

The Ultra-Orthodox in Israel: Who They Are, Where They Are Headed

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze current developments and trends in the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) society in Israel. It begins with a discussion of who the ultra-Orthodox are and why it is not easy to define them, followed by an overview of the group, with particular attention to the tensions and conflicts with the majority society. Exploring the ultra-Orthodox as a society in change, which nevertheless manages to maintain its enclave mentality, the article concludes with several predictions as to how it may evolve in the coming decades.

Key Words: the Ultra-Orthodox, Israel, Identity

Introduction

Israel's ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) population is a minority group comprising 13% of the total population (including non-Jews).^① In recent years, amidst demographic trends suggesting that within less than two generations, one in three Israelis will be a Haredi, research on this group has blossomed.^②

^① Lee Cahaner and Gilad Malach, *Statistical Report on Orthodox Society in Israel 2020* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2021), 11. [Hebrew]

^② Kimmy Kaplan and Yael Becher, *Studying Israeli Haredi Society: A Scholarly Inventory* (Jerusalem, September 2022), 11. [Hebrew]

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This article aims to analyze current processes and trends in Haredi society and offers several predictions regarding the future of the ultra-Orthodox over the coming decades. It begins with a discussion of who the ultra-Orthodox are and why it is not easy to define them, followed by an overview of the group and its social, political, cultural, and educational characteristics, with particular attention to the main tensions and conflicts with the majority society. Exploring the ultra-Orthodox as a society in change that nevertheless manages to maintain its enclave mentality, the article concludes with several predictions as to how it may evolve in the coming decades.

I. Who Is Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi)?

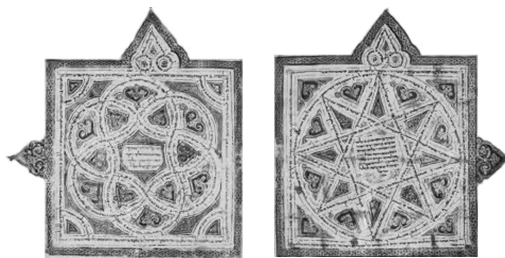
In the last two decades, ultra-Orthodox society in Israel has experienced change in various areas and expanded its boundaries. These changes have raised questions regarding what ultra-Orthodox Judaism is, who is “ultra-Orthodox,” and, accordingly, what defines whether a person is ultra-Orthodox.

Friedman, who laid the foundation for research on the group in Israel, claimed that the term “ultra-Orthodox Judaism,” in the modern era, refers to a defined and distinct part of Jewish society that considers itself committed to *halakha* (Jewish law) as interpreted and delineated by authorities in Jewish religious tradition (“orthodoxy”).^①

Unlike non-ultra-Orthodox forms of religious Judaism, such as Religious Zionism, the ultra-Orthodox are characterized, according to Friedman, by the following criteria: commitment to the strict interpretation of Jewish law; (male) total commitment to the study of Torah (specifically, the Babylonian Talmud); total obedience to religious authority; differential rejection of modernity; resistance to Zionism or at least its ideological rejection; and separation from the non-ultra-Orthodox majority.^②

① Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes* (Jerusalem: Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), 6-7. [Hebrew]

② Ibid.



Brown emphasized the concept of “faith of the sages” as a definer of Haredi society.^① This concept underscores the obligation of ultra-Orthodox to obey religious authority not only in matters of *halakha* but also in non-*halakhic*, everyday matters. Brown further highlighted the *halakhic* limitations that ultra-Orthodox Jews adopt and pointed to the “traditional” external appearance that distinguishes them from others in society. This “traditional” appearance includes modesty rules regarding appropriate dress, mainly applied to women.^②

The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is diverse and comprised of different sub-groups. These sub-groups are distinguished from each other according to the extent to which they deviate from tradition and have been influenced by modernity.^③ Writing more than three decades ago, Friedman suggested four main types of ultra-Orthodox:

“Lithuanian Jews” (also known as Litvak or Yeshivish) represent the way of life that emerged in Poland-Lithuania at the end of the 19th century. This stream holds to the educational-value ethos of a “community of learners,” according to which men must devote themselves to the study of Torah in yeshivas, while women raise the children and earn a living. This ethos gives the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel its unique character.

“Polish-Hasidic Jews” represent the Hasidic tradition that emerged in Poland. This stream is organized around a Hasidic “court” led by a rebbe, who shapes the nature of his congregation. One of the most influential courts in this stream is the Gur Hasidim, whose members constituted one of the pillars of the Agudath Israel movement. This international ultra-Orthodox movement worked to advance the interests of Haredim in the fields of education and welfare.

“Hungarian Jews” represent both the Hasidic tradition and Hungarian orthodoxy, which was inspired and shaped by Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Hatam

① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors* (Jerusalem: Am-Oved/The Israel Democracy Institute, 2017), 11-12, 25. [Hebrew]

② *Ibid.*, 12.

③ Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*, 6-7; Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 18-31.

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Sofer, 1762-1839), his sons, and his students. This group expresses positions against modernity, enlightenment ideals, and Zionism, which are stricter than those of the other Lithuanians and Hasidim.

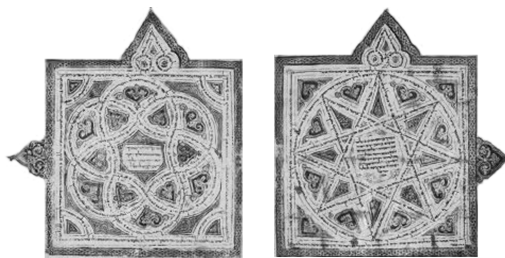
“The Jerusalemites (*Yerushalmim*)” represent the tradition that was created in the old Ashkenazi (whose origins are in Europe) community in Jerusalem. Strict observance and anti-Zionist attitudes characterized this group and brought it closer to the “Hungarians” and, especially, to the Satmar Hasidism, which comprises several “courts” and strict anti-Zionist groups.

