Social Change through Education in

The Haredi Community in Israel

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**Social Change through Education in the Haredi Community in Israel**

**Purpose of Study**

This study is an overview of practices in an organization serving an economically disadvantaged population to strengthen their success potential. It aims to evaluate the role and impact that academic education and professional training holds in bringing forth an urgently needed social and economic change.

**Methodology**

In this study, the researcher used qualitative methods to study human behavior in context, and behavior changes. The qualitative data gathering techniques used in this study was observations, personal discussions with students and teachers, personal life experience, and the study of the educational organization and its current practices on the selected population group of the *Haredi* women. In addition, the researcher also studied several academic researches, government statistics and reports on the subject of Haredi economic challenges and government initiatives to help resolve this issue. This report includes the researcher’s reflections on this subject.

**Definitions of Terms**

***Halacha:*** Halacha is a statement directly relate to questions of Jewish law and practice based on the *Talmudic* sources. An observant Jew follows the laws of Halacha (BIU, 2011).

***Haredi:*** The word Haredi derives from the Hebrew word for fear (*harada*) and can be interpreted as “one who trembles in awe of G-d” (Isaiah 66:2, 5). *Haredi* is a G-d fearing Jew, who strictly observes all Jewish laws (Friedman, 1991).

***Kollel:*** A Kollel is an institute for full-time, advanced [study](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_study) of the [Talmud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud) and [rabbinic literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_literature). Like a [yeshiva](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeshiva), a Kollel features [*shiurim*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiur_(Torah)) [lectures] and learning *Sedarim* [learning sessions]; unlike a yeshiva, the student body of a Kollel is all married men. Kollels generally pay a regular monthly stipend to their members (Gurovich & Cohen-Kastro (2004).

***Kosher Internet:***  The term *Kosher* (Hebrew: fit, ready, suitable), usually used in the context of Jewish dietary laws, with regards to food: Kosher food is fit to be eaten, and non-kosher food is not. *Kosher* can also be used to describe other realms of religious / Jewish experience, such as reading material, entertainment, and music can all be kosher or non-kosher; acceptable or unacceptable as a religious experience. The Internet experience too can be Kosher or non-Kosher.  Kosher Internet Providers analyzes any internet site that the user is trying to access and "decides" whether or not its content is permissible for access. This analysis takes place at real-time and at internet supplier level.

***MCY*** *(Michlala Charedit Yerushalayim)*. The Haredi College in Jerusalem; The first College for Haredi women establish in Israel (MCY,2011).

***Midrash:*** *Midrash* is a way of interpreting biblical stories that goes beyond simple distillation of religious, legal or moral teachings (Birnbaum, 1979).

***Talmud:*** The Talmud ([Hebrew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language): learning, studying) is a core text of Jewish studies. It is an ancient collection of [rabbinic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbi) discussions pertaining to [Jewish law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halakha), [ethics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethics), philosophy, customs and history, and many other subjects (BIU, 2011).

***Torah:***Torahis the name given by Jews to the first five books of the Jewish Bible. In [Rabbinic literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_literature) the word Torah denotes both these five books, the Written Torah, and an [Oral Torah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_Torah). The Oral Torah consists of the traditional interpretations and amplifications handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation and now embodied in the [Talmud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud) and [Midrash](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midrash). According to Jewish tradition, the entire Torah, both written and oral, was revealed to Moses at [Mount Sinai](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Mount_Sinai) (Birnbaum, 1979).

***Torahto Omanuto*** (Hebrew*: one’s* *Torah study is his artistry*) is a term describing one who's [Torah study](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_study) is his main occupation (*Omanuto*, his artistry). The source of the phrase *Torahto Omanuto* is taken from the [Talmud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud). In [Israel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel), the term is used in context of the special arrangement for the Israeli [Haredim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haredi_Judaism), the *Torahto Omanuto* arrangement*,* in which it enables the young men of the Haredi [Yeshiva](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeshiva) academies to be exempt from the compulsory enrollment to the Israeli army. The Israeli Haredi sector maintains the Torah studying practice, thus excuse itself from compulsory military service on the grounds of *Torahto Omanuto.*

***Yeshiva:*** (Hebrew: sitting; plural: *yeshivot*) is a [Jewish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews) educational institution that focuses on the study of traditional religious texts, primarily the [Talmud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud) and [Torah study](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah_study). Study is usually done through daily lectures or classes and in study pairs called [*chavrutas*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chavruta) ([Aramaic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic_language) for “friendship” or “companionship”). *Chavruta* style learning is one of the unique features of the yeshiva. Until the late 20th century, yeshivas were attended by males only. Many [Modern Orthodox](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Orthodox) yeshivas around the world have opened since then for girls and women (Gurovich & Cohen-Kastro (2004).

