and recordings of women-only events can be streamed on sites such as Toveedo (toveedo.com) and purchased on DVD wherever Jewish music is sold. During a recent visit to a local kosher supermarket, I counted over a dozen such DVDs. Regretably, a description of this revolutionary phenomenon is beyond the scope of this essay. Rose Waldman presents an excellent account of the ways in which women partake in Hasidic cultural production in “Women’s Voices in Contemporary Hasidic Communities,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 38, no. 2 (2020): 35–60, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/762079/summary>. Readers interested in the ways in which the digital turn has revolutionized female participation in Haredi cultural production more broadly should read Jessica Roda, *“For Women and Girls Only”: Reshaping Orthodoxy through the Arts in the Digital Age* (New York: NYU Press, 2024), and other recent work by this author, including “Orthodox Women and the Musical Shekhinah: Performances, Technology, and the Artist in North America,” in *Handbook of Jewish Music*, ed. Tina Fruhauf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 637–63. Other resources include: Assouline, “Haredi Yiddish,” 481; Zelda Kahan-Newman, “Women’s *badkhones*: The Satmar Poem Sung

- to a Bride,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 138 (1999): 81–100; and Ester-Basya Vaisman, “Hold on Tightly to Tradition”: Generational Differences in Yiddish Song Repertoires among Contemporary Hasidic Women,” in *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture*, ed. Lara Rabinovitch, Shiri Goren, and Hannah S. Pressman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013): 339–56.
8. For the historical associations that make the word *teater* (theatre) problematic to Hasidim, see Wojciech Tworek, “Staging Hasidism: Representation of the ‘Yossele Schumacher Affair’ in a Hasidic Yiddish Play *Vi Iz Yossele?*,” in *Representing Jewish Thought: Proceedings of the 2015 Institute of Jewish Studies Conference Held in Honour of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert*, ed. Agata Paluch and Lukas Muehlethaler (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2021): 47–67.
 9. For an account of the Bobover *purim shpil* in New York, see Shifra Epstein, “Drama on a Table: The Bobover Hasidim *Piremshpiyl*,” in *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, ed. Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995): 195–217. For more on this practice, past and present, see: Ahuva Belkin, *The Purimshpil: Studies in Jewish Folk Theater* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2002); Miriam Isaacs, “Yiddish Then and Now: Creativity in Contemporary Hasidic Communities,” in *Yiddish Language and Culture Then and Now—Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Symposium* (1998): 165–88; and Chone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Biblical Plays 1697–1750* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1979).
 10. See n. 2.
 11. For more on WEVD, see Ari Y. Kelman, *Station Identification: A Cultural History of Yiddish Radio in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
 12. See Tworek, “Staging Hasidism,” 47–67 and Tworek, “The Rise of Hasidic Yiddish Theatre,” in *Ada Rapoport-Albert Seminar Series on Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish* (2021).
 13. Chaya R. Nove, “Hasidic Pop Culture and Language” [Keynote Panel]. *Farbindungen* (February, 2023).
 14. The title of the play *Intermishn*, which features a mix of elements and characters from previous *Intern* plays, is a good example of creative language use. The combination of the Yiddish words *inter* (beneath) and *mishn* (mix), plays on the English “intermission” while simultaneously hinting at the play’s content.
 15. Recordings in the prewar era primarily featured the voices of celebrated cantors like Yossele Rosenblatt (1882–1933), whose vocal prowess was first captured in 1905. These innovative recordings utilized modern phonograph technologies to capture the sounds of liturgical and religious performances, preserving elements of Jewish tradition during a time of intense social change. For a fascinating exploration of the significance of early cantorial music to modern-day Hasidic singers, see Jeremiah Lockwood, *Golden Ages: Hasidic Singers and Cantorial Revival in the Digital Era* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2024).

16. Tzipora Weinberg, "The Songs of Yom Tov Ehrlich: Hasidic Encounters with Postwar American Culture," *American Musicological Society (AMS)* (2019).
17. For the role of *badkhones* at Hasidic weddings, see Yaakov Mazor and Moshe Taube, "A Hassidic Ritual Dance: The Mitsve-Tants in Jerusalemite Weddings," in *Jewish Oral Traditional: An Interdisciplinary Approach: Papers of a Seminar Initiated and Directed by Frank Alvarez-Pereyre*, ed. Israel Adler, Frank Alvarez-Pereyre, Edwin Seroussi, and Leah Shalem (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1994): 164–224.
18. Izzy Posen, "A Cultural Renaissance? New Chassidic Music Trends" (Online: Davar Bristol, 2022).
19. Tzipora Weinberg and Gordon Dale, "Shifting Paradigms, Pandemic Realities: The Reception of Ishay Ribo's Music in the American Hasidic Community," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* 8, no. 1 (2022): 39–52.
20. Yoel Finkelman, *Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Academic Studies Press, 2019).
21. Perhaps the best illustration of the maturation of Hasidic music is the swift and prolific response of Hasidic artists to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which more than forty Yiddish songs were released, many expressing longing for the familiar rituals of ordinary religious life of which they were deprived during this period. See Eli Benedict, "Hasidic Songs about Coronavirus: A Wonderful Voice of Renewal /הסידים שירי על קורונה-לידער א וואונדערליכע שטימע פון הידוש," in *Geveb*, April 2021, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/hasidic-songs-about-coronavirus>.
22. Link to *Yiddische Taavos*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RhMdFSslbs&ab_channel=MottyIlowitz%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%98%D7%99%D7%90%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%95%D7%95%D7%99%D7%98%D7%A9.
23. Kraus, personal interview, 2022.
24. H. Angus, "2023: The Year Culture Reached Peak Nostalgia," *Dazed*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/61592/1/2023-the-year-we-reached-peak-nostalgia-barbie-mean-girls-y2k>.
25. Link to *Yidn in Amerike*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8_mSKc3YfY&ab_channel=DovyMeisels.
26. Link to *Tentsele*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVB6HjhYm8c&ab_channel=MoishySchwartz-%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%95%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%A5.
27. Link to *Kretchme*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8fHhcL4Klqsab_channel=DovyMeisels.
28. The album's name, which translates to "an honest song" is a play on Ehrlich's last name, which means "honest" in Yiddish.
29. Link to *A Ehrlicheh Lid* (Album Sampler): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxsm_kJgw&ab_channel=LevyFalkowitz%7C%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%99%D7%A5.

30. See e.g., Clay Routledge, Tim Wildschut, Constantine Sedikides, and Jacob Juhl, "Nostalgia as a Resource for Psychological Health and Well-being," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 7, no. 11 (2013): 808–18.
31. Rose Waldman, "New York's Yiddish Press Is Thriving," *Tablet Magazine* (2018), <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/new-yorks-yiddish-press-is-thriving>; and Waldman, "Seizing the Means of Cultural Production: Hasidic Representation in Contemporary Yiddish Media," *In Geveb* 2018, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/seizing-the-means-of-cultural-production-hasidic-representation-in-contemporary-yiddish-media>. See also Zoë Belk, Lily Kahn, and Kriszta Eszter Szendroi, "Introduction: Thematic Issue on Contemporary Haredi Yiddish Worldwide," *Journal of Jewish Languages* 10 (2022): 1–13; Isaacs, "Yiddish Then and Now," 177–78; Steffen Krogh, "Some Remarks on the Morphology and Syntax of Written Yiddish among Haredi Satmar Jews," in *Zeitschrift für Dialektologie und Linguistik. Beihefte*, ed. Michael Elmentaler, Markus Hundt, and Jürgen E. Schmidt (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015), 379–413; Jordan Kutzik, "American Hasidic Yiddish Pedagogical Materials: A Sociological and Sociolinguistic Survey of 50 Years of Post-War Publishing," *Journal of Jewish Languages* 6, no. 1 (2018): 60–88, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134638-06011136>; and Bruce Mitchell, *Language Politics and Language Survival: Yiddish among the Haredim in Post-War Britain* (Belgium: Peeters Publishers, 2006).
32. For a close reading of a 1964 grammar book, see Kutzik, "American Hasidic Yiddish Pedagogical Materials."
33. This trend coincides with the visual turn in literature in mainstream society, which was influenced by Manga, multi-tasking culture, and multi-media consumption, among other things.
34. Mendel Hershkowitz, *Di Bund Mit Di Pirotn* (The Alliance with the Pirates), illustrated by Yaakov Yarchi (Israel: Shai Publishing, 2022), 28, 64.
35. Bleaman, "Implicit Standardization in a Minority Language Community."
36. Eli Benedict, "So Is Our Hasidic Yiddish Standardized, or Not?," *The Forward*, April 14, 2021, <https://forward.com/yiddish/467723/so-is-our-hasidic-yiddish-standardized-or-not/>.
37. Krogh, "Some Remarks."

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Communal Self-Regulation and State Law: The Case of the “Kosher Cellphone in Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox Community”

by *Shuki Friedman*

I NTRODUCTION

The Haredim, which literally translates as those who “tremble” or “fear God,” are anxious about preserving their identity. Haredi Judaism emerged in the nineteenth century as a response to modernity, which its adherents believe poses an existential threat to Jewish identity. The segregated way of life of the Haredi community includes many aspects, such as establishing separate Haredi school systems with their own curricula,¹ residing in separate neighborhoods,² and using separate media and communications eco-systems.³ Haredim in Israel regard the secular Zionist project embodied by the Jewish state as a threat to their well-being.

Outside Israel, the boundaries of the community are clearer, with the line drawn between Jews and “gentiles.” It is easier to maintain separation between worlds. In Israel, however, the “other” beyond the community walls is Jewish. As a result, life under Jewish sovereignty poses a challenge. Defining those who govern as “persecutors” becomes more complicated when they are “Jewish brethren.” With the rising influence of the Haredim in Israeli governance, they have themselves become part of the ruling class. They have both power and authority. However, such involvement in state affairs also poses a challenge to Haredi identity.⁴

To preserve their identity,⁵ the Haredim have established a rich autonomous existence.⁶ The Haredi communal system provides most of the community’s needs within its own institutions, thereby fortifying the walls between

them and the outside world. The “society of learners,”⁷ built by the Haredim, focused on Torah study, has also become an insular culture.⁸ Haredi lives are segregated, geographically and physically, from broader Israeli society. They live in cities and neighborhoods that are predominantly Haredi in character. They primarily shop in stores catering to the Haredi community. In so far as they work,⁹ most do so within the community or in places of employment that allow them to maintain their Haredi lifestyle.

The Haredim are willing to defend their way of life at any cost, even at the expense of health, as the essence of life for them is the preservation of tradition. This was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when Haredi leaders made decisions that contradicted Ministry of Health guidelines and Israeli law. Infection and mortality rates among the Haredim were significantly higher than those in the non-Haredi population. However, this did not prompt Haredi leaders to abandon their continued observance of the Haredi way of life, which includes intensive communal activities such as prayers, “tish” gatherings (large Sabbath or holiday assemblies around the rebbe’s “table”) and celebrations. Implicitly, Haredi leaders have declared that preserving their identity as Haredim takes precedence over saving lives.¹⁰

Still, in the face of the severity of the threat that Israel poses to Haredi identity, physical separation and educational insularity are not enough. To the Haredim, even the fear of God is not sufficient to prevent the outside world from breaking through Haredi isolation and undermining its identity. To ward off outside influences, the Haredi community exercises strict communal supervision. Life within the Haredi community is lived in great physical density.¹¹ Given that people are almost never alone, their actions are continuously monitored by others. Deviating from Haredi norms may adversely affect their own lives, as well as the lives of their children. Punishment for deviation from established norms remains a powerful tool in the Haredi world, which revolves around community, family, and particularly the upholding of Haredi values.

Haredim are willing to use state resources to preserve their way of life. A notable example of this is the use of state resources to sustain what Menachem Friedman called the “society of learners.” Thus, Haredi educational institutions and the long-term unemployment of many Haredim, especially men, require very substantial state support.¹² The exemption from military service, granted to Haredim since the early days of the state, allows them to promote their “society of learners”; for many years, those who did not serve were prohibited from working until well into adulthood. In 1977, a time of political upheaval in Israel, limits on the number of Haredi military service exemptions were

abolished, allowing many Haredi men to avoid conscription, which had the effect of reinforcing the “society of learners” model. Over the years, Haredim received significant state support, both in funding their educational institutions and through recognition of Torah study as a qualifying factor for various benefits. All these steps have enabled the Haredi community to rely on the resources of the Jewish state to buttress the community’s walls.

At times, the community internal enforcement structures operate through platforms that are not under the control of the community. Therefore, the Haredi community mobilizes the state and its laws to enable it to maintain an ultra-Orthodox way of life. Fundamentally, Haredim perceive the state as an external entity whose laws do not align with their way of life. Therefore, the use of the state’s legal resources to reinforce the walls of the ultra-Orthodox community is surprising but understandable. It turns out that in order to secure the ghetto walls, Haredim are willing to set aside their fundamental rejection of the state’s authority and use its laws to their advantage. This article examines the anomaly of Haredi identity preservation by leveraging state resources in the particular case of the “Kosher Cellphone.”

(1) The Digital Threat to Haredi Identity

The most significant risk to ultra-Orthodox identity is access to information about alternative ideas and lifestyles.¹³ Although it was easier in the “old world” to prevent access of community members to forbidden content, the digital world makes information much more easily attainable. In a world that relies so heavily on a digital infrastructure, complete disconnection from it is not possible. The digital world flattens hierarchies and exposes many ultra-Orthodox Jews to competing ideas. The hierarchy of knowledge and authority is a cornerstone of ultra-Orthodox existence.¹⁴ As a result, the digital age threatens the ultra-Orthodox way of life. The ultra-Orthodox community identified the digital threat more than two decades ago. The strategy it adopted was twofold. First, it discouraged internet penetration into ultra-Orthodox homes and internet use by Haredi individuals. The second aspect included the “kashering”¹⁵ of digital platforms, namely the creation of filtering mechanisms and self-usage regulations to block content that might pose a threat to Haredi identity.

Haredi rabbis took a decisive stance against the internet from its inception. Regulations and aggressive campaigns emphasized its “impure” nature and imposed a sweeping prohibition of internet use by Haredim.¹⁶ As internet technology advanced and the need for internet use increased, more Haredim

started to use the internet while ignoring the rabbinic prohibition. Regulations limiting access to online networks were introduced. Home access remained forbidden or severely restricted, and the use of technological tools that filtered out “forbidden” content was mandated.¹⁷

Current data shows that the community’s efforts to restrict internet usage have been largely effective. While the internet usage rate among Jews in Israel is 94%, it stands at 68% among the Haredim.¹⁸

(2) The “Kosher Cellphone” System

The advent of the smartphone with its easy accessibility to the internet turned out to be a much more significant threat to ultra-Orthodox identity than the internet. Its small size made it easy to hide internet use from family members or friends—in the study hall or elsewhere. In the next section, we will explore how the Haredi community in Israel managed the new challenge posed by technology.¹⁹

The Rabbinic Committee for Communications Affairs—A Model for Community-Based Regulation

The Rabbinic Committee for Communications Affairs, established in 2005, is the body that, to this day, governs the ultra-Orthodox “Kosher Cellphone” system.²⁰ Its founding documents state that its goal is to persuade the ultra-Orthodox public to use cellphones that only allow calls and to negotiate with communication companies to establish lines specifically reserved for the ultra-Orthodox public.²¹ Since its establishment, the committee has indeed achieved its goal and currently controls about 72% of the ultra-Orthodox cellular telecommunications market, overseeing approximately 600,000 lines.

With its establishment, the Rabbinic Committee built a mechanism of agreements based on four components: first, agreements between the committee and cellular companies to establish “Kosher Sections,” meaning number blocks where each telephone line and device operating within them would fall under the authority of the Rabbinic Committee and not be exempt from it. Second, agreements between clients of the kosher numbers and cellular companies would only derive from agreements with the Rabbinic Committee. Third, agreements between the Rabbinic Committee and kosher phone importers must stipulate that they would only be able to operate within “Kosher Sections.” Fourth, agreements between cellular companies themselves must respect each other’s number blocks and refrain from assigning numbers to

companies that do not have agreements in place with the Rabbinic Committee. After the “Kosher Section” was established through these voluntary agreements, it gained implicit recognition in the Communication Law.

The surveillance system comprises several components: first, the regulatory dimension. In order to establish a system for monitoring kosher mobile phone users, the Rabbinical Committee formed a series of agreements with major Israeli cellular companies, effectively establishing the “Kosher Section.” Under these contracts, it was agreed that the communication companies would allocate hundreds of thousands of numbers characterized by a unique prefix to the Kosher Section, identifying them as kosher and distinguishing them from other phone numbers. These numbers can only be associated with SIM cards that allow voice calls but not data usage, sending or receiving text messages, or any other service. Subscribers to the “kosher system” purchase mobile phones approved by the Rabbinical Committee, most of which do not allow text messages even if the option is not blocked by the communication provider. Both the SIM cards and the devices themselves bear the certification stamp of the committee. These commitments are also reflected in agreements with the cellular companies, which obligate them not to provide access to kosher numbers to those using non-kosher SIMs or devices.

The agreements between the cellular companies and the Rabbinical Committee impose a series of restrictions on the companies, affording the committee absolute control over the management of the Kosher Section. According to these agreements, the communication companies are committed to block kosher lines from dialing any number deemed inappropriate by the Rabbinical Committee. In some cases, the companies also provide committee representatives with access to the number management system, allowing them to independently block phone numbers at their discretion. Members of the Rabbinical Committee frequently use blocking tools to prevent kosher numbers from accessing a range of services.

The second component is the monopolistic dimension. The regulatory system is enabled by agreements signed by the clients of kosher numbers. Every purchaser of a kosher device and telephone line is required to sign a purchase agreement with the cellular company providing the kosher line. In this agreement, the customer consents to terms limiting the use of the kosher device and SIM, as well as pre-approval for the committee’s actions to block numbers according to its judgment. Customers also agree to limit their right to transfer their numbers from the Kosher Section and turn them into non-kosher numbers or to cancel line blocks.

The commercial aspect is expressed in agreements between the Rabbinical Committee and kosher device importers. In these agreements, the committee specifies the features required for a phone device to be eligible for certification. Importers also agree to distribute kosher phones only through committee approved distributors.

The fourth component comprises agreements among cellular companies that operate a Kosher Section, allowing for the mobility of a kosher number from one company to another.

Thus, through an aggressive rabbinical campaign, close community surveillance, and a series of agreements, the Rabbinical Committee has created a closed circuit of cellular providers, cellular device suppliers, and end-users identified by an ID number, subject to regulations that it has designed. The committee has thus become a monopoly in the ultra-Orthodox cellular market, with direct control of all its components.

The initial goal of the committee was to persuade the ultra-Orthodox public to use phones that only allow voice calls and those approved by the committee. Once the kosher market was established, the committee turned to the next stage of supervision: monitoring the voice content accessible from kosher devices.

The committee's supervision of voice content has two main aspects: first, monitoring and blocking access to service numbers and individuals whom the committee deems unacceptable to Kosher Section users; second, monitoring access to voice lines that provide information and specialized services (mostly) for users of the Kosher Section but which the committee blocked because they were being used by competing political groups.

Supervision of access to services and users: At the start of its operation, the committee began blocking access to lines providing services that it deemed inappropriate for users of the Kosher Section, such as sex services, pornographic content, and gambling lines. Subsequently, the committee has sought to block lines of many more services it deemed inappropriate for use by ultra-Orthodox individuals. The committee has also blocked the numbers of private individuals whose services it deemed unacceptable.

Supervision of service phone lines for the ultra-Orthodox public: With the growth in the number of Kosher Section users, several companies began operating to provide specialized services for the ultra-Orthodox community.²² These companies allow various service providers, mainly targeting the ultra-Orthodox community, to establish phone lines based on their platform and make them accessible to kosher phone users. The range of services provided on these platforms is very wide and includes, among other things,

various types of marketing information, event information, charity organization activities, political content, information on activities of various institutions, Torah lessons, and more. These services also provide an option for “Voice WhatsApp,” a service that allows open or closed groups to be created to leave messages for other users or to hold discussions. The committee closely monitors them and attempts to limit their use.²³

With the expansion of voice audio information services, the committee began fighting against these lines and started blocking services it found objectionable. Among other things, the committee struggled against lines providing news services specifically tailored to the ultra-Orthodox community (“news lines”), lines that offered up music, and entertainment and culture lines. Today, the committee operates on a “white list” basis, meaning pre-approval of audio content. For this purpose, the committee designed an application process for approval of kosher status, in which the applicant describes the content of the line they intend to operate and declares that it does not provide news services or forbidden content.

The committee’s blocking of service, information, and marketing lines, dramatically affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of Kosher Section users and limits their access to services and information, as well as to private, commercial, or non-Kosher Section line owners. Even the lines of official institutions are blocked at the committee’s will, without clear justification. Among other things, the committee routinely blocks lines of municipal and governmental offices, assistance organizations, ultra-Orthodox educational institutions, charities and *gmachs* (mutual aid societies), as well as lines transmitting religious and community content such as Torah lectures, funeral announcements, and more. When the committee suspects that a range of lines is used, among other things, for services it deems unacceptable, it blocks them arbitrarily, without examining the implications for the entire range of numbers, and apparently contrary to the terms of the cellular license of the companies.²⁴ The effect is to block hundreds of thousands of numbers without knowing for sure which services and users were blocked in this way.²⁵

(3) Internal Haredi Regulation—Between a Voluntary System and Community Enforcement

With respect to its impact on the the ultra-Orthodox community, the Rabbinical Committee’s success has been impressive. Questions arising from this success include whether the Rabbinical Committee operates the Kosher Section and

supervises it. Also, questions remain about the factors contributing to this success, and whether the choice of many from within the ultra-Orthodox community is truly voluntary or coerced.

***The Purpose of the Cellular Supervision System—
Between the Declared and the Actual***

The Rabbinical Committee's supervision system and monopolistic control over the kosher market includes three main components: first, establishing a Kosher Section and marking kosher numbers with special prefixes; second, preventing access to all network services other than voice calls; third, blocking phone lines and content providers the Committee deems off limits.

The Rabbinical Committee launched its activities in 2005, at a time when cellular browsing was in its infancy and access to it was limited. By contrast, the use of SMS text messaging, a technology relatively new at the time, was widespread, especially in the ultra-Orthodox sector. When the Committee embarked on its path, its first concern was blocking access to content it deemed inappropriate for the ultra-Orthodox public²⁶ (such as pornography) and also to restrict the use of text messages by permitting voice calls only.

Preventing the use of text messages: Why were the rabbis concerned about the increasing use of text messages among the ultra-Orthodox public? Hananel Rosenberg, Menahem Blondheim, and Elihu Katz²⁷ examined the reasons why the Rabbinical Committee sought to block the use of text messages for ultra-Orthodox users. They did this through interviews with rabbis associated with the Committee and by analyzing the discourse of ultra-Orthodox users on social networks. The interviews revealed that in the eyes of the rabbis, three main dangers arose from the use of text messages:

- 1. Marketing information about non-kosher content and services:** The ultra-Orthodox, like other users, were exposed to marketing text messages for non-kosher content that posed religious challenges.²⁸
- 2. Using text messages for illegitimate interaction between men and women:** According to the rabbis, supported by research findings, the availability of illegitimate interaction between men and women was greater when initiated through text messages than through voice calls. Some ultra-Orthodox users of kosher phones, when queried, also shared this view.²⁹

3. Using text messages to disseminate information about events in the ultra-Orthodox community: Traditional media outlets in the ultra-Orthodox community, such as newspapers, bulletin boards and ultra-Orthodox channels, are supervised and censored regularly by rabbis.³⁰ The increasing use of text messages made it possible for the ultra-Orthodox public to transmit information immediately, based on social networks or extensive distribution lists, without rabbinical supervision over content. The transmission of sensitive internal communal information, mostly about sectarian politics, disputes among rabbis and factions, and so forth, elicited a sense of discomfort among rabbis and a feeling that they might be losing control over the dissemination of information.³¹

The implication is that in addition blocking cellular browsing services, where the goal is assuring the community's insularity, the Rabbinical Committee has another purpose. Rosenberg and his partners call this "preserving hierarchical authority by controlling the exclusivity of information and its dissemination within the community."³² In other words, by preventing the possibility of disseminating information in an unmediated manner, the Committee seeks to maintain and safeguard the authority structures within the community.³³

Blocking content lines: It seems that the most significant change in the Rabbinical Committee's perception of its role and its duties lies in its decision to block content lines. The Rabbinical Committee initial guidelines were aimed at restricting ultra-Orthodox users to phones that only allow voice calls. The agreements signed by the Committee with cellular companies at the outset reveal that some of the authority it sought involved blocking access to and from phone lines outside the Kosher Section. From the start, the Committee aimed to block voice services that provided content it believed to be clearly incompatible with the ultra-Orthodox way of life. As mentioned, over the years since its founding, the committee has repeatedly expanded the range of lines it blocks from access to the Kosher Section, to the point that in many cases the blocking seemed arbitrary and promoted interests beyond the scope of the Committee's purpose.

One notable example of the Committee's expanded activity was its struggle against news lines intended for the ultra-Orthodox public ("entertainment lines"). The Committee began blocking Haredi sector news lines around 2010. To establish its legitimacy in this endeavor, it launched a campaign in which

ultra-Orthodox rabbis expressed their sharp opposition to content lines they perceived as causing harm to those exposed to them. The authorities called on Haredim “to disconnect the ultra-Orthodox news lines, whose exposure causes evil language, gossip, invalid perspectives, and especially the annulment of Torah. . . . Therefore, everyone should join . . . as per the approved blocking by the committee.”³⁴ And the Council of Torah Sages of Agudat Israel warned of “spiritual damage” to ultra-Orthodox users, due to their exposure “to evil language, gossip, mockery of all the sanctities of Israel, additional controversies and ridicule”³⁵—meaning the sectorial news lines. In the past decade, the Rabbinical Committee has waged a war against these lines and supported blocking them.³⁶ In fact, some believe that the Committee was behind the decision by the Ministry of Communications to limit access to these services.³⁷

The Rabbinical Committee’s initial struggle against text messages and news lines has since expanded to include other types of content whose religious justification for blocking is vague or nonexistent. Sometimes the blunt instrument of blocking lines is also used to block lines operated by political rivals in the Haredi sector³⁸ or beyond.³⁹ The impression that arises from the Committee’s decisions, and the political forces that support them, is that they are an attempt to control what happens in the ultra-Orthodox sector by making it impossible to access services or information without its consent, whether they are governmental, municipal, commercial, or other services.⁴⁰

THE PROTECTION OF IDENTITY THROUGH ENFORCED COMMUNAL POLICING— THE CASE OF THE “KOSHER CELLPHONE”

The “kosher cellular” police force created by the Rabbinical Committee relies on two pillars: (1) the spiritual import of only using kosher cellphones; and (2) the establishment of a strict enforcement regime that can deliver punitive consequences for those who transgress its mandate.

This enforcement mechanism encapsulates the concept of an “enclave culture,”⁴¹ that Emmanuel Sivan has described in relation to the Haredi society.⁴² This term connotes a community seeking to preserve the boundary between it and the rest of society. This is achieved by creating a symbolic space distinct from that of the general society, marked by symbols and conventions such as distinctive attire. In a world where the cellphone serves as both a means

of communication and a cultural symbol, using a kosher phone reinforces the boundaries of this enclosed culture and creates “enclosed communication” to serve it.

The importance of using a kosher phone is evident in the foundational documents of the Rabbinical Committee for Communication Affairs, which state that it seeks “to act among the ultra-Orthodox public and persuade it to use phones intended only for speech communication without the possibility of using content services.” Indeed, since its establishment, an aggressive campaign against any use of non-kosher cellular devices that do not bear the Rabbinical Committee’s stamp of approval has been conducted in the ultra-Orthodox community. Through newspapers, billboards, community radio channels, halachic rulings and rabbinical sermons, the committee and many participating rabbis make every effort to convince the ultra-Orthodox community that non-kosher phone usage will bring spiritual, communal, and personal disaster.⁴³

The kosher cellphone crusade has deployed all the heavy rhetorical artillery typically used by the Haredi community in declaring a total ban on non-kosher cellphones: for example, by announcing that “the city is on fire,” declaring the time a moment of crisis, ostracizing those who do not accede to the ban, and enshrining a halachic prohibition on the use of non-kosher phones.

In the early years of the campaign, with the establishment of the Kosher Section, there was a need to persuade those who already owned a cellphone to switch over to kosher phones, and the success of the effort was measured by the continuous expansion of the kosher cellphone market.⁴⁴ In the last decade, the goal of the campaign has been to persuade buyers of mobile phones to join the kosher market, but also to wage a relentless war against Haredim who own non-kosher phones or those holding such devices alongside their kosher⁴⁵ phones.⁴⁶ Graphical expression of the aggressive campaign was seen on posters (*pashkivilim*) plastered on the walls of Haredi towns and neighborhoods. On these posters, some of which are not signed and therefore allow for blunter messages, non-kosher cellular devices were likened to cancer, virulent bacteria, and predatory animals. Cellphone company executives were depicted as criminals with nooses around their necks. The power of these posters lies in their ability to assist in consolidating a comprehensive struggle and in generating a broad sense of communal engagement in combating non-kosher cellphone users. This all-out war was also waged against distributors of non-kosher cellphones and those who had not received kosher certification from the Rabbinical Committee.⁴⁷

Similar patterns of persuasion and aggressive marketing have also occurred in ultra-Orthodox communities in the United States. In these communities, the percentage of Haredim working outside the community is higher than in Israel, making access to new technologies even more common and thus threatening. In 2006, Haredi businessmen affiliated with the Hasidic communities in the Williamsburg neighborhood of New York City launched an especially aggressive campaign that equated the use of cellular phones with the destruction of Jews by the Nazis. The campaign led to a series of internal community complaints and a legal dispute with the company that launched the kosher phone, but this was done to emphasize the importance of the issue to community leaders.⁴⁸

Many rabbis also joined the fray, and a series of rulings made keeping a non-kosher phone a severe transgression punishable by divine retribution and personal ostracization.⁴⁹ For example, the rabbis determined that it was forbidden to associate with someone who holds a non-kosher phone;⁵⁰ to allow them to be a prayer leader, have an Aliyah to the Torah, participate in priestly blessings or to be deemed reliable in religious matters generally.⁵¹ It was decreed mandatory to destroy a non-kosher phone owned by a friend, even on Shabbat⁵² and that such a person was to be ostracized.

A Stringent Community Policing System and Communal Punishment

The Rabbinical Committee, its agents, and those who joined the struggle, communicated the belief that fighting against non-kosher cellphones is communal and requires widespread participation. Recognizing the efficacy of communal pressure on members of the ultra-Orthodox community in reinforcing the rabbis' guidelines on the issue of cellphones, the community has developed a series of mechanisms for supervision and communal sanctions regarding the use of kosher cellphones. At the core of the kosher cellphone regime lies the ability to identify visually the device by its kosher certification sticker, as well as the series of halachic rulings prohibiting the use of a non-kosher cellphone.

Supervision by Indoctrination—The Haredi Educational System

The ultra-Orthodox education system is a central framework for communal affiliation, and the ability to enroll children in it is fundamental to belonging to the ultra-Orthodox world. The education system has become an important and effective tool in the community policing system.⁵³ In many ultra-Orthodox

educational institutions, parents are required to declare their commitment to approved cellphones sanctioned by the Rabbinical Committee, which is easy to verify through their mobile phone numbers. These regulations, which parents agree to in writing, also state that if a parent is found to have used a non-kosher device, their children will be immediately expelled from school. The threat of expulsion creates a real fear among ultra-Orthodox parents,⁵⁴ and this sanction is indeed implemented.⁵⁵ The use of non-kosher cellphones is also prohibited in ultra-Orthodox yeshivas, and students are required to pledge not to use such devices. Students caught with non-kosher cellphones are subject to expulsion from their yeshivas.⁵⁶ *Rebbeim* (teachers) who keep non-kosher cellphone may forfeit their government stipends.⁵⁷ It almost goes without saying that these ultra-Orthodox institutions do not employ staff who use non-kosher cellphones.

Pressure through the local community: The synagogue is a central hub for members of the ultra-Orthodox community, and participation in the life of the synagogue, such as joining the prayer quorum, Torah reading, and more, is an essential component of ultra-Orthodox life.⁵⁸ In this way, the synagogue becomes another venue enabling the ultra-Orthodox community to regulate the use of kosher cellphones exclusively. Based on rabbinic rulings and pressure from the most conservative elements, ultra-Orthodox synagogues cast out those known to possess a non-kosher device.⁵⁹

Monitoring through communal “snitching”: One of the most effective means of community policing is the mutual surveillance of community members, including regarding the use of kosher cellphones. To deter non-kosher cellphone use, some ultra-Orthodox institutions have adopted a strict policy against transgressors. For example, some yeshivas encourage public “naming and shaming” of those using non-kosher cellphones.⁶⁰ In other cases, activists from Shas, the Mizrahi Haredi political party, have set up a “snitching” system where adherents can report public figures, businessmen, institution managers, and teachers who use non-kosher devices.

Violence: This long-time tactic is used by extremists in the ultra-Orthodox community to fight against non-kosher phones. In recent years, several stores selling non-kosher phones in ultra-Orthodox areas have been vandalized, producing severe property damage.⁶¹ In several cases, violent attacks have been visited upon users of non-kosher phones.⁶²

To these, we must add the social pressure exerted on returning or new community members. In fact, this population has already become accustomed to using smartphones and is less susceptible to communal surveillance. For

them, the return to orthodoxy and the strengthening of religious devotion require numerous assurances of transitioning to using kosher phones. Moreover, the abandonment of the smartphone has also become a public rite of repentance, which includes destroying the device publicly in return for blessings from the overseeing spiritual figure.⁶³

The majority of ultra-Orthodox individuals use kosher cellphones, creating what is termed “filtered communication.” However, are they doing this by choice and internal conviction, or because of the coercion exerted by the Rabbinical Committee and the ultra-Orthodox community? There is no doubt that the ultra-Orthodox campaign aimed at enforcing kosher cellphone usage resonates strongly with many ultra-Orthodox individuals and is seen by many as part of their ultra-Orthodox identity. However, it is also clear that in many cases, the price to pay is too high to continue to use non-kosher phones.

The connection between the kosher cellphone market and the Rabbinical Committee cannot be severed. The use of a kosher phone amounts to submission to the Rabbinical Committee and its rigorous policy of blocking content services intended for the Haredi sector, as well as its indirect control, as seen in marketing kosher lines and cellphones. The perception that using a non-kosher phone is unacceptable has gained broad acceptance among rabbis and members of the ultra-Orthodox community, but the Rabbinical Committee has been the driving force behind the kosher market and the engine that has accelerated the struggle against non-kosher phones, and it continues in this role today. However, the expansion of the market, the diversification of the ultra-Orthodox society, and the authoritarian conduct of the Rabbinical Committee raises the question of whether the time has come to sever, perhaps through external intervention by the regulator, the harmful connection between kosher cellphone use and the surveillance of the Rabbinical Committee.

