**Background—Changes in the Haredi Community**

Over the past twenty years, significant changes have taken place within the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community in Israel. For decades, the Haredi community has segregated itself from mainstream Israeli society and the influences of modernity behind walls that have only grown ever higher over the years. This segregation is reflected in geography, culture, media, employment, and more. For various reasons, which we will not delve into here, there has been a shift in this trend of segregation and isolation, and much of the younger Haredi generation has found itself seeking ways to lower the walls and integrate into the wider Israeli culture. Here, we would like to briefly describe the main areas in which these changes are occurring.

**Employment**

Over the years, employment rates among Haredi men in Israel have fallen as a result of the establishment of the “student society” model, whereby most Haredi men spend years in centers of Torah study, as both students and teachers. Among Haredi women, employment rates are also low compared with non-Haredi Israeli women, because women in the Haredi community tend to marry young and raise large families. Those among the Haredi population who are employed work mostly in education and teaching, or in other fields within the community that usually do not require professional training and/or an academic education, and thus earn relatively low salaries.

As time has passed, there has been a growing recognition that Haredim need to enter new employment fields where they will be able to earn higher salaries. However, these fields require professional training and /or higher education, and it is usually possible to integrate into them only within the mainstream Israeli workforce. Consequently, we are now witnessing a consistent growth in employment rates among both Haredi men and women, as well as higher levels of education—and these young Haredim are experiencing many more encounters with non-Haredi populations in the workplace.

**Academia**

For many years, the Haredi community refrained entirely from academic study, reflecting its commitment to segregation and seclusion. As described above, shifts in employment patterns have led to considerable changes in this area as well.

Currently, there are academic frameworks designed specifically for the Haredi population, and many Haredi students are also studying in mainstream academic institutions. In spite of the reluctance and opposition expressed by most Haredi rabbinical leaders to this shift, thousands of Haredi students can now be found in a wide range of fields of study, and some even in graduate education. However, it is important to note that young Haredi men and women who wish to advance in academia face many academic, economic, cultural, religious, and social difficulties and barriers. As a result, many of these young people find themselves unable to continue with their academic studies. Helping them overcome these challenges requires many and diverse types of initiatives.

**Military and national service**

The absence of Haredi youth in compulsory military service has been a matter of public debate in Israel for decades. Haredi women are entitled to exemption from national military service on religious grounds, and the vast majority of Haredi males also defer their service by claiming the status of “*Torato Umanuto*” [“Torah study is his job,” a special arrangement for the Israeli Haredi sector that allows Haredi males to complete yeshiva studies before conscription].

In the last 20 years, the IDF has opened dedicated military service tracks for Haredi male conscripts, for both combatant and professional roles in various fields. To date, thousands of Haredi men have joined these tracks, but the numbers nonetheless remain relatively small and Haredi soldiers remain the exception, not the rule.

In addition, over the past decade, civilian service tracks have also been developed as a substitute for military service for Haredi men seeking to enter the realm of employment and relinquish their *Torato* *Umanuto* status. The tracks are provided by various associations, mostly from within the Haredi community. Thousands of Haredi youths have served on these civilian tracks, and these initiatives have generally been welcomed in the community, since not only do they not involve any interference from outside the community, but these programs have, in fact, proven beneficial to the community.

**Media and the internet**

The penetration of the internet into the Haredi community has largely been responsible for the collapse of the social and cultural walls with which the community has surrounded itself. Through the internet, Haredi youth are now exposed to areas of culture and knowledge with which they were not previously familiar, and they are easily able to connect with different and diverse people from outside the Haredi community. Not surprisingly, most Haredi leaders perceive the internet as an existential threat, and every effort has been made to curb its incursion into the Haredi community.

As it became clear that would be impossible to completely prevent the use of the internet, many attempts have been made to limit its use, such as for adults only, for work use only, and only in the workplace itself. There is still a sweeping ban on smartphones and other similar devices. These moves have succeeded in slowing, but not stopping, the growth of internet exposure. There has been a clear increase in the penetration of the internet into Haredi society, in particular among the younger generation over the past years. The trend became more prevalent during the coronavirus pandemic, as a result of the multiple stay-at-home orders, the closure of academic institutions, the expansion in the use of Zoom software, and more.