Another group, which Friedman located (at the time) on the fringes of ultra-Orthodox society, is the Sephardim. That is, ultra-Orthodox whose ethnicity is of Spanish, North African, and Middle Eastern descent. Friedman did not research the Sephardim and emphasized that this group requires further research.

Two decades later, Leon filled this lacuna. He included in the definition of ultra-Orthodox also religious and traditional Sephardic Jews, who in the 1980s united around the figure of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013) and his *halakhic* rulings, with the assistance of the Shaspolitical-social movement (*Shomrei Torah Sephardim*, or Sephardic Guardians of the Torah). This community adopted the Lithuanian ultra-Orthodox model but was characterized by a less strict approach to most areas of life compared to the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox groups. Therefore, Leon referred to the Sephardim as “soft ultra-Orthodox.”^①

Indeed, compared to Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox groups, the Sephardic stream is more open to modernity and the non-ultra-Orthodox majority; is less strict regarding modesty rules and gender segregation; expresses less resistance to Zionism, and even identifies with it; and is not strongly opposed to military service, with some of the men serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Accordingly, Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox do not consider Sephardic ultra-Orthodox an integral part of the ultra-Orthodox. Their exclusion is seen in the separation between the two groups in the education system and in marriage.

① Nissim Leon, “Mizrahi Ultra-Orthodoxy: Strict Ideology, Liquid Identity,” *Journal for the Research of Haredi Society* 1 (June 2014): 1-20. [Hebrew]



Doron included in his definition of ultra-Orthodox Judaism also *baaleiteshuva*, “reborn” Jews who were not religious originally or did not come from an ultra-Orthodox background but have since adopted ultra-Orthodox worldviews and way of life.^① Some *baalei teshuva* identified with Sephardic ultra-Orthodoxy; others wholly detached from their previous lives and adopted extremely pious views; and others, while adopting ultra-Orthodox views, remained, to varying degrees, part of their previous life, mainly in their professional vocation.

Some *baalei teshuva* are highly educated and employed in critical professions and are generally characterized by relative openness to modernity and the majority. Some have integrated into the less introverted Hasidic groups such as *Chabad* or the new current of *Breslav*.^②

Malach and Cahaner expanded the definition to include “modern ultra-Orthodox” — those who originate from various ultra-Orthodox groups and have, in recent years, integrated more into the non-ultra-Orthodox majority and also adopted modern Western worldviews and values.^③ Individuals who belong to this group (which makes up about 7% of the ultra-Orthodox population) no longer see the “society of learners” as an ideal, and their sons are not committed totally to Torah study. This group also does not entirely obey religious authority. They strive for higher education, to become accomplished professionals, to integrate into the labor market, and, in general, to integrate into Israeli society. They serve in the military and turn to professional authority as an alternative to religious authority.^④

The expanding boundaries of the definition of ultra-Orthodoxy, and the

① Shlomi Doron, “Changing Identities Through Rituals: Newcomers to and Defectors from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 27 (2013): 13-32.

② Yoram Bilu and Tzvi Mark, “Between the Righteous and the Messiah: Outlines for a Comparative Analysis of Chabad Hasidism and Breslav Hasidism,” *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 23 (2013): 350-377; Benjamin Brown, *A Society in Motion: Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2021), 248-253. [Hebrew]

③ Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “Elements of Modern Life or ‘Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy’? Numerical Assessment of Modernization Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Society,” *Democratic Culture* 17 (2017): 19-51. [Hebrew]

④ Lee Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society on the Axis between Conservatism and Modernity* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2020), 19-70, 259-300. [Hebrew]

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wide variety of groups it includes leads to the question of how to define who is ultra-Orthodox for research and discussion. The Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) proposed three criteria for the definition of a household as ultra-Orthodox.^①

According to the educational institutions where the family members studied: a household is defined as ultra-Orthodox if it has at least one yeshiva graduate. This definition is problematic because it does not include families of *baalei teshuva*, who did not graduate from a yeshiva, nor does it include households with women only.

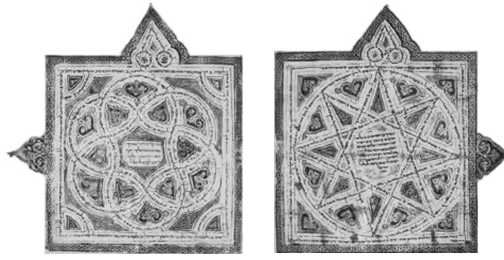
According to residence: a household is defined as ultra-Orthodox if it is in a city where the majority voted for Shas (Sephardic Guardians of the Torah), and Yahadut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism, UTJ), the two primary ultra-Orthodox political parties. This definition is also problematic, primarily because Shas is also supported by voters from traditional and Religious Zionist Sephardic families that are not identified with the ultra-Orthodox community.

According to self-definition: an ultra-Orthodox is someone who defines themselves as such. This, too, is problematic since, among the ultra-Orthodox population, there is often more difference than similarity. For example, a person who defines himself as an ultra-Orthodox but does not adhere to absolute gender segregation or legitimizes Zionism, may not be defined as ultra-Orthodox by other and less moderate ultra-Orthodox.

II. Background on the Ultra-Orthodox in Israel

The roots of ultra-Orthodox Judaism lie in Europe. In the 18th and 19th centuries, religious values and traditions began to disintegrate in the face of emancipation and secularization. The division in the Jewish community between those who wanted to continue adhering to Jewish law and those who wanted to abandon or change it led to the use of the term “orthodoxy” in the Jewish context. This term expressed the perception of *halakha*, as interpreted in the Talmud and by the Sages, as relevant for all times, without change.

