**REFORMING ISRAEL’S APPROACH TO THE HAREDI MAMLACHTI EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Recently, there has been a growing understanding and consensus that a fundamental shift must occur in the relationship between the Haredi community and the State of Israel.

We believe that reforming the Haredi education system could help drive this much needed change. The current Haredi education system is intentionally designed to neglect basic skills, knowledge, and democratic values, thus severely limiting its graduates’ options for becoming active members of the general Israeli workforce. Added to this issue is the prediction that the Haredi community will constitute a third of the entire Israeli population within 20 years.

To address this situation, in 2013–2014, the Mamlachti (state-run) Haredi education system (MMH) was established, offering an alternative to the existing independent and private Haredi schools. MMH schools integrate core academic studies while preserving Haredi cultural and halakhic needs. However, due to Haredi political parties that oppose the MMH, only 60 such elementary and high schools and 200 preschools have opened over the past five years. This is in spite of ongoing requests from different groups of Haredi parents to open more MMH schools across the country. In fact, today, only approximately 3% of the Haredi community’s children are enrolled in the MMH system. One of the main barriers to opening new MMH schools is that local mayors must officially approve this move. However, the mayors of most cities avoid approving new schools, fearing opposition from the Haredi political parties that could possibly harm these mayors’ future ambitions and impede their progress to the national political level.

For the general public, the response to the COVID restrictions at the height of the pandemic in Israel amplified the autonomy of the Haredi community in general and the education system specifically. The intense resentment this engendered, together with the continued separate status of the Haredi community undoubtedly represent a threat to the resilience of the State of Israel.

We are currently at an opportune moment in Israel’s political and social development. On the political level, the new government that has been formed represents a wide and inclusive coalition, which, for the first time in years, includes no Haredi parties that traditionally oppose the MMH. Indeed, this new government is committed to advancing core studies in Haredi education. These political factors, combined with the shock waves created throughout Israel’s Haredi communities in the wake of the Corona crisis, will certainly reshape some of the internal dynamics among the Haredi leadership.

We are confident that expanding the MMH education system and increasing the number of Haredi children studying in these schools can serve as a significant force for change. The threat of school expulsion resulting from not obeying the rules dictated by the Haredi leadership is non-existent in a government-regulated system. Offering parents the option to send their children to an MMH school would eliminate the control the Haredi leadership currently exercises over the community and would encourage the development of critical thinking among the Haredi population. Additionally, more Haredi children in the MMH system means a higher percentage of Haredi children studying math and English at a high level. This would have a positive impact on the number of Haredi individuals who will then have a realistic option of joining the general workforce. This, too, will significantly affect the Haredi population in three areas. The first is that Haredi men and women could readily opt to join the general workforce and integrate more effectively with general society. The second would be an increase in the number of Haredi households able to escape the poverty cycle, thereby freeing them from financial dependence on the Haredi leadership. The third would be the cultivation of a stronger Israeli identity among the Haredi population and the building of a deeper connection between the Haredi population and the State of Israel.

MK Dr. Moshe (Kinley) Tur Paz was very active in establishing the MMH school system in his role as head of the Jerusalem Department of Education. Tur Paz has made the MMH challenge one of his key objectives for his current term as MK for the Yesh Atid party. His goal is to secure government funding and political support to increase those participating in the MMH system from 3% of the Haredi community to 30% within a decade. He plans on doing so through a government and philanthropic partnership that will work together to lay the foundations and governmental infrastructure to anchor the MMH stream. This involves passing a government decision on a budgeted multi-year plan for building new schools and allocating adequate resources, and ensuring quality training and dedicated supervision standards.

**Meeting attendees:**

Dr. Moshe (Kinley) Tur Paz is a Knesset Member from the Yesh Atid party. Prior to entering politics, he served as the head of the Jerusalem Department of Education under Mayor Nir Barkat and was active in the field of religious pluralism as the chairman of Ne'emanei Torah Ve'Avodah.

Adi Bielawsky heads Jerusalem's Haredi Mamlachti Education department since September 2021. Prior to this, she led the secular and religious Zionist elementary schools department, including over 90 schools and 27,000 students.