**Openness and “Israeliness”**

The changes described above, and other factors, have resulted in a greater openness among the younger Haredi generation, as well as a greater identification with Israeli society, culture, and ethos. Far more than was the case in the past, many young Haredi men and women see themselves as Israeli, and they want to be part of the Israeli collective, for better or worse. They are exposed to Israeli culture and the Israeli daily discourse, and are searching for ways to balance their Haredi identity with their Israeli identity.

**Challenges arising from change**

As we have seen, the Haredi community in Israel must confront various challenges in and outside the home in order to maintain its members and values in a changing world. Here we will present some of the key challenges that have arisen as a result of the changes discussed above.

**The relationship of the Haredi community with the Israeli state and publics**

The relationship between the Haredi community and the rest of Israeli society has experienced various ups and downs over the years. Generally speaking, the Haredi community’s seclusion and segregation within Israel has been made possible by a status quo arrangement, according to which the Haredim lived their lives as they wished in terms of religion, education, and culture, with minimal involvement in shaping the public space or in the state’s political, security, or economic activities.

The demographic growth of the Haredi community increased the relative proportion of the Haredi population in Israel and, along with this, its public influence on various matters of religion and state. More significantly, this population boom has forced onto the public agenda the questions of Haredi conscription into the IDF, Haredi participation in the labor force, the amount of budget and benefits Haredim are entitled to, and which curricula are taught in the Haredi education system. These issues have mainly centered on the relationship between the Haredi community and the rest of Israeli society, but have also been debated within the Haredi community itself, where internal factors gave rise to new, and opposing voices on these matters.

**Encounters with secularism and modernity**

The Haredi community is a religious, Orthodox community, with a deep awareness of the need to defend itself against the spiritual dangers inherent in educating people in secularism and modernity. It was the spiritual challenges of the encounter between tradition / religion and secularism / modernity that sparked the establishment of separate Haredi communities in early 19th century Europe, and have continued to form the basis for Haredi segregation and seclusion to this day. This is the central challenge that the Haredi community constantly faces, and it is only growing as the Western and modern world becomes ever more liberal and permissive, and as its fundamental precepts take hold among the wider global public. The changes described above, including the increasing openness of Haredi community to mainstream Israeli society, and the penetration of the internet that brings the modern, Western world into every space, have only served to intensify this problem. Concepts such as feminism, equality, freedom of choice, individual rights, and many other Western values, have also filtered into the Haredi community, posing a threat to Haredi ideology.

**Internal divisions**

The Haredi community is made up of groups and subgroups with differing positions on various issues. These groups can be placed on a spectrum that spans closedness and openness: at one end, there are those factions that seek to remain segregated from the outside world and raise the walls ever higher, and at the other are those that seek to balance conservatism with openness to the rest of the world.

These internal disagreements on the issue of closedness versus openness find expression in innumerable internal struggles within the Haredi community, such as the question of the community’s relationship with the state, curricula taught in the Haredi education system, the exposure of Haredim to Israeli and general culture, Haredi dress codes, enforcement and sanctions, and internal divisions into separate communities (Torah leadership, synagogues, educational institutions, etc.). These internal fractures into groups and subgroups makes broad-based collaboration problematic and leads to incidences of factional arrogance and discrimination.

**Dropouts and “leaving with a question”**

Alongside the changes that have occurred within Haredi society over the past two decades, there is a growing awareness within the community of the high dropout rates from the Haredi education system, especially among Haredi boys of high school age and above. The dropout phenomenon is manifested in many ways other than terminating their studies, including by “dropping out” of society spiritually, socially, and normatively.

Various educational, professional, occupational, social, experiential, and military frameworks have been established over the years for Haredi boys and youths, but it seems that these do not sufficiently address the severity of the problem, and there remain a high number of young men who are not able to find a suitable educational framework for themselves. Every year, there are many thousands of boys and young men from Haredi backgrounds who are trying to find their way in the world and, without any direction, pose a high risk to themselves and society. Some of these boys and youths choose to abandon aspects of the Haredi lifestyle, or even to leave the community altogether. Many of them find it difficult to find their place socially outside the Haredi community.

In addition to the issue of Haredi youth dropping out of the education system, there is also a phenomenon of Haredi adolescents leaving the fold of the ultra-Orthodox community (in Hebrew, *yetziah* *bishe’elah*-- “leaving with a question”) following exposure to the society that surrounds them. Discussion of this phenomenon is still repressed in intra-Haredi discourse, but it appears to be a growing trend.