^① Israela Friedman et al., “Measurement and Estimates of Population of Ultra-Orthodox Jews,” *Technical Paper no. 25* (Jerusalem: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011), 4-14. [Hebrew]



The term “ultra-Orthodoxy” describes the streams that went further and sought to adhere to the strictest interpretations of *halakha*, accepting additional and new limitations that had not been part of Jewish tradition as a means to fend off the dangers of modernization.^① These streams were influenced by the ruling of Rabbi Moshe Sofer, who stated that “new things are forbidden from the Torah” in all aspects of life, including those that do not contradict Jewish law.^②

The emergence of Zionism exacerbated the split between Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy. The division between these two streams deepened after Israel’s establishment due to differences regarding their attitudes towards Zionism and in their socio-religious ethos, with one striving to separate from the majority society and the other striving to integrate and be involved in building the country (while maintaining its practiced religiosity).

The split between the two streams reached its peak in 1951 when the “United Religious Front” — the political bloc that united Religious Zionist Jews and the ultra-Orthodox since Israel’s establishment — disbanded. Since then, the ultra-Orthodox have formed separate political parties representing particular ultra-Orthodox subgroups.

III. The Ultra-Orthodox and the Zionist State

As described above, the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel comprises a range of approaches to Zionism. The vast majority (about 95%) identify with the more moderate view, which, despite its principle objection to Zionism as a secular ideology, recognizes the Zionist state and tends to obey its laws and avoid confrontations with its authorities.^③

From their split with the Religious Zionists until the 1980s, the ultra-Orthodox were represented in the Knesset mainly by Agudath Israel, dominated by the Gur Hasidic group. In the November 1988 elections, this political party split into two parties: “Agudath Israel,” representing the

① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 18-22.

② Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*, 7.

③ Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 211-231.

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Hasidic current, and “Degel Hatorah” (the flag of the Torah), representing the Lithuanians.^① The two reunited before the 1992 elections as Yahadut Hatorah and remained united ever since, with seven seats in the current Knesset—the exact number of combined seats they had in 1988.

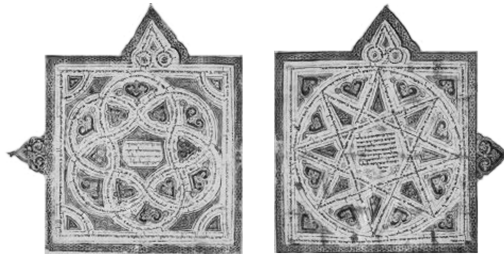
Why the representation of Yahadut Hatorah in the Knesset has not significantly grown despite the high fertility rates of its electorate has been one of the mysteries of Israeli politics. Part of the answer is that over the past 30 years, the demographic surge of the ultra-Orthodox was checked by waves of secular migration, mainly from the former USSR; another is that larger numbers of Haredim do not obey the Rabbis and vote for non-Haredi political parties, while some ceased voting at all for ideological reasons.

The strongest ultra-Orthodox political force since the mid-1980s has been Shas, representing the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox. Shas gained four seats when it first ran for parliament in 1984 and 11 in the most recent elections. Despite (but also because of) stormy criminal scandals in which members of its political leadership were embroiled, since its inception, Shas has maintained, with few interruptions, its electoral base and a kingmaker role in Israeli politics. It has steadily grown independent of the influence of non-Sephardic Rabbis and has elevated the status of Haredi Sephardic sages within the Haredi public at large.

Since 1977, the year Agudath Israel joined the first right-wing governing coalition in a country established and shaped by secular socialists, the ultra-Orthodox have enjoyed exceeding political influence. From that year on, ultra-Orthodox parties have been part of every right-wing-led coalition except for 2003-2004 and 2013-2015, when their exclusion was part of the agenda of centrist parties.

The 18 seats secured by the ultra-Orthodox in the most recent November 1, 2022, Knesset elections make up almost a third of the number required to form the majority. The centrist and left-leaning political parties made it clear that they would not join a coalition led by the largest faction in parliament, the right-wing Likud, whose head, Benjamin Netanyahu, the longest-serving

① Menachem Friedman, *Ultra-Orthodox Society: Sources, Trends and Processes*, 20-30.



prime minister in the history of the state, stands for trial on bribery breach of trust charges. The political survival of Netanyahu, and his hopes to remain in power and possibly out of prison, have thus become entirely dependent on the Haredi factions, whose voters vehemently and unconditionally sympathize with Netanyahu and distrust the Israeli judiciary.

As a result, the Haredim currently wield more power than ever before in Israeli political history. During coalition negotiations, the Haredi factions demanded inflated budgets, the continuation of the almost absolute deference of army service for ultra-Orthodox, and the passing of a law allowing gender segregation at public events without it being considered discrimination. Their outsized influence has raised doubts among secularist and traditional-secularist Israelis, who are still the majority in the country, whether Israel can maintain its democratic and liberal essence, and whether its economy and security can endure of Haredi population and influence.

A small minority of ultra-Orthodox in Israel (about 5%) are anti-Zionists who do not recognize the state. The circles associated with this camp have tended over the years to violate state laws in a blatant, provocative, and even violent manner.^① The anti-Zionist camp comprises groups and communities who identify as “Eda Haredit.” The Eda Haredit (or “Eda”) is the communal, religious, and economic framework that unites the segment of ultra-Orthodox society that sought to separate itself from the organizational-community frameworks of the Zionist Yishuv during the British Mandate. To this day, it does not recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel as a Jewish state and does not cooperate with its institutions.^②

This camp adopted a fierce and uncompromising anti-Zionist position and demanded that its members separate from the Zionist enterprise and the State of Israel. Zionism, according to the Eda, is blasphemy against the hope of Messianic redemption, reflecting a rebellion against God and a betrayal of the

① Menachem Friedman, “Haredi Violence in Contemporary Israeli Society,” *Studies in Contemporary Israeli Society* 18 (2002): 186-198; Sima Zalcberg Block, “Religious Coercion and Violence Against Women: The Case of Beit Shemesh,” in *Women’s Rights and Religious Law*, eds. Fareda Banda and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe (London: Routledge, 2016), 152-176.