**The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Population**

The Haredi community is Israel’s largest and most rapidly growing population. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics of 2010, there are currently about 800,000 Haredi people in Israel, and now comprising nearly 15 percent of Israel’s Jewish population, and the community is expected to double its numbers in the next decade (CBS, 2011).

***What is Haredi?***

Haredi is often translated as ultra-orthodox Judaism. Haredim (plural for Haredi) believe in the Devine Laws that are strictly observed, and refuse to modify Judaism to meet contemporary needs. In Israel and throughout the world, Haredim live in insular communities with limited contact to the outside world. Their lives revolve around the study of the *Torah*, prayer, religion and family. Television, films, secular publications and the Internet are not a part of their world. They tend to have their own economies, educational systems, medical services, welfare institutions and *Gemachs;* free loan societies for everything from money to household items (Feferman & Malchi, 2010).

The distinctive dress of Haredim helps them to define, and then insulate, their communities, and maintain a traditional and spiritual focus. They dress as their ancestors dressed in 18th and 19th century Europe. The men wear black suits and white shirts, and cover their heads with black, wide-brimmed hats. The men also generally have beards and side-locks called *peyot* (Kaplan & Sivan, 2003). 

Women, in line with strict standards of modesty, tend to wear long skirts and shirts with long sleeves and high necklines. The women get married at a fairly young age (18-21), and are then required to cover their heads with scarves, hats or wigs. There is a strict separation between the genders in areas of education, religious worship, social services and other activities in the public arena (Friedman, 1991).

**The Israeli Context**

Judaism includes a wide array of cultures and practices, ranging from strict belief and observance with cultural separatism, to cultural identification combined with a secular outlook. “Modern Orthodoxy” allows some reinterpretation of religious law to accommodate social and historical changes, and for some measure of participation and contribution to the secular world. In contrast, “ultra-Orthodoxy” such as the Haredim, tends not to accept the process of reinterpretation of religious law, but favors seclusion from the wider world, particularly from secular education and secular businesses.

In the Haredi world, it is the custom to have very large families. Wives support the families, and for men to engage in religious study for as long as possible in their lives. Religious studies are considered honorable and take a very high priority in the Haredi value system and tradition (Friedman, 1991).

Genders are traditionally strictly separated outside of the home. Because of their beliefs and practices, the community frequently lives in isolated “ghettos,” which are afflicted by poverty and a variety of social problems, which worsens by a general taboo to discuss these issues. Their attitudes to employment and participation in national economic life, as well their traditional exemption from the otherwise mandatory army service, arouse the resentment of mainstream Israelis. The Jewish ultra-Orthodox community in Israel is perceived by the rest of the Israeli society as one of the most unproductive, and willfully isolated. Sixty three years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Haredi community continues to grow at a rapid rate, and rely heavily on public funding.

The Haredi community suffers widespread poverty and its related social problems, due to the employment structure and choices. Women are under particular pressure in being expected to manage large families and to earn the family’s living.

**Economic Challenges**

Poverty in Israel is spread upon the geographic line of the Haredi population, in cities with very large Haredi population such as Jerusalem and B’nai B’rak. Seven out of every ten Haredi families in Jerusalem live under the poverty line (Levin, 2009). Government / Social Security allowance comprises of 70% of the Haredi family’s family income. The Haredi population’s way of life leads to poverty: 60% of men between the ages of 25-54 do not work. The birth rate grew from 6 to 7.5 children per family (CBS, 2011).

The high birth rate and the lack of earning ability causes financial and social strain the Haredi community, the government financial and social resources, and the rest of the Israeli population. Since Israel permits military exemptions for Haredi men who are studying full time in yeshiva, by the *Torahto Omanuto Agreement*, many Israelis resent the fact that this large sector of the Israeli society receives great support from the government, yet does not contribute to the national economic and communal efforts such as military services, workforce and taxation.

The unique circumstances and growth of Israel’s Haredi’s pose a significant challenge for the country.