Legal Exploitation for the Preservation of Haredi Identity

Israel is a Jewish state. Due to the state’s definition as Jewish and the vision of religious Zionist groups that a Jewish state must operate in accordance with Jewish law (Halacha), a good number of laws in the Israeli legal system recognize and accommodate religious law.⁶⁴ The purpose of these laws is to give a Jewish-religious character to Israeli public space in the country. An illustrative example of such legislation is the “Chametz Law,” which prohibits, based on Jewish law, the sale of leavened bread in public spaces during Passover. Another example of the influence of Jewish law on Israeli life is found in personal status

law. Other aspects that are regulated by religious prohibition and codified in law include the prohibition of Jews working on the Sabbath and laws dealing with the religious establishment in Israel. The common denominator of all these laws is the motivation to express, through state law, its status as a Jewish state.⁶⁵

The way the Haredim seek to use the law in the case of non-kosher cell-phones is different. They do not seek to legislate religious norms that express and strengthen the Jewish character of the State of Israel. They seek to create enforcement mechanism that will allow them to preserve the digital ghettos they have built to protect the Haredi identity of community members, as will be explained below.

Criticism of the Committee's Conduct

Restrictions on lines that can be contacted via kosher phones are imposed by the Rabbinical Committee based solely on its discretion, and are actually enforced by the telecommunications companies, which do not participate in the Committee's decision-making processes. The Rabbinical Committee has never published the criteria by which it makes decisions or the procedure it follows before deciding to block lines. Different publications and articles related to legal proceedings conducted against the committee indicate that such criteria and procedures do not exist. Furthermore, the committee blocks lines without any prior notice to service providers and individuals whose numbers are blocked, and without providing an opportunity for a fair hearing before the action is taken. In many cases, the committee also ignores complaints about line blocking, and many of the owners of blocked lines find themselves without any form of recourse.

The factors behind the Committee's actions and the way it makes decisions are shrouded in mystery. Although several rabbis are listed as members of the Committee in official documents, some of these rabbis deny any connection to the Committee's decisions.⁶⁶ Inquiries to the Committee in order to understand who is actually making the line-blocking decisions, by both legal representatives in litigation proceedings and journalists trying to understand the Committee's *modus operandi*, have either gone unanswered or received vague responses.⁶⁷

The Committee's conduct raises questions about legality and proper governance. According to two reports issued by the state's Corporations Authority regarding its activity,⁶⁸ its conduct is plagued by significant flaws and raises

serious questions about the motivations underlying its activities and its financial operations, to the point where the reports have concluded that there is cause to dissolve it. The main questions raised by the Committee's conduct in journalistic and other investigations relate to the economic interests that drive its activities.⁶⁹ According to these investigations, as well as from the Corporations Authority reports, those who manage the Committee's activities—for example, deciding on line blocking and approving or revoking certification for device importers and information line providers—do so while pocketing significant sums of money. Nevertheless, the Committee claims that its activity has no financial advantage and that it does not engage in any economic activity at all, but rather only serves as a body to promote the use of kosher phones and to act as a regulatory authority for the kosher phone market. The reports paint a picture in which the actors operating within the Committee are directly or indirectly involved in commercial activity in the kosher cellular market and make use of the Committee's activities to promote their economic interests.

These allegations of a conflict of interest between the committee's "supervisory-regulatory" activity and the direct or indirect business interests of its members or of individuals and entities associated with it, raise further difficult questions. What emerges from the available information about the committee's activity suggests, at least, the reasonable possibility that it is using its supervisory-regulatory authority to stifle competition and offers economic incentives to those who cooperate with it. This is the case both in terms of marketing kosher phones and providing access to voice line services. In both cases, the committee blocks those who do not generate profits for it, severely affecting the ability to compete in the cellular devices market and the cellular communication market. these two markets.

Committee Proceedings and the COVID-19 Crisis

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the Israeli Ministry of Communications deviated from its policy for the first time. During the crisis, there was a clear need to convey information about the disease and the behavioral guidelines set by the government to the Haredi public, which, on one hand, was severely affected by the pandemic, and on the other hand, had limited exposure to the media or the internet. To address this, several government bodies, including the Ministry of Health and the Home Front Command, established dedicated phone lines with the aim of providing the Haredi public with specific information to cope better with the crisis. In addition, in the absence of internet

accessibility, many Haredi educational institutions sought to use telephone lines for conducting classes and communications with students. For reasons that are unclear, the Rabbinical Committee blocked some of these lines. This led the Minister of Communications to intervene and instruct telecommunications companies to lift the restrictions on vital lines.⁷⁰

Efforts to Promote Reform in the Kosher Cellular Market

The authoritarian conduct of the Rabbinical Committee and the criticism leveled against it led the Minister of Communications in 2022 to promote comprehensive reform limiting the strict oversight and activities of the Rabbinical Committee. This was made possible, among other reasons, by the fact that the Haredim were not, at the time, members of the governing coalition. Following a petition submitted to the Supreme Court against the reform,⁷¹ it was frozen and essentially revoked when the government fell.⁷²

In the subsequent government, which remains in power today, the Haredim were included. Moreover, the Haredim saw that governing coalition as presenting a historic opportunity to utilize state resources to fortify the Haredi way of life. Among other things, the Haredim sought to pass laws enshrining the exemption they receive from military service and increasing the state's budgetary allocations to the Haredi community, among others.

One of the fundamental demands of Haredi political parties in negotiations around the formation of the current government was the regulation of the Kosher Cellular market. As mentioned, over the years, control of the kosher market had been lax and was regulated by a nexus of contracts between the communication companies and the Rabbinical Committee. Furthermore, in several instances, its existence was threatened by both the Supreme Court and directives from the Ministry of Communications. The power wielded by the ultra-Orthodox in the current government, and their ability to dictate policy on issues important to them, has provided them with an opportunity to shape the Kosher Cellular market as they see fit. This was also reflected in the coalition agreement they signed upon entering the government.⁷³ The agreements implicitly state that the government will promote legislation to protect the existence of the kosher cellular market and prevent the possibility of members who joined the kosher cellular market from leaving it.

Indeed, with the formation of the government, the Minister of Communications acted to initiate relevant legislation. Through a series of amendments to the law regulating cellular service in Israel, he created an array

of tools that enable the formalization of a regime of tight rabbinic control over the market. Through legislation, he proposed several components essential to the existence of the Kosher Cellular market regime: number immobility, the possibility of establishing various kosher certification bodies, an inability to move between providers, and the possibility of establishing even stricter surveillance over users in closed groups. Thus, through legislative means, the government has created the possibility for leaders of the Haredi community to impose increased surveillance over their members. In this way, they can continue to prevent community members from exposure to “undesirable” content and ensure that they remain within the ghetto walls.⁷⁴

The bill has been discussed in recent months by the Knesset Economic Affairs Committee. The Committee’s discussions reveal how ultra-Orthodox politicians seek to protect the kosher cellular market, even to the point of infringing upon the rights of community members by maintaining control through legislation.

The Committee’s work further highlights the motivation behind the ultra-Orthodox establishment of a unified cellular supervisory system (overseen by a rabbinical committee representing all Haredi streams). This approach aims to prevent competing rabbinical committees from creating different standards of supervision, which would grant the ultra-Orthodox community some choice among alternatives. In addition, the unified system affords ultra-Orthodox politicians and rabbis the ability to retain full control over the regulatory system within the community.

This is evident, for instance, in the report by one of the leading ultra-Orthodox figures, Moshe Gafni, chairman of the “Degel HaTorah” party. In a July 2023 discussion, he informed the Committee about a meeting attended by the spiritual leaders of the three main ultra-Orthodox streams: Rabbi Moshe Maya representing the Sephardim/Mizrahim, the Vizhnitz Rebbe representing the Hasidim, and Rabbi Moshe Hirsch representing the Lithuanians. In that meeting, they agreed that the rabbinical committee overseeing the kosher cellular market should be unified and include representatives from all factions. This would ensure that the state not only affirm the existence of a supervisory regime over the ultra-Orthodox community’s mobile communications, but also strengthen the existing leadership’s power against internal challenges.

To gain the approval of non-ultra-Orthodox Knesset members, ultra-Orthodox Knesset members presented a detailed argument. They claimed that the previous government’s communications minister Yoaz Hendel’s attempt to change the nature of cellular supervision aimed to harm the ultra-Orthodox

society and the education of ultra-Orthodox children. In their narrative, they depict their ability to supervise the community's cellphone usage as key to ultra-Orthodox boundary maintenance.

In this context, it is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, to see their preference for supervision over protecting the rights of Haredi community members. In a June 2024 the Knesset Economic Affairs Committee discussion, the Ministry of Justice presented an opinion stating that the proposed law would severely harm the community members' rights. At the heart of this opinion was the concern that linking a person's phone number to their lifestyle and community affiliation infringes on their autonomy and sets them against one another. This would entail a violation of the constitutionally anchored Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty (1992). Exposing a person's religious identity based on their preference for kosher cellphone services constitutes a risk. The Ministry of Justice's stance was sharply criticized by Knesset members, who declared their preference for keeping in place the mechanism of surveillance.⁷⁵

SUMMARY

Life in twenty-first-century Israel poses an increasingly significant threat to Haredi identity. In order to deal with this threat, ultra-Orthodox leaders employ various defensive strategies, whose ultimate goal is to preserve the community's insular walls and distinctive identity. One of the strategies discussed here is the use of the law, even though Haredim deny its legitimacy, in order to fortify the community's insularity, especially in the realm of mobile communications.

Thus, through a strict community regime on one hand and the use of state law on the other, Haredi leaders mitigate the threat to their followers' identity as much as possible. These complementary tools of state law and the informal sources of communal pressure can keep community members in full compliance with the rules. Restricted exposure to content that challenges the Haredi community's perception of reality persists, and even in the twenty-first century, Haredi insularity continues to thrive.

This paper focuses on one aspect of using the law to preserve Haredi identity. There is room to augment it with additional quantitative and qualitative research that examines Haredi sentiments regarding the relationship between the external norms of the state and the internal norms of the community in regulating Haredi use of cellphones.

Notes

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3. Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, "For We Ascend in Holiness and Do Not Descend": Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Women's Agency through Their Discourse about Media," *The Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 2 (2019): 212–26.
4. Aviad HaCohen, "'The Words of the Rabbi, the Words of the Rabbinate, and the Words of the Ruler—Whose Words Are Heard?': On 'Dual Loyalty' and Conflicting Interests of Ultra-Orthodox and Observant Civil Servants" [in Hebrew], in *Law and the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel*, ed. Haim Zicherman and Yoram Margalio (Tel Aviv: Buchmann Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University, 5779 [2019]), 169–223.
5. The efforts of the ultra-Orthodox to protect their identity began even before the establishment of the state. See Shuki Friedman, *Being a Nation State in the Twenty-First Century: Between State and Synagogue in Modern Israel* (Boston: Academic Press Studies, 2023), 7–17.
6. On the ultra-Orthodox autonomy see Dana Howard, "Education for Autonomy, Education for Culture: The Case of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel," *Philosophy of Education* 59 (2003): 354–61; Miriam Gur-Arye and Sharon Shakargy, "Solidarity, Religious Freedom and COVID-19: The Case of the Ultra-Orthodox Sects in Israel," *Neth. J. Legal. Phil.* 50, no. 2 (2021): 203–17.
7. Menachem Friedman, *The Ultra-Orthodox Society: Origins, Trends and Processes* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), chap. 4.
8. Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture," in *Fundamentalisms*, ed. M. Marty and S. Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 11–64.
9. Employment rates among ultra-Orthodox women are high (82%) and among ultra-Orthodox men are low (55%).
10. Assaf Malhi, Gilad Malach, and Shuki Friedman, "How Is the Ultra-Orthodox Sector Dealing with the Covid-19 Virus?" [in Hebrew] (Israel Democracy Institute, March 26, 2020).
11. For example, Bnei Brak, the ultra-Orthodox capital, is the most densely populated city in Israel. It is about 30% denser than the next densest city on the list (source: 2020 data, Central Bureau of Statistics, https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/doclib/2021/2.shnatonpopulation/st02_24.xls).
12. See Shuki Friedman, "A Rising Wall and a Challenging Future, Israel and the Ultra-Orthodox Community" [in Hebrew] (The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2021). In

this study, I show, based on a broad data base, how the efforts to integrate the ultra-Orthodox community into Israeli society have failed, in part due to the state's willingness to continue to budget for the ultra-Orthodox life instead of encouraging the ultra-Orthodox to seek an education, join the army and participate in the job market.

13. This struggle is not unique to the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. Other religious-conservative communities, such as the Amish in the US and the Hutterites in Canada, face this threat as well. See Roger Silverstone, "Domesticating Domestication: Reflection on the Life of a Concept," in *Domestication of Media and Technology*, ed. T. Berker, M. Hartmann, Y. Punie, and K. J. Ward (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 229–48; Yossi Katz and John Lehr, *Inside the Ark: The Hutterites in Canada and the United States* (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2018).
14. Yoel Cohen, "Israeli Rabbis and the Internet," in *Digital Judaism: Jewish Negotiations with Digital Media and Technology*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 183–204.
15. Silverstone, "Domesticating Domestication," 13.
16. Neri Horvitz, "The Ultra-Orthodox and the Internet" [in Hebrew], *Kivunim Hadashim* 3 (2000): 7–30.
17. Heidi Campbell and Oren Golan, "Creating Digital Enclaves: Negotiation of the Internet among Bounded Religious Communities," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 (2011): 709–24.
18. Lee Cahaner and Gilad Malach, *Ultra-Orthodox Society Yearbook 2023* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2023).
19. Regarding the attitude of the ultra-Orthodox community to the Internet and cell-phones, see K. Barzilai-Nahon and G. Barzilai, "Cultured Technology: The Internet and Religious Fundamentalism," *The Information Society* 21, no. 1 (2005): 25–40; O. Livio and K. Tenenboim Weinblatt, "Discursive Legitimation of a Controversial Technology: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women in Israel and the Internet," *The Communication Review* 10, no. 1 (2007): 29–56; Heidi Campbell, "'What Hath God Wrought?' Considering How Religious Communities Culture (or Kosher) the Cell Phone," *Continuum* 21, no. 2 (2007): 191–203; Nathaniel Deutsch, "The Forbidden Fork, the Cellphone Holocaust, and Other Haredi Encounters with Technology," *Contemporary Jewry* 29, no. 1 (2009): 3–19; T. Rashi, "The Kosher Cellphone in Ultra-Orthodox Society: A Technological Ghetto within the Global Village?," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. H. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013), 173–81; Hananal Rosenberg, Menachem Blundheim, and Elihu Katz, "Breakers of the Walls: Supervision, Limits and the Campaign for 'Kosher Cell Phones' in the Haredi Society" [in Hebrew], *Israeli Sociology* 17, no. 2 (2016): 116–37; Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, "'Mobile Internet Is Worse Than the Internet; It Can Destroy Our Community': Old Order Amish and

- Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women's Responses to Cellphone and Smartphone Use," *The Information Society* 36, no. 1 (2020): 1–18. Hananel Rosenberg, Menahem Blundheim, and Elihu Katz, "It's the Text, Stupid! Mobile Phones, Religious Communities, and the Silent Threat of Text Messages," *New Media & Society* 21 (2019): 2325–46.
20. In the meantime, it was dissolved by the court but continues to operate de facto (see Avior Abu, "The Ultra-Orthodox Mobile Market: The Court Presented a Dissolution Order to the Rabbinic Committee for Media Affairs" [in Hebrew], *Calcalist*, December 4, 2021, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/marketing/articles/0,7340,L-3904352,00.html>).
 21. The nonprofit organizations national database, https://www.guidestar.org.il/VF_View_File?guid=55c5115041292e8-4c879470a79c1fd9-d08d8d304b44b3ad62d0eeb08b0dede86e15111f9d891b0b4120c3168c125b8a-cc4e6413ec1553a9-fb79e6f5ca424acac.
 22. This is done through telephone information systems known as Interactive Voice Response (IVR), and allow listening to recorded voice information, as well as creating chat rooms and interactive line services for leaving messages for groups and individuals.
 23. Nati Toker, "The Committee That Oversees the 'Kosher' Cellphone Wants to Listen to Users' Conversations" [in Hebrew], *The Marker*, April 2, 2020.
 24. The cellular license prohibits the telecommunications companies from blocking a range of lines. See for example the Parenter company license, p. 41 (https://www.gov.il/he/Departments/policies/partner_cell).
 25. Avi Rabina, "Revenge of the Rabbinical Committee: About Half a Million Numbers Were Blocked in a Day" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, September 25, 2019.
 26. G. Klein, "Survey: Women Are the SMS Champions" [in Hebrew], *YNET*, April 20, 2005, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3075184,00.html>. The survey found that 49% of the ultra-Orthodox use SMS regularly compared to 41% of the secular.
 27. Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls."
 28. This is a problem that even the rabbis admit can be overcome with technological means (Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls," 121).
 29. One of the spokespeople in the Haredi forums that were investigated warns that any willingness of the rabbis to be flexible and allow the use of text messages will lead to burglaries because of the ease of using such text messages to create illegitimate relationships between men and women (Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls," 123).
 30. Kimmy Caplan, "Profiles in the Haredi Press in Israel: History, Development, and Characteristics," in *Segmental Media in Israel* (series), ed. K. Caplan (2006): 1–47 (Herzog Institute); Yoel Cohen, *God, Jews and the Media: Religion and Israel's Media* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–9; Cohen, "The Media Challenge to Haredi Authority in Israel," *ESSACHESS-Journal for Communication Studies* 10.02 (2017).

31. Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls," 124.
32. Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls," 129.
33. Rosenberg, Blundheim, and Katz, "Breakers of the Walls," 129.
34. A letter from the "Great Ones of Israel" dated Kislev, 5771.
35. From a letter from the Council of Torah Elders of Agudat Israel dated 20 Shevat, 5774.
36. However, there are lines that do continue to operate and ultra-Orthodox politicians are interviewed there, which indicates that the war on the news lines may have additional motives beyond the religious ones (Eliezer Hayon, "Information for All Who Operate a Broadcast from the Festivity in Miron, the Punishment: Blocking the Line" [in Hebrew]. *Haredim* 10, August 5, 2018, https://www.ch10.co.il/news/435090/#.XrqZDGgzb_a_).
37. Rabina, "Revenge of the Rabbinical Committee."
38. Hanan Greenwood, "The Kosher Lines: Shas Were Bocked, Torah Judaism Was Not" [in Hebrew], *Israel Hayom*, September 3, 2018.
39. Avi Weiss, "Telephone Lines for Feiglin's Campaign Were Blocked" [in Hebrew], *First Class News*, April 6, 2019.
40. As stated above, the conduct of the rabbinic committee in the face of the COVID-19 crisis and their blocking of essential information lines, including official ones, in an arbitrary manner, is a good indication of this.
41. Thanks to my friend Professor Nissim Leon for helping define this framework.
42. This is based on the import of the theoretical framework created by Mary Douglas (Emmanuel Sivan, "The Enclave Culture" [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 4 [5572 (1991)]: 45–98).
43. Hananel Rosenberg and Zviel Roshi, "Bring Out a New Medium from an Old One: The Pashkevilles in Their Struggle for the Kosher Cellphone," *Studies in Language and Society* 6, no. 2 (2014): 71–95.
44. Rashi, "The Kosher Cellphone in Ultra-Orthodox Society."
45. A common expression in ultra-Orthodox society is "one kosher and one to call" (*Ehad kasher ve-ehad lehitkasher*) (see "One Kosher and One to Call: Beit Shemesh Leads in the Number of Residents Who Own 2 Phones or More" [in Hebrew], *Darinews*, December 25, 2019).
46. According to a 2017 survey by the Israeli Internet Association, about 21% of the ultra-Orthodox public own a smart phone. See: *Israel Internet Association* website [in Hebrew], 2017, <https://en.isoc.org.il>. According to an estimate by "Kikar Hashabat" from 2016, 100,000 ultra-Orthodox used a smart phone: editorial, "Over 1,000,000 Unfiltered Smartphones in the Ultra-Orthodox Sector" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, March 30, 2016. (There is apparently a phenomenon of maintaining double phones—one kosher, for intra-congregational needs and one normal, for extra-congregational needs).
47. Rosenberg and Roshi, "Bring Out a New Medium from an Old One."

48. Deutsch, "The Forbidden Fork."
49. "A collection of the great and eloquent discourses of our generation and the most important rabbis and educators of our generation" about the dangers and prohibitions of using a non-kosher phone can be found on a website called "Torat Emet."
50. Tzvika Grunich, "Testimony: This Is How We Were Thrown Out of the Synagogue for Possessing a Non-Kosher Device" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, July 26, 2015, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/177399>.
51. Haim Lev, "Don't Trust in Religious Matters an Unkosher Phone Holder" [in Hebrew], *Channel 7*, July 1, 2015.
52. Yaki Adamkar, "The Rebbe of Toldot Avraham Yitzhak: 'Destroy a Phone Even on Shabbat'" [in Hebrew], *Be-hadre Haredim*, June 28, 2012.
53. Yair Ettinger, "Rabbi Eliashiv: Orthodox Schools Will Not Accept Students Whose Parents Do Not Have Kosher Cellphones" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, March 2, 2007.
54. This is how it is in the registration forms for ultra-Orthodox kindergartens of the municipality of Bnei Barak and in the regulations of educational institutions in the city and in many other institutions in the ultra-Orthodox sector (<http://actual.co.il>; https://www.imkforms.com/forms/zform_74451549384110).
55. A. Katzir, "9 Girls Were Expelled from the Seminary Because of Non-kosher Phones" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, October 27, 2010.
56. Moshe Weisberg, "Holding a Non-Kosher Device? It is Forbidden to Eat and Sleep in Yeshiva" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, September 28, 2017; Yaki Adamkar, "Why Were Boys Thrown Out of the Mir Synagogue?" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, December 19, 2012.
57. Shaul Kahana, "Council Member: Anyone Who Has an Unclean Device Will Not Be Considered Blessed" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, March 11, 2019.
58. Moshe Heller, "The Phone is Not Kosher? Forget about Her for the Torah" [in Hebrew], *mynet Jerusalem*, May 28, 2015.
59. Grunich, "Testimony."
60. Yaki Adamkar, "Shas Activists Set Up an Eavesdropping Machine to Report the Use of Non-kosher Cellphones" [in Hebrew], *Walla*, June 8, 2015.
61. Haim Goldberg, "A Serious, Horrific Escalation: They Demonstrated against a Phone Shop and Violently Beat the Seller" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, August 26, 2019; the modesty squad blew up a shop selling phones (Hadari Haredim Forum, June 19, 2008, https://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=2431730&forum_id=771).
62. "Orthodox Children Beat Up a 10-year-old Girl Because of a Non-kosher Phone" [in Hebrew], *Rotter*, November 5, 2009.
63. Tzvika Grunich, "Elul: The Smartphone Smashing Ceremonies Have Begun" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, August 28, 2014; editorial, "Second Attacks: Rabbis Against Smartphones" [in Hebrew], *YNET*, September 10, 2012.
64. Jacob Blidstein, "Halacha and Democracy," *Democratic Culture* 2 (1999): 9–40.

65. Prof. Yitzhak Englard saw these laws as a secularization of religion (see Yitzhak Englard, “Study of Hebrew Law—Its Essence and Purposes,” *Mishpatim* 7 (1974): 34).
66. Avi Rabina, “Recordings of Rabbis from the ‘Committee of Rabbis for Communications’ Are Exposed” [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, October 2, 2019.
67. In the last two years, several press articles have been published about the activities of the Rabbinic Committee for Communications Affairs, which attempt to investigate the way the committee operates and the economic and other interests it serves: Nati Toker, “The Man Who Controls the Cell Phones of a Million People” [in Hebrew], *The Marker*, May 7, 2019; Avior Abu, “This Is How the State Abandons the Competition in the Cellphone Market to Rabbis” [in Hebrew], *Calcalist*, December 11, 2019.
68. Inspectors on behalf of the Registrar of Corporations published two reports on the association’s activities. One from September 18, 2016, and the other from March 27, 2019. Both reports find a long list of administrative and technical deficiencies in compliance with the rules of proper management, including failure to submit reports, inconsistent reports or incorrect, non-functioning of the association’s institutions, fear of hiding information from the register of corporations, failure to answer the registrar’s questions, failure to safeguard the association’s assets.
69. See n. 68.
70. Yishai Cohen, “The Minister of Communications against the ‘Committee of Rabbis’: Unforgivable” [in Hebrew], *Kikar Shabbat*, April 12, 2020; Avior Abu, “Ministry of Communications for the Ultra-Orthodox Rabbis: Open the Kosher Phones for Information about Covid” [in Hebrew], *Calcalist*, April 12, 2020.
71. HCJ 4031/22 Rabbinical Committee for Communications v. Minister of Communications.
72. Kobi Nachsoni, “Kosher Cellphone Reform Is Underway,” *YNET*, February 2, 2022.
73. See: Coalition agreement to establish a national government between the Likud party and the Torah Judaism party (<https://main.knesset.gov.il/mk/government/pages/coalitionagreements.aspx>).
74. Raphaela Goichman, “The First Step of Karai in the Ministry of Communications: The Cancellation of the Kosher Cellphone Reform” [in Hebrew], *The Marker*, February 1, 2023.
75. For the protocols of the Knesset Economic Committee’s discussions on the bill, see <https://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Committees/Economics/Pages/CommitteeProtocols.aspx>. The bill was finally enacted on July 22, 1974.

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Stuck in Neutral: Some Ethnographic Reflections on Haredim, Education, and the State

by *Lea Taragin-Zeller*

INTRODUCTION

I met Naphtali on a cold winter day in Givat Ram. He was sitting at the computer station at the library, a black *kippah* (skullcap) on his head, with a black hat resting on the desk beside him. When I asked him what brought him to the library that day, he shared a story that has stayed with me ever since: “One day, not long after I got my driving license, I borrowed a car from my sister. I was new to driving, but didn’t think it would be too complicated. We met at the bottom of her building, she started the car and I drove to meet a friend. After the meeting was over, I got into the car and couldn’t get it to start. My sister is going to kill me! What had I done wrong? I wondered. I tried everything but couldn’t figure it out. I called my sister, who was furious. She was sure that I ruined her car. She came over and when I showed her what the problem was she started laughing. ‘Naphtali! You are in neutral! Of course you can’t get the car to go! Can’t you see? This is N and this is R.’”

My sister couldn’t believe I didn’t know the difference. You see, I was at the top of my year in Yeshiva, but we never learned English properly, nor science for that matter. When I went to sleep that night, I decided I would never be humiliated like that again. Yeshiva didn’t provide for me, and I realized that I would have to make up for it myself. Since then, I have searched for a place to come and learn and found the library here helpful, as well as the people. I love Yeshiva, and I love learning Torah, but I must find a way to compensate for what I don’t know.”

I was struck by Naphtali's story then, and I am still captivated by it as I write this story down. His story painfully captures the gap between one's sense of freedom and the realities of real life. Receiving a driver's license is both a symbolic (and practical) ticket to freedom. It seems that it is all you need to get anywhere. Until you painfully realize that it is not enough. Naphtali cannot get anywhere, he is stuck. In neutral. It doesn't really get more symbolic than that.

This story is especially poignant because of the gap between Naphtali's capabilities and those of his sister. His sister has the knowledge that can take her places. But he is stuck. Even though they come from the same family, they were brought up in very different, gendered paths. Knowledge is often gendered, but in Haredi education these differences are intentional and inscribed in the entire education and social system.¹ Haredi education prepares children for gender-specific roles—men are to become religious scholars and women are prepared to support them as main breadwinners and domestic caregivers. As Haredi women are expected to navigate the non-Haredi world as wives, mothers, and as main breadwinners, female pupils usually study English, math, and some science (termed the *Wonders of Creation*) up to the age of fifteen years. Boys, however, are meant to become Torah scholars, who will need little formal science or math education. To this end, most male students do not learn much *limudei chol* (secular studies), and typically do not learn any science beyond fifth or sixth grade.²

Naphtali is a product of this gendered education system. And while he admires and loves the system, he also takes issue with it. Naphtali is not alone. As an ethnographer of Haredi Judaism in Israel for over a decade, I have heard different versions of this story. Over the years, Haredim, and especially men, have shared with me various descriptions of these painful moments when they realized that the Haredi world (which they hold dear), didn't properly prepare them for the world. In many ways, the power dynamics between Naphtali and his sister are a clear depiction of the knowledge gaps that characterize Haredi men and women. On average, Haredi women have far more secular education than their male counterparts. This gendered educational gap continues in higher education where, for example, women were 67.5% of all Haredi undergraduate students in Israel (14,700 in total) between 2020 and 2021.³

When I think about Naphtali, and his sister, I cannot ignore the sheer resemblance to Virginia Woolf's "Shakespeare's Sister."⁴ In her essay, Woolf creates an imaginary sister, Judith, who had the potential to become a famous

female British writer, if only she had been given the opportunity. She leaves home to live the life of a writer and actor, only to realize that this option is not only discouraged at home, but everywhere. Positioning the sister and brother side by side, Woolf's provocation looms large: What would have happened if the societally gendered dynamics were different? While Judith's story doesn't end well, I see Naphtali's decision to go to the library and educate himself as a mirror story, with a much more positive ending. One of the fascinating differences is, of course, what happens outside the threshold of one's home. The fictional figure of Judith Shakespeare ends up committing suicide because she has no place as writer or performer as a woman during the Elizabeth age. But Naphtali has the ability to attain education in the "secular" world within which he lives, where these doors are wide open to men. Naphtali's moment of humiliation provokes a change that has clear actionable steps where he can begin a supplementary trajectory of knowledge that might take effort but is accessible, as he decides that this is a path that he wants for himself.

I see Naphtali's story not only as a story about education, but as a story about a shift in Haredi positionality vis-à-vis the state. Since the state of Israel was established, Haredim have developed their own educational system, while acquiring varying levels of autonomy from the national curriculum.⁵ Alongside Israel's national education system, an independent Haredi school system was developed to bypass subjects that pose challenges to intra-communal world-views and lifestyles. In the past, there have been numerous efforts by the Israeli government to introduce *limudei chol*, often called in Hebrew *limudei liba* (core curriculum), into the curricula. Even though these were mostly repelled by political pressure, in recent years, minimal core studies have been gradually introduced through a number of school reforms.⁶

While Haredi politicians continue to push back on incorporating more *limudei liba*, Haredi men and women are finding other ways, often through extracurricular activities and initiatives, to enrich their studies, especially English and STEM. During the past few years, I have witnessed these changes in different spheres. Engaging with science (and English) is a growing sphere where we can see Haredim challenging the walls of what is often perceived as an enclave (a term that is continuously being challenged) to lay claim to what the leaders of their communities deem as unnecessary. For Naphtali and many of the other people I spoke to, these turned out to be more necessary than they imagined. I have written elsewhere about the ways cracks appear in the perception that Haredi leaders and society properly equip them for life.⁷ Here, I wish to showcase the paths they take, searching for a better life for themselves

and their children. This is a path, I argue, that reflects a deep renegotiation of Haredi-state relationality. Instead of continuing the boundary-making discourse of “us” and “them,” these practices showcase a hybrid and fluid relationship between Haredi individuals and the various infrastructures of the state.

I have been following the ways Haredim have been reengaging with science since before COVID-19, which was a transformative moment regarding science. During the pandemic, Haredi Jews were slower to adhere to social distancing guidelines than other groups in Israeli society.⁸ By the end of March 2020, the epidemiological disaster was clear: there were significant clusters of infections in Haredi neighborhoods, 40%–60% of all coronavirus patients at four major hospitals, even though they make up only 12% of Israel’s population.⁹ Israeli politicians and health workers began to tailor scientific messages and offer vaccines in “Haredi-friendly” ways. From distributing free cholent (the traditional Sabbath stew) at vaccine stations to specially tailored public health materials, COVID-19 instigated renewed efforts to develop tailored health and educational programs.¹⁰ But the realization that something needed to change was not made only by state actors. In a series of studies that I have conducted since, I have analyzed the different ways Haredim are finding ways to mediate and bridge these gaps while they are equipped with little English, limited science education, and ongoing trust issues with the Israeli state and its “secular” healthcare system.¹¹

The emergence of the first Haredi *National Geographic* science magazine fits perfectly into a post-COVID effort to offer the younger generation with Haredi sensitive ways to engage with science. Launched in March 2021, *Niflaot Olam* (Hebrew: “Wonders of the World”) is a global partner of NG Kids US. But rather than translating content from English into Hebrew, it takes the already-translated Hebrew content from *National Geographic* Israel and tailors it for Haredi audiences. In a recent co-authored study, we combined content analysis and interviews with *Niflaot*’s editorial staff and public relations team to explore the ways scientific knowledge is tailored for Haredim.¹² Similar to the ideas of many Americans that science is not value-neutral,¹³ the process of tailoring science for Haredi sensibilities is largely a project of cultural adaptation. This entails a dual process: an (attempt) to divorce science from scientific culture (which Haredim perceive as Western and/or secular), followed by an attempt to make the remaining parts of science kosher.

When comparing the topics that appear in all types of magazines, we found that cultural knowledge (movies, museums, and the history of other civilizations) is minimized, while practical knowledge (information about health

and safety) takes a front seat. We also found a clear difference in descriptions of and attitudes towards the producers of scientific knowledge. Whereas NG US and NG Israel have many sections aimed at promoting science as a future vocation for children, these sections were deleted from *Niflaot*. The editorial team explained that Haredi children are taught that “Everyone needs to be a head of Yeshiva,” so they cannot put forward any other types of vocational dreams. The clear omission of any other types of vocational trajectories offers a clear reminder of how it is not just science that must be tailored, but also its cultural representations. In other words, the science that is advanced must resonate with inner-communal sensibilities about vocation, religion as well as gender roles.

This work resonates with established research from sociology, anthropology, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and history which have demonstrated how engagement with science is repeatedly shaped by social identity, particular historic contexts and power relations.¹⁴ As Noah Weeth Feinstein and David Isaac Waddington put it, “People encounter scientific questions in social context—both *as* members of their social and cultural groups and *with* other members of those groups.”¹⁵ In the Haredi context, children are being taught to engage with science but continue to dream to be Torah scholars.