② Menachem Friedman, *Society and Religion* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1977), 31. [Hebrew]

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Jewish faith.^① The Eda Haredit includes several circles such as the “Yerushalmim,” Brisk, Dushinsky, and Neturei Karta, as well as Hasidic “courts” such as Munkacs, Pinsk-Karlin, Satmar, Spinka, Toldot Aharon, and Toldot Avraham Yitzhak.^② In the past decade, an anti-Zionist trend has also been adopted by the “Jerusalem faction” — a Lithuanian faction that became radicalized — and among peripheral groups of *baalei teshuva*.^③

IV. Characteristics and Trends

Although ultra-Orthodox society comprises a wide range of groups and streams, it is possible to observe several crucial common shared characteristics and trends relating to demography, education, higher education, employment, and military service.

A. Demography

The ultra-Orthodox population in Israel is particularly young (about 60% are under the age of twenty, compared to 35% of the total population in Israel) and is characterized by extremely high fertility rates (about 6.6 children on average per ultra-Orthodox woman compared to less than two children on average per woman in the Western world).^④ This is due to the strict observance of the command “to be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 9:7) and the prohibition on using contraceptives.^⑤

The high fertility rates affect the community’s rapid growth rate. Forecasts indicate that within fifteen years, the ultra-Orthodox proportion of the total population (including non-Jews) will be 16%, and the proportion of ultra-Orthodox of working age will be 11%. According to long-term forecasts,

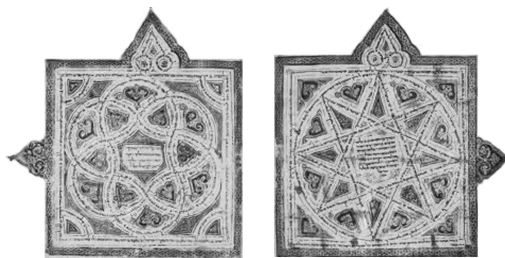
① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 153-183.

② Menachem Keren-Kratz, “Wall of Separation: Neturei Karta and Its Press During the Foundation of the State,” *Kesher* 50 (Fall 2017): 71-88. [Hebrew]

③ Shlomi Doron, “Changing Identities Through Rituals: Newcomers to and Defectors from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism.”

④ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*.

⑤ Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, “Your Faith or Mine: A Pregnancy Spacing Intervention in an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Community in Israel,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 16 (November 2008): 185-191.



in 2065, ultra-Orthodox will make up about a third of the total population in Israel and 40% of the Jewish population in Israel—over five and a half million people.^① According to Ben David, in less than forty-five years, about half of Israel’s children will be from the ultra-Orthodox community!^②

Still, there has been a 0.4% decrease in fertility rates since the late 1990s, when the fertility rate for an ultra-Orthodox woman was seven children.^③ This resulted from an increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox women using contraceptives,^④ the concept of “family planning” spreading in ultra-Orthodox society, and, perhaps, the increase in the age of marriage.^⑤ According to Cahaner and Malach, fertility rates in the Haredi community may continue to decrease; if so, this will reduce its growth rate.^⑥

B. Education

Even before Israel’s establishment, the ultra-Orthodox had a separate education system under the auspices of Agudath Israel. As part of the guidelines for regulating religion and state relations during the transition from the pre-state period to independence, full educational autonomy was granted to the ultra-Orthodox within the framework of “independent education.” It became the so-called “status quo.”

Due to the refusal of ultra-Orthodox to accept the state’s requirements for core studies (including core subjects such as math and science), independent education was and still is funded only partially by the state. This arrangement did not include the ultra-Orthodox circles that refused — and refuse to this day, at least formally — to receive state funds.^⑦

① Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 15.

② Dan Ben-David, “The Shores Handbook: Education and Its Impact in Israel, 2017-2018,” *The Shores Institution for Socioeconomic Research* (2018).

③ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 13.

④ Lee Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society on the Axis between Conservatism and Modernity* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2020), 200; Kimmy Kaplan, *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2007), 231-233. [Hebrew]

⑤ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 13.

⑥ *Ibid.*, 14.

⑦ Benjamin Brown, *A Society in Motion: Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*, 74-76.

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The ultra-Orthodox education system maintains complete gender segregation. Boys study in “Talmud Torah” from three to thirteen. In this framework, religious studies are emphasized, but there are a few extracurricular studies at the most basic level. At thirteen, young ultra-Orthodox men move to yeshivas, where their studies from morning until evening are devoted to religious studies, especially Talmud. At seventeen, the young men move to “big yeshivas,” where they devote themselves to studying Talmud for at least a year. Some retire or partially retire from the yeshiva track to work at one point or another. However, in the Lithuanian stream, most men continue the yeshiva track until their thirties and forties. Thus, most ultra-Orthodox males do not study core subjects, and only a small minority (15%) take matriculation exams.^①

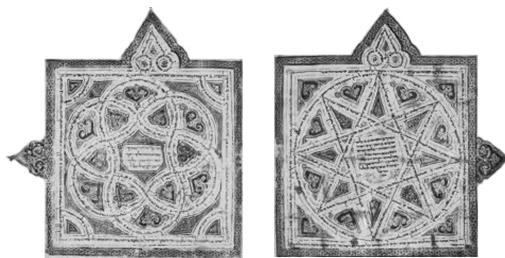
Most ultra-Orthodox girls are educated in the “Beit Ya’akov” network, which includes an elementary school and a seminar equivalent to high school. Over the years, girls’ studies integrated more basic studies covering broader subjects than their male counterparts. This is so girls can fulfill their destiny within the “Society of Learners”— to provide for the family so the husband can devote himself to studying Torah.

The main potential vocation of Haredi women has been teaching in the Beit Ya’akov network. This occupation was perceived as ideal for ultra-Orthodox women, as it allowed them to earn a living while remaining within the community’s boundaries. The level of education at ultra-Orthodox girls’ schools is much lower than that of state institutions. Indeed, only in the past ten years did educational institutions for girls begin preparing them for the state matriculation exams.^②

The teaching field within the community became saturated, making teaching a less viable profession for women to pursue due to a lack of available positions. Moreover, teachers’ salaries did not cover the expenses of families with many children, even more so when the woman was the sole breadwinner. Recognizing the need for additional sources of income, the Beit Ya’akov

① Benjamin Brown, *A Society in Motion: Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*, 76-95.