There are several factors keeping Haredi’s out of the workforce: Haredi values, including wariness of the secular world; government subsidies for yeshiva study; and the Israeli army draft rules which mandate Yeshiva or Kollel study to avoid military draft (Kaplan & Sivan, 2003).

Child bearing is encouraged in the Haredi population, not only for the religious reason, but also for the financial reason: families with more than four children receive substantial children allowance from the Israeli Social Security to be used for daily living expenses. This encourages families to have more children.

In the Haredi society, “*be all that you can be*” only implie*s* towards Torah Studies, but never towards secular, professional or academic studies. However the modern religious leadership in the Israeli society now claims that this outlook is an irresponsible misconception that needs to be urgently reevaluated. They claim that although some men fit into the criteria of *Torahto Omanuto,* since Torah study is and should be their only daily occupation (Kaplan & Sivan, 2003), all others should carry the economic responsibility of their family and their community.  When a Haredim wish to enter the work force, they face many obstacles. They usually lack basic education required for higher education or professional training, in subjects such as English, math, sciences, and computer skills. They also lack financial means to pay for the training and family living expense. Getting married at a young age also prevents them from allocating proper time for education. They also experience difficulties integrating in work places that are not suitable to their Haredi life style, restrictions and values.

**The Haredi Women** Haredi women are often the ones who are often forced to join the work force. They are brought up with a culture that honors a woman who supports her family, while her husband is occupied with Torah learning. The Haredi women also lack the education, are prohibited access to the internet and computers, and lack knowledge of the sciences, the English language and computer and professional skills. Due to the child bearing responsibilities they are limited to only certain type of working conditions. In addition, the strict gender segregation in the Haredi lifestyle which prohibits interaction with the opposite sex, also raises challenges in the employability of women in the secular job market (Baumel, 2006).

There is a new wave of private, public and government initiatives to move more Haredim into the workforce. Institutions provide professional counseling, professional training, workshops, and academic courses, as well as higher education and degree programs.

**The Ashoka - Social Entrepreneurship Education**

Ashoka is a global organization that leads a profound transformation in society by investing in people. They search the world for leading social entrepreneurs and at the launch stage, provide these entrepreneurs, Ashoka Fellows, a living stipend for an average of three years, allowing them to focus full-time on building their institutions and spreading their ideas. Ashoka also provides a global support network of their peers and partnerships with professional consultants. Once elected to the Ashoka Fellowship, Fellows benefit from this community for life (Ashoka, 2011).

Throughout the world we can find population groups that are isolated from the main stream of society. Ashoka helps develop a model by which a higher education institute is built in the centers of an isolated community and manage to educate the people in non-threatening ways without compromising their value system and ways of life, and thus allows then to learn and achieve academic success. The community gains the ability to contribute to society, and help themselves towards academic and economic freedom.

**The Strategy**

The founder, Adina Bar-Chaim, understood that in order to improve the socioeconomic condition of the Haredi population, and raise its social status in Israeli society, improving employment opportunities had to be developed. To accomplish this, required better, more accessible higher educational opportunities. Since non-religious higher education or any academic training is considered impermissible in the Haredi community, Adina used her political connections, as the daughter of an eminent Rabbi, in order to launch her quiet revolution, to remove these obstacles to higher education slowly and respectfully from within.

Adina’s solution was to establish an academic college that meets the highest academic standards that uses the knowledge, experience and personnel of the best Israeli universities, but at the same time, caters for the special needs of the ultra-Orthodox community. She has achieved this with the blessings (literally) of the most prominent and respected leaders of this, her own community, and the college provides its services in the most nonthreatening and accessible way, and at minimal cost to the students. Adina also expanded the possible career choices for Haredi women; where once teaching was so popular a career choice for Haredi women, now a number of practical and professional subjects are offered (Ashoka, 2011).

Believing in social change rather than charity; and finding practical solutions as opposed to waiting for “help from heaven or other quarters”, Adina created an institution for ultra-Orthodox women, that could eventually serve as a possible bridge to the rest of society, a gateway for inclusion, self-esteem, and better socioeconomic conditions.

**The Haredi College for Women**

The Haredi College for Women is Israel’s first college suitable for the demands of the Haredi Orthodox women. It was opened by Mrs. Adina Bar Shalom, daughter of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of the Sephardic Orthodox party in Israel. It provides Haredi women with education and a future of economic capability and civic participation. The college is comprised of 1,100 students and offers degrees such as social work, psychology, computer programming, educational counseling, speech pathology, health sciences, and medical laboratory science.