I have heavily discussed the socio-political and gendered implications of these efforts to craft a religiously sensitive model of science communication.¹⁶ Here, I wish to situate the emergence of *Niflaot* in a particular moment where Haredim are searching for extra-curricular ways to cultivate a new generation that will have a different relationship to science. Some parents are hiring English tutors for their children, others are sending them to science lessons after school, and others are purchasing *Niflaot*. What they all share in common is a desire to provide a different path for themselves and for their children. In doing so, they also share a common (painful) realization that their leadership will not make the necessary changes. During COVID-19, Netta Barack-Koren and Lotem Perry Hazan found that Haredi communities found that the state is willing “to bend the laws to accommodate their demands even in an unprecedented crisis that has far-reaching health, social, and economic consequences for the entire nation.”¹⁷ But, the parents I met will not let their children pay the price of this negligence.

In a forthcoming co-authored paper, we argue that parenthood is often a moment when Haredi men and women revisit the Haredi status quo on education.¹⁸ Parents with similar experiences to those of Naphtali (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), develop different levels of relationality to Haredi

leadership and the state. While sending a child to a *mamach*—that is, to a new National Haredi Education (NHE) educational network¹⁹—still comes with a price that many families find too high to pay, the choice to search for “secular” education beyond the walls of Haredi education attests to a growing realization that some of the basic parts of education are not being provided. In the absence of state-based education infrastructures, scholars of Haredi Judaism²⁰ have heavily documented how verbal taboos around sexuality prevent familiarity with consent, contraception, and reproductive health (not to mention anything beyond cisgendered, heterosexual reproduction). While some Haredim and ex-Haredim are clamoring for reform,²¹ and some cases gain publicity,²² Haredi men and women are no longer waiting for their leadership to make the necessary changes; a new generation is no longer satisfied with these attempts. Even though many of these attempts occur quietly, often in the solitude of one’s own home, the ripples of these practices are (potentially) wide-reaching.

Will these ripples bring forward a more direct engagement with secular education in the near future? Will these ripples expand to other aspects of Haredi life, such as higher education, the digital world, and participation in the army? Post October 7th we have seen a renewed consideration regarding army service. Yet, the Supreme Court’s ruling ordering compulsory service for Haredi men, might be ushering in a new era.²³ It is too soon to know. But, what I have learned from over a decade of research is that social change occurs slowly. I have seen men such as Naphtali, who are re-evaluating their relationship to education and the state, in ways that I would never have imagined, were I merely to follow newspaper headlines. As an ethnographer, we often hear whispers before a change can be spoken publicly, clearly and loudly. And what I hear is a young generation of parents who want more—for their children, and for themselves. And I truly wonder what the whispers of Naphtali’s children will sound like, especially when they receive their driver’s license.

Notes

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*PART II: POLITICS IN
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Kosher Socialism? A History of Haredi Judaism and the Left

by Nathaniel Deutsch

Haredi Judaism first emerged out of the fierce intra-Jewish debates of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and today comprises Hasidic, Lithuanian, and, in Israel especially, Mizrahi branches, each with its own distinctive history and characteristics.¹ Haredi Jews now constitute by far the fastest growing segment of both the American and Israeli Jewish populations which together comprise approximately 85% of the world total. Despite their differences, all Haredi Jews embrace religious traditionalism, even if they do not always agree on how this should be expressed. Around the world, religious traditionalism and political conservatism often go hand in hand—and the Haredi movement is no exception. And yet, as this essay will argue, from its very beginnings, Haredi Judaism also possessed a complex historical and ideological relationship with radical Jewish politics—and with socialism and communism, more generally.² While this relationship was frequently marked by competition and conflict, it also included elements of influence and even identification.

Without a doubt, political conservatism, often punctuated by fierce condemnation of the left, has been the majority position within the Haredi movement since its emergence in Central and Eastern Europe—and it remains the case today though, as we will see, the picture is more complicated than contemporary voting patterns in both Israel and the United States would suggest.³ Indeed, it was precisely the opposition of traditionalist Jewish leaders to the inroads then being made by both socialist and Zionist parties among Jews at the turn of the twentieth century that inspired them to organize their own countermovement,

building on a foundation that had already been laid in the nineteenth century by rabbinic opponents of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and Reform Judaism. The Haredi antipathy to the left was only intensified by the harsh persecution of traditionalist Jews in the Soviet Union which coincided chronologically with the solidification of Haredi political identity in interwar Poland and was later reinforced by the experience of Hasidic Holocaust survivors under communist rule in Hungary and Romania during the 1940s and 50s.

And yet, particularly during the interbellum period, some religious Jews who shared the same background, traditional education, and strict adherence to the Halakhah (Jewish law) as the members of the emerging Haredi movement, reimagined socialism or communism in ways that were harmonious with their deep commitments to Judaism. Some of these individuals formally identified with the Haredi camp, such as the young activists who established the Haredi organization Poale Agudas Yisroel (Workers of the Union of Israel) in Poland in 1922. Others, like Abraham Isaac Kook, Hillel Zeitlin, and Yehuda Ashlag, were iconoclasts in a variety of ways—even beyond their kabbalistically influenced claims regarding the latent holiness within socialism or communism, a subject to which I will return below. Whether we see them as Haredi outliers who sought to transform the movement from within or as standing outside of it, depends on how capaciously we understand a category that, like radicalism, itself, was in the process of being formed, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century. In addition to these figures, some Haredim who were diametrically opposed to leftist ideology were nevertheless influenced by the revolutionary ethos that seemed to permeate the very air of Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century and, in some cases, they borrowed from the organizational innovations of the numerous radical political groups in their midst, refashioning them for their own, traditionalist purposes. Together, these phenomena illuminate the intersecting histories of those who “tremble” before God—the meaning of the Hebrew term “Haredi”—and the radical Jewish political tradition.

EARLY ENCOUNTERS

The rise of radical Jewish politics and, in particular, the creation of the Bund or “General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia” in Vilna in 1897, spurred intense opposition among many rabbis within the Russian

Pale of Settlement, as well as elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe. On a local level, individual rabbis sought to counter the political activities of socialist Jewish revolutionaries in their communities while expressing support for civil authorities. In at least a few instances, such as in Krakow and Vilna, groups of rabbis publicly and unequivocally denounced the Bund, whose members were, themselves, harshly critical of the rabbinic establishment.⁴ And yet, despite the efforts of rabbinic leaders to stem the tide among Bundist followers, Jonathan Frankel has noted that, “even Orthodox Jews deeply hostile to socialism . . . tended increasingly to sympathize with their young relatives in the revolutionary underground.”⁵ Compounding the problem for traditionalist leaders was that men and women from highly prestigious rabbinic and Hasidic families were also drawn to radical politics in this period. Regarding this widespread phenomenon, the writer and scholar Aaron Ze’ev Aescoly, who was himself raised in a Hasidic home and later moved to Palestine, where he joined the cultural committee of the Histadrut or Israeli labor federation, recalled: “Not a house remained whose sons and daughters were not swept up in the current of that generation . . . the families of the zaddikim [Hasidic holy men] could not resist the spirit of the times . . . and they grazed in other fields—from Hamizrachi [religious Zionism] to the Communist Party.”⁶

In 1912, traditionalist Jewish leaders and activists from Germany, Poland, Russia, and Hungary, responded to the growing threat of socialism and Zionism by creating the Haredi organization Agudas Yisroel which would become the chief vehicle for Haredi political expression in Poland and eventually, beyond its borders.⁷ A few years later, the politicization of traditionalist Jews in Eastern Europe was accelerated by the effects of World War I, including the displacement of numerous Jews from smaller towns to big urban centers in the soon to be dissolved Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Yet another catalyst was the February 1917 Revolution, which spurred Orthodox rabbis in Russia to form a new party called Masoret ve-Herut (Tradition and Freedom) to grapple with the challenges and opportunities posed by the fall of the Tsar.⁸

Despite its Orthodox character, this short-lived organization was not immune to the revolutionary *Zeitgeist* then transforming Russia, a tension reflected in its very name, which combined categories—tradition and freedom—that were frequently put in opposition by both traditionalists *and* revolutionaries. As Andrew Koss has noted, “The platform put forward by Masoret ve-herut was not the series of uniformly conservative, antisecularist proclamations one might have expected from an organization led by so many staunchly Orthodox rabbis, many of whom were already or would go on to be

closely associated with the emerging haredi (ultra-Orthodox) camp.”⁹ Indeed, one of its leaders, Rabbi Isaac Rabinowitz (aka Reb Itsele), a member of the rabbinic council of Augudas Yisroel and founder of the famous Ponovezh Yeshiva in Lithuania—later transplanted to Israel, where it became a central Haredi institution in that country—strongly supported socialism and workers’ rights and called on Masoret ve-herut to endorse the redistribution of land to the peasants.¹⁰ Rabinowitz also appears to have enjoyed cordial relations with Jewish radicals, perhaps in part because one of his own sons was a revolutionary who was arrested in 1905.¹¹

The October Revolution of 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power, put an end to these incipient efforts in Russia to harmonize Orthodox Judaism and socialism. Instead, traditionalist Jewish leaders in the newly formed Soviet Union would soon find themselves subject to the whim of the Evseksia, the Jewish section of the Communist Party, whose members, in the words of Mordechai Altshuler, waged a zealous “campaign against the Jewish religion.”¹² Exemplifying the Evseksia’s anti-rabbinic campaign was Ester Frumkin, the granddaughter of a rabbi who received a strong Jewish education as a child before becoming a Bundist leader. After the 1921 dissolution of the Bund’s Communist faction or Kombund, which Frumkin had co-led, she joined the Evseksia and became its most prominent female member. In 1923, Frumkin published a fiery Russian pamphlet titled “Down with the Rabbis!” and later justified the ferocity of the Evseksia’s crackdown as follows, “The danger is that the masses may think that Judaism is exempt from anti-religious propaganda and, therefore, it rests with the Jewish Communists to be even more ruthless with rabbis than non-Jewish-Communists are with priests.”¹³ Besides preempting the charge that the Soviet regime was favoring Judaism as part of a Judeo-Bolshevist conspiracy, Frumkin may have also had another motivation for so fiercely persecuting rabbis. According to Elissa Bemporad, “Ester might have nurtured some bitterness towards the religious leadership and infrastructure since it ultimately offered greater resistance and showed a greater ability to adapt to the [Soviet] regime than the Bund had. As Ester Frumkin poignantly noted in the mid 1920s, “No Jewish socialist party fought for its principles with as much vigor and devotion as these [religious] Jews wrapped in their prayer shawls.”¹⁴

The traditionalist Jewish leaders that Ester Frumkin had in mind were figures like Yehezkel Abramsky, a prominent rabbi who served the community of Slutsk in the 1920s and publicly opposed the Soviet suppression of Judaism, leading to his arrest and imprisonment for several years in Siberia, Shlomo Yosef Zevin, who co-edited the Orthodox publication *Yagdil Torah* along with

Abramsky before being imprisoned, and, most prominently, Yosef Yitshak Schneerson, the rebbe of the Chabad-Lubavitch branch of Hasidism, who founded and led the *Va'ad Rabbanei SSSR* or Committee of Rabbis of the USSR, an underground organization that co-ordinated Jewish ritual observance and traditional education from 1922 until 1930.¹⁵ In establishing this Soviet-wide network of Jewish religious functionaries, ritual sites, and schools, Schneerson, who would also be imprisoned for his activities, drew on longstanding Hasidic organizational structures.¹⁶ Yet, as David Fishman has argued, “the new structure differed from Hasidic communal life in that it needed to be conducted on a clandestine basis. In this respect, Schneerson borrowed many of the techniques of the Russian revolutionary movement, and its Jewish arm, the Bund, including “covert channeling of funds from abroad, and the use of secret emissaries,” as well as a “tightly-knit [underground] organization and aggressive propaganda, or as Schneerson called them, *histadrut ve-ta'amulah*.”¹⁷

By the beginning of the 1930s, all of these rabbis had escaped from the Soviet Union, joining an earlier wave of prominent rabbis who had crossed the border into independent Poland with their followers in the first years after the Revolution. Among these were the members of the Novaredok yeshiva, an institution famous—and controversial—for its passionate devotion to Musar (pietistic ethics) and fierce opposition to the westernizing and bourgeois elements that had infiltrated other Lithuanian yeshivas such as Telz and Slobodka.¹⁸ Until it decamped to Poland and established a network of yeshivas there, Novaredok fought a campaign on Soviet soil for the hearts and souls of idealistic young Jews who might otherwise have joined the Communist cause. Rather than see the yeshiva as fundamentally insulated from the revolutionary culture that surrounded it, however, David Fishman has argued that “Novaredok’s Musarist practices and world-view, which took form in the first decade of the twentieth century, were products of the age of radicalism and revolution.”¹⁹

Established in 1896, only a year before the Bund, the yeshiva contended with the socialist organization almost from the very beginning in the town of Novaredok, where the Bund enjoyed growing popularity, including, notably, among some of the yeshiva students themselves. In order to compete effectively with its rival, the head of the yeshiva, Rabbi Yosef Yoyzl Hurwitz (aka the Alter of Novaredok) co-opted certain features of the revolutionary movement including the *birzhe*, a daily time set aside for debate among the yeshiva students that was modeled on the “outdoor peripatetic exchange of information and ideas,” instituted earlier by the Bund.²⁰ Yet, as Fishman has argued, these borrowings were not merely cosmetic, nor even solely pragmatic, but instead

reflected the interpenetration of a revolutionary ethos into a Musarist framework that was already receptive, or as he put it, “Novaredok . . . was a radical religious counter-culture. It appealed to drives and emotions similar to those that led other young men to leave traditional orthodoxy and join the Bund. Unlike Bundism, however, it was a rebellion from within.”²¹

TORAH SOCIALISM

It is a testament to the powerful appeal of radical politics among the Jews of Eastern Europe that in precisely the same years that traditionalist Jewish leaders were being imprisoned in the Soviet Union or escaping its borders, a group of young Haredi activists in Poland decided to establish a new organization that would appeal to Orthodox Jewish workers and compete head-to-head with the Bund. Poale Agudas Yisroel was founded in 1922 by idealistic, yeshiva educated intellectuals within the broader Agudah movement who argued that social justice and workers’ rights were central Torah values and therefore the increasingly proletarianized Jewish masses of Poland should not have to choose between maintaining Orthodox religious observance or engaging in labor activism but, rather, could embrace both under a single banner.

From the very beginning, Poale Agudah struggled to navigate its relationship with Agudas Yisroel, on the one hand, and the broader Jewish workers movement, on the other. Its members affirmed the authority of the Agudah’s rabbinic leadership when it came to religious matters but also debated whether to embrace some form of socialism. As Gershon Bacon has written, “The position adopted by many publicists of Poale Agudah might be called ‘Torah socialism,’ that is, socialism humanized by the laws of the Torah. As one writer put it, neither socialism nor capitalism could bring salvation to mankind, for both had elements of civil strife, hatred, and antagonism. Torah socialism was different, since it sought to eradicate evil from man himself.”²² For their part, Agudah leaders frequently accused Poale Agudah of fomenting class conflict within the Jewish community, which they asserted “is completely against the spirit of Torah and Judaism,” and of challenging the alliance between Agudas Yisroel and the conservative Pilsudski government in Poland.²³ At the same time, they acknowledged that Poale Agudah had helped to staunch the flow of Orthodox Jewish workers to parties like the Bund or the Labor Zionist organization Poale Zion.

In the intense, intra-Jewish political competition of interbellum Poland, Poale Agudah carved out a distinctive space for itself by affirming the enduring authority of the Torah and its interpreters, the rabbis, while adopting certain aspects of socialism, hoping, in the process, to influence those Jewish parties—the Agudah and the Bund—that affirmed one but not the other. Commenting on this, Ada Gebel has written of the movement’s “dual purpose: to spread the idea of justice within Haredi Judaism and to spread the idea of godliness within the socialist movement.”²⁴ The result of this approach was on display at the organization’s first national conference in October 1928, which brought together 140 delegates from one hundred local branches to Warsaw, where in a hall decorated with the Ten Commandments, a hammer and anvil, and quotations from the Torah, the proceedings began with a recitation of the Poale Agudah hymn in Yiddish:

We trust in God and in His ways,
 Our mouths forever chant His Praise,
 And as we work with hammer and saw,
 We praise God’s Name and study His law.
 We laugh at all the free-thought preachers,
 We spurn the many new-law teachers;
 Our ancient Torah for evermore,
 is ours to practice and adore.
 Blessings fall upon that hand,
 That labors for people and for land . . .
 We shall fight to the very death,
 until master and slave have ceased to be,
 And justice and right rule land and sea.
 Our aim is to strive towards the day,
 When Mercy and Justice all men shall sway,
 And our way is the way that our Teachers trod,
 The way of Torah, that leads to God.²⁵

Writing as “a sincere friend of the impoverished Jewish masses” in *Der Moment* on November 1, 1928, a few days after the conference, Hillel Zeitlin praised Poale Agudah for critiquing the “way that Jewish workers were treated by wealthy Jews, who consider themselves ‘God fearing Haredim’ as well as by the elite within Agudah, itself.” Zeitlin argued that “people must employ the full influence of the [Hasidic] rebbes on their Hasidim [followers] to compel the latter to hire Jewish workers,” even though they were unable to work on the Sabbath (many Jewish factory owners in interwar Poland preferred to hire

non-Jewish employees for this reason, something that had become a battle cry for Poale Agudah). In exhorting the leaders of Agudah to focus on the Jewish poor, Zeitlin invoked a teaching of the early Hasidic master, “Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav [who] used to say that the greatness of a tsaddik [Hasidic holy man] consists in simultaneously being above and below . . . he should be a ‘partner with the Holy One Blessed be He in the act of creation,’ and when it is necessary, a *prostok* (boor) among boors.”²⁶

Raised in a Chabad Hasidic home, Zeitlin, like many of his contemporaries in Eastern Europe, had embarked on a path that led away from tradition as a young man and had immersed himself in European philosophy and literature. Following World War I, however, Zeitlin re-embraced Orthodox Jewish practice and sought to critique—and reform—the Haredi establishment in Warsaw by offering an alternative vision of Judaism that would combine traditional adherence to the Torah, a return to what he considered to be the original spirit of the Hasidic movement, and a perfected form of socialism. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, indeed up to his murder by the Nazis in 1942, Zeitlin worked to establish a series of spiritual communities in Warsaw, beginning with “Yavneh,” named in honor of the legendary first-century CE gathering that had ‘founded’ rabbinic Judaism, and which he hoped would serve as models for other Jews and, ultimately, even help to redeem the entire world. As Zeitlin put it in 1924:

The “Hasidism of the future” will thus incorporate all that is healthy, pure, and honest in socialism. But it will with great bitterness cast aside all in socialism that is petty, egotistical, merchant-like in its materialism, unjust, jealous, or vengeful. It will reject the dark and wild tyranny of the masses and of those adventurers who climb up on the backs of the masses. In the Hasidism of the future the love of God will shine forth and burn even more brightly than it did in the days of the BeSHT [the movement’s eighteenth century founder]. The “Love of Israel” will be transformed into a great worldwide “Love of Humanity.” Nevertheless, Israel will always be recognized as the firstborn child of God, the one who has borne, continues to bear, and will continue to bear the godly light. . . . “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deut. 16:20) will be spread through all social relationships. Justice will be demanded not only of the opposing class (as both the capitalists and the proletariat do today), but people will demand justice of *themselves*. Pursuit of justice will be not only a public matter (as it is today), but rather one of individual concern. Each person will

think not about how to avoid being *exploited*, but rather about how to avoid *exploiting the other*.²⁷

Like his contemporaries and interlocutors, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine Abraham Isaac Kook and the prominent kabbalist Yehuda Ashlag, Zeitlin believed that the wars, revolutions, and other upheavals of his day signified the “footsteps of the messiah.”²⁸ In his interpretation of this unfolding eschatological drama—which reflected the intellectual influence of Hegel and Marx as much as the kabbalists Isaac Luria and Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto—Jews were chosen to serve as a proverbial “light onto the nations” and a kind of spiritual revolutionary vanguard, who would combine Torah with socialism or, in Ashlag’s case, a communism that had gone through a process of rectification or *tikkun*.²⁹ The result would be what Ashlag, who was raised in a Hasidic home in Poland and exposed to revolutionary politics as a young man before immigrating to Palestine, would later call “altruistic communism,” which integrated Lurianic Kabbalah and socialist ideology, as opposed to the flawed “egoistic communism” that then existed in the Soviet Union as well as in communist organizations.³⁰ Inspired by the contemporary Jewish labor movement and by traditional kabbalistic beliefs regarding the link between *gashmius* (materiality) and *rukhnus* (spirituality), Kook, Ashlag, and Zeitlin all viewed physical labor, especially in the land of Israel, as playing a key role in this transformation. As Zeitlin put it, “The Hasid of the future will live only from his own physical labor. . . . He will be filled with love and compassion for every Jew and non-Jew, for every creature. He will long to raise up the form of the Shechinah [the Divine Presence] in the Holy Land and to spread her light through the world.”³¹

Similarly, for the members of Poale Agudah, the land of Israel came to represent the one place where a new kind of Orthodox Jew was truly possible, one as radical in its own way as the “New Jew” then being invented by secular Zionists. After a failed attempt to establish a branch of the movement in Palestine in the 1920s, Poale Agudah succeeded in 1933 under the leadership of Benyamin Mintz and Yaakov Landau. In this new environment, Poale Agudah had to negotiate relationships with the Histadrut (the Labor Zionist dominated general trade union for Jewish workers), the right wing Revisionists, and HaPoel HaMizrahi, the labor arm of the religious Zionist movement that was founded in Jerusalem in 1922—all while still navigating their increasingly fraught relationship with the Agudah establishment in Poland, as well as the local Haredi leadership in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak.

Like all the Jewish labor organizations in Palestine during this period, Poale Agudah was also forced to grapple with the changing status of women.³² Labor Zionists frequently expressed support for gender equality and many women were attracted to the movement precisely because of the new opportunities it appeared to promise. In practice, however, *halutsot* (“women pioneers”) often suffered from occupational inequality, lower rates of compensation, limited access to leadership roles, sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination. Many of the Orthodox women who immigrated to Palestine from Europe in the 1930s and 40s were also influenced by contemporary calls for gender equality in the broader society, leading to what Yosef Fund has described as a “new social phenomenon: woman, worker, Orthodox, and independent.”³³ Instead of empowering these women in new ways, however, Poale Agudah responded by basically following the blueprint already established by the Agudah movement in Poland. This meant establishing a series of separate groups for women, limiting women’s activities to educational and cultural spheres, and, above all, prohibiting women from voting, becoming leaders, or involving themselves in the political dimensions of the movement.³⁴

Poale Agudah generally took a pragmatic approach towards the Histadrut, despite its secular Zionist orientation, and collaborated with it on the *vodah ivrit* (Hebrew Labor) campaign in the 1930s that called on Jewish employers in Palestine to hire Jewish workers rather than their Arab counterparts, who were often willing to work for lower wages.³⁵ This campaign, along with increased Jewish immigration from Nazi Germany and other factors, helped to spark the Arab Revolt of 1936. In its wake, Rabbi Isaac Breuer, who had become the president of Poale Agudah in Palestine following his own immigration from Germany, called for peace between Jews and local Arabs, whom he acknowledged as a “people of the land,” or in his words: “Poale Agudas Yisroel calls upon to all the workers [. . .] to join its mission and become a part of its war: on behalf of God, His Torah, His nation and His land! On behalf of a regime of loyalty to the Torah and to national unity! On behalf of peace between nations and peacemaking between the peoples of the land of Israel! On behalf of Torah socialism and justice in the relations between those who provide work and the worker!”³⁶ Regarding this statement, Ada Gebel has observed, “a recognition of this kind [i.e., that Arabs were a “people of the land of Israel”] represented an act of defiance against the Zionist movement, whose different factions were then expending great efforts to oppose recognition of the local Arabs as a nation with property rights in the land of Israel.”³⁷

The Zionist party most stridently opposed to Arab property rights in Palestine during the 1930s was the Revisionists, whose leader Vladimir Zéev Jabotinsky had split from the World Zionist Organization in 1935 and founded Tsakh or the New Zionist Organization.³⁸ While Yaakov Rosenheim, the president of the worldwide Agudas Yisroel organization (which, by then, also had a branch in the United States), advocated for a tactical alliance between Poale Agudah and the Revisionists, Yaakov Landau rejected any cooperation between the groups. Poale Agudah's view of the Revisionists was spelled out in a 1935 article in *Der yidisher arbayer* (The Jewish Worker), the official organ of the movement: "We Poale Agudas Yisroel distance ourselves from the approach 'by the sword you shall live,' which is the might of Esau [the brother of the biblical patriarch Jacob, traditionally associated with gentile power]. We especially condemn as a terrible thing the spirit of militarism and the fascism that this movement is liable to introduce into the Jewish camp."³⁹ Indeed, according to Yaakov Landau, "the chauvinism and false god of violence of the Revisionists is poison to our youth and stands in opposition to the spirit of the Torah."⁴⁰

The same could not be said for HaPoel Hamizrahi, however, which, like Poale Agudah, combined strict adherence to the Torah with elements of socialism, an approach reflected in their slogan *Torah ve-'Avodah* (Torah and Labor). Already well-established in Palestine by the time Poale Agudah arrived on the scene in the mid-1930s, HaPoel Hamizrahi enjoyed the support of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who described the movement as the "completeness of ultra-Orthodox Jewry."⁴¹ Kook drew on the Kabbalah to argue that even the most secular Zionists were playing a crucial, if unwitting, role in the *athalta digeulah* or "beginning of the redemption." Similarly, he viewed socialism in kabbalistic terms as possessing a core of holiness or, as he put it, "The inner soul vivifying the socialist doctrine is the light of the practical Torah."⁴² Yet, in the present day this divine spark was still surrounded by a profane husk and, therefore, socialism needed "pruning and weeding, purification and refinement."⁴³ Just as HaPoel HaMizrahi demonstrated that it was possible to purify the Zionist movement of its faults, so socialism would one day be rectified and become "a true expression of the strength of the Torah and the commandments in the fullness of their loftiness and purity."⁴⁴

Given their many shared values, it is not surprising that activists from Poale Agudah and HaPoel Hamizrahi sought collaboration during 1930s, including the establishment of a separate *Histadrut* or labor union for Orthodox Jewish workers in Palestine.⁴⁵ Despite the enthusiasm on both sides,

however, these efforts were torpedoed in 1937 by the leaders of Agudas Yisroel, who wanted to prevent a split within the broader Aguda movement over the proposed alliance with a Zionist organization, especially one that also claimed allegiance to the Halakhah. Instead, these rivals and partners, as Yosef Fund put it, found more limited ways of working together even as they both pursued parallel tracks on the ground, including the establishment of religious *kibbutzim* (collective farms) and *moshavim* (cooperative farms).

The very creation of these agricultural institutions reveals the profound degree to which Poale Agudah was embedded within the broader Jewish labor movement in Palestine. At the same time, these institutions were shaped in ways large and small by Poale Agudah's Haredi character. For instance, members of the organization's farming collectives adhered to the Halakhic authority of Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1878–1953), known as the Hazon Ish, one of the most influential Haredi leaders in Palestine. They allowed their fields to lie fallow during the Sabbatical year or *shmita*, as required by the Halakhah, and men and women were segregated in a variety of ways. Days were spent laboring in the fields and workshops while evenings were devoted to classes on Tanakh (Hebrew Bible), Talmud, the Shulhan Arukh (an important Jewish legal code), and other subjects.⁴⁶

Poale Agudah's most prominent kibbutz was named in honor of the Hafetz Hayim, as Rabbi Yisroel Meyer Kagan (1838–1933), an iconic Eastern European Halakhic authority and moralist, was popularly known. By the mid-1940s, Kibbutz Hafetz Hayim, like the other communities established by Poale Agudah, was focused primarily on absorbing young men and women from traditional Jewish homes who had survived the Holocaust and managed to enter Palestine. In 1947, Rabbi Moshe Meir Yashar, himself a biographer of the Hafetz Hayim, visited the kibbutz from the United States and shared his impressions in the Orthodox journal *HaPardes* (The Orchard): "Haredi Judaism justly boasts of the religious kibbutzim . . . they are holy to us and precious to our nation, [and] Kibbutz Hafetz Hayim is the 'holy of holies.' There is nothing like Kibbutz Hafetz Hayim in the entire Yishuv [pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine]."⁴⁷ Despite the enthusiasm that agricultural communities like Kibbutz Hafetz Hayim inspired in observers like Yashar, as well as among the leaders of Poale Agudah, itself, they were unable to retain a majority of the young Orthodox immigrants who only temporarily worked on them after arriving in the country. Rather than a kibbutz, most members of Poale Agudah, like their fellow Haredim, in general, preferred to live in urban neighborhoods and eventually settled in Jerusalem, Bnai Brak, or elsewhere.

With the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Poale Agudah, like many of the other parties that had flourished in the Mandate period, began to shift away from the distinctive ideology that had nurtured the movement and, in the words of Yosef Fund, “preferred to embrace a pragmatic path.”⁴⁸ In practice, this meant becoming involved in electoral politics and running candidates for the Israeli Knesset or parliament, which it did beginning in 1949, when Poale Agudah joined Agudat Yisrael, Mizrahi, and HaPoel HaMizrahi, to form the Hazit Datit Meuhedet or United Religious Front. For the next several decades, Poale Agudah continued to run candidates for the Knesset, either alone or in alliance with Agudat Yisrael—with which it continued to have a contentious relationship—and also maintained smaller branches of the movement in other countries, including the United States, where it opened an office in Brooklyn, New York, in 1948.

HAREDI SOCIALISTS?

Despite their differences, both Agudat Yisrael, as the party became known in Israel, and Poale Agudah allied themselves for pragmatic reasons with a series of left-leaning governments for three decades prior to the watershed victory of Likud in 1977. The end of Labor’s hegemony and the rise of Likud coincided with the creation of two new Haredi political parties during the 1980s, Shas and Degel HaTorah, as well as the demise of Poale Agudah as an independent party. Founded in 1984, Shas, led by Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, the former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, sought to provide a political voice for the growing number of Mizrahi Jews in Israel who identified as Haredi but were frustrated with the exclusively Ashkenazi leadership of Agudat Yisrael. The creation of Shas—as well as the extensive cultivation of Mizrahi voters by Likud—helped to neutralize the radical Mizrahi political activism of the early 1970s (which took the form of an Israeli Black Panthers group); the subsequent electoral strength of Shas contributed substantially to the rightward shift among Haredi voters overall in Israel. Haredi support for Likud-led governments, in turn, became an increasingly important component of the right’s ongoing success in Israel and was rewarded with numerous—and, in some circles, highly controversial—governmental aid programs to the Haredi community.

This decisive Haredi political shift to the right in Israel during the 1980s and ’90s occurred despite the relative “dovishness” of some Haredi

leaders—at least compared to the Likud or religious Zionists—regarding the Occupied Territories. One of these leaders, Rabbi Eliezer Shach (1899–2001), the Lithuanian-born head of the transplanted Ponevezh yeshiva in Bnai Brak and founder of the Degel Ha-Torah Haredi political party in 1988, frequently expressed a willingness to compromise land for peace on the Halakhic principle of *pikuah nefesh* (saving a life), i.e., if the transfer of land would help diminish deadly violence. Shach’s position on this issue might have made for a natural alliance with Labor but as Shahar Ilan has argued, Shach’s “hatred for the left and historical score with the Labor movement were much stronger.”⁴⁹ Regarding the latter, Shach witheringly declared: “Labor severed the Jewish people from its past. Today you meet children who don’t know what Shabbat [the Sabbath] is. There are kibbutzim that do not know what Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement] is. No idea. And there they raise rabbits and pigs [i.e., non-kosher animals]. . . . This is called Jewish? Labor? Labor is something holy? They do not have Shabbat or Yom Kippur, they have a new theory and a new Torah.”⁵⁰

It is difficult to reconstruct historical Haredi voting patterns in the United States, especially prior to the extreme consolidation of Haredi residents in certain urban and exurban enclaves in the greater New York City area, where they have become more “visible” to demographic analysis. Yet it appears that the 1970s may have signaled a shift to the right among Haredim in the country. Even then, in local elections, most Haredim continued to support candidates, no matter what their party, who promised to deliver on core issues such as education, affordable housing, crime, and government anti-poverty programs.⁵¹ In the 1972 presidential election, leaders of the Satmar Hasidic community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn—the largest Hasidic group in the country—enthusiastically endorsed Republican Richard Nixon in his reelection campaign against the Democratic candidate George McGovern, praising Nixon for his “efforts to bring about a just and lasting peace so badly needed in a troubled world,” and his “noble efforts in inspiring our country toward a greater commitment of moral values.”⁵² Significantly, they also lauded Nixon for his strong support for government aid to private and parochial schools, a key bread and butter issue for Haredi voters since the interwar period in Poland, when it was a central concern of Agudas Yisroel.