② Ibid.



institutions have created more training courses, some of which prepare the girls for matriculation exams so that they can pursue degrees, primarily at institutes of higher education that have been established in the last two decades that are geared toward the community. The increased preparation for the matriculation exams in the Beit Ya'akov network led to a tremendous jump in the rate of ultra-Orthodox girls who passed the exam: 58% in 2018/2019, while fifteen years earlier, only 31% passed.^①

Given the data above, as well as the lack of core studies in educational institutions for boys and the community's rapid growth rate, some fear Israel becoming a country of "third-world education."^② However, an encouraging trend is the moderate decrease in the number of ultra-Orthodox boys studying in ultra-Orthodox institutions between 2013-2021.

From 2003 to 2013, the growth in ultra-Orthodox education was rapid and constant at 4.2% per year. From 2013 to 2021, this trend reversed with a 2.3% decrease in total.^③ This trend stems from a decrease in ultra-Orthodox birth rates and in the attractiveness of ultra-Orthodox institutions among the more moderate trends within ultra-Orthodoxy.

At the same time, the influence and importance of ultra-Orthodox state institutions have moderately increased. Ultra-Orthodox state institutions offer a hybrid educational model to pupils from ultra-Orthodox backgrounds whose parents wish to preserve Torah-based ultra-Orthodox educational foundations and have their children obtain a broader education on core subjects and acquire more diverse study skills. This synthesis applies to approximately 4% of all ultra-Orthodox education for boys.^④ Although this rate is low, it is significant from the point of view of the ultra-Orthodox, for whom core studies for boys not only abrogate the Torah but also subvert the ultra-Orthodox ethos.

C. Higher Education

In line with the low rate of eligibility for enrollment to institutes of higher education, the rate of ultra-Orthodox studying in such institutes is also

① Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 98-103.

② Dan Ben-David, "The Shores Handbook: Education and Its Impact in Israel, 2017-2018."

③ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 26-43.

④ *Ibid.*, 27.

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particularly low. While the ultra-Orthodox comprise 13% of the general population, only 4.5% of all university and college students in Israel are ultra-Orthodox. Most students study for a bachelor's degree (82%), while only a few pursue graduate degrees (18%). Most students are female (67%).

While the rate of ultra-Orthodox enrollment is relatively low, it has more than doubled in the last decade, while the rate in the general population has not changed significantly.^① It is, therefore, possible to speak of a process of academization emerging in ultra-Orthodox society, especially for women, but it is still in its infancy.

Most ultra-Orthodox students — both men and women — apply to special academic frameworks that are culturally and religiously adjusted to the values and practices of the ultra-Orthodox student. These frameworks include courses and programs that do not differ in their level and requirements from non-Orthodox academic institutions. In recent years, the number of these institutions has risen, and studying in them has become normative and part of the ultra-Orthodox mainstream.^②

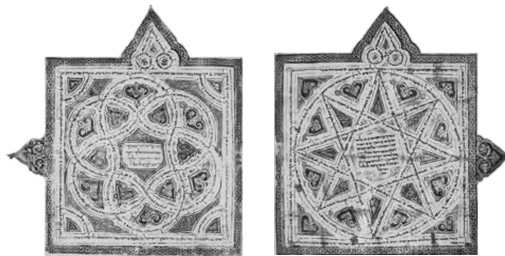
The existence of an “ultra-Orthodox” academic framework expresses a significant change that ultra-Orthodox society is going through and the long way it has come. Once, the concept of “Orthodox academic education” was considered an oxymoron, and higher education was seen as a real threat. Still, the demand for special frameworks also signifies the insistence of the Haredi population to limit the influence of the non-ultra-Orthodox majority and to maintain its autonomy.

D. Employment

In line with the high rate of ultra-Orthodox men who devote themselves to Torah study (or at least claim to) and the low rate of ultra-Orthodox men who pursue higher education, only 52.5% of ultra-Orthodox men of working age (25-64) join the labor market, compared to 86% of men of working age in the

① Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 32-33.

② Novis Deutsch and Rubin, “Ultra-Orthodox Women.”



general populace.^① In the last decade, the rate of ultra-Orthodox men of working age who devote themselves to studying Torah (or at least claim to) and avoid integration into the labor market increased by one-third: in 2012, the number of ultra-Orthodox men of working age who studied in “Kollel” was 70,000, and in 2020 it was 94,000.^②

Furthermore, the lack of professional experience and education among ultra-Orthodox men limits their possible employment in certain occupations. Thus, over the last decade, ultra-Orthodox men have found work in education more than in any other field: about one in three, compared to one in twenty in the general population. It is a low-income profession. Thus, the grim reality is that much of the Haredi contribution to the labor force is the creation of a new generation of Haredi men who will not be able to compete in the job market.

In contrast, the rate of ultra-Orthodox men working in management and high-tech, high-income professions, is particularly low (4.5% and 3%, respectively, compared to 13% and 14%, respectively, in the general population). Furthermore, while the rate of non-ultra-Orthodox men working in the high-tech industry has increased by almost 2% in the last decade, the rate of ultra-Orthodox men in the industry has not changed.^③

These data explain the disparity in average income between ultra-Orthodox men and non-ultra-Orthodox men, which is increasing: the average gross monthly income among ultra-Orthodox men aged 25-64 is twice as low as the average income of men aged 25-64 from the general population.^④ The data illustrates the link between low education and low income in the ultra-Orthodox community, which led Ben David to argue that “third world education” will lead to a “third world economy.”^⑤

Employment data regarding ultra-Orthodox women indicates an increase in their participation in the labor market over the past two decades. This

① Ariel Karlinsky, “Education, Employment and Earnings of Ultra-Orthodox Men, a Long-Term View: Are the Gaps Narrowing?,” *Policy Paper no. 70* (Jerusalem: Kohelet Policy Forum, 2021), 5-7. [Hebrew]

② Ibid., 39-40.

③ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 61.

④ Ibid., 58-59.

⑤ Dan Ben-David, “The Shores Handbook: Education and Its Impact in Israel, 2017-2018.”

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increase coincided with their increasing pursuit of academic studies. In 2003, only about half of ultra-Orthodox women worked, while in 2020, almost 80% of them were working. The data also show the gap between the percentage of working ultra-Orthodox women and the percentage of working non-ultra-Orthodox women (82.5%) has narrowed and that the rates of occupational integration among the two groups are almost equal.^①

Moreover, unlike ultra-Orthodox men, whose main occupation is still education, the occupations of ultra-Orthodox women are similar to those of non-ultra-Orthodox women. For example, between 2014-2020, the rates of ultra-Orthodox women employed in education decreased by 5% in favor of other occupations (39%), while the rates of non-ultra-Orthodox women employed in education did not change significantly (17%). In these years, there was also an increase in the rate of ultra-Orthodox women engaged in high-tech (from 3% to 5%), while among non-ultra-Orthodox women, there was an increase in this industry, but at a lower rate (from 6% to 7%).^②

Despite ultra-Orthodox women increasingly joining the workforce, the reality that in at least half of ultra-Orthodox families, most of which have multiple children, they are the primary or sole breadwinners, means that the ultra-Orthodox population is characterized by extremely high poverty rates (over half of the ultra-Orthodox population lives below the poverty line compared to 21% of the total population), and high levels of housing and population density.^③ Given this, Ben David warns that Israeli society is facing an existential threat.^④

E. Military Service

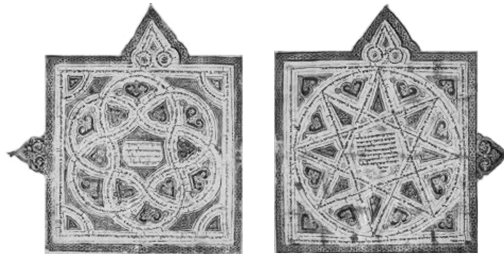
According to the Israeli Defense Service Law (1986), men and women 18 years of age are conscripted into the IDF; men are required to serve three years and women two years. Citizens can be exempted from military service because of different conditions, including religious practices. Ultra-Orthodox youth are

① Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 64.

② *Ibid.*, 63-64.

③ Assaf Tsachor-Shai and Nitsa Kasir, "Covid-19, Population Density, and Haredi Cities," *The Haredi Institute for Public Affairs* (April 2020), 3-4.

④ Dan Ben-David, "The Shoresh Handbook: Education and Its Impact in Israel, 2017-2018."



encouraged to request service exemptions or deferrals based on their being yeshiva students whose “profession” is studying the Torah. Ultimately, they postpone their enlistment until their duty to serve expires, thereby avoiding military service entirely.^①

Ultra-Orthodox opposition to military service stems from several factors: (a) the perception that military service harms Torah study and, given the Torah is of supreme importance, religious study surpasses military service in importance; (b) the perception that the military’s secular framework threatens to undermine or erode the faith of ultra-Orthodox youth even though the IDF goes to great lengths to accommodate their religious and cultural needs; (c) lack of identification with the values of the IDF and the state; and (d) the perception of military service involving risk that contravenes Jewish law.^②

The roots of the generous exemption policy are in a decision taken by Israel’s first prime minister and minister of defense, David Ben-Gurion. In the early years of independence, Ben-Gurion exempted 400 yeshiva students from service in order to enable them to study Torah and revive the yeshiva world that was destroyed in the Holocaust. According to Ben-Gurion, “Based on Section 12 of the Security Service Law, I released yeshiva students from mandatory service. This release applies only to yeshiva students who are engaged in Torah study in yeshivas, as long as they are engaged in Torah study in yeshivas.”^③

The exemption from military service does not allow those who wish to leave the yeshiva and integrate into the labor market to do so without being obliged to enlist. Over the years, the number of yeshiva members has grown; today, over 135,000 yeshiva students are exempt from military service.^④

Until 2007, the rate of ultra-Orthodox who joined the army reached a few hundred at most; it then began to rise until 2015, when enlistment reached more than 2,000 recruits, although it is questionable whether all of these were

① Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 14.

② Yohai Hakak, *Haredi Masculinities Between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics—The Sage, the Warrior, and the Entrepreneur* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 39-56.

③ Zvi Tal, “The Committee to Formulate the Appropriate Arrangement Regarding the Recruitment of Yeshiva Students—A Report [Hebrew],” Knesset of Israel, 2002.

④ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 72.

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actually Haredi at all. However, since 2015, the enlistment rate has decreased significantly; in 2019, only 1,222 ultra-Orthodox enlisted.^①

The ultra-Orthodox attitude toward military service has not changed, except among certain circles that see military service as a default for boys the ultra-Orthodox framework cannot deal with. Indeed, most ultra-Orthodox recruits do not represent the mainstream of the ultra-Orthodox public. Rather, they are young people who did not last in the yeshiva framework, and the military framework provides them with an alternative supportive framework. Others turned to military service so they could join the labor market when discharged from service.^②

V. Conflicts and Tensions

The characteristics and trends detailed above result from the ultra-Orthodox's religious stringencies, its separation from the majority, and the obligation of the men to devote their time to Torah study.^③ These characteristics create points of tension and conflict between the ultra-Orthodox and the non-ultra-Orthodox majority around three main issues; (a) lack of participation in the workforce; (b) opposition to military service; and (c) opposition to the legal system.

About half (47%) of ultra-Orthodox men still prefer the world of the yeshiva or at least the resources their membership provides them, over entering the general labor market, and they rely on allowances they receive from the yeshiva.^④ These allowances are paid for by donations, as well as by the state, which has provided (and provides) funds as part of coalition agreements with ultra-Orthodox parties.

