**Abstract**

The present study examines how Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) mothers of children with disabilities describe their parenting experience and how it is affected by perceptions of disability in their society. These issues were examined within the framework of a critical disability studies approach, which draws on social and medical models of disability.

In this qualitative study, 30 mothers of children with disabilities from various sectors of Haredi society (Lithuanians, Sephardim, Hassidim, and those who were not raised religious) participated in in-depth interviews about their perceptions of disability and their parenting experiences. Data collected in the interviews were coded and analyzed in accordance with the principles of a grounded theory approach, which studies people in their natural environment, enabling insights into their personal perspectives and reflections on their experiences (Charmaz, 2016).

The findings were grouped into three main themes. The first concerns the meaning attributed to disabilities in the context of the values of Haredi society, as perceived by these mothers. The findings attest to the central role of the rabbis in shaping perceptions of disability. The rabbis who chart the Torah-halachic path for their congregations influence their attitudes on every issue, including attitudes towards people with a disability. The mothers expressed their awareness that their rabbis differentiate between people with disabilities and other members of the community, even when attempting to preserve their dignity or exempting them from the obligation to perform the mitzvot (religious commandments). Perceptions of disability in Haredi society were reflected in the mothers’ descriptions of the meaning of disability. The mothers described a strong desire for themselves and their disabled children to fully belong to the community and its institutions. Sometimes their reliance on community charitable institutions leads to a feeling of being needy. They are aware that they received assistance because of their child's disability, and this reinforces the sense of being different, rather than promoting true inclusion. This raises conflicts between accepting assistance and rejecting it due to their desire for inclusion.

The second theme deals with Haredi mothers’ experience of parenting a child with a disability. Following the finding about the rabbinate in Haredi society, this theme addressed the daily personal routine of raising a child with a disability in this community. Their parenting experience takes place in a specific cultural context and naturally includes appeals to the accepted religious resources for support and reinforcement. The mothers described both inclusive and exclusionary experiences in the social and family environments, and their emotions in reaction to them. They also spoke about mediating the social landscape for their other children who don’t have a disability. The mothers interpreted exclusionary reactions from people in the social environment in terms of the aspect of community inclusion. Finally, they often mentioned their need to deal with significant feelings of frustration, grief, and disappointment due to the social and cultural expectations that sometimes cannot be met by the child with the disability.

The third theme deals with the repercussions of the reactions to children with disabilities in this social environment. This theme complements the previous ones by addressing processes of growth and development, in addition to the challenges. The mothers described spiritual growth in three main areas that are highly valued in their culture: the ability to pray and communicate with the Creator, their own personal traits (patience, the ability to give without expecting anything in return, etc.), and tools for educating their other children. Growth in these areas is generally achieved through rigorous personal work; that is, refining their moral and character traits, which are core values in the Haredi community. Finally, the mothers spoke about their activism and efforts to bring about some degree of change in the existing social order so as to encourage more inclusion of their child in the community.

The discussion of the findings shows that the rabbinic establishment is strongly present in the lives of the community members, and that their response to difference is in some ways similar to the medical model. Accepted social and religious norms are enforced for all community members, but people with disabilities are not yet fully integrated, which causes frustration to their mothers. The mothers’ experiences include cognitive perceptions of the disability and emotions related to raising a child with a disability. Their experience is strongly influenced by the rabbinic perspective, which has a strong presence, as mentioned, in the Haredi community and its educational institutions (which sometimes exclude students with disabilities). Many of the mothers expressed frustrated regarding their children’s exclusion due to a perception that they do not fit into the social norm (similar to characteristics of a medical model). They expressed a desire for opportunities for their children to be included and integrated (similar to characteristics of the social model). Finally, alongside their focus on raising a child with a disability and dealing with the reactions of the environment, the mothers experienced personal and spiritual growth and even noted activist elements to promote their child's integration into the community fabric (characteristics of a social model). Given that discourse on equal rights is foreign to Haredi society, this represents a novelty and indicates a new development arising from the personal struggles of mothers raising children with disabilities in this distinctive culture and society.

The contribution of this study is the enrichment of our knowledge regarding attitudes towards disability in a given cultural context. The study of Haredi society, a collectivist-religious culture characterized by self-imposed seclusion, is an important step in understanding this issue. The perceptions expressed by Haredi mothers of children with a disability give insight into personal aspects of the parenting experience from a context-aware perspective. This detailed picture of the situation makes it possible to promote public and political changes concerning perceptions of disability in Haredi society. An example in the applied, practical realm would be designing programs to provide support and reinforcement to families in the Haredi community that take into account the social and cultural context.