In recent years, surveys and election results have consistently demonstrated the politically conservative leanings of most Haredim in the United States and their striking divergence from the American Jewish mainstream in this regard.⁵³ Thus, the 2013 Pew Survey of US Jews found that Haredim were far to the right of the overall American Jewish population, with 58% responding

that they “Identify as/lean Republican” and 64% that “they are politically conservative,” contrasting with “Other Jews” (a category that included Reform, Conservative, and those with “no-denomination”), 18% of whom responded that they “Identify as/lean Republican,” and only 16% that “they are politically conservative.” This gulf found dramatic expression in the 2016 Presidential election, when roughly 70% of the Jewish electorate supported the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, while a majority of Haredi voters—perhaps as much as 75%—supported Donald Trump.⁵⁴ In Borough Park, the most populous Haredi neighborhood in Brooklyn, 69% of voters supported Trump compared to only 27% for Clinton, leading one Haredi resident of the neighborhood to exclaim to *The New York Times*, “It’s like West Virginia, Wyoming, and you’re talking the heart of New York City,” while another opined, “Borough Park was a red state.”⁵⁵ Surveys following the election suggested that, if anything, support for Trump only increased among Haredim.⁵⁶

During the same period, Haredi leaders and activists in both Israel and the United States employed “communist” and “socialist” as pejorative labels to tar their opponents. During a contentious race for a local New York State Senate seat in 2018, for example, the Hasidic newspaper *Der Yid*, a media organ for the largest faction of the Satmar community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, ran a public service announcement in Yiddish that lamented the possibility that Julia Salazar, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), would defeat Martin Dilan, the incumbent endorsed by the Hasidic establishment: “Will Williamsburg Fall to the Socialists?”—the newspaper asked.⁵⁷ At the height of the COVID-19 epidemic in Israel, when cases were rising rapidly among Haredim, one of the *pashkevilin* (Yiddish, “broadsides” that are ubiquitous in Haredi neighborhoods around the globe) condemned the Israeli government for applying restrictive measures to their community but not to the military: “Communists! You didn’t close the camps of your impure army. You don’t care for the health of your soldiers, but you care for the health of Haredi Jewry?”⁵⁸ Similarly, in 2020, when Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, the son of Ovadia Yosef and himself the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, condemned Russian immigrants—who frequently opposed government set-asides for Haredim—he called them “communists and religion haters.”⁵⁹

And yet, in the same decades that Haredim were embracing right-wing politics in both Israel and the United States, numerous community members were also becoming more and more dependent on the kinds of government aid programs that are the hallmarks of left-leaning and socialist governments around the world, including housing subsidies, aid to families with dependent

children, free medical coverage, and other services that were unique to either the Israeli or American contexts. In 2011, for instance, *The New York Times* reported: “The poorest place in the United States is not a dusty Texas border town, a hollow in Appalachia, a remote Indian reservation or a blighted urban neighborhood . . . none of the nation’s 3,700 villages, towns or cities with more than 10,000 people has a higher proportion of its population living in poverty than Kiryas Joel,” a Hasidic village in upstate New York. The newspaper added that “About half of the residents receive food stamps, and one-third receive Medicaid benefits and rely on federal vouchers [i.e., Section 8] to help pay their housing costs.”⁶⁰

In short, Kiryas Joel and other Haredi communities in the United States benefited greatly from precisely the kinds of federal aid programs promoted by socialist politicians like Bernie Sanders rather than conservatives like Donald Trump. Thus far, this phenomenon has not led a majority of Haredi voters in the United States to support progressive candidates on the national level; the story is different on the local level, at least in New York City, where Haredim have sometimes supported progressive politicians like Mayor Bill DeBlasio when a more conservative opponent had no chance of winning. Nevertheless, in 2020, the rise of a new generation of progressive candidates in the greater New York area during the waning days of Donald Trump’s presidency led *The Forward* newspaper to speculate—hopefully, it seemed—that Haredi voters “will find more common ground with progressives . . . than they realize, such as on issues of expanding the social safety net and securing housing protections.”⁶¹

Alternatively, most Haredim in the United States may continue to vote Republican, especially in non-local elections, even as the economic interests of many poorer community members remain better served by left-wing policies. If so, it will likely be because a majority of the community’s members identify with the right when it comes to questions of gender and sexuality, governmental approaches to private education, the relationship between religion and state, American policy towards Israel—especially as traditional Haredi hostility to Zionism has weakened overall—and a range of other social, cultural, and political issues. Combined with the growing embourgeoisement of the community and the empowerment of an entrepreneurial class, Haredi voters may continue to support right-wing candidates in large numbers for years to come.

Indeed, in surveys conducted in 2023 and 2024 by David Myers and Mark Trencher, more than 90% of Haredi respondents, including both men and women, indicated that they intended to vote Republican in the 2024 election.⁶² This represented an intensification of a longstanding pattern in presidential

elections dating back to at least 1980 and probably earlier, with only a brief window of support for Bill Clinton.⁶³ By contrast, most Modern Orthodox respondents, like the vast majority of non-Orthodox Jews in the United States, stated that they intended to vote Democratic in 2024. Significantly, despite the long history of reliance on government aid programs by poorer members of their communities, only 6% of Haredi respondents identified the “availability of welfare programs” as an “issue of importance” when it came to voting and ranked it at the very bottom of a list of eleven such issues.⁶⁴

For a variety of reasons, Haredim in Israel have come to benefit from government aid programs even more than their counterparts in the United States. Newly married Haredi men in the United States tend to learn in *kolel*, a kind of post-graduate institution, for only a few years before entering the work force (though this differs by community). As a result, most American Haredi men are employed, as are many Haredi women, at least until child-care responsibilities take them out of the workforce, and even then, sometimes only temporarily. When Haredim in the United States qualify for government aid programs such as food stamps or Section 8 housing vouchers, therefore, it is typically because they are members of the working poor—like millions of other Americans—whose relatively low incomes combined with large families and high housing costs grant them eligibility.

Many Haredi men in Israel, by contrast, learn in *kolel* for years, if not decades, following marriage and they do not enter the work force at all or enter it at a much later age, producing what Menachem Friedman has famously described as a *hevrat lomdim* or “society of learners.” Meanwhile, Israeli Haredi women continue to be employed at significantly higher rates than their male counterparts—though this varies by community—even as child-care duties, concerns regarding modesty, and unequal pay for women, in general, limit their earning power. Indeed, an annual survey of Israeli Haredim found that in 2021, 78% of Haredi women were in the workforce compared to only 51% of men, while the community as a whole had a 44% poverty rate compared to 22% among other Israelis.⁶⁵

Finally, unlike in the United States, Haredim in Israel are represented by their own political parties—Agudat Yisrael, Shas, Degel HaTorah—which have successfully lobbied for a wide range of aid programs in return for joining a series of coalition governments. Because these right-wing governments, despite their neoliberal orientation in general, have consistently funded massive social welfare programs for Haredi communities in order to ensure their ongoing political support, Haredim have not been forced to choose between economic

subsidies that essentially make their religious lifestyle possible, on the one hand, and their right-wing views on issues such as gay marriage, separation of religion and state, equal rights for all residents of Israel, and so on. In other words, Israeli Haredim have, thus far, at least, been able to have their cake and eat it too.

Yet a series of surveys of Israeli society conducted since the late 1960s sheds intriguing light on how complicated it is to place Haredim on the traditional political spectrum. Beginning in 1968, these surveys have asked Israelis of different religious orientations, from Haredi to *hiloni* (secular), the following question: “Which do you support more, a socialist or capitalist approach?”⁶⁶ Initially, secular Israelis were more likely to support socialism than were Haredim but since the 2000s, the situation has changed dramatically, as Gilad Be’ery has noted, “The data indicate the existence of two periods in relation to this issue: until the 2000s, Haredim in Israel tended to identify more with capitalism or no difference was found between them and the secular; by contrast, in the early 2000s, a reversal occurred and the religious and, above all, the Haredim, began to identify with socialism at a higher rate than did secular Israelis. This finding in the case of the Israeli Haredi public is surprising given the historical identification of socialism with secularism.”⁶⁷

Since roughly half of Haredim in Israel lived below the poverty-line during the period under consideration, Be’ery has speculated that their growing support for socialism “is connected with the desire of the Haredi public, which is mostly mired in poverty, for budgetary support from the state.”⁶⁸ Supporting this interpretation is another finding of the surveys from the 2000s, namely, that there was a direct correlation between the level of poverty among Haredi respondents and their support for socialism. Yet complicating any simple equation, the surveys also found that the opposite phenomenon existed among secular Israelis, namely, the poorer the respondents, the *less* likely they were to endorse socialism rather than capitalism.⁶⁹ It would appear that a significant majority of Haredim in Israel understood socialism as more likely to address the needs of the poor, in contrast to their secular counterparts. However, because most Haredim also opposed a variety of other positions traditionally associated with socialism—what Be’ery calls “classic socialism”—it is also likely that they only understood the term in a narrowly economic sense and that their “identification with the label ‘socialism’ is not related to the full adoption of the ideology and its implications.”⁷⁰

What would Haredi voters in Israel do if faced in the future with a choice between a right-wing government that refused to support social welfare

programs out of conservative principles and a left-wing alternative that endorsed such programs? Would they behave like numerous voters in countries around the world who hold a mix of progressive and conservative opinions—a category that Noam Gidron has called “cross-pressured voters”—who “are more likely to support the right: while support for the left requires progressive attitudes on all issues, it is enough to be conservative on one issue to support the right.”⁷¹ Or if push came to shove, would a majority of Haredim in Israel support a left-wing government if it were the only option for preserving the aid programs that make contemporary Haredi society in Israel economically viable? Put differently, it may be that a century after the founding of Poale Agudas Yisroel in Poland, a majority of Haredim in Israel might best be described today as social conservatives but economic socialists.

Notes

1. There is a large—and growing—body of literature on various aspects of Haredi Judaism. On the historical roots of the phenomenon in Europe, see the now classic essay by Michael Silber, “The Emergence of Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Invention of a Tradition,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity since Emancipation*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 23–84.
2. Any study of the relationship between Haredi Judaism and the Left must acknowledge the striking and highly idiosyncratic life and work of Abraham Bick (1913–1990). A descendent of the most prominent *misnagdic* (non-Hasidic) rabbinic family in Medzibozh, Bick studied during the 1930s in the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Palestine, where he received *smikhah* (rabbinic ordination) from Zvi Yehuda Kook, Abraham Isaac Kook’s son and successor. Bick devoted the following decades to exploring the connections—both real and imagined—between Jews, Judaism, and socialism in a series of books and newspaper columns, many for the Communist affiliated Yiddish *Morgn Frayhayt* founded by Moshe Olgin in 1922. A long-time apologist for both Stalin (he wrote a paean to the dictator in honor of his seventieth birthday in 1949) and the Soviet Union, Bick was compelled to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In 1945, Bick founded the Institut far Yidisher Bildung in Manhattan, which has been studied by Hayyim Rothman, “Rediscovering Radical Rabbi Abraham Bick at the Site of the Former Institut far Yidisher Bildung,” in *Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, January 12, 2020, <https://ingeveb.org/blog/rediscovering-radical-rabbi-abraham-bick-at-the-site-of-the-former-institut-far-yidisher-bildung>, has described as “his Socialist yeshiva.” Bick finally broke with the Soviet Union, accusing it of anti-Semitism, following its support of the Arab countries during the Six Day War in 1967. He spent his final years working as the librarian at Mosad Ha-Rav Kook in Israel, while authoring numerous essays on the rabbinic backgrounds of important Marxist figures (e.g., Rosa Luxemburg) and the supposedly socialist leanings of important rabbinic figures (e.g., Moshe Sofer).
3. Eliyahu Stern, “Anti-Semitism and Orthodoxy in the Age of Trump,” *Tablet Magazine*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/anti-semitism-orthodoxy-trump>, writes, “Where Orthodoxy’s position was unique . . . is the way in which it identified left-wing politics as a cancer from within the Jewish collective, something internal to Judaism itself. The fight against Marxism and a materialist theory of the world was not only to be waged against gentiles, but first and foremost against other Jews who played integral roles in founding these new movements.” Stern draws on the work of Marc Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884–1966* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007).

4. See Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale: The Formative Years of the Jewish Worker's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 106–07, drawing on *Der fraynd*, No. 176, (August 8, 1903): 4; Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 73, “The Vilna rabbis’ appeal of June 1903, therefore, reflects the situation of the local religious authorities in the context of Russian politics. Under the circumstances, they would have considered a denunciation of socialist and revolutionary ideas timely and eminently beneficial for the Jewish population at large.”
5. Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 140.
6. As quoted in David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis in the History of Hasidism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 217.
7. On the history of Agudas Yisroel in Poland, see Gershon Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996).
8. Andrew Koss, “War within, War without: Russian Refugee Rabbis during World War I,” *AJS Review* 34 (November 2010): 249–50, has written that similar organizations were established by Orthodox rabbis elsewhere in the former Russian Empire, including in Ukraine and Belorussia.
9. Koss, “War within, War without,” 250. See, also, the writings of Yehudah Leyb Graubart, one of the Orthodox rabbis most involved in political organization among his fellow rabbis in Russia, for example, Yehuda Leyb Graubart, “Etsel haharedim,” *Ha-tsefrach* 25 (August 16, 1917).
10. See Shaul Stampfer, “Yeshiva of Ponevezh,” *YIVO Encyclopedia*, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Ponevezh_Yeshiva_of. “Exceptional among his peers in strongly supporting socialism, Rabinovich apparently even read Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* and was impressed by it. While most rabbis supported employers in labor issues, Rabinovich came out strongly on behalf of workers. His sensitivity to their needs and his bitter distaste for oppression and exploitation won him great popularity among the Jewish masses.”
11. Marc Shapiro, “Rabbis and Communism,” *The Seforim Blog*, March 31, 2008, <https://seforimblog.com/2008/03/rabbis-and-communism-by-marc-b/>.
12. Mordechai Altshuler, “The Rabbi of Homel’s Trial in 1922,” *Michael* 6 (1980): English section, 10–11. As Stern, “Anti-Semitism and Orthodoxy,” has noted, Haredi leaders correctly understood the mortal threat posed by the Evsektsia and some responded in kind rhetorically, such as Rabbi Elochonon Wasserman, who “employed the category of Amalek [a perennial enemy of the Jewish people] to describe leaders of the Yevsektsiya, the Jewish section of the Communist Party. . . . He advised his flock to ‘physically fight them with arms. To prepare oneself to kill.’”
13. Ester Frumkin to Boris Bogen, the head of the Joint Distribution Committee in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, in Boris Bogen, *Born a Jew* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 329.

14. Elissa Bemporad, "A Woman's Path to the Revolution: Ester Frumkin, 'Queen' of the Jewish Working Class" (paper, Jews in and after the 1917 Russian Revolution Conference, YIVO Institute, November 5, 2017).
15. David Fishman, "Judaism in the USSR, 1917–1930: The Fate of Religious Education," in *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Yaacov Ro'i (Newbury House: Frank Cass, 1995), 251–62.
16. On Chabad's relationship to socialism, see Tali Loewenthal's lecture, "Is Socialism Kosher? Proto-Socialist Resonances in Chassidic Thought," Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/2703778/jewish/Is-Socialism-Kosher.htm. Loewenthal observes, "There is something that has always fascinated me about Chabad. I'm only going to give one example of it . . . It is the use in modern contemporary Chabad of socialist imagery in order to convey a spiritual point." In a letter of August 2, 1963, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, to Shalom Levine, and Israeli educator, wrote, "Perhaps it seems strange that I am addressing such a request to a person who is not a member of any religious party, and is actually a member of a Socialist party . . . But surely it requires no elaboration that the present circumstances in no way resemble the way things were during the formative years of Socialism, especially since, even then, there was no truth in the assumption that Socialism necessitates a conflict with religion." Regarding this statement, Loewenthal concludes, "In other words, socialism can be kosher." For the letter, see https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/letters/default_cdo/aid/66725/jewish/G-d-in-the-Classroom.htm.
17. Fishman, "Judaism in the USSR, 1917–1930," 254.
18. David Fishman, "Musar and Modernity: The Case of Novaredok," *Modern Judaism* 8, no. 1 (February 1988): 44–45.
19. Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 42.
20. Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 51, "His [Hurwitz's] appropriation and adaption of the institutions of the Jewish radical movement was a calculated attempt on his part to stem the tide of defection from the yeshiva to the revolutionary movement, and perhaps even to turn the tide back the other way."
21. Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 56.
22. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition*, 115.
23. As quoted in Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition*, 111. Regarding the alliance between Agudas Yisroel and Józef Pilsudski's Sanacja party, Stern, "Anti-Semitism and Orthodoxy," writes, "Both parties held authoritarian, conservative, and pro-business platforms and favored strong charismatic and authoritarian leaders who appealed to religious symbols and traditional practices."
24. Ada Gebel, *Haredim ve-anshe ma'aseh: Po'ale Agudat Yisra'el, 1933–1939* (Jerusalem, Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 2018), 25.

25. For a description of the conference hall and the translation of the hymn, see "Orthodox Labor Group's Hymn Strikes Note of Hope," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 11, 1928.
26. Hillel Zeitlin, "Di hoykhe poezie un di proze fun lebn," *Der Moment*, November 1, 1928.
27. Hillel Zeitlin, *Di Teyve* (1924), trans. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *In Geveb: A Journal of Jewish Studies*, March 8, 2016, <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/what-does-yavneh-want-a-dialogue>.
28. On the relationship between Kook, Zeitlin, and Ashlag, see Yonatan Meir, "Wrestling with the Esoteric: Hillel Zeitlin, Yehudah Ashlag, and Kabbalah in the Land of Israel," in *Judaism, Topics, Fragments, Faces, Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Professor Rivka Horwitz* [in Hebrew], ed. Ephraim Meir and Haviva Pedaya (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 2007), 585–647; Meir, "Longing of Souls for the Shekina: Relations between Rabbi Kook, Zeitlin and Brenner" [in Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 19 (2005): 771–818.
29. Boaz Huss, "'Komunizm altruisti': ha-kabala ha-modernistit shel ha-rav-Ashlag," *Iyunim be-Tekumat Yisrael* 16 (2006): 127. Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth-Century Kabbalah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 150, n. 34, writes, "I would be cautious, however, of sweepingly defining Ashlag's doctrine as socialist."
30. Huss, "'Komunizm altruisti,'" 127. Also see, Yonatan Meir, "Giluim hadashim shel R. Yehuda Leyb Ashlag," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 19 (2009): 352, n. 29, "There is also no doubt that in his youth he [Ashlag] looked positively on the revolution and in his older years he worked to realize a political vision with a communist spirit (in accordance with his own approach)."
31. Hillel Zeitlin, "Vos vil yavne? (Dialog)," *Di Teyve* (privately published pamphlet, 1924), trans. Arthur Green and Ariel Evan Mayse, *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, March 8, 2016, <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/what-does-yavneh-want-a-dialogue>.
32. Yosef Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!: Po'ale Agudat Yisrael: ideologyah u-medinuyut* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2018), 409, has written, "The large number of young Orthodox women who immigrated during the 1930s presented the leadership of Poale Aguda with the need to tackle the new social phenomenon: woman, worker, Orthodox and independent."
33. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*
34. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*, 409–11.
35. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*, 265–66.
36. Gebel, *Haredim ve-anshe ma'aseh*, 28.
37. Gebel, *Haredim ve-anshe ma'aseh*, 29.
38. Nevertheless, Amir Fuchs has written, "Though Jabotinsky was the leader of the nationalist camp, which advanced the idea of the Jewish state with all its might,

- he declared over and over again that Arabs must be granted absolute equal rights within that state.” See Amir Fuchs, “Jabotinsky’s Vision of a Democratic, Jewish Nation State,” The Israel Democracy Institute, April 26, 2013, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/9868>.
39. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*, 449.
 40. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*
 41. As cited in Amir Mashiach, “The Concept of Work in the Theological Teachings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook,” *HTS/Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 5, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/5869>.
 42. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Shemonah kevatsim* (Jerusalem: Mishpachat ha-Mehaber, 1999), I:89, as translated by Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 97. In *Shemonah kevatsim*, I:90, Kook adds that “Anarchism stems from an even more sublime foundation than socialism . . . Consequently, it is [currently] even further from its source.”
 43. As quoted in Shalom Rosenberg, “Introduction to the Thought of Rav Kook,” in *The World of Rav Kook’s Thought*, ed. Benjamin Ish Shalom and Shalom Rosenberg (New York, Avi Chai, 1991), 61.
 44. Kook, *Shemonah kevatsim*, I:89. Mashiach, “The Concept of Work,” 6, notes that Kook was highly critical of certain features of contemporary socialism, “Apart from his statements in either criticism or praise of socialism, R. Kook objected to some of the basic socialist tenets. First of all, he was adamantly opposed to any harm to private property; secondly, R. Kook recognised the different social classes. He objected to class war and to the elimination of all social classes.”
 45. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*, 450–51. To help facilitate this alliance, Benyamin Mintz even attempted to have Kook become a member of the *moetses gedole haTorah*, the supreme rabbinic council of Agudas Yisroel, despite the hostility that many within the Haredi establishment felt towards Kook because of his attitude towards Zionism and his role as the British appointed Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Palestine, a position that they considered illegitimate.
 46. Moshe Meir Yashar, “Banayikh bonayikh,” *HaPardes* 22, no. 1 (October 1947): 11–12.
 47. Yashar, “Banayikh bonayikh.”
 48. Fund, *Proletarim datiyim hitahadu!*, 504.
 49. Shahar Ilan, *Haredim be’è.m.: Ha-taksivim, ha-hishtamut u-remisat ha-hok* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2000), 31.
 50. As quoted in Ilan, *Haredim be’è.m.*, 31.
 51. On the Haredi shift towards Republican candidates, at least on the national level, see Ari Goldman, “Hasidim Flexing Political Muscle,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 1972, who observed that “with polls and conversations indicating a shift among the Hasidim from the Democrats to President Nixon, the Republicans are hopeful of scoring large gains in Hasidic communities this fall.” Yet, for pragmatic reasons, Haredim continued to vote for numerous Democratic candidates on the local level,

- particularly in Brooklyn, where the Democratic primary generally determined the eventual winner.
52. “7 Orthodox, Hasidic Leaders Endorse Nixon for Reelection,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 26, 1972. On the same endorsement, see “7 Jewish Leaders Give Nixon Support,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 1972.
 53. On this phenomenon, see Nathaniel Deutsch, “‘Borough Park Was a Red State’: Trump and the Haredi Vote,” *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 158–73.
 54. Ben Sales and Laura Adkins, “I Think It’s Israel: How Orthodox Jews Became Republicans,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, February 3, 2020.
 55. William Neuman, “In Democratic Stronghold of New York City, Trump Finds Support among Orthodox Jews,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2016.
 56. Sales and Adkins, “I Think It’s Israel,” have written, “A survey by Nishma Research, released this week early and exclusively to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency . . . concluded that . . . Nearly three-quarters of haredi Jews voted Republican [in the 2016 Presidential election], the survey found.” By contrast, “only about a third of Modern Orthodox respondents said they voted for Trump.” Jake Turx, “The Exclusive Ami Magazine Poll: What Orthodox Jews Really Think of President Trump,” *Ami Magazine*, December 11, 2019, “as this year’s Ami poll reveals, support for the president [among Orthodox Jews] has now hit a whopping 89%. What this upward trajectory makes abundantly clear is that more and more Orthodox Jews are fans of the 45th president of the United States . . . with the ultra-Orthodox being more supportive of the president than the Modern Orthodox.”
 57. *Der Yid*, August 24, 2018.
 58. Anshel Pfeffer, “Inside Israel’s Ultra-Orthodox Coronavirus Hot Spots—Where Even the Mayor Is Sick,” *Haaretz*, March 29, 2020 (English language edition).
 59. Aharon Rabinowitz, “Ha-rav ha-rashi le-Yisra’el: helek meha-’olim goyim gemurim, komunistim, ve-sonai dat,” *Haaretz*, January 7, 2020.
 60. Sam Roberts, “A Village with the Numbers, Not the Image, of the Poorest Place,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2011. For the definitive history of Kiryas Joel and its complex relationship to government programs, see Nomi Stolzenberg and David Myers, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).
 61. Ari Feldman, “Insurgent New York Primary Victories Could Signal Shift in Orthodox Voting,” *The Forward*, July 24, 2020.
 62. See David Myers and Mark Trencher, “A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors: Haredi and Modern Orthodox Sectors September 2023,” Nishma Research, 2023, p. 7, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Orthodox%20Jewish%20Political%20Attitudes%20and%20Behaviors%20September%202023.pdf>; David Myers and Mark Trencher, “Israel, Zionism, Politics, and the Impact of Israel’s War with Hamas,” Nishma Research, February 2024, p. 22, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Israel,%20>

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63. Myers and Trencher, “A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors,” 18.
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 65. Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “80% of Ultra-Orthodox Women Participate in the Workforce—2022 Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel,” The Israel Democracy Institute, January 2, 2023 (Ha-Makhon ha-Yisraeli le-Demokratia: Merkaz Gutman le-Sekarim), <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/47009>.
 66. Gilad Be'ery, “Sekarim ve-aktualiah: Ha-keshet ben datiut le-shita ha-kalkalit hamuadefet be-Yisra'el,” *Da'at* 4 (January, 2014) (Ha-Makhon ha-Yisraeli le-Demokratia: Merkaz Gutman le-Sekarim).
 67. Be'ery, “Sekarim ve-aktualia,” 3. On p. 9, Be'ery adds, “From a historical perspective, the identification of many Haredim with a position that is originally anti-religious seems puzzling.”
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 71. Noam Gidron, “Many Ways to Be Right: The Unbundling of European Mass Attitudes and Partisan Asymmetries across the Ideological Divide” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016), iii–iv.

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Ultra-Orthodox Judaism and the State of Israel: New Perspectives

by Itamar Ben Ami

INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to reevaluate the relationship of Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy (Haredism) to the state. The question of the Haredi attitude toward the state has been examined thus far primarily from an ideological perspective—in light of the ideological refusal of Haredim to accept the Zionist and secular nature of the State of Israel. The fact that mainstream Haredism (unlike some more radical streams of ultra-Orthodoxy) chose to cooperate with the State of Israel is often described as overcoming a difficult ideological tension: namely, the non-Zionist stance associated with Haredism. However, as detailed below, a description focused solely on ideological tension is far from sufficient in characterizing the Haredi relationship to the state, which includes deep institutional and existential involvement that began with the establishment of the State of Israel and has recently expanded significantly.

This essay attempts to examine an alternative possibility to the “ideological tension” paradigm; it will do so by presenting a different framework for conceptualizing the relationship between Israeli Haredism and the state. The alternative framework examines Israeli Haredism not only as pragmatically operating through state institutions, but as a phenomenon to which the state was and still is essential in terms of its development, existence, and operation. Thus, instead of focusing on a ultra-Orthodox ideology of the state, the essay presents several ways in which the state has been *essential* to Israeli Haredism—in a way that casts doubt on the ability to speak about “Israeli Haredim and the state,” as if they are two separate phenomena. The essay draws on insights from

social theory about the construction and preservation of groups through power. In doing so, its aspiration is to shift attention away from the ideological peculiarities of the Haredi case to practical dimensions concerning the relations of minority groups to states. This can lead to comparative reflections on Israeli Haredism as a conservative form of orthodoxy in a post-secular public sphere.

The central focus here will be on the mainstream of Haredi politics as it operates within and through state institutions, namely the Agudath Israel party until the 1980s, and the three Haredi parties that emerged following its decline (the Hasidic Agudath Israel, Degel HaTorah, and Sephardic Shas party). This focus is intended to distinguish Israeli Haredism from, on the one hand, more radical ultra-Orthodox streams that reject any state involvement (developed mainly in the old Yishuv and some Hungarian circles in Jerusalem)¹ and, on the other hand, from more moderate streams that exhibited a measure of ideological identification (albeit incomplete) with the Zionist state.² Alongside this focus, comparisons will be made throughout the essay to American Haredism, which can serve as a useful control group for our purposes. For the relationship of American Haredism to the state has been different politically (due to the American political structure, which separates religion from state) and economically (a lesser involvement of the state in funding and stirring minorities' form-of-life).

The unwillingness of Israeli Haredism to accommodate ideologically to the existence of a Zionist state that clearly deviates from ultra-Orthodox ideology has been well-documented in the scholarly literature.³ Mainstream ultra-Orthodoxy, as shaped before the Holocaust, rejected the only two options that could have provided legitimacy to a Jewish state: either the full neutralization of Jewish politics and its complete separation from culture and religion,⁴ or, conversely, the full sacralization of the Jewish state.⁵ Given their resistance to altering the exilic condition of Judaism through the establishment of a state, ultra-Orthodoxy ideologically rejected both options.⁶ By contrast, Religious Zionism, Haredism's chief Orthodox rival, more readily accepted these options.

To avoid narrowing the rejection to Zionism alone, it is necessary to define the Haredi ideological tension with the Jewish state as entailing a more fundamental crisis of legitimacy. Borrowing from Carl Schmitt, one can speak of two dimensions of legitimacy.⁷ The first is "legality," which refers to the state being an entity that meets its own legal requirements and presents itself externally as constitutional coherence.⁸ Indeed, there is no indication that Israeli Haredism has a particular problem accepting the Israeli state's *legality*—just as ultra-Orthodoxy elsewhere has not struggled historically to accept regimes of any other kind. However, only the second dimension is appropriately termed

legitimacy by Schmitt.⁹ This involves more fundamental factors that have the power to justify or invalidate a political order. For example, this level may impose a second-order question on the adequacy of “legality” as a basis for legitimizing a regime altogether.

In the Israeli Haredi context, it is apparent that the “legality” of the Israeli political order has not satisfied Haredi demands for legitimacy. Proper legitimacy would require instead a congruence between the state and the ultra-Orthodox telos. In this sense, ultra-Orthodoxy can be seen as demanding modern political order, typically trapped in Charles Taylor’s “immanent frame,”¹⁰ to account for its dependence on transcendent factors, which theoretically could also undermine its legitimacy.¹¹ Seen from this perspective, Israeli Haredism’s hesitation toward the state stems from a general tendency to judge a political order based on pre-modern hierarchical values of “order, virtue, and harmony,” which starkly contrast to modern state politics emphasizing “popular sovereignty, democracy, and equality.”¹²

We may then formulate the ideological tension of Haredism toward the state as a crisis of legitimacy. This conclusion, however, raises the opposite question: Why does Israeli Haredism nevertheless accommodate itself to the State of Israel so well? The scholarly literature has pointed to an additional component—the pragmatic tendency of Israeli Haredism to ignore ideological tensions for the sake of promoting its present concerns; this is what Yoav Peled and Horit Herman Peled called “pragmatic rejectionism.”¹³ Although one can indeed find ample evidence of a pragmatic tendency in Israeli Haredism, this solution is not entirely satisfactory, since the Haredi accommodation to the state has been in many cases much higher than mere pragmatic rejectionism. Not only did ultra-Orthodox leaders sign the Israeli Declaration of Independence; Benjamin Brown emphasizes how mainstream Haredi rabbis celebrated the establishment of the Jewish state, and even did not shy away from labeling the state with a term that would later become associated with religious Zionism—“the beginning of our redemption.”¹⁴ Recent surveys also clearly indicate ultra-Orthodoxy to be a highly integrative group within the state, at rates not significantly lower, and in some respects even higher, than the rest of the population.¹⁵

For this reason, we need to modify the “pragmatic rejectionism” thesis as an adequate description of the Haredi attitude toward the state. Rather, this attitude can be defined as entailing a contradiction or ambivalence. Brown, for example, termed the Haredi attitude as “Zionism without Zionism.”¹⁶ This implies that the state appeared to Israeli Haredism not only as evil—despite

the aforementioned ideological tensions. The resulting paradigm of ambivalence has also guided scholarly understanding of the “status quo” agreement, depicting it as a modern version of a medieval charter of privileges for ultra-Orthodoxy whereby the State of Israel agrees to allow this community to maintain its distinct culture in return for Haredi political allegiance.¹⁷ The status quo is presented as an ambivalent arrangement that makes the state Jewish enough for ultra-Orthodox not to oppose it and non-Jewish enough so they will not be tempted to support it. And yet, although the paradigm of ambivalence is preferable to pragmatic rejectionism, it suffers from a central difficulty: Why do ultra-Orthodox accept the state if its existence is so contrary to their ideological stance?

This essay tries to solve this question by examining the issue from a different perspective, which does not assign an exclusive importance to the ideological tension. Moreover, instead of thinking about the relationship between Israeli Haredism and the state in an antagonistic way, as two distinct entities that do not depend on but stand across from each other, the essay examines the ways in which Israeli Haredism is produced by and shaped through the state apparatus, in a manner that prevents one from speaking of Israeli Haredism as separate from the state.

The argument below focuses on two moments, one around the establishment of the State of Israel and the other around the present day—the era of the robust right-wing Israeli coalition. As will be argued, a review of both periods demonstrates the centrality of the state to Israeli Haredism, but in different ways. In the years after the establishment of the state, non-Zionist Orthodoxy exploited state power in order to define itself as “Israeli Haredism” distinct from both majority society and other forms of Israeli Orthodoxy. In recent years, Israeli Haredism has become even more of a public force, aspiring to incorporate ultra-Orthodoxy into the Israeli state itself.

THE BIRTH OF ISRAELI HAREDISM OUT OF THE SPIRIT OF THE ISRAELI STATE

When imagining the relationship between Israeli Haredism and the state, it is easy to slip into essentialism: to assume a well-made state on the one hand, and a cohesive Haredi community on the other. It suffices to recall the conditions in 1948 to understand that the situation was much more complex. First,

the young state was in the process of formation, striving for centralization vis-à-vis various Yishuv and pre-Yishuv institutions, traditions, and arrangements. Moreover, ultra-Orthodoxy in the young state was clearly not a cohesive community—such that it may not make sense to see the term “Haredism” in this period as an accurate sociological signification. Non-Zionist Orthodoxy did not establish significant centers in Yishuv society (relying instead on the highly conservative institutions of the Old Yishuv), and its main institutions were located far away in Eastern and Central Europe. As a result, it was non-Zionist Orthodoxy which suffered the harshest political destruction in the Holocaust. These conditions did not allow for a cohesive Haredi society to take rise afterwards.¹⁸ Israeli Haredism would coalesce only later, in a way that requires explanation.

Non-Zionist Orthodox Jews entered the state as a collection of various non-institutionalized immigrant communities, a condition that placed them in a position of acute weakness. It is noteworthy (and by no means self-evident) that ultra-Orthodoxy opted not to try giving the state an Orthodox character. The idea of a “Halakhic State,” as Asher Cohen, Alexander Kaye, and Asaf Yedidya have shown, served as a vision for halakhically committed Orthodox to reconcile the demands of Halakha with the reality of the state during the late 1940s and 1950s.¹⁹ However, the bills proposals by Haredi Knesset members during the first two decades of the state reveals almost an agnostic indifference (rather than pragmatic rejectionism) toward the Jewishness of the state. In fact, most Haredi legislative efforts during this time focused on non-religious rather than religious issues.²⁰ Indeed, early ultra-Orthodoxy showed no particular interest in making the state Orthodox (though, as we will see in the next section, this has changed in recent years).

Instead, non-Zionist Orthodox communities adopted a novel strategy to engage with the state; Brown insightfully termed this model “cultural entrenchment.”²¹ It can be argued that this strategy has transformed non-Zionist Orthodox Jews into the “Haredi society” that is familiar to us today. The symbolic birth of this model can be traced to Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz’s (the Hazon Ish, 1878–1953) decision in 1951 to dismantle the “United Religious Front,” within which Zionist Orthodoxy and non-Zionist Orthodoxy operated as a unified political bloc. This decision can be conceptualized as an attempt to establish a novel Orthodoxy, that is separate from the state in cultural but not political terms. Interestingly, a similar phenomenon—political reconciliation with the secular state on one hand, while structuring a distinct cultural apparatus on the other—occurred in European Catholicism around the same

period.²² Ultra-Orthodoxy began developing separate cultural mechanisms that would enable it to coalesce into an alternative counter-culture. “Cultural entrenchment” effectively provided the structure for various later Haredi projects—from the “society of learners” to the “enclave culture” to the more Hasidic “holy society.”²³

Although Brown’s model of “cultural entrenchment” provides a crucial link in understanding the development of Israeli Haredism, the picture would be incomplete if we naively postulated the existence of two distinct entities—the secular state on the one hand and the Haredi community on the other—as a “society against the state,” in the spirit of Pierre Clastres.²⁴ The state was vital to the very development of Israeli Haredism in a way that challenges any conceptualization of the latter as separate from it. One must therefore refine Brown’s model and think of cultural entrenchment not as complete detachment from the state, but as a strategic use of the state apparatus to ensure the building of a robust Haredi society capable of entrenchment. We can identify at least three ways in which the state actively served the efforts to build up Israeli Haredism.