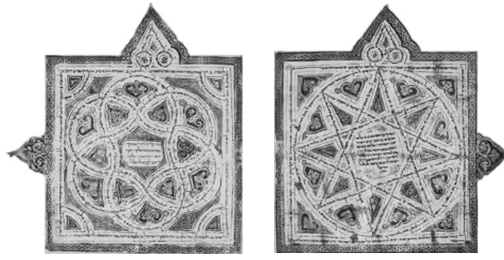
As a result, under the auspices of the state, it has been possible to perpetuate the ignorance of ultra-Orthodox men in worldly matters and their

① Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 72.

② Yohai Hakak, *Haredi Masculinities Between the Yeshiva, the Army, Work and Politics—The Sage, the Warrior, and the Entrepreneur*, 39-56.

③ Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors*, 11-12.

④ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 31.



inability to integrate into the workforce. This reality has provoked anger and frustration among the majority, who feel those among the ultra-Orthodox, who do not work or pay taxes, are living at their expense, and do not share the economic burden. “Exploiters, parasites, and freeloaders” are only some of the pejorative terms used by Israelis in the majority to describe the ultra-Orthodox.^①

Another source of tension is the ultra-Orthodox’s failure to share the country’s security burden with the majority. Over the years, efforts have been made to change the Israeli Defense Service Law. These efforts involved bills requiring yeshiva students to enlist in the IDF and civil service.

However, whenever such a bill is raised, ultra-Orthodox hold mass demonstrations and prayer rallies led by the community’s leading rabbis to protest the potential law and to prevent its adoption and implementation. Attempts to change the Israeli Defense Service Law have failed so far. Still, efforts to advance legislation have had an unintended consequence; they have contributed to increasing already existing ultra-Orthodox suspicions of the judiciary and their lack of faith in it.

According to Zicherman,^② ultra-Orthodox distrust of the judiciary stems from three conflicts:

The obligation to obey the law when it contradicts religious law.^③ This was most recently seen, for example, during the Covid-19 lockdowns, when ultra-Orthodox violated state-mandated restrictions on public gatherings by obeying their rabbis’ orders to continue attending congregational prayers and study in yeshivas.^④

The common perception among ultra-Orthodox is that the Israeli judiciary is “the courts of Gentiles,” mainly due to its adoption of the British legal system and general reliance on so-called human-made laws. “Gentile courts” are prohibited in Jewish law, while rabbinical courts are considered the

① Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 230.

② Haim Zicherman, “One Trial You Will Have: The Triple Confrontation of Haredi Society,” *Law, Society and Culture – Tel Aviv University* (2018): 37-68. [Hebrew]

③ Ibid.

④ Zalberg and Zalberg Block, “Covid-19 Amongst the Ultra-Orthodox.”

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appropriate venue for legal proceedings.

Confrontation with the Supreme Court over rulings on issues of religion and state, which the ultra-Orthodox view as restrictive and encroaching on their way of life.^①

These three conflicts led to a crisis of trust. The only three demonstrations organized by ultra-Orthodox leaders in recent decades that attracted hundreds of thousands of protestors were directed against the Supreme Court and its rulings. Surveys indicate a very high degree of distrust in the judiciary among the ultra-Orthodox (83%).^②

VI. Where Is Ultra-Orthodox Society Headed?

What is the future of ultra-Orthodox society? Has it and will it become an existential threat to the Zionist enterprise as a rational and modern expression of Jewish identity, or will a moderate trend emerge that bridges the widening gaps between the community and the majority?

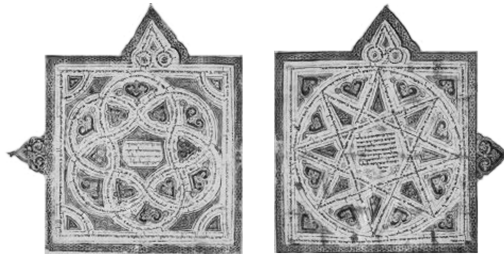
Studies suggested that the development of religious movements is a process that includes several key stages. (a) The foundation stage of the movement; (b) the expansion stage—in which the movement expands and recruits new members to its ranks; and (c) the institutionalization stage—in which members are born into the movement, into an existing reality, with almost no scope for choosing an alternative reality.

Intergenerational changes and changes in the socio-economic status of religious movements and groups over time make them more “compromising” in their relations with the “outside world,” and they take on a more institutional and “calm” character. The religious zeal of the founders’ generation is moderated among the members of subsequent generations, and some may even rebel against it.

The data presented so far indicate a trend of perpetuating ignorance among the ultra-Orthodox population, especially among ultra-Orthodox men, and a trend of low integration of ultra-Orthodox men into the labor market.

① Zicherman, “One Trial You Will Have.”

② Ibid.



However, looking at the processes that ultra-Orthodox society has undergone in recent decades paints a broader, more profound, and more complex picture.

This picture does not ignore the impact ultra-Orthodox society has on Israeli society. At the same time, it identifies changes and trends that may minimize the threat to Israeli society that some policymakers and researchers see emanating from the ultra-Orthodox community.

Recent years have seen increasing participation, presence, inner resilience, and self-confidence of different factions in ultra-Orthodox society.^① Some ultra-Orthodox are strong enough to integrate into the majority without feeling threatened by it. At the same time, ultra-Orthodox society has become more receptive to its members who integrate into the majority and to members that deviate from the ultra-Orthodox ethos.^② Extensive discourse has developed among the ultra-Orthodox on issues that until recently were considered taboo, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse, even in the most conservative circles.^③

Part of the change originates from grassroots ultra-Orthodox female activism—ultra-Orthodox women who dared to challenge social conventions and challenge the community’s leading rabbis.^④ Ultra-Orthodox women’s activism, which some also define as “ultra-Orthodox feminism,” involves female activists who raise the issues of women’s education, women’s employment in the public discourse, and their political representation.^⑤ Their activity is seen by others in the ultra-Orthodox public as a challenge to

① Kimmy Kaplan and Nurit Stadler, *From Survival to Consolidation: Changes in Israeli Haredi Society and Its Scholarly Study* (Tel Aviv-Jerusalem: HakibbutzHameuchad and Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, 2012), 11-28.

