Thesis Proposal

My doctorate will discuss the escalation of the discourse on sexuality that has occurred in the Israeli population known as Haredi-Leumi (nationalist ultra-Orthodox) and its theological-political significance. My analysis will make use of psychoanalytic theory, as I will describe below.

The establishment of the State of Israel brought different groups within the Jewish population into contact with geo-political issues and in doing so intensified conflicts that already existed. These conflicts touch on the foundations of the State and of Israeli society.

All of these conflicts have given rise to discourse in which a variety of elements in Israeli society participate. The Haredi-Leumi community is one of these elements with its participation sometimes explicit and at other times more subtle. The most important theological source for this group is the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935). Haredi-Leumi society is, at root, ultra-conservative and its adherence to a halakhic lifestyle and rejection of modernity resemble those of the Haredi community in Israel. At the same time, the Haredi-Leumi community is ideological, Zionist and revolutionary, with strong messianic themes.

In recent decades, sexual issues and themes have received a great deal of attention in this community. Among these are women’s roles in the public sphere, the nature of marital relationships, LBGT discourse, the structure of the family and the publication of modesty guidelines for women. The escalation of the discourse on sexual matters in this sector can be seen in the publication of pamphlets and books as well as public discourses on these topics. The language has become much more extreme in tone and style. Moreover, this community has, almost for the first time, begun directing its energy and devotion to public, political action in Israel by organizing demonstrations, making use of the media, and especially, by founding a political party, Noam.

Haredi-Leumi discourse about these subjects is disturbing for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is historically incoherent with respect to the sector’s theological-political stance. Secondly, this discourse is a danger to Israeli society. Finally, it is damaging to Jewish theology. My research will analyze this Haredi-Leumi discourse and seek to evaluate the dangers it presents to both Israeli society and Jewish theology.

This analysis will make use of psychoanalytic theories, initially through a Freudian (and Kleinian) prism. One of the fundamental elements of the Freudian perspective is the Oedipal complex. This complex invites us to examine how early conflicts associated with gender are part of every human being. These conflicts can give rise to tendencies to objectification, alienation, rejection and repression of intimacy, and to narcissistic pornography. In this thesis, I will investigate which of these tendencies are present in Haredi-Leumi discourse and how they control it.

Another significant contribution of psychoanalysis is to the understanding of culture. Freud and his successors addressed several cultural themes in their writings. I will seek to make use of this literature as means of understanding Haredi-Leumi society and its culture. Psychoanalysis has a special approach to cases of lapsus, be they individual, interpersonal or cultural. These cases extend from minor slips of the tongue to the gaps between the dynamic elements of the psyche, on the level of the individual as well as the collective “psyche” of a society. For this reason, psychoanalysis can be a tremendous resource for understanding Haredi-Leumi culture and the gaps that I identify within it, along with the gaps between it and the discourse of Israeli society and the gaps between the positions of early expositors of Haredi-Leumi theology and those of later ones.