The first relates to a fundamental shift in the nature of the ultra-Orthodox community. Despite their shared name, the pre-state non-Zionist Orthodox communities and the Haredi community after the state’s establishment were not the same community. The interwar non-Zionist Orthodox communities were an attempt, albeit limited, to create structures and institutions that would provide for Orthodox needs, religious as well as material. This was especially relevant for the embryonic ultra-Orthodoxy that developed in Palestine during the Yishuv period, which sought to provide its members with tangible needs like work, insurance, and immigration certificates. The foundation of the state, however, rendered the Haredi community’s erstwhile function entirely redundant. The ideal of statism (*mamlakhtiyut*) that guided young Israel dismantled the pre-state Yishuv structures,²⁵ leaving Orthodox communities with no actual functions beyond religious ones—which the Jewish state, through its religious councils, also began providing for to a reasonable extent. In this context, it is important to recall Ernest Gellner’s observation that the state as an institution inherently challenges earlier communal associations and fosters “amnesia” regarding former group identities.²⁶

The state created a substantive change in the function of the ultra-Orthodox community. If prior to the state establishment, the Orthodox communities were entities that provided a range of services unavailable elsewhere, after 1948, the non-Zionist Orthodoxy turned into a mediating community, insisting less on providing alternative services than on regulating the services

provided by the state. Non-Zionist Orthodox institutions sought to monopolize state services such as education, welfare, and religion by insisting on their own role as mediators between the state and ultra-Orthodox citizens. The crucial point is not what Haredi ideology thought of the state (from rejectionism to ambivalence) but how the Haredi community changed its essence in response to the consolidation of the state: from a community producing services to a community mediating state-provided services while monopolizing the access to them.

A second role of the state in building up Haredi cultural entrenchment was through the formation of what may be termed “normative Haredism.” A brief glance at the first half of the twentieth century suffices to acknowledge that there was no hegemonic way “to be Haredi.” Haredism—itsself a term that before the latter half of the 1930s had not signified ultra-Orthodoxy as distinct from other forms of Orthodoxy²⁷—connoted a multitude of Orthodox groups with a non-Zionist orientation. Agudat Israel during the interwar period was a loose transnational coalition of Hasidic rabbis, Polish petite bourgeoisie, Lithuanian yeshivish scholars, Polish and German youth movement activists, German educators and ideologists, and Central European bourgeoisie. Agudat Israel managed to hold this plurality together only due to its frequent decision not to decide at all—which frustrated at times the more ideologically oriented people within it.²⁸

In this context, one of the most conspicuous and surprising facts about Israeli Haredism later has been its relatively uniform nature, the appearance of what may be termed “normative Haredism.” While this essay is not the appropriate framework to address the complex question of the essence of normative Haredism,²⁹ it is enough to observe that there has been a growing institutionalization and unification of what it means to be Haredi.³⁰ The invention of normative Haredism is arguably what molded the various non-Zionist Orthodox communities into a distinct sociological stream termed “Israeli Haredism” properly. Normative Haredism was far from gaining dominance in the 1950s, but its triumph over other ultra-Orthodox options can be clearly discerned since the 1970s.³¹ While differences between groups continue to exist, it is no trivial development that the ultra-Orthodox coalesced sociologically into a “society of learners” and rejected other forms of ultra-Orthodoxy prevalent before the Holocaust (which indeed survived as legitimate options in Israel during the 1950s and 60s, and as less legitimate ones to this very day). As theorists such as Rogers Brubaker and Ernesto Laclau have asserted, the essence and nature of a group are a matter of constant contention, and its definitive formulation

(which can be changed from time to time) requires both power and hegemony (that is, the ability to contain dissenting interpretations relatively satisfied).³²

It can be suggested that a central mechanism that enabled the crystallization of non-Zionist Orthodoxies into a distinct, sociologically normative Haredism, is Haredi political representation in the state and vis-à-vis the state. Indeed, Agudat Israel itself became, over the course of the state's first decades, a framework that enabled the emergence of normative ultra-Orthodoxy (that would later become the society of learners). In this context, one can speak of the link that Agudath Israel created between army draft exemptions and normative Haredi behavior (such as studying in yeshiva). Accordingly, it can be argued that Haredi political representation was not a matter of representing the pre-state community before the state, but rather a top-down effort to create a sociologically distinct Israeli Haredism through this very political representation. Israeli Haredism was thus invented through its representation in the state apparatus.

A third aspect regarding the state's role in the formation of Israeli Haredism pertains to the education system. It was again Ernest Gellner who emphasized the importance of state schools in producing the consciousness essential to modern state masses.³³ In Gellner's view, education not only transfers knowledge but also creates a shared consciousness, separating students from their previous identities and re-inventing them as citizens. In this regard, it is crucial to point out that ultra-Orthodoxy does not maintain a private educational system but a state educational system. Paradoxically, it is only the emergence of the state that has allowed ultra-Orthodoxy the benefits that a state education system provides, granting it unprecedented control over the education process of ultra-Orthodox Jews. The fact that it is the ultra-Orthodox community, rather than the state, that provides state education, allows ultra-Orthodoxy both to isolate students from the state and to invent the consciousness it wishes for its members.

The roots of the arrangement grounding Haredi education do not lie, as commonly thought, in the pre-state "status quo" arrangement, for while the status quo did ensure educational autonomy for ultra-Orthodox, it did not establish that the state would fund and organize it. The "nationalization" (or better "statification") of the Haredi education system is rooted in the environment in the 1950s, especially in the State Education Law (1953), when it was decided that the state would fund, albeit not fully, the Haredi educational system.³⁴ This decision created a Haredi-state system that attained public status, public funding, and the ability for coercive power, while remaining autonomous in

determining the system's curricular contents. The unique combination of statism and cultural entrenchment (thanks to the very presence of state power) produced Haredi subjects and invented normative Haredism.

In conclusion, while it is accurate to recognize 1950s ultra-Orthodoxy as having adopted the model of cultural entrenchment (in Brown's apt formulation), one should not imagine this entrenchment as a clash between two distinct entities in the form of a pre-state Haredi community vs. a secular state. Rather, the state apparatus is what has transformed non-Zionist Orthodoxies into the very Israeli Haredism that we know today. Stated otherwise, Israeli Haredism is a statist project, and not a simple continuation of earlier forms of non-Zionist Orthodoxy. A brief comparison to American Haredism will illuminate this point. Although it can be argued that American Haredism, too, has undergone processes of unification in recent years, it is clear that over the course of the decades that followed the Holocaust, a unified normative Haredism was not produced—whether in the form of a society of learners or any other project. I suggest that these differences pertain to the strong presence of the state in the Israeli Haredi case and its absence in the American case.

THE EMERGENCE OF “PUBLIC ULTRA-ORTHODOXY”

The previous section established the central role of the state in forming Israeli Haredism. This section will discuss the ways in which the state currently operates within the well-formed Haredi society. In this context, it is worth noting a striking shift in the Haredi attitude toward the state. In Israel's early years, state power served as a resource through which Haredim secured their cultural entrenchment—ultimately positioning themselves as a social group with ambivalent relations to the state. Currently, however, we can discern a certain abandonment of the cultural entrenchment model and a turn to a more substantial Haredi presence in the Israeli public sphere. Contemporary Israeli Haredism, like other groups in Israel's conflictual public sphere, quarrels and struggles over the state and its nature. Rather than secluding itself within its own boundaries, it presents a particular vision of the state, cautiously contemplating what a Haredi State of Israel might look like.

The shift in Haredi attitudes toward greater involvement in the public sphere is evident in several surveys of Haredi public opinion. Two recent

surveys conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute—one more general and the other focused on tensions between “modern” and more traditional ultra-Orthodox—present a fairly similar picture.³⁵ An overwhelming majority of ultra-Orthodox across the denominational spectrum see themselves as an integral part of the right-wing coalition that has dominated Israeli politics, support illiberal public policies, and feel pride in their Israeli identity. At the same time, identification with a range of state institutions remains mixed, and while most do identify with the state, a significant dissenting minority (around 35–40%) do not. This could be interpreted as a coherent stance: “The positive attitude diminishes the further one moves from the emotional-identitarian sphere toward the formal-ideological one.”³⁶ Moreover, it may signify a Haredi aspiration to render the still relatively neutral state institutions more “Haredi” in nature.

We may interpret this as the emergence of what can be termed “public ultra-Orthodoxy,” which exhibits interest in the state as an arena of influence over the nature of Israeli public sphere.³⁷ In a previous article, I pointed out that the advent of “modern Haredism”—ultra-Orthodox who serve in the IDF, participate in the job market, and join academia—does not necessarily signify liberalization processes within Haredi society (as some may be inclined to believe). Rather, the new Haredism should be understood as manifesting a public ultra-Orthodoxy precisely as part of a more politicized form of religion—a phenomenon that should be evaluated according to a cross-national trend of religion assuming a more robust political role in formerly liberal public spheres.³⁸ In the ultra-Orthodox case (as opposed to the Religious-Zionist one), this is less about directly confronting secularism and more about adapting spheres previously seen as secular (such as universities or the military) to ultra-Orthodox forms of life. In other words, Haredi involvement in the public sphere does not represent the weakening of Haredi identity, but rather the broadening of Haredism in ways that challenge the fragile status quo which confined religion to non-political domains in the decades following World War II.³⁹

Analyzing public ultra-Orthodoxy as part of broader cross-national processes may help delineate its trajectory. In scholarly research on the turn of Orthodoxy toward “thick” public engagement, two paradigms can be discerned: the religious nationalist paradigm and the populist paradigm.⁴⁰ “Religious nationalism” tends to hew to the long view, arguing that liberal narratives have underestimated the role religion played in shaping modern political sphere and in producing modern masses.⁴¹ Furthermore, religion itself has been transformed as part of the creation of the “homo nationis” to the extent that

it now provides “post-secular nationalism”⁴² as the most encompassing identity of the political community.⁴³ The second paradigm, focused on the present populist moment, presents different emphasis but builds on insights from the first.⁴⁴ For example, Brubaker presents the appearance of “Christianism” as a populist identity characterizing the holy nation whose survival is threatened by outsiders.⁴⁵

In terms of contemporary public ultra-Orthodoxy, similar aspects can be identified. In an important essay, Yosef Miller noted that what is novel in current Haredism is not the turn to the right, since that also happened in the past; already in the 1990 “rabbits’ speech,” the Haredi leader Elazar Menachem Man Shach (1899–2001) refused to join Yitzhak Rabin’s leftist coalition, emphasizing the Haredi affinity with the traditionalist-right bloc. Rather, what is new is the nature of the Haredi alliance with the right. Whereas earlier Haredi right-wing positions were based not on an identification with the state but on a rejection of secular-liberal values, the current Haredi support for the right symbolizes a profound identification with the state in its right-wing form—and even criticizes the left for not identifying with it enough.⁴⁶ Thus, the “politicization” of ultra-Orthodoxy can be seen as part of a populist moment in which religious groups seek to influence the public sphere in a way that challenges its neutral liberal self-identity.

To demonstrate the unique place occupied by the state in the turn of Israeli Haredism to the right, a look at American Haredism—whose identity was not shaped through state power—can shed further light. American Haredism has also turned right in recent years, as clearly reflected in rates of support for Donald Trump.⁴⁷ However, the presence of American ultra-Orthodoxy in the American public sphere, despite being on the rise, can still not be compared to the Israeli Haredism’s interest in the Israeli public sphere. As Stolzenberg and Myers recently demonstrated, one of the central strategies of American Haredism for attaining political power has been exploiting the American structure separating religion and state in order to achieve a thick private, protected enclave for religion from which the state refrains to interfere.⁴⁸ Thus, it can be argued that American Haredism is not undergoing a process of becoming public ultra-Orthodoxy—but rather experiencing accelerated privatization that serves its independence and autonomy better.

In contrast, in nation-states like Israel that have a more interventionist structure than the United States—politically, economically, and culturally—the path for religions to attain public influence is precisely the opposite of privatization: they strive to gain a more robust public status. In other words,

religion is forced to struggle over the nation-state's shared public sphere, as one party among many vying for the state's resources (both material and symbolic). It cannot afford to create an alternative private sphere—as American Haredism does—since such a sphere would lack power versus the interventionist nation-state. Thus, Israeli Haredim's turn to the right, unlike that of American Haredism, can be seen as an aspiration to forge a more inherent connection between ultra-Orthodoxy and the State of Israel. Of course, not all ultra-Orthodox groups necessarily strive to confront secularism and fundamentally alter the Israeli public sphere's character; however, their increasing presence in the public sphere demonstrates that they do not deem themselves outsiders within it.

Against this background, we may understand the renewed interest shown by Israeli Haredism in religious legislation. The previous section noted that in the post-independence period, ultra-Orthodoxy did not evince much interest in the main instrument then available to mitigate tensions between Orthodoxy and the state—that is, religious legislation rendering the state more “Halakhic.” It is therefore striking that in recent years, ultra-Orthodox members of Knesset are quite willing to introduce religious legislation. The most prominent law Haredi legislators have tried to advance recently is the 2023 “Basic Law: Torah Study,” supported by all Haredi parties. This proposed law emerged from a specific political context—the fear that the Supreme Court would not allow the draft exemption for yeshiva students to continue (the fear has been materialized in October 2024, when the Supreme Court ruled that the exemption infringes upon equality). The proposed Basic Law, which is yet to pass, establishes that “(t)he State of Israel as a Jewish state sees supreme importance in encouraging Torah study and Torah students.”⁴⁹

There is nothing self-evident in the Haredi willingness to legislate such a law. The idea behind it was apparently that a “basic law”—a concept developed by none other than Carl Schmitt⁵⁰—would be a law the Supreme Court could not overturn.⁵¹ The turn to legislative means, however, demonstrates ultra-Orthodoxy's understanding that the only way to secure its interests is by formulating the values of the state as a whole—and not through cultural entrenchment. Here Israeli Haredism displays what Hirschl termed “constitutional theocracy”⁵²—that is, Orthodoxy working with the modern state's legislative apparatus. The emerging ultra-Orthodox preference to integrate into the state through legislation is far from being self-evident. Although this essay has attempted to downplay the importance of Haredi ideological opposition in favor of the operational logic of the community (which, as discussed, appears

as intertwined with the state), a complete adoption of the modern state signifies, in a sense, a fundamental shift in the ultra-Orthodox approach to “the political” itself. It is certainly possible to imagine an alternative ultra-Orthodoxy that rejects the modern state’s legislative apparatus, which excludes questions of truth and ultimate Telos, and instead focuses on procedures based on instrumental rationality.⁵³ Israeli Haredism’s willingness to operate through the state’s structure of secular power demonstrates how profoundly it has changed, becoming a public and state-oriented project.

Recent developments indicate an ironic reversal of Haredism’s and religious Zionism’s attitudes toward the state. Previously, it was religious Zionism that advanced the statist aspiration of Jewish Orthodoxy. However, current religious Zionism tends (in part) to be more and more committed to undermining state institutions, modeling itself on a romantic and mystical “general will” that challenges the state.⁵⁴ By contrast, it is now Israeli Haredism—perhaps due to the prominence it grants to Halakhah over ideology—that is willing to work through the state in the spirit of constitutional theocracy. Indeed, one can observe a certain revival of the idea of a “halakhic state” in Haredi thought, whereby Haredism strives to render the public sphere more Orthodox through the state’s legislative mechanisms.⁵⁵

SUMMARY: TOWARD HAREDI CITIZENSHIP

This essay argued that the relationship between Haredi society and the state cannot be conceptualized solely through terms such as “pragmatic rejectionism”—which emphasizes, on the one hand, a Haredi ideological inhibition (due to anti-Zionism) to accept the state, and, on the other hand, a tendency for pragmatism that can overcome ideological concerns for the sake of addressing temporary needs. Instead, this essay proposed that Israeli Haredism itself—unlike other forms of ultra-Orthodoxy, chiefly the American one—is a *statist* phenomenon. The essay examined two key moments in the “statification” of Haredim. The first was in the early years of the Israeli state, when the non-Zionist Orthodox communities were transformed into “Israeli Haredism” through adoption of the tools of state power. The second moment is seen in the shift occurring in recent years, when Israeli Haredism is becoming a public ultra-Orthodoxy that aspires to position religion as a political force that influences state institutions in the Israeli public sphere.

If the perspective offered here be correct, one may reevaluate the prevalent discourse around the relationship between Israeli Haredism and the state. Ultra-Orthodoxy is often portrayed as an “exilic” group that has never truly integrated into the state. One prominent discourse that highlights the presumed lack of statism among Haredism pertains to civic education, where ultra-Orthodox are seen as unable to be proper citizens due to their ideology.⁵⁶ In the past year, a minor scandal occurred over the fact that the civics textbook used in the Israeli Haredi education, “כְּאַזְרַח רַעֲנָן” (Ke-’Ezrah Ra’anan) contains assertions such as: state sovereignty contradicts divine sovereignty, equality and liberty values are anti-Jewish, the Supreme Court is anti-Haredi, Zionism is heresy, and there are essential differences between Jews and non-Jews.⁵⁷

However, it is important to emphasize that, despite the ideological tension between the Haredi perspective and liberal civic sensibilities, there are other non-ideological aspects in which Haredi society itself exhibits profound integration within the state, as discussed. Indeed, if exile be characterized by lack of a state, Israeli Haredism defies the model by already having a state. The point is that the Haredi understanding of the state is decidedly illiberal. In the early years of Israel, Israeli Haredism emerged as a thick communitarian phenomenon wholly dependent on the state but refusing to expand solidarity beyond its own community boundaries. In recent years, Haredi society explicitly links Orthodoxy to its particular interpretation of the state. In this context, it would be more accurate to speak—following Michal Kravel-Tovi’s insightful point about Religious-Zionism—of the emergence of “Haredi citizenship” as a defined discourse and praxis of involvement (rather than avoidance) of ultra-Orthodox in the state.⁵⁸

The changing nature of the Haredi-state relationship, in turn, calls for a more nuanced scholarly understanding of the varying ways in which different Orthodox visions “adopt” the state. In Israel’s early years, for example, an Orthodox vision emerged (which ultra-Orthodoxy then rejected) that was close in spirit to “constitutional theocracy”; that is, it sought to adapt the secular state’s constitution to Jewish law. By contrast, once it became clear that the state (which indeed never adopted a constitution) would not obey religious laws, this vision was replaced by two competing programs—the Haredi program of cultural entrenchment through state power, and the religious Zionist program of replacing the state institutions through a comprehensive cultural revolution. The empowerment of ultra-Orthodoxy, in quantitative and qualitative terms, over the past few decades has allowed it to reenter the public sphere now, thereby renewing the long-lost possibility of a fusion of interests between the Israeli

state and Jewish Orthodoxy—a possibility not seriously considered since the 1950s. It is too early to assess the trajectory of this possibility, but it is not too soon to consider the prospect of a living Haredi theocracy.

Notes

1. See Motti Inbari, *Jewish Radical Ultra-Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity, Zionism and Women's Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
2. For an elaborated history, see Yosef Fund, *Religious Proletarians Unite!: Poalei Agudat Israel—Ideology and Policy* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2018).
3. The most important analysis is Benjamin Brown, “The Haredim and the Jewish State,” in *When Judaism Meets the State* [in Hebrew], ed. Yedidia Stern et al. (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: The Israel Democracy Institute and Yediot Sfarim, 2015), 79–268. See also the classic account in Menachem Friedman, “The State of Israel as a Religious Dilemma” [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 3 (1990): 24–68.
4. See the “realist” option in Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz, *Religious Zionism and the Six Day War: From Realism to Messianism* (Milton: Routledge, 2018).
5. This is the more activist option of the late Religious Zionism. See Gideon Aran, *Kookism: The Roots of Gush Emunim, Jewish Settlers' Sub-Culture, Zionist Theology, and Contemporary Messianism* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2013).
6. See the established account of Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), chap. 4.
7. Carl Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004; first published in 1932).
8. Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, 9–12.
9. Schmitt, *Legality and Legitimacy*, 89–94.
10. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 15.
11. For an illuminating comparison see Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
12. Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 203; see an old, insightful analysis in Douglas Sturm, “Corporations, Constitutions, and Covenants on Forms of Human Relation and the Problem of Legitimacy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no. 3 (1973): 331–54.
13. Yoav Peled and Horit Herman Peled, *The Religionization of Israeli Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 11–12.
14. Brown, “The Haredim and the Jewish State,” 96–99.
15. I elaborate on this in the third part of this essay.
16. Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Am Oved and Israel Democracy Institute, 2017), 242–51.
17. Menachem Friedman, “And These Are the Annals of the Status Quo: Religion and State in Israel,” in *The Transition from Yishuv to State, 1947–1949: Continuity and*

- Change* [in Hebrew], ed. Varda Pilovsky (Haifa: Herzl Institute and University of Haifa, 1990), 47–80.
18. The only exemptions are the old Orthodox communities in Jerusalem. However, since the 1930s these communities formed themselves as an opposition to the Orthodox immigrants. On the old communities' separate formation into a group which refrains from taking part in Israeli political system, see Menachem Friedman, *Society and Religion: The Non-Zionist Orthodoxy in Eretz-Israel, 1918–1936* [in Hebrew with English summary] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1978).
 19. Asher Cohen, *The Prayer Shawl and the Flag: Religious Zionism and the Vision of a Torah State in Israel's Formative Years* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1998); Alexander Kaye, *The Invention of Jewish Theocracy: The Struggle for Legal Authority in Modern Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Asaf Yedidya, *Halakha and the Challenge of Israeli Sovereignty* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019).
 20. I examined all private bills submitted by ultra-Orthodox PMs (I also included the Poalei Agudath Israel party in the database, as some of their candidates ran under the Agudah banner in several campaigns) between the establishment of the state and 1973. In total, there were forty-two private bills submitted by Haredi PMs. The only religious issues discussed in them were pig farming, Shabbat observance, kashrut regulation, and regulating the market of religious instruments such as Mezuzos. I sincerely thank my friend Dr. Nir Kosti, an expert of public policy, for sharing his databases with me.
 21. Benjamin Brown, "From Political Isolationism to Cultural Entrenchment: Hazon Ish and the Formation of the Path of Israel's Haredi Community," in *Both Sides of the Bridge: Religion and State in the Early Years of Israel* [in Hebrew], ed. Mordechai Bar-On and Zvi Zamert (Jerusalem: The Ben Zvi Institute, 2002), 364–413.
 22. Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
 23. Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society: Sources, Trends and Processes* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), chap. 5; Gabriel A. Almond, Scott R. Appely, and Emanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 1; Nava Vasserman, *I Have Never Called My Wife: Marital Relations in Gur Hasidism* [in Hebrew] (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2015), chap. 1.
 24. Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State: Essays in Political Anthropology*, trans. Robert Hurley and Abe Stein (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 189–218.
 25. See Avi Bareli and Nir Kedar, "Mamlakhtiyut: The Zionist and Israeli Version of Republicanism," in *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Israel*, ed. Guy Ben Porat et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), 22–34.

26. Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 6–28.
27. Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society*, 9.
28. For an insightful analysis regarding some fundamental tensions within Agudah, see Alan Mittleman, *The Politics of Torah: The Jewish Political Tradition and the Founding of Agudat Israel* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996).
29. Benjamin Brown, “The Fundamental Components of Haredi Ideology (Hashkafah),” in *Contemporary Israeli Haredi Society*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nissim Leon (London: Routledge, 2023), 32–66.
30. I touched upon this topic in “Über die Neuerfindung der jüdischen Ultraorthodoxie in Israel,” in *Umbrüche: Neues und Altes aus der jüdischen Welt*, ed. Gisela Dachs (Berlin: Suhrkamp and Jüdischer Verlag), 192–210.
31. Yair Halevi located the formation of the society of learners in the 1960s. See “The ‘New Haredism’ Revolution in Israel in the 1970s” [in Hebrew] (PhD Diss., Bar Ilan University, 2019).
32. Rogers Brubaker, “Ethnicity without Groups,” *European Journal of Sociology* 43, no. 2 (2002): 163–89; Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 223–31.
33. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 26–38.
34. See Ehud (Udi) Spiegel, “*Talmud Torah is Equivalent to All*: The Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Education System for Boys in Jerusalem (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 2011), 39–40.
35. Lee Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodoxy Society on the Axis between Conservatism and Modernity* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israeli Democracy Institute, 2020), 211–58; Yedidia Z. Stern et al., *Jewish, Haredi, and Democratic: The State of Israel through Haredi Eyes* (Jerusalem: Israeli Democracy Institute, 2022), 86–89.
36. Stern et al., *Jewish, Haredi, and Democratic*, 115.
37. See the important contributions in the *JQR Blog*’s 2021 forum on “the Haredi moment,” published in three installments, which elaborates on the political-cultural change seen in ultra-Orthodoxy in recent years: <https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/resources/blog>.
38. Itamar Ben Ami, “Modern Haredim and the Contemporary Haredi Society: Beyond the Paradigm of Liberalization,” *Jewish Social Studies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 183–205.
39. The literature on the reappearance of religion in the public sphere is vast. For a recent philosophical introduction, see Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019), 75–109.
40. Both paradigms should not be confused with the term “political religion,” which originated in the 1950s as part of the conservative-liberal critique of modern totalitarianism.
41. See important analysis and taxonomy in J. Christopher Soper and Joel S. Fetzer, *Religion and Nationalism in Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 1.

42. I borrowed this term from Ernst van den Hemel, "Post-Secular Nationalism: The Dutch Turn to the Right and Cultural-Religious Reframing of Secularity," in *Social Imaginaries in a Globalizing World*, ed. Hans Alma and Guido Vanheeswijck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 247–64.
43. See the insightful methodological remarks of Jocelyne Cesari, *We God's People: Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in the World of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 9–27.
44. For an analysis that combines both approaches, see Philip S. Gorsky and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).
45. Rogers Brubaker, "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191–226.
46. Yosef Miller, "Shnei Musagim Shel Harediyut Yemanit," *De'ot* 104, September 2023.
47. "Jewish Americans in 2020," Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, 160–63.
48. Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
49. Aaron Rabinowitz and Michael Hauser Tov, "Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Party Proposes Basic Law to Exempt Haredim from Army Draft," *Haaretz*, July 25, 2023.
50. Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham and London: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 94–96.
51. Meanwhile, the Israeli supreme court exhibited its readiness to intervene in basic laws, in disqualifying Netanyahu's judicial reform in January 2024.
52. Ran Hirschl, *Constitutional Theocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
53. Sedgwick, *Traditionalism*, 205.
54. Shlomo Fischer, "Religious Zionism—Romantic Religious Nationalism in Israel," in *Routledge Handbook on Contemporary Israel*, ed. Guy Ben Porat et al. (London: Routledge, 2022), 258–73.
55. There are contemporary Haredi organizations pushing in this direction, most prominently Agudath Kdushat Zion.
56. See, for example, Yehoshua Pfeffer, "Autonomy Wars: Civics Education in the Haredi Education," in *Law and the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel* [in Hebrew], ed. Yoram Margalioth and Haim Zicherman (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2018), 459–91.
57. Or Kashti, "'Asur le-Yehudi le-hisafet 'al pi huke ha-medinah': Hatsazah Le-Sefer Limud Ha-'Ezrahut Ha-Movil Be-Israel," *Haaretz*, April 25, 2023.
58. Michal Kravel-Tovi, "Shouldering the Weight of the State: Religious Zionist Citizenship, National Responsibility, and Jewish Conversion in Israel," *PoLAR* 41, no. 1 (2018): 35–50.

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From a Negligible Minority to a Rising Force: Three Formative Events in Post-1977 Haredi History

by Benjamin Brown

I

INTRODUCTION

In the nascent stages of academic scholarship on Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel, a sense of bewilderment attended the very premise of researching this ostensibly peripheral and inconsequential community. A cursory examination of Israeli print newspapers from the 1940s until the 1970s reveals, at best, a tangential engagement with the Haredi community. This engagement manifested itself primarily in two distinct forms: folkloric accounts chronicling religious customs practiced within Haredi enclaves, particularly in connection with religious holidays (the *kapparot* rite, *sukkah* construction, the pre-Passover burning of bread, and *Lag Ba-Omer* bonfires), and newspaper articles dissecting the internal dynamics and national struggles of Haredi political parties. Only on rare occasions would stories concerning noteworthy religious leaders from the Haredi world also appear on the pages of these publications. The larger Haredi community, as a distinct socio-religious entity with its own norms, practices, and worldview, remained largely unexamined. Even official governmental surveys conspicuously omitted them, as religious affiliation rarely served as a significant statistical metric. According to one urban legend, the prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, acquiesced to the demand for an exemption of yeshiva students from military service due to his conviction that the Haredi community would naturally disappear within a generation or two, leaving behind a few isolated communities, confined to enclaves such as Jerusalem's Meah She'arim neighborhood.

The past few decades have demonstrated how errant this erstwhile assessment was. At present, every major Israeli media outlet maintains a correspondent dedicated to reporting on Haredi affairs; they consistently push issues pertaining to this community to the forefront of public discourse. Governmental statisticians now meticulously analyze this community, and numerous research institutions channel significant resources toward investigating this sector through scholarly inquiry and policy initiatives. Even in public consciousness, the Haredi community has emerged as a perennial subject of impassioned discussion and debate.

This burgeoning interest in the Haredi sector has also made its mark on the halls of academia. In recent years, the academic study of Haredi Judaism in Israel has blossomed into a fertile field of research, easily integrating into the broader discipline of Israel Studies. However, its origins lie outside that academic field.¹ As has often been observed, the scholarly interest in this marginalized group and its ideology was sparked by its growing visibility in the public sphere. The ensuing academic inquiries emerged as part of an effort to comprehend this group as it took its place as a new player on the stage.

In the upcoming pages, I will briefly survey the awakening of public interest in Haredi Judaism in both the academic and political spheres. Subsequently, I will direct my attention to three pivotal events that, in my opinion, *merit* recognition as significant milestones in any comprehensive analysis of the intricate dynamics that characterize the ultra-Orthodox populace in Israel and the concomitant scholarly discourse that has emerged in response to this fascinating societal phenomenon. While these events did not figure centrally in the annals of academic scholarship on the ultra-Orthodox sector (and certainly not in the historical narrative of ultra-Orthodox Jewry itself), their importance cannot be understated. The events in question are: Rabbi Shach's "Rabbits and Pigs" speech (1990), the so-called *Gezerot Netanyahu* ("Netanyahu's Evil Decrees") during the Sharon government (2003), and the upheaval at the *Yated Neeman* newspaper (2013). Subsequently, I shall explore why the COVID-19 crisis in Israel (2020–2022) possessed the latent potential to be included among this corpus of momentous incidents and then explain why it failed to achieve that level.

ENTER HAREDIM

Embrace of Academia

The genesis of Haredi studies can be traced to the pioneering scholarship of Jacob Katz and Moshe Samet on the historical development of Orthodox Judaism. Their research initially focused on the early development of Orthodox Judaism in Central and Western Europe, exploring the rifts between the Orthodox and Reform camps, primarily concerning issues pertaining to Jewish law and observance. It was only in a relatively obscure work, which for many years failed to garner a suitable audience, that Samet shifted his scholarly lens from the more distant historical research on European Orthodoxy to the more proximate historical inquiry into Israeli Haredi Judaism. This shift was epitomized in his 1979 publication, *The Conflict over the Institutionalization of Jewish Values in the State of Israel*,² which did not achieve wide circulation upon its release.

During that same period, another of Katz's students emerged onto the burgeoning academic landscape. This student, Menachem Friedman, is rightfully considered the founder of rigorous academic inquiry into the Israeli Haredi community. Friedman's entry into the field of Haredi studies was almost accidental. Once immersed in the subject matter, however, he became a trailblazing scholar, forging uncharted new paths into this nascent domain. His doctoral dissertation examined the struggles between Haredi and Zionist communities in Mandatory Palestine in the years between 1918 and 1936. This work was later published as a monograph in 1978, entitled, *Society and Religion: The Non-Zionist Orthodoxy in Eretz-Israel, 1918–1936*.³ However, even this book dealt with the Haredi community within the context of Mandatory Palestine, rather than the Haredi society that emerged after 1948 in the State of Israel. It was only many years later, in 1991, that Friedman published his study: *The Haredi Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*.⁴ This book, coupled with a series of articles, placed in full scholarly view the existence of a community that had hitherto been shrouded in obscurity. While institutionally rooted within the Department of Sociology at Bar-Ilan University, Friedman developed an innovative methodological approach that transcended disciplinary boundaries. He employed an analysis that situated contemporary Haredi sociological phenomena within their historical antecedents and evolutionary trajectories. Consequently, his scholarly oeuvre yielded insights that advanced our understanding of Haredi society's present realities and historical self-understanding; indeed, his elucidations into the community's intricate past proved no less seminal than his exegeses into its sociological dynamics and patterns.⁵

Over time, there has also been a growing interest in probing the religious, halakhic, and theological literary creativity emanating from the Haredi world. The pioneers who established the foundational pathways in this domain in the late twentieth century included Gershon Bacon, whose doctoral thesis sketched the incipient contours of the *Da'at Torah* doctrine—ascribing supreme authority to the Torah sages as public leaders—within pre-Holocaust Agudat Israel circles.⁶ Additionally, Aviezer Ravitzky probed the intricate ultra-Orthodox ideological stances vis-à-vis Zionism and the State of Israel,⁷ while Eliezer Schweid delved into Haredi theological responses to the Holocaust.⁸ Concomitantly, there has been a notable surge in scholarly inquiry into the later periods of Hasidism, a period hitherto largely neglected within scholarly circles,⁹ alongside a reinvigorated focus on the intellectual landscape of twentieth-century Lithuanian, or Litvish, Haredi thought,¹⁰ including the seminal Musar movement that profoundly shaped the ideological and spiritual contours of the Yeshiva world.¹¹ Additionally, new scholarly attention was subsequently directed toward the novel phenomenon of Sephardic ultra-Orthodoxy within the Israeli social milieu.¹² Nevertheless, the majority of researchers from this generational cohort remained individuals formally trained in the social sciences. As a result, academic studies excavating the un intellectual depths of Haredi religious literary creativity and endeavoring to decipher the intricacies of its ideological underpinnings remained, to a certain extent, on the periphery of the field's overarching scholarly landscape, that kept bearing a social-scientific emphasis.