By creating the first structure in which ultra-orthodox women (and recently, men) are able to acquire academic qualifications and professional skills in harmony with their identities and traditions, Mrs. Adina Bar Shalom is not only contributing to their economic well-being, but also opening doors to inclusion and improved status within larger Israeli society (MCY, 2011).

Some of the programs offered in the Haredi College are in the areas of services within the Haredi community. These programs were planned with the purpose of the students giving back to the community from which they come. Since they understand the background, value system, the needs and concerns of their own community and also are more likely to trust professionals of their own community.

***Mechina (College Prep Course)***

Haredi leadership does not want outsiders interfering in the “purity of Torah learning” which many Haredim fear could pave the way toward a secular lifestyle. Therefore, the Haredi elementary and high schools do not teach students the core curriculum in science, math, English and civics. Hence, Haredi young men and women who graduate from high school, lack the secular education background in basic academic skills. They do not qualify for the *Bagrut* (the Israeli Matriculation) certification; they cannot pass the standardized Psychometrics exam (which is equivalent to the SAT) that could enable them to enter college.

Therefore, the HCW offers *Mechina* (Preparation) courses in Math, English and sciences. Since Haredim do not use computer in their daily lives, the Mechina curriculum also provide extensive training in computer skills, using Kosher Internet providers (HCW, 2011).

The HCW four-year program is contingent upon the completion of the preparatory courses (Mechina). The Mechina is operated by the Bar Ilan University, an accredited university in Tel Aviv. The curriculum of the Mechina courses are monitored and designed to fit the Haredi spiritual values and practices.

***Child Care*** The average MCY student is married and will have two babies in the course of her four years of study. In order to provide the mothers with easy accommodation during their school hours, lectures are conducted just down the hall from a pair of classrooms transformed into a nursery for the students’ babies. The nursery provides a safe environment for their infants and enable the mothers peace of mind while they study. The nursery is subsidized by the college and a symbolic charge is collected for this service (MCY, 2011).

***Addressing Haredi Social problems***

Social issues and problems in the ultra-Orthodox community are now being addressed by graduates who are positioned to open up discussion on “taboo” topics.

Five years after its conception, academic tracks were also opened to men at Haredi College. In accord with tradition, men and women do not mix, and traditional dress and presentation is expected of the women, though not of lecturers. This, too, constitutes a major change in the culture, as men have traditionally been expected to study and not to work (Ashoka, 2011).

**Conclusions / Results**

The Haredi community sanctifies Torah learning. A Rabbi or a Torah scholar is held in very high regard. The goal is to add the professional aspect of education to the Haredi value system, and open doors to new ideas for means to support the Haredi families. The women graduates hold their degrees with pride and dignity. It gives them great self-esteem, and they are considered the elite of the Haredi community

There are currently two Haredi colleges; Haredi College in Jerusalem and another in B’nei B’rak. They produce 540 of graduates every year who, in turn, achieve impressive placements rates of 94 percent in a wide variety of jobs. There are currently 1100 students and 540 female graduates. Many Israeli organizations realized that the Haredi community can provide reliable and skillful workers, if the companies are clever and sensitive enough to cater for their special needs (Cave & Aboody, 2011).

The latest developments at Haredi College is collaboration with the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem, to offer Health sciences degrees, and with Ben Gurion University of the Negev to offer a course in clinical psychology for women identical to the course offered at the Be’er Sheva campus. The four-year course will be taught by Professor David Leiser of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and will result in a certificate to practice clinical psychology. The students are to undergo therapy (with female therapists) as part of their studies.

Adina sums up her approach and beliefs by saying, “

I don’t know if this is a revolution. But it is possible to talk about a significant change in the attitude of the ultra-Orthodox community toward education. The leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community realize that it’s impossible to sit on the fence if they don’t want this community to wallow in poverty all its life, I entered this field in order to open a door to masses of girls. This is my aim (Ashoka, 2011).

About women’s empowerment, Mrs. Bar-Shalom says,

This is a new Haredi femininity, the recognition that a 40-year-old woman can still develop and realize one of her longings…I was searching for meaning…I looked for something to do that would remain after me, something to generate change.

She has found it (Ashoka, 2011).

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