② Neri Horowitz, “Haredi Disaffiliation: Risk, Potential and Social Policy,” *Out for Change Association* (Jerusalem, 2018), 22-24.

③ Sara Zalcberg, “Changes in Coping Patterns of Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel Regarding Sexual Abuse,” in *Sexual Offenses in Israel: Trends in Legislation, Assessment, and Treatment*, eds. Mili Shhory-Biton, Yehudit Aboulafia and Lisa Tzvi (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2021), 455-480. [Hebrew]

④ Michal Kravel-Tovi, “They Must Join Us, There is No Other Way: Haredi Activism, the Battle Against Sexual Violence, and the Reworking of Rabbinic Accountability,” *Nashim* 37 (2020): 66-86.

⑤ Cahaner, *Ultra-Orthodox Society*, 203-205.

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fundamental values such as modesty, the family, and obedience to the rabbis.^①

In general, ultra-Orthodox women today are more educated, established, assertive, and opinionated. As such, they have become significant agents of change for the ultra-Orthodox population, initiating innovative and revolutionary developments. Meanwhile, their conduct consciously and unconsciously has contributed to challenging the prevailing ideal type of ultra-Orthodox family—the husband who devotes himself to Torah study while his wife, in addition to raising the kids, works as the primary breadwinner, often as a teacher.^②

Several other agents of change have contributed to transformations in ultra-Orthodox society in recent years. One is those who leave the ultra-Orthodox world. Throughout the years, such people were denounced and ostracized by their families and the community.^③ However, in recent years, the attitude of ultra-Orthodox society regarding “dropouts,” as they are called in Haredi discourse, has changed and shifted from an exclusive to an inclusive approach. Following this, a significant portion of dropouts tend to maintain ties with their family members, unlike before, and they influence them in one way or another.^④

Another major agent of change is the internet. Despite some rabbis' objection to any such usage, whereas only 28% of the Haredim used the internet in 2008, no less than 64% did so in 2020.^⑤ The internet revolution penetrated ultra-Orthodox society, exposing it to previously inaccessible content, which is now only a click away. This revolution broke the boundaries of the “Orthodox ghetto.”

The changes in employment and the increasing integration, even if still

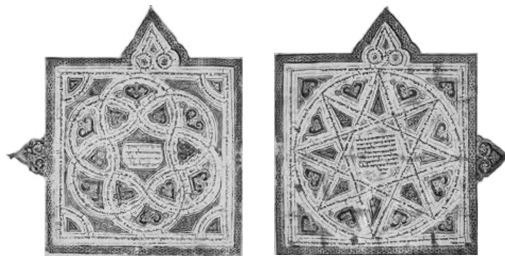
① Helene Sinnreich, “(In) visible Women: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Women’s Faces and the Internet,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 38 (Summer 2020): 61-91.

② Orly Tsarfaty, “From Transparent Women to Present Women: The Struggle of Ultra-Orthodox Women for Representation in the 20th Knesset,” *Gender* 4 (December 2015): 1-29.

③ Shlomi Doron, “Changing Identities Through Rituals: Newcomers to and Defectors from Ultra-Orthodox Judaism,” 13-32.

④ Neri Horowitz, “Haredi Disaffiliation: Risk, Potential and Social Policy,” 9-39.

⑤ Cahaner and Malach, *Statistical Report 2020*, 74.



very moderate, into the labor market have created, in recent years, an ultra-Orthodox middle class, a class that did not exist previously. This is a more academic, open, and consumerist ultra-Orthodox, which has adapted to modern Western consumer culture and even to a luxurious lifestyle that it did not know before. This group has adopted a standard of living that will be very difficult to give up.

To maintain this standard of living, the new middle class will have no choice but to continue to pursue education, lucrative professions, and further integration into the labor market.^① This group is not only a product of changes within ultra-Orthodox society, but is itself an agent of change that may impact the future of ultra-Orthodox society. It is not impossible that this class will continue to expand and will contribute to increasing integration, perhaps even through military service. A counter-reaction of resistance to such a trend is expected but, according to Brown, will appear at much lower rates.^②

The great triumph of the ultra-Orthodox in the recent elections may prove counter-productive, as the non-ultra-Orthodox majority appears to be losing patience. Future governments may back away from coalition agreements with ultra-Orthodox parties that force them to finance yeshiva members, as was the case in 2003 when child allowances were significantly cut and ultra-Orthodox had no choice but to enter the labor market.^③

It is also possible that future governments will sever the link between exemption from military service and the inability to enter the workforce and allow and encourage yeshiva members who refuse to serve in the army to go to work. Such a decision will indeed further damage the perception of conscription as egalitarian. Yet it will decrease the huge gap in economic contribution.

Even if the rate of ultra-Orthodox who adopt modern Western worldviews and the rate of ultra-Orthodox men who study in institutions of higher education and integrate into the workforce remain very low today, they

^① Haim Zicherman and Lee Cahaner, *Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy: The Emergence of Haredi Middle Class* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2012), 145-161. [Hebrew]

^② Benjamin Brown, *A Society in Motion: Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism*, 401-403.

^③ Eitan Regev, "Patterns of Haredi Integration into the Labor Market: An Inter- and Multi-Sector Analysis and Comparison," in *The State of the Nation Report 2017* (Jerusalem: Taub Center, 2017), 6.

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represent an increase compared to the rates in the past and a significant change whose weight is far beyond its quantitative significance. These are indeed very small steps for the majority but important steps for ultra-Orthodox society. Just as the ultra-Orthodox community of two decades ago did not look the same as it does today, in two decades, it may look different than today.