Growing Impact on National Politics

The timing of this awakened scholarly interest in these ultra-Orthodox communities was far from coincidental. A constellation of catalyzing events precipitated transformations within this societal sphere, which reverberated profoundly across the Israeli landscape as a whole—events that propelled the ultra-Orthodox squarely into the center of national legal and political discourse. In 1972, the Langer Controversy (known in Israel as “the Brother and Sister Affair”) erupted: an ad hoc rabbinical court headed by then Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Goren, ruled that siblings Miriam and Hanoch Langer were not halakhic bastards (*mamzerim*) as previously adjudicated by the State Rabbinical Court, thereby permitting them to marry their chosen partners. This controversial ruling sparked unexpectedly passionate protests among the ultra-Orthodox, who alleged that the Chief Rabbi had bent the

Jewish religious legal system to accommodate to the perceived demands of Prime Minister Golda Meir in a quid pro quo exchange for his appointment.¹³

However, as Yair Halevy recently demonstrated in his doctoral thesis, this protest also heralded a seminal inflection point in the history of ultra-Orthodox Judaism: for the first time, Rabbi Elazar Menahem Shach (1899–2001), head of the Ponevezh Yeshiva, emerged as the preeminent leader of the Litvish (non-Hasidic) community, charting its ideological course for decades to come.¹⁴ Rabbi Shach's leadership pushed toward increased insularity and dissociation from the State and the Zionist enterprise, coupled with the consolidation of deference to the authority of the *Gdolim* (eminent Torah scholars) within the Haredi world.

While such a stance had already characterized some Haredi leaders in the nascent state's earliest decades, it now became the dominant path even among the broader ultra-Orthodox public. In contrast to the first generation raised in the State of Israel (*Dor Ha-Medinah*), still reeling from the trauma of the Holocaust, and experiencing firsthand the perceived miracle of the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty, the subsequent generation was nurtured within the insular orbit of the revitalized Yeshiva world; their worldview was molded by the ideological currents emanating from their rabbinic leaders. The Langer Affair functioned as a catalyst, bringing to the fore preexisting societal tensions that had long simmered beneath the surface.

Several years after that affair, in 1977, a second pivotal development unfolded. On May 17 of that year, the event known as “the Overturning” (*Mahapakh*) occurred, bringing the Likud Party to power.¹⁵ For the first time since 1952, the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Israel party became an official member of the ruling government coalition, which allowed it to secure substantial commitments guaranteed in the coalition agreements. Among them was the arrangement known as *Torato Umanuto* (Torah study is their profession) arrangement whereby Haredi youth engaged in religious studies would receive an exemption from military service from the Minister of Defense—an arrangement that not only facilitated the de facto blanket release of all ultra-Orthodox youth from military service but also permitted and even incentivized extended periods of religious study without workforce integration, thereby rendering this sector increasingly reliant on state subsidies. Agudat Israel refused to accept ministerial posts in order to circumvent any ministerial action that might be antithetical to Halakhah or Haredi ideology. However, an Aguda Knesset member chaired the influential Finance Committee in the Knesset, a position of wide-ranging leverage. Henceforth, Agudat Israel emerged as the indispensable

kingmaker in the formation of successive coalition governments. This development catalyzed an expansion of the ranks of permanent ultra-Orthodox Torah students, fostering greater insularity while concomitantly entrenching their socio-political influence in shaping the national landscape.

The Shas movement attained a similar status upon its ascent to the national political stage following the elections for the eleventh Knesset (1984), expanding the influence wielded by the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox public within both the intra-Haredi and broader Israeli political spheres. Shas, under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (1920–2013), initially acquiesced to Rabbi Shach's overarching hegemony as the paramount rabbinic authority presiding over the collective Haredi sector. However, a pivotal schism between the two rabbinic leaders emerged, beginning in 1990 during the period known as the "Dirty Trick" affair (further elaborated upon below), and culminating in a definitive rupture in 1992 when Shas joined a left-wing ruling coalition. Following the teachings of Rabbi Shach, the ultra-Orthodox factions exhibited a preference for right-wing Likud-led governments over a left-wing parties, which historically, and to this day, have been less sympathetic to the agenda and interests of religious parties.¹⁶ As the political influence of the ultra-Orthodox ascended, so too did the opposition—and even animosity—towards them. Many within the secular and national-religious publics grew embittered by what they perceived as excessive and undue ultra-Orthodox influence. Concomitant with the rapid demographic expansion of the Haredi population, opposition to state subsidies allocated to this group, their absence from the workforce, and predominantly, their exemption from military conscription, garnered increasing momentum. Nearly every electoral cycle witnessed the emergence of a political party whose primary platform centered on a negative campaign directed towards Haredi citizens (or, more bluntly, outright hostility toward them). These campaigns reliably secured no fewer than six parliamentary seats.

Concurrently, intellectual curiosity towards the Haredim burgeoned, with segments of the broader public seeking a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this insular society, beyond superficial media depictions. The emergent field of academic study dedicated to ultra-Orthodox Judaism arose to address this lacuna, coupled with policymakers' growing impetus to incorporate the ultra-Orthodox populace into their strategic deliberations and policy formulations. Gradually, the Haredim underwent a transition from an ostensibly marginal minority scarcely meriting consideration to an ascendant force within Israeli society. This led many scholarly and lay observers to attempt

to elucidate the makeup and orientation of these communities as they sought to reveal the underlying ideological tenets and socio-cultural paradigms that governed their existence.

Notwithstanding their conservatism, the Haredim are a dynamic movement. Even in the relatively short period in which they have been playing an important role in the history of Israel and been subjected to intense scholarly scrutiny, they have participated in a number of moments that enable us to understand them in a more nuanced way. Three such events merit, in my opinion, special attention, and recognition as significant milestones in their history. Even if the Haredim themselves may not acknowledge these events as formative in their history, and even if scholarly research regards them as unexceptional, a close examination of them may reveal several important aspects of their internal dynamism.

THREE FORMATIVE MOMENTS

*The Rabbits and Pigs Speech (1990)*¹⁷

This event transpired amidst the tumultuous milieu that yielded what is known in Israeli history as the “Dirty Trick.” Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s government had been toppled, and in the effort to form a new government, his rival, Shimon Peres, relied on the support of the Haredi members of the Knesset. Consequently, all eyes were fixated upon Rabbi Shach, who served as both the preeminent rabbinical authority of the Degel Ha-Torah party (a splinter faction from Agudat Israel) and was concurrently regarded as the spiritual guide of the Shas party. Political operatives organized a mass rally at Yad Eliyahu Stadium in Tel Aviv, where the great rabbi was anticipated to announce his decision. Tensions mounted as the capacious hall filled with admirers and journalists, both local and international. Rabbi Shach ascended the podium and delivered an impassioned talk, contending that the Torah, and no other factor, constitutes the immutable bedrock of Jewish national identity and existence. The secular public’s estrangement from tradition therefore posed an existential threat to this collective identity. He reserved particular vitriol for the kibbutzim, the embodiment of ideological secularism, where, he alleged, “they raise rabbits and pigs.” Only peripherally did he later clarify that he meant to suggest no political alliance with the Left was possible.

Those well versed in the ideological positions of Rabbi Shach readily discerned this speech as a reaffirmation of recurrent themes, previously elucidated in his public addresses. Yet, the secular public, hitherto unexposed to such perspectives, reacted with profound consternation. Responses ranged from outright dismissal to outrage, though some posited that his stance merited serious engagement. Although far from a systematic philosopher and certainly lacking in oratorical eloquence, Rabbi Shach's speech nonetheless served as the inaugural encounter for the non-Haredi public with a perspective that was radically divergent from the prevailing ideological discourse of Israel in the 1980s. It appears that this event served as a catalyst, sparking the realization that Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy constituted a bona fide counterculture, thus transcending its image merely as an economic burden rather than a serious ideological challenge.

*Netanyahu's Evil Decrees (2003)*¹⁸

Upon the formation of the second government of Ariel Sharon in 2001, Benjamin Netanyahu was appointed as minister of finance. He inherited an Israeli economy teetering precariously on the precipice of a major crisis. He promptly embarked on a series of economic measures, most notably implementing substantial reductions in transfer payments, and instituting stringent eligibility criteria for national insurance entitlements. These measures were strategically designed to increase labor force participation while concomitantly mitigating dependency upon state assistance.

The ultra-Orthodox community voiced its vehement opposition; Meir Porush, a member of the Knesset representing the United Torah Judaism party (a new political bloc comprising two factions—Agudat Israel and Degel Ha-Torah) even resorted to staging a hunger strike outside the prime minister's office.¹⁹ Nonetheless, one matter remained clear to the ultra-Orthodox: the finance minister's motives were purely economic. Throughout his extensive political career, Netanyahu refrained from uttering a single anti-Haredi statement, even as an inadvertent slip of the tongue or in the midst of a heated confrontation. Furthermore, his economic policies, which the Haredim shortly labeled *Gezeirot Netanyahu* ("Netanyahu's Evil Decrees"), were comprehensive in scope and not specifically designed to target the ultra-Orthodox, albeit they were the principal demographic adversely impacted by said measures. The result of the policies was swift: a marked increase in the integration rate of the ultra-Orthodox into the labor market within a relatively short time frame.

Subsequently, during his later tenure as prime minister, Netanyahu, under pressure from the Haredi parties, reinstated a significant portion of the entitlements, and ultra-Orthodox integration into the labor market decelerated moderately. Nonetheless, the overarching lesson that emerges from this sequence of events remains clear: the Haredi community exhibits a readiness to accommodate and adjust (albeit outwardly professing a sense of coercion), provided the impetus for such measures is perceived as rooted in genuine necessity rather than an agenda aimed at fundamentally altering their traditional way of life or undermining their interests. The distinction between the two is often dependent on the rhetoric of the change promoters, as well as their image in the eyes of the Haredim. This flexibility is particularly pronounced if the measures implemented are not exclusively targeted at the ultra-Orthodox and are free of antagonistic rhetorical undertones. It seems this lesson eluded politicians eager to impress constituents with tales of Haredi “capitulation.”

Upheaval at Yated Neeman (2012)²⁰

Since its founding in 1985, this Litvish ultra-Orthodox newspaper served as a bastion of doctrinal orthodoxy, giving voice to what it saw as the authentic Haredi ideology as articulated by Rabbi Shach.²¹ Implicit in its very nomenclature, the Hebrew word *yated* (peg), also subtly alludes to the acronym of *Yoman Da'at Torah* (approximately: The Daily Chronicle of Torah View), suggesting that the paper carried the weight of leading rabbinic authorities. Its cultural significance transcended that of a mere periodical. This slender yet trenchant newspaper wielded a potent ideological cudgel, sparing neither the secular public nor the religious Zionist sector, and notably also those within the ultra-Orthodox fold whose adherence to the ideological tenets of the *Gedol Ha-dor* (supreme sage of the generation) was deemed insufficient. During the tenure of Rabbi Shach, a considerable number of the faithful fell, in his view, into this latter camp of ideological dissidents. Yet, the paper's admonitions scarcely aroused the ire of secular or nationalist-religious Jews, who largely ignored it. Rather, it was the ultra-Orthodox dissenters who did not march in lockstep who were the primary targets of its censure. Following Rabbi Shach's gradual retreat from leadership around 1995, the editorial leadership of *Yated* strategically threw its weight behind Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (1910–2012), favoring his leadership over that of the more moderate Rabbi Aharon Leib Shteinman (1914–2017). This may have served as a pivotal factor in the former's ascendancy within the Haredi world.

As the summer of 2012 unfurled, Rabbi Elyashiv was hospitalized and ultimately succumbed to his terminal illness. During these hectic days, Shimon Glick, a businessman and confidant of Rabbi Shteinman, executed a bold move, gaining control of the newspaper by being appointed chairman of its parent nonprofit organizational structure. Glick removed the mythological editor, Natan Zev (Nati) Grossman, and installed a fresh editorial cadre more aligned with his vision. Grossman, who wished to enthrone Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach (1931–2018), a more radical figure, embarked on an unprecedented legal battle. This endeavor compelled him to seek redress in the secular courts of the State of Israel, a move that diverged markedly from customary communal arbitration practices in the Haredi world.²² This pivotal moment was further catalyzed by a seminal public letter penned by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky (1928–2022), a preeminent luminary within the Haredi Litvish sector, who issued an unequivocal affirmation of Rabbi Shteinman’s leadership, whom he designated as the paramount sage of their generation.²³ This constellation of events proved to be a veritable watershed in the intricate power dynamics governing the Litvish ultra-Orthodox sector.

This watershed moment, disruptive in its departure from established norms, upended the customary trajectory observed within Haredi circles, wherein the “more orthodox” and fervent segment traditionally assumes the role of aggressor, while their more moderate counterparts adopt a defensive posture. While infrequent, the inversion of these roles imbued this episode with profound significance, heralding a shift in the prevailing communal ethos.

The newly dismissed *Yated Neeman* staff founded a new newspaper, *Ha-Peles*, targeted, like its predecessor, at a Litvish non-Hasidic Haredi readership, representing Rabbi Auerbach’s conservative line. The latter was now recognized as the head of a new opposition camp, *Ha-Peleg Ha-Yerushalmi* (“the Jerusalem Faction”). The majority of the community nominally remained under the leadership of Rabbi Shteinman, bolstered by the active endorsement of Rabbi Kanievsky. They launched an offensive against the defectors, imposing a range of social sanctions upon them, and in so doing, confining them to an interminable defensive posture until their influence gradually dissipated into irrelevance.

This episode served as a precedent-setting event, a stark deviation from the established Haredi socio-cultural ethos. The conventional roles of conservative forces taking the offensive posture and moderates assuming a defensive stance were reversed. Such aberrations from the entrenched dynamic are rare occurrences. Yet, a precedent remains a precedent, notwithstanding its

anomalous nature, and its reverberations continue to linger, hinting at a paradigm shift within the prevailing socio-cultural ethos of Litvish ultra-Orthodoxy.

A NON-FORMATIVE MOMENT: THE COVID-19 CRISIS

And what of the COVID-19 crisis in Israel (2020–2022),²⁴ which shocked Haredi society, particularly in its initial stages? Indeed, as the pandemic initially afflicted the populations of Israel and the United States, disproportionately impacting the Haredi community, a prevalent perception emerged that this group would be compelled to undergo a profound process of introspection and soul-searching, given the inordinate toll exacted upon it.

In Israel, the ultra-Orthodox community's response to the pandemic swiftly emerged as one of the catalyzing factors that exacerbated the crisis and served as a key factor in determining its trajectory. Moreover, even in the United States, where the ultra-Orthodox represent a far smaller percentage of the overall population, their response constituted one of the foremost challenges vexing authorities in the greater New York metropolitan area as they grappled to contain the crisis. Without delving into granular specifics, it can be broadly stated that during the initial two waves of the pandemic, an analysis of morbidity rates revealed a concerning trend: adherence to coronavirus protocols within the ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities was demonstrably lower compared to the rest of the Israeli population and consequently, these demographics suffered from elevated morbidity rates. At one juncture, it was reported that among elderly patients (aged sixty-five and over), ultra-Orthodox individuals comprised over fifty percent of fatalities.²⁵ Shockingly, within this elderly ultra-Orthodox demographic, one out of every seventy-three individuals succumbed to the disease—a mortality rate four times higher than that of the general Jewish population in Israel.²⁶ Meanwhile, in the United States, the morbidity rate reached such alarming heights that it even deeply unsettled the ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel. This pandemic arguably triggered not only a public health crisis of severe proportions but also catalyzed a moral reckoning within the ultra-Orthodox community regarding its socio-religious praxis.

The high rates of infection could be attributed to several factors. On one hand, there were objective challenges to adhering to the protocols: this is a community where the majority have large families and reside in small residences where they are in close contact with one another. Moreover, many children

attend schools with dormitory facilities (thus slightly mitigating household crowding). On the other hand, subjective challenges of a socio-cultural nature were also present: the ultra-Orthodox constitute a conservative community that looks askance at any attempt to alter its lifestyle. It is accustomed to an exceptionally tight-knit communal existence, premised on daily ritual convenings (for prayer), frequent social interactions, and large gatherings. Moreover, its level of awareness regarding the severity of the pandemic—at least during the initial stages—was significantly lower due to its insularity and limited access to up-to-date communication channels (e.g., social media) reporting on critical health information. Throughout the crisis, the positions espoused by the ultra-Orthodox rabbinic leadership also played a critical role. Haredi leaders took on themselves to issue directives that only marginally, if at all, aligned with those of the Ministry of Health and the medical establishment.²⁷

By way of illustration, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky penned a letter instructing all educational institutions to remain open, ignoring the Ministry of Health protocols. In contrast, Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, then regarded as the second most prominent Torah authority in the Litvish sector, issued a directive to adhere to all government guidelines, shuttered the *Ponevezh Yeshiva* under his leadership, and even instructed *Yated Neeman* to abstain from publishing the letter of the *Gedol Ha-dor*.²⁸ Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to establish direct contact with Rabbi Kanievsky were not successful, resulting in communication solely with the sage's grandson, the influential Ya'akov (Yanki) Kanievsky. The latter committed to persuading his grandfather to mandate the closure of all Haredi educational institutions. However, the efficacy of this persuasion proved to be considerably limited in its scope and impact.

The response of the Hasidic leadership to the vicissitudes of the COVID-19 pandemic was marked by an array of ever-evolving approaches. In the initial wave, many among the Hasidic rabbinical elite instructed their adherents to exhibit, at the very least, a modicum of deference to official health guidelines, or, at the very minimum, to avoid outright defiance. However, as subsequent waves emerged, the influence of more permissive and dismissive voices became increasingly pronounced. From the second wave onward, a brazen disregard for governmental directives led to the unfettered reopening of all of their educational institutions. This act of defiance would later prove to have been undertaken with near total impunity, unburdened by legal or social consequences.

Of particular note, Rabbi Baruch M.Y. Shochet, the Rebbe of Karlin-Stolin, emerged as a singular voice advocating for strict obedience to the

official protocols mandated by the Israeli Ministry of Health. The Gerer Rebbe, Rabbi Ya'akov A. Alter, also largely argued for strict adherence to official protocols throughout the greater portion of this tumultuous period (he too fell ill with the virus in August 2021). The Belz Hasidic sect maintained an outward facade of strict compliance with state mandates, yet an implicit understanding pervaded the faithful that they could revert to their established routines irrespective of potential health ramifications (their Rebbe, Rabbi Yissakhar Dov Rokeach, fell ill in October 2020, necessitating clandestine medical treatment in his residence).

Meanwhile, within the Sephardic Haredi leadership, there existed a propensity to adhere to official protocols. Yet even within this community, public compliance was not uniformly observed, with certain lower-ranking rabbis demonstrating a less stringent stance towards compliance. This dynamic reflects the various tensions and stances that characterized the response in the decentralized Haredi communities to an unprecedented crisis that challenged fundamental communal norms and values.

In fact, one of the central and defining dilemmas that confronted the Haredi community was the inherent tension between the narrower confines of pure halakhic deliberations and the broader existential concerns regarding the preservation of the communities. The narrow legal argument would argue that the sanctity of human life is of paramount halakhic concern (*pikuah nefesh*). This principle would ostensibly mandate the cessation of communal prayers, the suspension of public gatherings, and stringent adherence to all social distancing protocols. However, the all-encompassing value ascribed to communal holism favored the continuance of such practices, even while necessitating deviations from deep-rooted halakhic principles that enshrine the paramount importance of the preservation of life. Intriguingly, despite the Haredi self-perception of being inextricably bound to an uncompromising observance of Halakah, the exigencies of this period led to the principle of communal preservation taking precedence in most instances. Some sought to reconcile this seeming dichotomy by embracing a stance of COVID denialism, or at the very least, skepticism. Others straightforwardly argued that from the perspective of the Haredi community, the government's demands encroached upon core religious tenets and social structures, thereby exceeding the scope of acceptable compromises. This critique laid bare the intrinsic tension between strictly held religious precepts and the pragmatic realities of sustaining a thriving, cohesive community.

Nonetheless, the divergent routes charted by the Haredi communities and their increasing detachment from mainstream society became more

pronounced as the pandemic unfolded. The media maintained an unrelenting focus on the issue, repeatedly thrusting the public conduct of the Haredim during the crisis into the blinding glare of the national spotlight. At various critical junctures, the longstanding animosities harbored against Haredim by other sectors of Israeli society were reignited, with criticism and censure directed towards them from manifold quarters. Many within the media and general public expressed what they saw as the abject failure of the Haredi leadership and began to articulate the hope that the Haredi populace would commence the process of reassessing its obligation to obey the directives of its religious leadership (known as *Da'at Torah*).²⁹

A senior preacher within the American Haredi community, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Jacobson, asserted in a striking interview that the Haredim “are afraid to look reality straight in the face and tell the truth; if we made a mistake, then we made a mistake.”³⁰ Even Israel’s ultra-Orthodox Interior Minister, Aryeh Deri, declared that the Haredi public was compelled to engage in a period of *heshbon nefesh* (soul searching) in the wake of these events.³¹ However, within the Haredi community itself, few felt compelled to engage in such introspection, and those who did, hailed from the more “modern” fringes of Haredi society.³²

The passage of time witnessed a notable shift in the pronouncements of Rabbi Gershon Edelstein. Initially, he publicly expressed dissent against Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky’s mandate to reopen the Haredi primary schools for boys.³³ However, he subsequently altered his stance and proceeded to authorize the reopening of all Haredi educational institutions, overtly contravening official government directives.³⁴ In due course, Deri also retracted his call for introspection, asserting that “[the spread of the virus] began in the Haredi sector for objective reasons, they do not bear an iota of blame.”³⁵ This dynamic underscored the profound dissonance between the Haredi worldview and that of the broader society, exacerbating preexisting fissures and sowing further seeds of alienation and mutual mistrust.

Another salient lesson gleaned by the Haredi community pertains to the perceived fragility and limitations of state enforcement mechanisms. Indeed, while efforts were undertaken to apply governmental COVID-19 mandates to Haredi educational institutions, these endeavors proved sporadic and ultimately ineffectual. A crucial realization dawned upon the Haredi community—law enforcement agencies are dreadfully impaired in contending with large coordinated contingents of young students and their teachers, most of whom are stubbornly opposed to governmental orders. During this period, law enforcement

avoided actions whose optics were not conducive to favorable public perception, and when facing the potential for violent confrontation, they often chose the path of least resistance: abstention. This prudential inaction stemmed from an acute awareness that any forcible attempts at compliance could catalyze broader conflagrations whose ramifications would extend well beyond the immediate theater of conflict. Prudence, therefore, dictated a judicious embrace of pragmatic restraint by police. This tacit acknowledgment of the state's impotence, which was never overtly articulated, likely emboldened the Haredi community's resolve in bracing for future confrontations vis-a-vis state institutions, especially concerning the contentious issue of military enlistment of yeshiva students. Their newfound awareness drew attention to their ability to defy state authority through intransigence borne of an unshakeable conviction in the righteousness of the cause.

When the pandemic subsided, Israeli society exhibited a surprisingly swift return to its established rhythms. However, during this period of transition, a curious phenomenon emerged: a resounding call, emanating specifically from within the non-Haredi populace, for an inner introspection regarding the events that had just transpired. A growing sentiment took root that the precautionary measures implemented were disproportionately stringent, with many asserting that the economic and psychological toll exacted by these measures outweighed the health risks associated with a broader spread of the disease.

While outright COVID-19 deniers failed to sway public opinion, partly due to their reliance on dubious conspiracy theories, COVID-19 skeptics—those who harbored reservations from the outset regarding the wisdom of precautionary government measures—gradually gained legitimacy and even witnessed a swelling of public support. During this phase, the Haredim were no longer castigated as adversaries of public order and health. Few recalled their previous acts of defiance. Within the insular confines of the Haredi enclaves themselves, calls for introspection and self-examination were conspicuously absent from the chorus; instead, there was a notable appreciation for the prescience of Torah sages who were now perceived as having foreseen all that would unfold.

In summation, what was initially presumed by many observers to be a pivotal societal juncture, whereby the Haredim might reconsider fundamental perspectives and lifestyles, ultimately devolved into a nonevent. Each side hastily reasserted its preexisting entrenched positions and swiftly reverted to the familiar routines and patterns it favored, as if the intervening crisis were but a passing aberration. Within the Haredi community itself, dissenting voices that

had arisen during the throes of the pandemic largely fell silent once more, with the mainstream narrative viewing COVID-19 as a transient or inconsequential phenomenon. The pandemic thus failed to provoke any substantive reevaluation or shift in longstanding theological tenets or modes of social organization. The forces of stasis and deeply rooted tradition ultimately proved triumphant over the ephemeral tumult of an unprecedented global upheaval.

A BRIEF CONCLUSION

Thus, we remain with the three decisive events delineated above: the “rabbits and pigs speech,” “Netanyahu’s Evil Decrees,” and the upheaval at the *Yated Neeman* newspaper. Two of these pivotal historical episodes are directly connected to the Litvish leadership. One could argue that in focusing on these events, I am neglecting the contributions and experiences of the other two principal sectors of Haredi society—the Hasidim and the Sephardim. Yet, within Haredi society, both historically and until the present day, the Litvish subgroup occupies a unique position as the ideological standard bearer. It therefore appears that these three events serve as illuminating reflections of the fundamental dynamics that characterize Haredi society and its multifaceted position within the broader Israeli society. While the Haredi community poses an intellectual challenge to the hegemonic secular-liberal cultural milieu, it simultaneously exhibits pragmatism in response to practical constraints. On rare occasions, it even demonstrates a willingness to confront extremist elements within its own ranks.

These three overarching conclusions will continue to accompany both Israeli societies, the general and the Haredi, as they continue on their intertwined and lengthy path forward. These seismic events described in this paper starkly expose underlying fissures and tensions, and serve as poignant reminders of the deep ideological and existential divides that must be navigated as these parallel societal narratives forge ahead into an uncertain future.

Notes

1. On academic scholarly studies of Haredi Judaism (from a critical, largely dissenting perspective), see: Malachi Kranzler, “Hitpathut ha-ḥaredologia: Megamot u-meafyenim be-ḥeker ha-ḥaredim be-Yisra’el” [Development of Haredology: Trends and Characteristics in the Study of Haredim in Israel] (PhD diss., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2016). In this article the terms Haredi and ultra-Orthodox will be used interchangeably.
2. Moshe Samet, *Ha-konflikt odot missud ‘erkhe ha-Yahadut bi-medinat Yisra’el* [The Conflict over the Institutionalization of Jewish Values in the State of Israel] (Jerusalem: Department of Sociology, Hebrew University, 1979).
3. Menachem Friedman, *Ḥevrah ve-dat: Ha-Ortodoksiyah ha-lo-tsiyonit be-Eretz-Yisra’el 1918–1936* [Society and Religion: The Non-Zionist Orthodoxy in Eretz-Israel, 1918–1936] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1977).
4. Menachem Friedman, *Ha-ḥevrah ha-ḥaredit: Mekorot, megamot ve-tahalikhim* [The Haredi Society: Sources, Trends, and Processes] (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991).
5. On Friedman’s contribution to sociological scholarship, see: Nissim Leon and Eliav Taub, “Menachem Friedman and the Historical Sociology of the Haredi Society and Its Leaders” [in Hebrew], in *Ha-Gedolim: Ishim she-’Itsvu et penei ha-Yahadut ha-haredit Be-Yisrael* [The Gdolim: Leaders who Shaped the Israel Haredi Jewry], ed. Nissim Leon and Benjamin Brown (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Magnes Press, 2017), 834–54. On his contribution to the scholarship of Haredi Judaism more generally: Leon and Brown, *Ha-Gdolim*, 4–7.
6. Gershon C. Bacon, “Agudath Israel in Poland 1916–1939: An Orthodox Jewish Response to the Challenge of Modernity” (PhD diss., University of Columbia, 1979). Bacon later adapted his thesis into a published work: Gershon C. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition: Agudath Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem: Center for Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry and Magnes Press, 1996).
7. Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
8. Eliezer Schweid, *Ben ḥurban li-yeshuḥah: Teguvot shel hagut ḥaredit la-Shoah bi-zemanah* [Between Destruction and Salvation: Contemporaneous Reaction of Haredi Thought to the Holocaust] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publishing House, 1994).
9. Scholarship on Hasidism predominantly concentrated on the movement’s nascent stages, particularly up to 1815, leaving the examination of later Hasidic developments to the realm of folklore and Maskilic literature. However, the groundbreaking works of scholars such as Raphael Mahler, Mendel Piekartz, David Assaf, and others, established the foundations for rigorous academic inquiry into the Hasidism of the

- nineteenth and twentieth centuries, opening new avenues for scholarly exploration and analysis.
10. Lawrence Kaplan has yet to produce a comprehensive monograph on the subject. However, three of his articles provide valuable insights into significant aspects of later Lithuanian thought. Hopefully, these articles will be compiled into a single volume in the future, see: Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Rabbi Isaac Hutner's 'Daat Torah Perspective' on the Holocaust: A Critical Analysis," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 18, no. 3 (1980): 235–48; Kaplan, "Daas Torah: a Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, ed. Moshe Sokol (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 1–60; Kaplan, "The Ḥazon Ish: Haredi Critic of Traditional Orthodoxy," in *The Uses of Tradition, Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 145–73.
 11. In this subgenre, the research conducted by Immanuel Etkes, Tamar Ross, Mordechai Pachter, and Hillel Goldberg has been particularly significant and influential in shaping later scholarship.
 12. Menachem Friedman, a trailblazer in this field as well, devoted a chapter of his seminal work to examining the intricacies and dynamics of this community: *Ha-ḥevrah ha-ḥaredit*, 175–85. The groundbreaking work of scholars such as Shlomo Deshen, Yoav Peled, Aaron Willis, Nissim Leon, and others laid the crucial foundations in this field of study. Their pioneering research has established the path for significant advancements and further developments in the twentieth century, the examination of which lies beyond the scope of the current review.
 13. Shifra Mishlov, "Manhigut datit no'ezet u-mehireha: Ha-peg'i'ah be-ma'amado hatsiburi shel ha-Rav Shlomo Goren be-'ikvot parashat ha-aḥ ve-ha-aḥot" [A Bold Religious Leadership: The Damage to Rabbi Goren's Public Status Following the Brother and Sister Affair], in *Manhigut ve-hanhagah* (Proceedings of the 5th Amadot Conference), ed. Moshe Reḥimi (Elkanah: Orot Yisrael, 2013), 165–79; Aviad T. Hollander, "Neemanut kefulah la-halakhah ve-la-Medinah: Pesikato shel ha-Rav Goren ke-mikreh boḥan" [Dual Loyalty to Jewish Law and the Jewish State: Rabbi Goren's Halakhic Decision Making as a Case Study], *Hakirah* 15 (2015): 3–34.
 14. Yair Halevy, "Mahapekhat ha-ḥarediyut ha-ḥadashah bi-shnot ha-shiv'eim" [The "New Haredism" Revolution in Israel in the 1970s] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2019). The forthcoming publication of this brilliant work in book format is eagerly awaited.
 15. Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (New York: Alfred and Knopf, 2010), 835–38.
 16. Ian S. Lustick, "The Political Legacy of *de Facto* Annexation: Rabin, the Territories and the Regime Crisis in Israel," in *Israel at the Crossroads: The Challenge of Peace*, ed. Efraim Karsh and Gregory Mahler (London: British Academic Press, 1994), 100–1;

- Avishai Ben Haim, "Ish 'ha-haskafah ha-tehorah': Ha-Rav El'azar Menaḥem Shach" [The Man of "Pure Ideology": Rabbi El'azar Menaḥem Shach], in *Ha-Gedolim: Ishim she-Itsvu et penei ha-Yahadut ha-ḥaredit Be-Yisrael*, ed. Benjamin Brown and Nissim Leon (Jerusalem: Van Lear and Magnes, 2017), 652–53.
17. Regarding this speech: Avishay Ben Haim, *Ish ha-hashkafah—ha-ideologiyah ha-ḥaredit 'al pi ha-Rav Shach* [The Man of Vision: Ultra-Orthodox Ideology of Rav Shach] (Jerusalem: Mosaica, 2004), 130–31; Eliav Taub, *Gedolim ba-politikah, hanhagatam shel ha-rabanim 'Ovadiah Yosef ve-El'azar Shach* [Political Sages: Trends in the Leadership Styles of Rabbis Ovadiah Yosef and El'azar Shach] (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2013), 147–49.
 18. On these so-called "Netanyahu's Evil Decrees": Benjamin Brown, *Ḥevrah bi-temurah: Mivnim ve-tahalikhim ba-Yahadut ha-ḥaredit* [Society in Motion: Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism] (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2021), 28–29.
 19. "MK Porush Is on Hunger Strike 'Due to the Evil Decrees'" [in Hebrew], *Haaretz*, May 15, 2003, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2003-05-15/ty-article/0000017f-e1c7-d804-ad7f-f1ff2f560000>.
 20. On the upheaval at *Yated Neeman*: Brown, *Ḥevrah bi-temurah*, 151–54.
 21. On the establishing of *Yated Neeman* see Taub, *Gedolim Ba-Politikah*, 30–32; Brown, *Ḥevrah BiTemurah*, 147–49.
 22. On the coup in *Yated Neeman* see Brown, *Ḥevrah bi-temurah*, 151–54.
 23. "Letter from *Maran Ha-Gaon* Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky" [in Hebrew], *Yated Neeman* (Jerusalem), June 2, 2012. On the political maneuvers behind the publication of this letter: Hayim Shkedi, "Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky: The Leadership of This Generation Has Been Handed over to Rabbi Shteinman" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Ha-Shabbat*, June 12, 2012, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/97466>.
 24. On the response of the Haredi sector to the Covid-19 pandemic: Ravit Hananel, Ram Fishman, and Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe, "Urban Diversity and Epidemic Resilience: The Case of the COVID-19," *Cities: The International Journal of Urban Policy and Planning* 122 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2021.103526>; Sara Zalberg and Sima Zalberg Block, "COVID-19 amongst the Ultra-orthodox Population in Israel: An Inside Look into the Causes of the High Morbidity Rates," *Contemporary Jewry* 41 (2012): 99–121, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-021-09368-0>. For an interesting online academic forum dedicated to this topic: "The Haredi Moment: An Online Forum," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, April 21, 2021, ed. David Myers, <https://katz.sas.upenn.edu/resources/blog/haredi-moment-online-forum-part-2>.
 25. Kobi Nachshoni, "More Than Half of Elderly Coronavirus Patients—Haredim" [in Hebrew], *Ynet*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/S1pNf2Gwv>.
 26. Doron Avigad, "COVID-19 Mortality Rate among Haredi Elderly Four Times Higher Than General Jewish Sector" [in Hebrew], *Calcalist*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.calcalist.co.il/local/articles/0,7340,L-3892790,00.html>.

27. For an initial summary of the response of religious Jewish leadership in Israel (accurate up to June 2020): Gabriel Abensour and Shuki Friedman, "The Jewish World and the Coronavirus Crisis" (Israel Democracy Institute, July 16, 2020), <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/32020>.
28. Eli Bitan, "Coronavirus Regulations Undermine Haredi Leadership" [in Hebrew], *Makor Rishon*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/222891/>. Rabbi Edelstein published a stern letter, commanding a strict adherence to the official state protocols: "Ha-Gaon Rabbi Gershon Edelstein Issued a Particularly Strong Epistle" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Ha-Shabbat*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.kikar.co.il/corona/353257>. Even after the government permitted public prayer, subject to restrictions, he remained steadfast in ruling that his followers should persist in worshipping solely at home. Kobi Nachshoni, "After the Outbreak, the Haredim Are More Stringent: 'It Is Proper to Continue Praying at Home'" [in Hebrew], *Ynet*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5717054,00.html>.
29. Kaplan, "Daas Torah"; Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition*, 48–69; Benjamin Brown, "Jewish Political Theology: The Doctrine of Da'at Torah as a Case Study," *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 3 (July 2014): 255–89.
30. Hanani Breitkopf, "A Rare Soul-Searching: We Are Afraid to Look in the Mirror and Say We Were Wrong" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Ha-Shabbat*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.kikar.co.il/%D7%9B%D7%99%D7%9B%D7%A8-%D7%92%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%91%D7%9C/362443>.
31. Yishai Cohen, "The Passing of the *Rishon Le-Tsion*, Childhood Memories, and the Coronavirus Epidemic in the Sector" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Ha-Shabbat*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/358888>.
32. For example: Yehoshua Pfeffer, "Holiness and Public Policy: The Haredi Response to Covid-19," *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2020): 5–7.
33. Avi Ravina, "Drama: Ha-Gaon Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky Instructed to Open the *Heders*—Contrary to the Protocols" [in Hebrew], *Kikar Ha-Shabbat*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/376672>.
34. Kobi Nachshoni, "The Parents Who Are Not Waiting for the Rabbis: 'The *Talmud Torah* Schools are Competing for Who is More Righteous'" [in Hebrew], *Ynet*, January 7, 2021, <https://www.ynet.co.il/judaism/article/SkB4GUECv>.
35. Anna Rayva-Barsky, "Minister Deri Removes Responsibility from the Haredi Public: 'The Media Has Made Us Lepers'" [in Hebrew], *Maariv*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-777812>.

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The Haredi Parties and the Rightist Camp in Israel 1948–2022: From Preference to Default

by Nissim Leon

INTRODUCTION

A longtime assumption in Israeli political discourse, one highlighted by the serious and ongoing political crisis of the past five years, is that there is a natural relationship between the Haredi political parties and the rightist camp, with an emphasis on the ultranationalism of the latter. But that relationship is not self-evident. On the one hand, as we shall see, an ideological, symbolic framework, and certainly a measure of prior public sentiment, can indeed be found in support of a connection between Haredi parties and parties of the right. On the other hand, the Haredi parties were not always partners in governments led by right-wing parties. Furthermore, one Haredi party, Shas, was actually a partner at a key moment when the Israeli left's political ideology reached its greatest degree of fulfillment.

In the present article I aim to shed light on this conundrum and to explain the deepening political relationship between the Haredi parties and those of the right over the past decade as a shift from ideological preference to political default. The reason behind this development is not an increase in hawkish or ultranationalist sentiment among the Haredim but rather the rise of a reactionary secular outlook within Israeli's upper middle class. In the following pages I will offer a brief historical overview of the Haredi parties' dynamic behavior within the Israeli political system. We will look at various milestones in Haredi political development and learn about the gaps between ideological preference and political interest, and between political interest and political default.

“HAREDIM,” “RIGHT,” AND “LEFT” AS DYNAMIC CONCEPTS IN ISRAEL

Before I expand on the above topics, I would like to devote some attention to the complexity of three terms and signifiers that appear in this article. In Israel, the terms “right,” “left,” and “Haredim” not only do not designate monolithic entities; they have in fact undergone, and are still undergoing, changes of historical and sociological significance. Firstly, the Haredi society of the 1950s in Israel is not that of the 2020s. In the early 1950s, in the wake of Israel’s establishment and the destruction of the Eastern European Jewish communities, non-Haredim looked upon the Haredi community as a tiny remnant of a world that was—a world with a past but no future. From the perspective of the present decade, however, we see a society that, both in Israel and outside it, has gone from survival mode to stability, with future prospects of demographic growth and political empowerment.¹ The somewhat dichotomous tenor of 1950s Haredi society, with its division between Hasidim and their historical opponents (“Litvaks”)—although all were of Eastern and Central European extraction (“Ashkenazim”)—has changed and become heterogeneous. We should note, first of all, the multiplicity of streams and modern influences that now exist,² as well as the presence of a large and significant Sephardi-Mizrahi stream that did not exist in the distant past and that encompasses a large peripheral population of non-Haredi tradition-observers.³ To this we may add a growing realization among scholars of Israeli society in Israel and elsewhere that one cannot talk of a “Haredi society” but rather about Haredim, as individuals, whose preferences regularly diverge from the social models that dictate their everyday communal behavior. For example: the past decade’s election results show that large swaths of the Haredi mainstream still see themselves as loyal to the main Haredi parties—the Ashkenazi United Torah Judaism and the Sephardi-Mizrahi Shas.⁴

Nor is the Israeli right of the 1950s the Israeli right of today. Seven decades ago, the core of the Israeli right consisted of former underground members who had fought the British Mandate—the “fighting family,” as they were known.⁵ They offered both a nationalist and capitalist alternative to the worker parties and were led by a mainly Ashkenazi elite.⁶ Today one finds an entire domain of movements and circles in which the old secular-nationalist element is waning while an inherent tension is rising between a neoliberal element and an outlook known as “masorti” (traditionalist) that is significantly influenced by the political mobility of those descended from Middle Eastern/North African Jewry—a group that sociologists refer to as “Mizrahim”—into positions of

leadership of the rightist camp. The Likud party exemplifies this. Previously, the Likud could be seen as a secular-nationalist party, but in the past decade it has become more correct to view it as a masorti-nationalist party. And another difference: while in the 1950s, the Israeli right consisted of oppositional groups with no chance of gaining power,⁷ today's rightist camp includes experienced entities endowed with significant political capital and seeking hegemony, albeit not without opposition.

And that opposition comes from what is currently known in Israel as the “center,” which itself is in flux. The State of Israel was founded by the leftist arm of the Zionist movement, which makes it a rather distinctive political actor. While on the global plane the “left” is often regarded as opposed to the formative establishment of nation-states, in Israel it was the key agent in forming the nation-state. The interests of the worker occupied a prominent place in the Zionist left's political thinking, reflecting its socialist commitment to the working class. Over the years, the emergence of middle class politics came to play a central role within the Zionist left, initially reflected at the level of party functionaries and municipal employees.⁸ This process had two major features. One was an erosion of the hold on the leadership of Israeli workers and laborers—particularly of the Histadrut (the General Organization of Workers in Israel).⁹ The second was a decline in the political representation of one of the old Labor left's main subsectors—the *kibbutzim* and the *moshavim*—to the point of its disappearance from the country's centrist and leftist parties. The hawkish approach of the Labor camp has yielded since 1977 and the ascent of the right-wing Likud party to power to a pragmatic security outlook that seeks all possible means of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁰ Socialist discourse was replaced by liberal discourse, which is chiefly identified with the protection of human rights and which draws its power less from the political system than from its presence in the state's standing institutions, of which the judiciary is the foremost.¹¹ Attempts less than two decades ago by the Israeli Labor Party to re-embrace the erstwhile social-democratic approach were rejected by its voters, who shifted toward centrist parties such as Kadima, Yesh Atid, and Blue and White or, more recently, National Unity. The left-wing Zionist parties shifted to become what is known in today's Israel as the “centrist camp.” While the place of the leftist camp was taken by parties that emphasized equal civic partnership between Jews and Arabs, the centrist parties' underlying agenda was to restore the influence of “old-time Israel.” Prominent within this agenda was a desire to advance both a national-*mamlachti* (“statist”) stance that challenged sectorial efforts, and a new sensitivity to secular defensiveness

in the face of Orthodox activism. The revitalized politics of Israel's centrist parties began to develop around an outlook focused on the Israeli republic's democratic future and liberal profile. The issue of Arab demography that once greatly preoccupied the Zionist left was superseded by matters of concern to the centrist parties—Haredi demographics and the influence of the National Religious circles.¹² And this issue, as we shall see, is of great importance in terms of the historical and sociological dynamic of relations between the Israeli right and the Haredi parties, a topic to which I will now turn.

RIGHTIST SENTIMENT WITHIN THE HAREDI PUBLIC

Most Israeli Haredim do not receive an active nationalist education, certainly not a Zionist education. Not only that, but they are taught to view their own way of life as a long-standing alternative to modern Jewish nationalism, and in particular to Zionism. Over the past two decades, scholars have argued that a certain change is underway, change associated with what Kimmy Caplan describes as an Israelization of Haredi society.¹³ But this change is not happening due to Haredi socialization; rather, it is occurring largely despite Haredi education, or in belated response to it. Nor is it a wholesale transformation; rather, small-scale changes are appearing which, at least at the time of writing, were very fluid and could potentially become more substantial in light of the war that erupted after October 7, 2023. As of now, Haredi socialization, whether at the familial or the communal level, exists in constant tension with the process of Israelization, and seeks from the outset to foster insularity and distance from Israel's republican model and, in particular, from its compulsory military draft.¹⁴ By the republican model of Israel, I mean the way in which its critics identify it as the continuation of Zionist action through the tools of a sovereign Jewish state.¹⁵ On this interpretation, the “republican model” rests on the view that positive citizenship depends on the degree of mobilization for achieving the national goals, chief among them the duty of military service. In this case the Haredim find themselves in a difficult position. First, they have maintained over time a position of suspicion towards Zionist ideology and its institutions, especially the army. The army is seen as a social institution that deals not only with security but also with ideological re-education. In addition, Haredim fear that army recruits, who will be far away from close religious supervision, will over time abandon their religious lifestyle and become secular. This leads to a

conundrum: Haredim seek involvement and even partnership in the political life of Israel but under cultural and ideological conditions that suit their life style and are far from the Israeli republican model. Haredi socialization still promotes an ethos of strict religious observance, traditional family life, adherence to gender segregation, devotion to Talmudic and halachic (Jewish religious law) studies as a masculine ideal, and adherence to rabbinical authority as core values.¹⁶ Accordingly, textbooks in the community's educational institutions teach children to see the founding of the State of Israel as a major challenge in terms of its deviation from the traditional way of life, and the historical danger it represents.¹⁷ The conclusion is that one must live with the Zionist state as a civic responsibility, but that the state requires correction as a political imperative, and that one must reject the "secular vision" associated with its institutions.

However, none of the above testifies to the national sentiment, that is, to the sense of solidarity with the Jewish majority evinced by the Haredim in the wake of the establishment of the Jewish state. Even in the first few decades of Israel's existence, under the governance of the socialist-nationalist Labor movement, the various Haredi subsectors, excepting the most zealous ones, tended to display emphatically nationalist sentiments.¹⁸ For example: despite their anti-Zionist image, Haredi newspapers marked, if not outright celebrated, Israeli Independence Day for nearly two decades. Ironically, they stopped doing so during the years when Israel was led by rightist governments. During the 1950s and 1960s the Haredi Poalei Agudat Yisrael party was a coalition partner. And if we jump to the 1990s, we find that, even while the Haredi "enclave" was developing as a society devoted to institutionalized Torah study—the "society of learners"—there were clear signs of admiration for the Zionist state's military might, from soldier costumes worn by children on the Purim holiday and trips to battle heritage sites such as Ammunition Hill in Jerusalem (*Givat Ha-Tachmoshet*) to the establishment of civic organizations for security-related activity, for example, the Zaka emergency response organization which has assumed a complementary function to that of the military in identifying victims of terrorism.¹⁹ Furthermore: a number of statistical findings indicate that, at least since the late 1990s, Israel's Haredi sector has held sharply hawkish views with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; some parts of that sector even hold radically hawkish views on Jewish-Arab relations and on Jewish relations with non-Jews in Israel in general.²⁰

Some point to sociological developments that have intensified national sentiment among Haredim over the past decade. This can be seen, for instance, in the quest for relatively inexpensive housing solutions for a community with

a very high birth rate. New Haredi urban localities, as well as Haredi neighborhoods in Jerusalem, were established on the seam line of the bloody Zionist-Palestinian conflict: cities such as Elad and Modi'in Illit (Kiryat Sefer), the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Neve Yaakov and Ramot, and nearby localities. Large urban settlements such as Immanuel were founded in the heart of the West Bank. This placement presents major security challenges, and may expose the Haredi public and its representatives to ultranationalist discourse fueled by segments of Israel's rightist camp. To this may be added demographic developments, at a time when *mitchazkim* (those strengthening in religious observance) and *hozrim biteshuva* (returnees to religious observance) of Mizrahi extraction, as well as Haredi immigrants from welfare states such as France, are bringing with them ultranationalist political views and introducing them into the Haredi community.²¹ One may also add a tendency to see the Jewish state's legitimacy as emanating not from "dubious" secular national sources, but rather from authoritative religious sources. According to this view, once the "Jewish state" or the "state of the Jews" became a political fact, then "Jewishness," that is, Jewish identity in Orthodox terms, must occupy a hegemonic position within it.²²

Not only that, but the Haredim view the rightist camp as aligned with religious tradition, as respectful of that rabbinical authority, and as willing to see the Haredi parties as natural political partners. Moreover, the connection between the Jewish-first stance of Israel's ultranationalist right and the religious elitism and sense of chosenness of the Haredim provides fertile ground for a flourishing ultranationalism.

There is another explanation for the Haredi community's preference for the right. Although the division between "right" and "left" is rooted in the political history of the West, the word "left" is semantically associated in Jewish mysticism with evil, satanic power. Some in the Haredi world, who know how to transform such associations into meaningful symbols, hastened to ascribe that same demonic power, which must be eradicated, to the anti-clerical, Labor Zionist "left." Thus, Rav Elazar Menachem Shach, the leader of the Litvak yeshiva world in the 1980s and 1990s, explained the preference for political partnership with the right in terms of a historical and ideological accounting with the revolutionary world from which the left arose. In his view, the right may have sinners, but the left has heretics.²³ A similar semantic allusion was made by Benjamin Netanyahu, a completely secular politician, in his 1996 election campaign, while explaining to an important rabbi associated with the Haredi Shas party that "the left has forgotten what it is to be Jews."

Nationalist and even ultranationalist sentiment undoubtedly exists among the Haredim, which can explain the sector's preference for political partnership with rightist parties. But we must take into account that political, and not just ideological or sentimental, considerations play an exceedingly significant role in the behavior of Israel's Haredi mainstream. In his book *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society*, sociologist Menachem Friedman discusses how the Agudat Yisrael party's transition in 1977 from sitting outside Israel's governing coalition to being a partner in it, and in particular its widened access to governmental resources—state budgets, positions and appointments, legislative influence in support of the Haredi way of life—helped transform the ideological vision of a “society of learners” from aspiration to social reality.²⁴

The “society of learners” model that developed within Israeli Haredi society differs from that of other Haredi communities around the world. This model relies on a system of longstanding political arrangements that effectively began with the political upending of 1977 and that facilitate realization of institutionalized Torah (Talmud) study as the ideal of a complete Haredi life. The political arrangements make a clear division of labor possible along gender lines: men are exempt from Israel's compulsory military service so that they can engage in regular study in yeshivas or kollels (for married students) financed by the state, while women participate in an ever-more-technologically-advanced employment market so that the men's way of life can be maintained.²⁵ Some will maintain that this model is changing in light of modernizing developments in Haredi society, and indeed one sees more Haredi men going to work.²⁶ But it cannot be denied that the society-of-learners model remains the dominant educational ethos across the various Haredi communities and subgroups. Nor is it the case that the choice of a different way of life, one of integration within the Israeli middle class, as with “working Haredim” or those who pursue academic study, is an ex post facto development, not an educational or ideological preference from the outset.

THE HAREDI PARTIES AND THE POLITICS OF BARGAINING

As noted, the question at the heart of this article is that of the Haredi parties' inclination for political partnership with parties of the right-wing camp. Friedman's thesis explains the great weight borne by Haredi political effort in Israel as a crucial means of maintaining the society of learners, and, more

generally, of protecting the sectorial gains achieved by the Haredi community over the years. But Friedman's work still does not explain the Haredi parties' preference for partnership with the rightist camp. As a first step toward understanding, we need to distinguish between the Haredim as a sector and the Haredim as loyal to the traditional Haredi political frameworks—namely, the Haredi parties. Unlike, for instance, Haredim in the United States, the Haredi mainstream in Israel is organized into institutionalized political frameworks that take care of its needs. Since the advent of Zionism, and largely in response to it, Haredi circles have been organized by means of parties that play a direct or indirect role in representing different groups of Haredim, such as Hasidic communities, those connected with the Litvak yeshiva world, and the newly observant class (*hozrim biteshuva*). Some of these parties were established before the founding of the state. Such is the case with Agudat Yisrael, which was established in 1912, and with Poalei Agudat Yisrael, founded in 1922. Other parties include Shas, founded in 1984, the Litvak Degel HaTorah, founded in 1988, and the pan-Haredi United Torah Judaism, founded in 1992. Israeli political history shows that the Haredi parties generally act in a politically and ideologically calculated manner; in many respects, it is hard to detect in their behavior a consistent orientation toward the political right. What is actually consistent is their attempt to manage the gap between Zionist activism as a significant and ascendant force in Israeli life and the safeguarding of the Haredi way of life—and even more, its formulation as a counter-ideology. This work of navigation is conducted by the Haredi parties not only through systematic criticism of the Zionist ideology and practice, but also through relatively continuous political collaboration with leading Zionist actors. In light of this, we need to take a retrospective look at the political behavior of the Haredi parties. Such an examination will highlight the need for precision in understanding the relations between the Haredi parties and those on the right. In doing so, we should view the relationship as multidimensional and dynamic, not merely a matter of ideological preference but also one of negotiation and default.

To understand the dynamic associated with this dilemma, we must be mindful of the historical behavior of the non-Haredi Zionist parties. It is hard to forget that David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and a member of Mapai, the foremost party of the Zionist left, preferred to establish three early coalitions in the period 1949–1952 with the religious parties, including the Agudat Yisrael. Curiously, the deal-making Orthodoxy of the Religious-Haredi front was preferred to the hard-line socialist-Zionism of Mapam.

Ben-Gurion was prepared to reach a number of institutional arrangements with the Haredim and with the Religious Zionists, as long as they entered his government. Among these was a policy of exemption from compulsory military service for religious women, and the deferral of service for a small and agreed-upon number of rabbinical students in the Haredi yeshivot that were then in a state of recovery; the number of students increased dramatically over the years.²⁷ Added to this was the ratification of a “status-quo” agreement on issues of religion and state as part of an approach known as *mamlachtiyut* or “statism”; these arrangements included an agreement that in government-sponsored sites, especially the army, stringent kashrut standards would be binding. It is not surprising that these three early governments collapsed relatively soon after their establishment, due among other things to crises in the management of religion and state relations.²⁸ However, over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, Mapai and the Labor Party formed governing coalitions with the Haredi party, Poalei Agudat Yisrael. In 1977 Menachem Begin succeeded in bringing into his coalition Agudat Yisrael, which represented itself as the ideological standard-bearer of the Haredi mainstream. Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres also included Shas in a coalition in 1984. Yitzhak Rabin, a Labor Party prime minister, regarded Shas’s inclusion in a coalition under his leadership as a significant matter. Meanwhile, on the right, Benjamin Netanyahu, in his first government, formed in 1996, and Ehud Barak, on the left, in his brief government of 1999, also included the Haredim in their coalitions. The fact is that, during the periods 2003–2006 and 2013–2015, there were governments formed by the right that conspicuously did not include the Haredi parties, at the behest of the centrist parties. I will discuss the meaning of this below.

With regard to the Haredi parties, we also find great dynamism. The Haredi mainstream was split for many years between the ideological Agudat Yisrael party, which preferred to sit in the opposition, and the more pragmatic Poalei Agudat Yisrael, whose leaders chose to participate in labor coalitions and even to bear ministerial responsibilities for over a decade (1959–1969).²⁹ Poalei Agudat Yisrael’s partnership with Mapai drew harsh ideological criticism from within,³⁰ but its practical advantages were clear to all. Among these were assistance in rebuilding, step by step, the yeshiva institutions, the women’s seminaries, large-scale educational networks and, indeed, everything that fortified the foundations of the “society of learners.”³¹ This situation did not arise *ex nihilo*, or solely on the basis of ideological will; another factor was the limited, but still substantial, bargaining power wielded by the pragmatic Haredi politicians within the government.

Another significant stage in Haredi political dynamics emerged in the 1970s, against the background of major intergenerational change in Israeli society—what might be referred to as the “youth revolution.” The generation of the state, that is, those born as Israel was on the verge of achieving independence or early in its first decade of statehood, began to displace the veteran leaderships. Young Mizrahim who gathered under the banner of the “Black Panthers” went out to demonstrate, while other young Mizrahim supplanted the veteran operatives of the Herut movement.³² After the Yom Kippur War (1973), young middle-class Ashkenazim came out against the Labor Party leadership and, in advance of the 1977 elections, founded the Dash and Ratz parties. An intergenerational struggle also emerged between the “young people” and the veteran Religious Zionist leadership, set against the background of religious settler movement Gush Emunim focused on the West Bank.³³

Haredi society experienced its own generational change. Over the course of the 1970s, a new “young” subsector reached maturity within Israel’s Haredi mainstream: that of the “scholars.” This subsector was based on a large mass of young people who chose, ideologically, the scholarly way of life for which they had been conditioned by the yeshivot and which they regarded as the purpose of Haredi existence at the personal, familial, and communal levels. The Haredi yeshiva heads encouraged this trend. They saw it as an objective necessary for the realization of a separate and complete Haredi way of life. Ideologically, this trend helped establish their authority over the Haredi community. Theologically, it helped fulfill the ideal of Torah study (i.e., the study of Talmud and halacha), in an institutionalized and maximalist way. This generational evolution in Haredi society paradoxically led to a growing dominance of older, authoritative and conservative rabbinical figures. Within the scholars sector, the head of the Ponevezh Yeshiva, Rav Elazar Menachem Shach, gained special prominence.³⁴ Rav Shach encouraged an oppositional approach to Zionism and the state, and launched an all-out war against Poalei Agudat Yisrael and the Mafdal (the National Religious Party). In contrast to the somewhat nationalist and pragmatic old Haredism, the 1970s saw the development of what Yair Halevy calls a “new Haredism”—oppositional, principled, walled-in, separatist, and sectoral.³⁵

And yet, the rise of the new Haredism and, in particular, the nurturing of the young and growing society-of-learners sector, required exceptional political and economic resources. These could no longer be obtained solely through philanthropy on the part of wealthy individuals or ordinary citizens;

rather, they required large-scale state involvement. This resulted in yet another paradox.

A major turning point arrived with the *mahapach*, the political upending of May 1977, when the Likud came to power for the first time. The Agudat Yisrael leadership consented, for the first time in many years, to accept Menachem Begin's invitation to join his coalition. This agreement was explained to the Haredi public in terms of the respect for religious tradition evinced by Begin and his party.³⁶ The coalition agreements with the Likud transformed the growing society-of-learners sector into the gold standard of "Orthodox"—that is, "proper"—Haredi life, under state sponsorship. This placed the Haredi parties, first Agudat Yisrael and later Shas, in a permanent state of vigilance, financial need, and thus political haggling. For example, the stance of Rav Shach, however resolute and authoritative it was, did not prevent Haredi participation even in coalitions led by the left. Particularly notable in this regard was the Haredi Mizrahi party Shas, a large proportion of whose voters actually came from the Likud and the far right.³⁷ But Shas, which was founded in 1984 with the consent of Rav Shach, was in fact not merely an ethnic Haredi party from the outset, but the insurance policy needed to preserve the coalition arrangements on which the Haredi society-of-learners relied. Shas's ability to enlist support from a non-Haredi population, its willingness to be actively involved and to consolidate its power in the government, as well as to take part in the formation of both leftist and rightist coalitions, has made it a key political actor from the 1990s on.

To sum up: Israel's Haredi public may harbor nationalist sentiment, but since the country's early years of statehood the Haredi political parties have also participated in governing coalitions with left-wing parties. They have demonstrated an ability to maneuver between political camps, motivated not by any specific political preference, but rather by the need to retain bargaining power, at first in order to rebuild Haredi life, and later in order to create, fortify, and institutionalize the infrastructure for the society of learners. But the question must be asked: has its maneuverability eroded somewhat over the past two decades?

THE SECULAR REACTIONARY TREND AND THE POLITICAL DEFAULT

Shas's growing power played a major role in the development of a secular opposition to Haredi activism. While at the start of the 1980s the Haredi parties accounted for four to five out of a hundred and twenty representatives in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), by the end of the 1990s, thanks to Shas's capabilities, these parties had twenty-two Knesset mandates. Shas's Haredi activism, backed by a critical and oppositional stance toward the achievements of Zionism and, in particular, the party's efficacy at electoral mobilization in the late 1990s, aroused real anxiety within Israel's established middle class. While Ashkenazi Haredim were regarded as an "authentic" religious phenomenon with clear roots and social boundaries, Shas constituted a historical and social enigma. To begin with, it was the first party to challenge the rule that ethnic parties could not survive in the long term. Shas has not only survived but thrived as a major and authoritative Haredi force. Secondly, Shas's activist religious-Haredi agenda undermined existing models regarding the scope of Haredi demographic growth. The society-of-learners framework was viewed as a serious challenge to the longstanding Israeli republican model, which regarded compulsory military service as a key factor in proper civic integration.³⁸ And now, by means of a popular back-to-religion movement, Shas had broadened the boundaries of the society of learners. Thirdly, Shas appears to have threatened the future of the modern neoliberal economy which the Israeli middle class favored, particularly in response to Israel's great economic crisis of the early 1980s. The widening Haredi dependence on governmental supports that Shas strove to defend was represented as a major challenge to that objective.³⁹ And fourthly, an array of criminal corruption charges against its political leadership fueled an organized campaign by Shas in the late 1990s against the Israeli judicial system—a campaign that won the party unexpected clout.⁴⁰

Shas thus became a red flag for Israel's established upper middle class, and even for parts of the secular and religious right. Ideological opposition to Shas and the Haredim became a major factor behind the development of an activist politics of *mamlachti* populism, as a counterweight to the sectorialism associated with Shas and the Haredim. This counterweight has been more pointedly offered to the Israeli middle class over the past two decades by old and new centrist parties such as Shinui, Yesh Atid, Kadima, and Blue and White. The push-back by the centrist parties became tangible in the coalitions they formed with the right under the Likud. For the first time since 1977, a

coalition founded by Ariel Sharon with Shinui that operated during the years 2003–2006 did not include the Haredi parties. This was also the case with the coalition headed by Benjamin Netanyahu during 2013–2015. Both of these instances can easily be seen as unusual, but it should be noted that they greatly concerned the leadership of the Haredi mainstream.

In the face of this secular push-back and the political uncertainty that came with it, the Haredi parties needed a new strategy. That strategy coalesced on two planes: the political and the ideological. On the political plane, the interests of the Haredi parties dovetailed with those of the Likud under Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu faced a growing weakness of the Likud vis-à-vis the centrist parties and their burgeoning influence. Political advisers told him that only an alliance with the Haredi parties would enable him to provide the means to return the Likud to power under his leadership.⁴¹ But this alliance was not self-evident. The Haredi parties were harshly critical of Netanyahu for his actions as Minister of Finance during the period 2003–2006. The neoliberal policy line he championed had struck at the economic arrangements that supported the society of learners. What appears to have dulled the criticism was the Israelization of Haredi society.⁴² Up to then, that term had denoted a process of Haredi assimilation to Israel's dominant republican model, but "Israelization" now seems to have taken on a more complex meaning—owing to developments that took place within Religious Zionism in recent decades.

The Religious Zionist sector developed divisions over this period between liberal forces and forces that self-describe as "conservative."⁴³ Behind the word "conservative" lies a very broad outlook that pertains to the perceived need to safeguard the Jewish element within Zionist nationalism and the primacy of religious tradition in its Orthodox forms; it also entails a commitment to a market economy oriented toward accelerated privatization—that is, one that allows for the penetration of a conservative voice into places ordinarily deemed as established *mamlachti* or "statist." Over the past decade, a new subsector known as National-Haredi, or per its Hebrew acronym "Hardal," has gained prominence within the conservative camp. Its influence in Religious Zionist society is notable within the sphere of religious education; beyond that, the Hardalim have a complicated relationship with the Haredi community.⁴⁴ The Hardal subsector is intent on putting aside the ideological quarrel with the Haredim regarding Zionism, and views the institutions of Haredi society and the Haredi way of life as a source of inspiration for proper religious conduct. While in the past, proto-Hardal circles such as students of the "Merkaz Ha-Rav" Yeshiva with young religious-Zionist activists and young politicians

had focused on the development of the West Bank settler movement and on establishing the movement ideologically on the basis of a messianic outlook,⁴⁵ over the past decade the “progressive threat” has come to occupy a more prominent place on the Hardal agenda.⁴⁶ Behind the term “progressive threat” lies the contention that the Israeli liberal model has promoted a secular lifestyle and a “rights discourse” based on the individual rather than collective. The “progressive threat” narrative serves as a point of political and ideological connection between the Hardalim and the Haredi parties.

While the Haredi parties had formerly avoided ideological linkage with the Hardalim, something appears to have changed over the past decade, particularly in light of Haredi opposition to Israeli judicial activism, that is, to judicial intervention on public matters that, from a Haredi perspective, undermines its community’s cultural autonomy. Issues on which the judiciary intervened in this fashion include the admissions policy of Haredi educational institutions and compulsory military service. The claim that Haredi autonomy has been undermined, especially with regard to the Haredi education systems, has been a source of much agitation over the past two decades, and has sparked a number of huge demonstrations by the Haredim against the judicial system and, in particular, against the Supreme Court.⁴⁷ The Hardalim have had their own criticisms of the judicial system, connected with their struggle against the Israeli government’s decision to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and with their battle against the progressive-liberal outlook of secular Israel. Along with the Likud’s mobilization in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he faced criminal charges (2019–2022), this produced a new political partnership in which criticism of the “judicial system” became the cornerstone of an ideology shared by the Haredim and the rightist parties. This was cogently summarized in a tweet by a Haredi media personality regarding the judicial reform launched by the Netanyahu government formed in 2022: “The Haredim, the Kahanists, and the settlers don’t want a strong Court because it interferes with their plans. It’s not really a matter of (Justice Aharon) Barak’s judicial revolution or the separation of powers; it’s a matter of removing the abomination.”⁴⁸ The centrist parties’ lack of interest in a possible coalition partnership with the Haredi parties also did its part toward bolstering the Haredi alignment with the rightist parties.

The Haredi struggle against the judiciary helped resolve the issue of friction with, and dependence on, the political system and opened the way for Haredi parties’ participation in Zionist coalitions of the left and the right.⁴⁹ It effectively restored the oppositional line required by Haredi ideology under

conditions of Israelization and change. The legal system was seen as being at war with the halachic system. Now most of the arrows were not directed at the “kibbutzim” as a symbol of the “secularizing left,” but rather at the “Supreme Court” as the code name for a new enemy—the “liberal left.” Now it wasn’t the “new Jew” thrusting aside the “old Jew” on which Haredi criticism focused, but rather the legal entity known as the “reasonable person” who was displacing the “good Jew”—the devoutly religious observer of mitzvot. The partnership with the right-wing parties, against the background of the centrist parties’ recalcitrance, fortified the Haredi rightist orientation. An old-new axis coalesced, led by the Likud with the participation of the Haredi parties, Shas foremost among them. But all this came at a price: Haredi bargaining power significantly contracted given the solidity of the rightist alliance.

CONCLUSION

Relations between the Haredi political parties and the Israeli political right are not a one-way street. They have ebbs and flows, advances and retreats. “Rightist” sentiment does indeed exist within the Haredi public, and the community’s political and spiritual leadership is aware of this. To this must be added the fact that in recent decades, and especially after the Second Intifada, a substantial part of the Jewish public in Israel tends to see the right-wing parties as a suitable political address.⁵⁰ In this respect the Haredi sector is not an exceptional group. At the same time, the political interest of the Haredim representatives who seek to protect the “society-of-learners” privileges and arrangements in any way must also be taken into account. The political partnership with the right-wing camp, and especially with the Likud led by Netanyahu in the last decade, has provided a convenient political environment to in which Haredim can achieve their goals at a low ideological cost: easy access to state budgets, the possibility of postponement or suspension of the conscription law, and the holding of influential administration positions in the Ministries of Interior and Religion. What can be interpreted as a tradition of political pragmatism can also be seen as a deep commitment to a principled ideological position: the deep responsibility for preserving the patterns of differentiation and the responsibility towards the preservation of the “society-of-learners” pattern. According to this interpretation, politics is a tool in the hands of ultra-Orthodox ideology and not of commitment to the interests of the right-wing camp.

Yet, it seems that in terms of the present day, the Haredi sector's relationship with the right-wing parties has transformed from an instrumental and pragmatic matter into an alliance—one that seeks to provide a counterweight to the liberal forces of Israel's upper middle class. At the same time, the Haredi community's preference for the right has also narrowed its range of bargaining options, at least for the present. Is this the end of the story? From a historical perspective, the relationship's dynamic nature, the web of interests that it spans, not to mention the existential shadow that perpetually looms over Israel, all point to greater complexity than can be conveyed in a one-dimensional description.

Notes

1. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler, “The Changing Face of the Haredi Society— from Survival to Presence, Strengthening and Self-Confidence,” in *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study*, ed. Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler (Jerusalem: Van-Leer Institute, 2012), 15–18.
2. Lee Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society on the Axis between Conservatism and Modernity* [in Hebrew] (The Israel Democracy Institute: 2020), 43–60.
3. Yair Ettinger and Nissim Leon, *A Flock with No Shepherd: Shas Leadership the Day after Rabbi Ovadia Yosef* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Am-Oved, 2018), 63–71.
4. Nissim Leon, “An Uneasy Stability: The Haredi Parties Emergency Campaign for the 2013 Elections,” *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2015): 230–44.
5. Yechiam Weitz, *First Step to Power: The Herut Movement, 1949–1955* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yitzhak Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007), 18–19, 54–60.
6. Uri Cohen and Nissim Leon, *The Center of the Herut Movement and the Mizrahim 1965–1977: From Paternalistic Partnership to Competitive Partnership* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2011), 29–39.
7. For example, see Udi Lebel, *The Road to the Pantheon: Etzel, Lehi, and the Borders of Israeli National Memory* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2007), 99–127.
8. Daniel Gutwein, “Socio-economic Logic of the 1977 Regime Change in Israel,” in *Israel 1967–1977: Continuity and Turning* [in Hebrew], ed. Ofer Shiff and Aviva Halamish (Sde-Boker: Ben-Gurion University, 2017), 23–35; For extended reading in this thesis, see Avi Bareli and Uri Cohen, *The Academic Middle-Class Rebellion: Socio-Political Conflict over Wage-Gaps in Israel, 1954–1956* (London: Brill, 2018).
9. Gadi Nissim, “Histadrut Labor Federation of Israel: Decline and Revitalization,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Israel*, ed. P. R. Kumaraswamy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 19–20 (in press).
10. Yoram Peri, *Brothers at War: Rabin’s Assassination and the Cultural War in Israel* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Babel, 2005), 282–90.
11. Nissim Leon, “Dystopian Politics in Israel, 1995–2023” [in Hebrew], *Israeli Sociology* 24, no. 2 (2023): 182–83.
12. Leon, “Dystopian Politics in Israel, 1995–2023,” 182–83.
13. Kimmy Caplan, *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2007), 246–47.
14. Yagil Levy, *From People’s Army to Army of the Peripheries* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2007), 64–66.
15. Levy, *From People’s Army*, 23–26.
16. Lotem Perry-Hazan, *Ultra-Orthodox Education in Israel: Law, Culture and Politics* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Nevo, 2013), 150–55, 166–70.

17. Chen Shlita, "Don't Even Think about Math and English: Haredi Youth Are Taught an Alternative History" [in Hebrew], *HaShomrim*, June 2, 2023.
18. Yair Halevy, "Against the Tide: Resistance to Ultra-Orthodox Enthusiasm Following the Six Day War," in *Israel 1967–1977: Continuity and Turning* [in Hebrew], ed. Ofer Shiff and Aviva Halamish (Sde-Boker: Ben-Gurion University, 2017), 221–24.
19. For example, see Nurit Stadler, "Taboos, Dreams and Desires: Haredi Fantasies on Militarism and the Military" [in Hebrew], *Israeli Sociology* 6, no. 1 (2004): 69–90; Gideon Aran, *The Cult of Dismembered Limbs: Jewish Rites of Death at the Scene of Palestinian Suicide Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
20. Dror Feitelson, *Era of the Right: Israel 1977–2018 as Reflected in Data* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2019), 29–35.
21. Hillel Cohen, *Haters, Love Story: Mizrahi Jews, Palestinian Arabs and Ashkenazi Jews from the Rise of Zionism to the Present* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ivrit, 2022), 313–15.
22. Netanel Fisher, "The Fundamentalist Dilemma: Lessons from the Israeli Haredi Case," *International Journal for Middle East Studies* 48 (2016): 541–42.
23. On Rav Shach's political stance and the meaning of his preference for the right as opposed to his political views, see Avishay Ben Haim, *The Man of Vision: Ultra-Orthodox Ideology of Rav Shach* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mozaika, 2004), 117–58.
24. Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources Trends and Processes* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), 105–6. The coalition partnership was also one of the main reasons behind a growing interest within the Haredi community itself in the political system, in the views of the spiritual leadership, in the relations between political functionaries (*askanim*), and in the political games played out within the government. It was also one of the main reasons behind a growing interest in the Haredim on the part of non-Haredi Israelis, given the Haredi sector's apparent growing influence on the governing systems. For extended reading see Nissim Leon, "How the Black Line Was Drawn: The Haredi Question in Israeli Sociology" [in Hebrew], *Israeli Sociology* 21, no. 1 (2020): 33–52.
25. Friedman, *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 129–30; for extended reading on the consequences of the process, see, for example, Tamar El-Or, *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World* (Boulder, CO: L. Rinner, 1994).
26. Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 107–9.
27. Friedman, *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 8–10.
28. Menachem Friedman, "And These Are the Origins of the Status Quo: Religion and State in Israel," in *Transition from "Yishuv" to State: 1947–1949: Continuity and Change*, ed. Varda Pilowsky (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1990), 55–56.
29. Yossef Fund, *Religious Proletarians Unite: Poalei Agudat Israel—Ideology and Policy* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2018), 317–406.
30. Fund, *Religious Proletarians Unite*, 480–97.

31. Friedman, *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 80–87.
32. Cohen and Leon, *The Center of the Herut Movement*, 26.
33. Yehuda Azrieli, *The Crocheted Kippa Generation: The Political Revolution of the Young Members of Mafdal* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Avivim, 1990), 30–38.
34. A novelistic treatment of this social development can be found in Israel Segal, *My Brother's Keeper* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2004)
35. Halevy, "Against the Tide," 222; for extended reading, see Yair Halevy, "The 'New Haredism' Revolution in Israel in the 1970s" [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2019).
36. Nissim Leon, "The After-Shocks of the 1977 Political 'Upheaval' and Their Role in the Rise of Shas" [in Hebrew], *Israel* 15 (2009): 14–16.
37. The factors behind the connection between a Haredi leadership and a non-Haredi Mizrahi public have been discussed extensively in the scholarship on Shas. See for example, Yoav Peled, "Towards a Redefinition of Jewish Nationalism in Israel? The Enigma of Shas," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 703–27; David Lehmann and Batia Siebzeher, *Remaking Israeli Judaism: The Challenge of Shas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
38. Levy, *From People's Army*, 15–36.
39. In contrast to the optimistic outlooks that, in the early part of the decade, predominated in the policy-studies discourse on Haredi integration in general Israeli society, the past few years have seen the advent of more pessimistic views. See, for example, Shuki Friedman, *Israel and the Ultra-Orthodox Community: Higher Walls and a Challenging Future* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2021).
40. Nissim Leon, "The Political Use of the Teshuva Cassette Culture in Israel," *Contemporary Jewry* 31, no. 2 (2011): 103–05.
41. Meirav Arlosoroff, "Netanyahu's Cynical Alliance with the Haredim Is Causing the Nation to Lose Its Way" [in Hebrew], *The Marker*, October 9, 2020.
42. Kimmy Caplan, *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2007), 245–61.
43. On the multiple internal categories in the religious Zionist society of our time and their social and political meanings, see Yair Ettinger, *The Disputes That Redefine Religious Zionism* [in Hebrew] (Modi'in: Kinneret, Zmora, Dvir, 2019).
44. For extended reading, see, for example, Yair Sheleg, *Zionist Ultra-Orthodox: History, Ideology, Presence* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2020).
45. Dov Schwartz, *The Theology of the Religious Zionist Movement* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 194–234; Tsvi Raanan, *Gush Emunim* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Poalim Press, 1980), 50–56.
46. Yagil Levy, *Divine Commander* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015), 254–66.
47. See, for example, Yaacov Ben-Shemesh, "The Immanuel Affair—The Dilemma Faced by Shas," *Democratic Culture* 15 (2014): 13–29.

48. Eli Bitan (@Eli_Batan, Twitter Post, January 15, 2023), https://twitter.com/Eli_Bitan/status/1614547542875820032.
49. Friedman, *The Haredi Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 19–20.
50. Yoram Peri, *Brothers at War: Rabin's Assassination and the Cultural War in Israel* [in Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: Babel, 2005), 256.

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Politics, National Identity, and Democracy: A Comparison of Haredi Political Attitudes and Behavior in the United States and Israel

*by Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe, David N. Myers,
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One of the tasks of this volume has been to bring to wider public attention contemporary research that explores the social, cultural, and political proclivities of Haredim today. This recent scholarship is obviously not a creation *ex nihilo* but builds on the work of earlier generations of scholars. These prior generations include scholars who brought a sociological lens to the study of Haredi society and culture (e.g., Menachem Friedman, Samuel Heilman, William Helmreich, George Kranzler, Egon Mayer, Solomon Poll, and Israel Rubin), as well as those trained in political science (e.g., Asher Cohen, Eliezer Don-Yehiya, Charlies Liebman, and Bernard Susser). In the past decade, there has also been a noticeable uptick in research devoted to Haredi political thinking and activity, particularly in Israel, where Haredim have become a ubiquitous and often decisive presence in public life (for example, the work of Itamar Ben Ami, Benjamin Brown, Kimmy Caplan, Yohai Hakak, Motti Inbari, Nissim Leon, Daniel Mahla, Heather Munro, and Elisheva Rosman-Stollman). In the United States, there has been renewed interest in the political impact of Haredim following the intense, COVID-19-driven “moment” of 2020, when long-standing alliances and assumptions gave way to a new and sharper form of political expression and activity.

Even in the midst of this efflorescence of scholarship, what has been studied and understood less are the attitudes and behavior of every-day members

of Haredi communities—as distinct from the political thinking and acts of rabbinic leaders such as Rav Schach, Rav Ovadia, the Lubavitcher Rebbe or the various and competing Satmar Rebbes.¹ This article brings together the work of two research teams, one based in the United States and the other in Israel, that worked in parallel with the goal of identifying the political attitudes, voting behavior, and civic identities of Haredim in those two realms. In the next two sections, the article offers a quick survey of these attitudes and identities in each of the two cases before offering in Section 3 a comparative analysis of them in Haredi societies in the United States and Israel.

It should be noted that there are many commonalities between the two communities, beginning with a belief in strict and sustained separation from general society in all domains of life, including in residential areas, and education (which in Israel is state-funded). Both communities also place great value on Torah study (though a key difference in Israel is that some 45% of Haredi men often devote their entire lives to study, while it appears that a much smaller number in the US do). And both communities maintain the view that they are “in exile,” dwelling in an unredeemed world under political regimes that are not rooted in Torah-true values.

These similarities help set off a key difference in the way in which politics is practiced in the two communities, which is, itself, a reflection of two diverse political cultures. In Israel, Haredim are represented in the electoral process by political parties such as Agudath Israel, United Torah Judaism, and Shas, whose leaders consult with rabbis to gain guidance but function as full-time politicians. Over the course of nearly six decades, since the 1967 War and again in the *mahapakh* (the “upending” that marked a right-ward shift toward the Likud party) of 1977, Jewish religious parties have moved from a position of subordinate allies to the center of governance and power. This move to the center has been accompanied and facilitated by the rise of the “HarDaLim,” a word that combines “haredi” and *dati le’umi* (religious Zionist); the HarDaLim blend the values, strategies, sense of threat, and agency of the ultra-Orthodox and religious Zionist camps.² In the government of Benjamin Netanyahu formed in the wake of the elections of 2022, a figure such as Bezalel Smotrich represents not only the HarDaLi wing of the Jewish political spectrum, but its growing proximity to power (as Finance Minister and the chief civilian authority overseeing Israeli settlement in the West Bank).

In the United States, Haredim are represented not by political parties of their own but rather by community activists (*askunim*), usually closely affiliated with rabbinic leaders, who serve in important, but unelected positions as

intercessors and negotiators with secular political authorities. In both cases, the communities seek to leverage their internal discipline through ideological cohesiveness and an established leadership structure to gain benefits for their members.

As Haredim continue to grow in absolute and relative numbers, it is reasonable to assume that their political influence will also continue to grow. This will likely bring on increased tensions between long-standing Haredi principles of communal cohesion and strict adherence to Jewish law, on one hand, and values emblematic of the wider political culture such as tolerance, individualism, and democracy. As Haredim constitute an ever-expanding slice of the Jewish demographic pie, it will be interesting to see how their persistent and well-developed ability to accommodate to secular political regimes, from pre-war Europe to post-War Israeli and diaspora communities, fares.

1. THE AMERICAN CASE

How do Haredim think of themselves as political actors and members of American society? It was this set of questions that prompted Mark Trencher and David Myers to undertake a pair of surveys of Orthodox Jews in 2023–2024. The surveys were conducted by Nishma Research, with the assistance of the Sady and Ludwig Kahn Chair in Jewish History at UCLA. The first survey, devoted to Orthodox Jewish political attitudes, was published in September 2023.³

Participants were invited to take part in the study through email blasts, notifications to WhatsApp Groups and WhatsApp Status lists, and an Opt-In list of past Nishma Research surveys. The survey ran between August 20–29, 2023. The sample consisted of 1,224 self-identified Haredi respondents (out of a total of 2,551), of whom 40% were female. In terms of intra-group affiliation, 36% were Hasidish (including Chabad), 33% identified as Yeshivish/Agudah/Litvish, and 20% identified as other, though leaned Haredi.

Among the key findings of the survey were:

- 63% of Haredim in the US identified as Republicans, and 90% planned to vote for a Republican in the 2024 election (as opposed to 11% who identify as Democrats and 10% who plan to vote for a Democrat in the 2024 election).
- This party affiliation is long-standing. Over the past forty-four years since 1980, more than 80% of Haredim have voted for Republican presidential candidates—with only two exceptions: in 1992, when 65% of Haredim voted for

George H. W. Bush (vs. 34% for Bill Clinton), and 1996, when Clinton received 55% vs. Bob Dole (45%).

- 73% maintain that “being an American” is a somewhat or very important part of their identity; an equal number are somewhat proud or very proud to be American.
- 88% assert that democracy is important or very important to them.
- 80% vote always or most of the time in elections.
- 41% declare that they often or sometimes are told for whom to vote; in the largest number of cases (67%), they are told by community leaders (*askunim*), followed by rabbis, and family members.
- 51% describe themselves as somewhat or strongly Zionist.

A second survey, which was intended to gauge shifts in attitudes after the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7, was completed in February 2024.⁴ This survey attracted 1,307 Modern Orthodox and Haredi respondents. In general, the two surveys raise a pair of methodological questions: how representative was the sampling given that there is no comprehensive census of the Orthodox community in the United States? And given that the survey was conducted online, what segment of the Haredi community did this survey attract, in light of the fact that a considerable minority of community members might not be open or have ready access to an online survey?⁵ In response, we note that the two surveys reveal a good deal of consistency in their findings, suggesting a strong conservative orientation, which, one might surmise, would likely comport with the attitudes of “off-line” Haredim. It is also important to note in the survey the disconnect among Haredim between self-identifying as a Zionist and feeling a close bond to Israel; this clearly sets them apart from Modern Orthodox Jews, for whom Zionist affiliation and connection to Israel are closely linked.

Among the key findings of the second US-based survey are:

- 69% identify as Republicans/conservative/libertarian (vs. 63% who identified as Republican in September 2023), whereas 92% plan to vote for Donald Trump (versus 90% surveyed in September 2023). Only 9% identified as Democrat/liberal in February 2024.
- 45% of Haredim describe their upbringing as strongly or somewhat Zionist (as opposed to 86% of Modern Orthodox); 51% of Haredim describe themselves as somewhat or strongly Zionist today.
- 94% of Haredim feel strongly (84%) or somewhat (11%) connected to Israel.
- 64% of Haredim report that their feelings for Israel became stronger after October 7.

2. THE ISRAELI CASE

The Israeli survey was conducted by Nechumi Malovicki-Yaffe and Chaya Lehfield-Trop in May 2024 through the Tatay Research Institute for the purposes of this paper. Its questions were based on those posed in the two Nishma Research studies. Israeli participants were invited to take part in the survey through banners published on the largest Haredi website in Israel and worldwide, Kikar Ha-Shabbat (Shabbat Square), which attracted over 3.5 million unique visits to the site each month during the past year. After clicking on the banner, participants were directed to a study designed to examine their attitudes toward the political attitudes, along with questions about respondents' identity. The survey ran between May 15–19, 2024, and drew 661 participants, of whom 46% were female. Of those who participated, 45% were Lithuanian, 23% Mizrahi, 25% Hasidic, and 7% identify as other.

Among the key findings were:

- Participants' mean age was 33.454 ($SD = 11.17$).
- The majority (84%) were married.
- Participants described themselves as poor. On a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1 (*well above average*) to 5 (*well below average*), their mean assessment of income was 4.1 ($SD = 2.12$).
- In terms of their political stance, 15% identified as extreme right, 44% as right, 31% as moderate right, 8% as centrist, and 2% as moderate left.
- 59% maintain that "being Israeli" is a somewhat or very important part of their identity; 58% are somewhat proud or very proud to be Israeli.
- 70% assert that democracy is important or very important to them.
- 95% vote always or most of the time in elections.
- 63% declare that they often or sometimes are told for whom to vote; in the largest number of cases (95%), they are told by rabbis, followed by community leaders (*askunim*) (18%), followed by family members (13%).
- 47% describe their approach to Zionism as positive to some or a large extent.

3. COMPARING HAREDI ATTITUDES IN THE US AND ISRAEL

This paper presents an opportunity to bring together key findings from the two surveys of Haredi communities in Israel and the US. This comparison allows us to disaggregate the larger transnational group of Haredim into smaller national cohorts—and thereby to highlight attitudinal differences emerging out of the

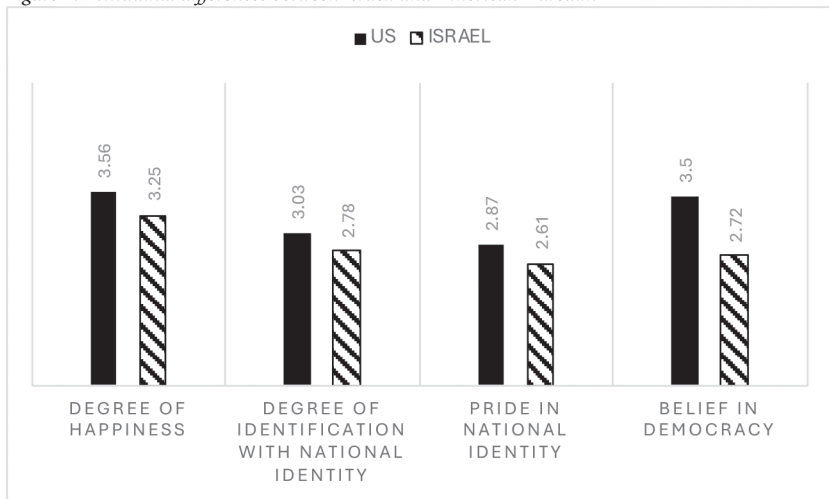
distinct national contexts. The comparison focuses on a number of questions that were asked in both surveys, including:

1. In general, describe whether you are happy in life.
2. Do you believe that being Israeli or American is an important part of your identity?
3. How important is democracy to you? Are you proud to be an American?
4. Does anyone tell you for whom to vote in elections? If so, who?

Among the key findings of the combined surveys:

- American Haredim declare themselves to be considerably happier than Israelis.⁶
- More American Haredim identify with or are proud to be American than Israeli Haredim identify with or are proud to be Israeli.⁷
- More American Haredim express appreciation for democracy than Israeli Haredim.⁸
- American Haredim feel much more connected to Israel than Israeli Haredim feel to diaspora Jews.⁹
- Fewer Israeli Haredim declare themselves to feel Zionist than American Haredim (47% vs. 51%).¹⁰

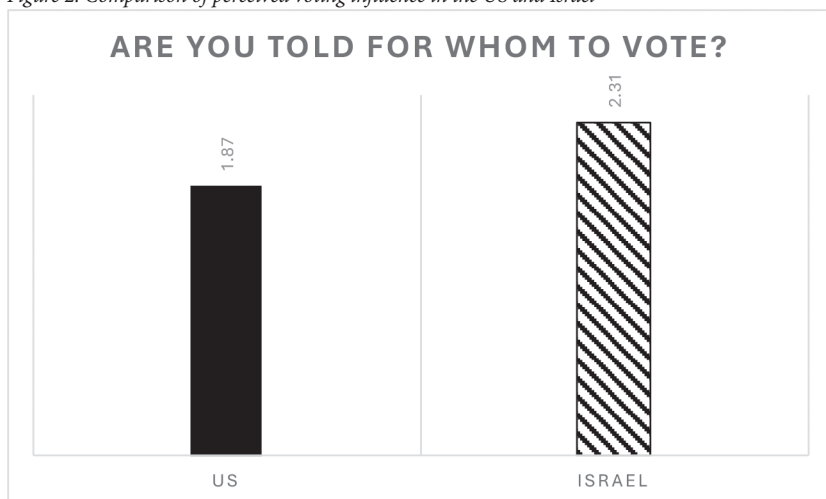
Figure 1. Attitudinal differences between Israeli and American Haredim¹¹



The next measure was whether there is a difference between the communities regarding the question of who tells you how to vote. Here again we found a significant difference between the two groups. In short, Israeli Haredim were

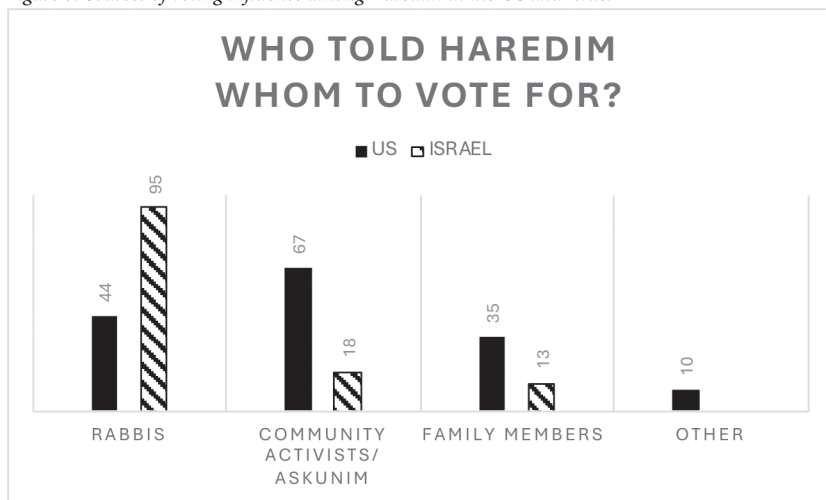
significantly more likely to be told for whom to vote than Haredim in the United States.¹²

Figure 2. Comparison of perceived voting influence in the US and Israel



To the question of who tells Israeli and American Haredim to vote, there was a notable difference. For Haredim in the US, community activists (*askunim*) and family members were more likely to influence their votes than in Israel, where rabbis were more likely to offer guidance.

Figure 3. Sources of voting influence among Haredim in the US and Israel



The surveys revealed a number of interesting correlations in the American sample:

- Happiness stood in inverse relationship to one's identity as an American.
- By contrast, there was a positive correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote.
- Identity as an American is strongly and positively correlated with pride in being American ($r = .564, p < .001$) and support for democracy ($r = .226, p < .001$).
- By contrast, identity had a weak negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -.094, p < .001$).
- Pride in being American had a positive correlation with support for democracy ($r = .260, p < .001$) and a weak negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -.090, p < .001$). Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between pride and happiness.¹³

A similar correlation analysis was done for Israeli Haredim with some notable differences. For example:

- There was a weak positive correlation between happiness and democracy ($r = .085, p = .008$).
- Identity demonstrated a strong positive correlation with pride ($r = .628, p < .001$) and democracy ($r = .286, p < .001$), and a negative correlation with the question of who tells you how to vote ($r = -.122, p = .002$).
- There was a positive correlation between pride and democracy ($r = .286, p < .001$) and a weak negative correlation with who tells you how to vote ($r = -.031, p = .004$).¹⁴

Survey data also highlight a significant disparity in how Israeli and American Haredi communities perceive their connection to one another. Haredi Jews in the US tend to feel a deeper connection to Israel, possibly reflecting the centrality of Israel in their religious and cultural identity, as well as the influence of education and community leadership that emphasizes solidarity with Israel. Conversely, Haredi Jews in Israel appear to have a weaker connection to diaspora Jewry, which could be the result of a stronger focus on local community life, or to a lesser degree of exposure to Jewish communities outside of Israel. This discrepancy may also indicate broader differences in the degree of insularity and understanding of Jewishness outside of their own community.

Figure 4. Sense of connection to Jews in Israel/Diaspora among US and Israeli Jews

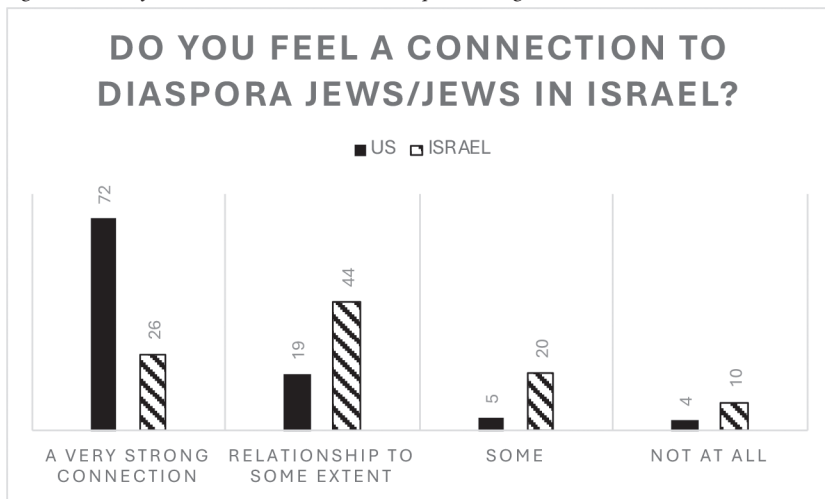


Figure 5. Attitudes toward Zionism among US and Israeli Haredim



This finding also supplements data on attitudes to Zionism, which reveal that American Jews are slightly more Zionist than Israelis. This figure affirms the higher degree of connection of US-based Haredim to Israel and Israeli Jews and the greater disconnection of Israel-based Haredim to those outside of their community.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper joins a growing body of research on the political life and perspective of Haredi Jews. Its particular contribution is to highlight the attitudes and behaviors of Haredim as political actors and voters in Israel and the United States through a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods. A comparison of the two groups reveals both similarities and differences. In the first regard, Haredim in both contexts are conservative in their political disposition: American Haredim have consistently voted Republican in presidential elections since 1980; Israel Haredim, as Nissim Leon shows in his paper in this volume, have become increasingly identified with right-wing parties since 1977. At the same time, American Haredim appear to be more comfortable than Israeli Haredim in their relationship to the polity to which they belong; they express more identification with and sense of belonging to the United States than Israeli Haredim do toward Israel. They also are more firmly committed to democracy than their Israeli peers.

Both groups have a famously transactional relationship to government. Israeli Haredim engage in party politics in order to promote issues of great concern to them that include, as our survey data show: the economy and inflation, the security situation, funding for education, and health. In comparison, American Haredim mobilize their formidable political networks to attend to their issues of greatest concern: the economy, crime, Israel, antisemitism, and education.¹⁵ There is another important finding. The September 2023 survey reveals that 91% of Haredim believe somewhat or strongly that the United States is a *malkhus shel hesed*, a rather unique “kingdom of grace” in the annals of the Jewish Diaspora.¹⁶ More research is necessary to provide empirical grounding, but it is reasonable to assume, given their historical antipathy to Zionism, that many Haredim in Israel regard the state as a necessary evil or worse, but not as a kingdom of grace.

This paper is but a cornerstone of a future edifice of research that tracks the political attitudes and voting behavior of Haredim. It will be important to focus, especially in the US case, on both national and local levels, where there are different interests, affiliations, and, in all likelihood, voting patterns. It will also be necessary to trace the way in which ongoing Haredi immersion in the world of the Internet may alter social and political norms, either by opening new perspectives or producing a sharp conservative backlash. What is clear, above all, is that Haredim are an increasingly significant part of a transnational Jewish world, although, as we have endeavored to show, far from a monolith.

Notes

- 1 In the American case, an important exception in investigating Haredi voting behavior is Nathaniel Deutsch, "'Borough Park Was a Red State': Trump and the Haredi Vote," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 3 (2017): 158–73, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.22.3.08>. See also Nomi M. Stolzenberg and David N. Myers, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 376–96. Meanwhile, the various research initiatives of the Israel Democracy Institute generate valuable data and insight into many aspects of Haredi life in Israel, though relatively little on political attitudes and behavior. See <https://en.idi.org.il/tags-en/2081>.
2. On the "HarDaLim," see Yair Sheleg, *Ha-Hardalim: Historiyah, Ideologiyah. Kokhot* [Haredi Zionists: History, Ideology, Presence] (Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2020), <https://www.idi.org.il/media/15255/the-zionist-ultra-orthodox-history-ideology-presence.pdf>. See also Daniel Mahla, "Convergence of Fundamentalisms? Ultra-Orthodox Nationalists (*Hardalim*) in Israel," *Zeitschrift* 7 (2023): 151–71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-022-00122-3>.
3. See Mark Trencher and David N. Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors: Haredi and Modern Orthodox Sectors," Nishma Research, September 2023, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Orthodox%20Jewish%20Political%20Attitudes%20and%20Behaviors%20September%202023.pdf>.
4. See Mark Trencher and David N. Myers, "Israel, Zionism, Politics, and the Impact of Israel's War with Hamas," Nishma Research, February 2024, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Israel,%20Zionism,%20Politics,%20Impact%20of%20War%20With%20Hamas%20-%20February%202024.pdf>.
5. These questions are relevant for all surveys of the Haredi community. The studies cited above (nn. 2–3) and others deal with them in various ways, such as engagement through known organizations and publications that Haredim use and respect, as well as some stratified sample weighting.
6. Happiness scores between the two groups ($F = 15.697$, $p < .001$) $t(1264.824) = 8.159$, $p < .001$, (95% CI: 0.234 to 0.383), with a standard error of 0.038.
7. On the identity measure, a significant difference was found in identity scores, $t(1379.803) = 6.671$, $p < .001$. The mean difference was 0.249 (95% CI [0.175, 0.322]), with a standard error of 0.037. On the level of pride in national identity, the analysis revealed a significant difference in pride scores, $t(1336.916) = 4.941$, $p < .001$.
8. There was a statistically significant difference in democracy scores between the two groups, $t(1178.973) = 13.858$, $p < .001$.
9. $t(1192.013) = 16.308$, $p < .001$, two-tailed), with a large mean difference of 0.693 (95% CI [0.609, 0.776]).

10. $(1540.073) = 0.342$, $p = .732$, two-tailed), with a small mean difference of 0.016 (95% CI [-0.075, 0.106]).
11. For clarity and ease of interpretation, all scales in the graphs are coded as 1 being not at all and 5 to a large extent converted from the original scale.
12. $t(1187.460) = -10.480$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed). The mean difference was -0.443 (95% CI [-0.526, -0.360]), with a standard error of 0.042.
13. This table illustrates the correlation between variables in the American sample:

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Happiness	--				
2. Identity	-.041	--			
3. Pride	-.023	.564**	--		
4. Democracy	.081**	.226**	.260**	--	
5. Who tells you what to vote	.052	-.094**	-.090**	-.088**	--

14. This table illustrates the correlation between variables in the Israeli sample:

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Happiness	--				
2. Identity	-.155**	--			
3. Pride	-.020	.628**	--		
4. Democracy	-.085*	.286**	.286**	--	
5. Who tells you what to vote	-.122**	-.206**	.180**	-.031	--

15. See Trencher and Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors," section on "Importance of Issue as a Voter," 8.
16. Trencher and Myers, "A Survey of Orthodox Jewish Political Attitudes and Behaviors," section on "Perceptions of the United States," 11.

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MARK TRENCHER is the founder and head of Nishma Research, which he established in 2015 upon his retirement from the business world. He has conducted sixteen broad Jewish communal studies, with a focus on relatively unexplored issues in the Orthodox community. He headed the research departments at two Fortune 100 firms and has served as Adjunct Professor at undergraduate and graduate levels in mathematics (Kean University), operations research (Rutgers University), and statistics (University of Hartford). He has been and continues to be heavily engaged in lay leadership positions within the Orthodox community. He has rabbinic ordination and also conducts Yiddish language appreciation seminars.

CHAYA LEHRFIELD TROP completed her master’s degree in clinical psychology research at Tel Aviv University, graduating summa cum laude, where her thesis focused on how the context of social situations influences cognitive responses in psychopathology. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in psychology and sociology, graduating summa cum laude. As a Haredi woman who studied in Beit Ya’akov institutions, Chaya earned a teaching certificate in religious studies and history. Currently, she is a researcher at the Taty Institute, where she conducts weekly public opinion polls on ultra-Orthodox society.

GALINA ZELENINA is an associate professor at Moscow State University. Originally a medievalist, with a specialty in Spain and Spanish Jewry, now she mostly focuses on the history of Soviet Jewry with particular reference to autobiographical writing, issues of identity, memory, and gender, and questions of emigration and cultural revival. She has published on medieval and early modern Spanish Jews, Conversos and the Inquisition, and on Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish cultural history.

The USC Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life

The American Jewish community has played a vital role in shaping the politics, culture, commerce and multiethnic character of Southern California and the American West. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when entrepreneurs like Isaias Hellman, Levi Strauss and Adolph Sutro first ventured out West, American Jews became a major force in the establishment and development of the budding Western territories. Since 1970, the number of Jews in the West has more than tripled. This dramatic demographic shift has made California—specifically, Los Angeles—home to the second largest Jewish population in the United States. Paralleling this shifting pattern of migration, Jewish voices in the West are today among the most prominent anywhere in the United States. Largely migrating from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the East Coast of the United States, Jews have invigorated the West, where they exert a considerable presence in every sector of the economy—most notably in the media and the arts. With the emergence of Los Angeles as a world capital in entertainment and communications, the Jewish perspective and experience in the region are being amplified further. From artists and activists to scholars and professionals, Jews are significantly influencing the shape of things to come in the West and across the United States. In recognition of these important demographic and societal changes, in 1998 the University of Southern California established a scholarly institute dedicated to studying contemporary Jewish life in America with special emphasis on the western United States. The Casden Institute explores issues related to the interface between the Jewish community and the broader, multifaceted cultures that form the nation—issues of relationship as much as of Jewishness itself. It is also enhancing the educational experience for students at USC and elsewhere by exposing them to the problems—and promise—of life in Los Angeles' ethnically, socially, culturally and economically diverse community. Scholars, students and community leaders examine the ongoing contributions of American Jews in the arts, business, media, literature, education, politics, law and social relations, as well as the relationships between Jewish Americans and other groups, including African Americans,

Latinos, Asian Americans and Arab Americans. The Casden Institute's scholarly orientation and contemporary focus, combined with its location on the West Coast, set it apart from—and makes it an important complement to—the many excellent Jewish Studies programs across the nation that center on Judaism from an historical or religious perspective.

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