**Denouncing the leaders of change**

The Haredi community is inherently conservative, and fears and opposes all change, big or small. The changes discussed above (employment, military / civilian service, academia, and the internet) are met with open hostility from a significant part of the Haredi Torah leadership. In many cases, this even leads to sanctions against those involved in the processes of change, and especially against those who lead them. This opposition does not prevent the trend of change, but it does slow it down, and results in concealment, fears, and the levy of a high social cost on the pioneers and leaders of the change processes. Acute hostility often leads to crippling fear.

**Confused identities, lack of belonging**

As a result of the challenges mentioned above, many Haredi young people who have chosen a different path from the classical Haredi path—integration into work, academic studies, military or civilian service, exposure to the internet, or a certain openness to Israeliness and modernity—find themselves with a confused identity. They feel a certain alienation in the Haredi community in which they were raised, but they also do not see themselves as belonging to any other Israeli social group. The fact that they cannot identify clearly with one group or another causes a certain confusion that has many implications, for example, when choosing a spouse, a place to live, a synagogue and community, educational institutions for children, and many more dilemmas concerning questions of personal and social identity that do not always have answers. Even those who have a clear idea of their personal identity often find it difficult to find a suitable community and social framework where they can feel a sense of belonging and of being welcomed.

**The coronavirus crisis and its implications**

The year of the coronavirus crisis has especially affected the Haredi community and its relations with wider Israeli society. A significant proportion of the Haredi community did not accept social distancing rules and the various rules enforced by the state regarding face coverings, avoiding prayers in synagogues, closing educational institutions, and prohibiting large gatherings, including weddings and community events. This caused considerable tension between the Haredi community and large sections of Israeli society who were angered at the Haredi violations of the guidelines and their lack of solidarity with the wider Israeli society on a matter that concerned the safety of the whole public. Even within the Haredi community itself, many people were disappointed by the conduct of the rabbinical and public leadership in relation to these issues.

Prolonged stay-at-home orders and the complete or partial closure of education institutions also led to a significant rise in the number of Haredi boys and young men who found themselves outside of the education system, and many did not return to school or employment after the pandemic. During this period, there was also a dramatic increase in the use of the internet and smartphones in the Haredi community in general, particularly among young Haredim. Although these changes were precipitated by the difficult circumstances of the period, in light of the various changes already discussed here, it is highly doubtful that once there is a return to normality, the community will return to it previous state.

**Proposal for a new Haredi agenda**

In light of the changes in the Haredi community as described above, we propose a number of strategies that may help the community cope with the challenges that have arisen as a result

**The challenges**

The Haredi community in Israel has tens of thousands of young people who do not feel comfortable with much of that community’s prevailing attitudes toward a number of issues, in particular toward openness to modernity and its values, and to wider Israeli society. Within this younger generation, there are hundreds of Haredi entrepreneurs and social activists who are operating in a wide range of areas. However, to date, there seems to be almost no framework for connecting these tens of thousands of young people, or these hundreds of activists. We believe that steps aimed at uniting these young people into a joint movement, as well as an organization that can connect hundreds of entrepreneurs and social activists, can prove of great benefit to their agenda.

**Torah leadership**

The Haredi community sees itself as fully committed to the ways of Torah and *mitzvot*, [Hebrew, “commandments”] and as a result, the Haredi Torah leadership enjoys considerable weight in all areas of life, both personal and public. At this point, even those among the young Haredi generation who are seeking a slightly different path than that of their parents and teachers need the leadership of rabbis and Torah scholars who view combining Torah with *Derech* *Eretz* [Hebrew, “the way of the land,” an ethical and responsible way to live] as a fundamentally worthy path; wise scholars who can serve as community rabbis, heads of educational institutions, and Torah scholars, and who can develop a Torah-based concept that is relevant and suited to this unique population. This leadership will need to make its unique voice heard on various key issues, within and outside the Haredi community, and can serve as a counterbalance to those within the Haredi community who oppose this new approach and movements for change.

**Civic leadership**

The Haredi political parties see themselves as committed mainly to the Haredi “student society” and, as such, they rarely represent the attitudes and needs of those Haredim who integrate into the workforce, academia, or the army, or those who seek educational institutions for their children that offer a broad, high level education. Consequently, this large population subgroup finds itself without political representation. It appears that what is needed is the establishment of an apolitical organization or movement that is able to unite and focus this public and its activists and to promote their worldview and unique needs as a social and public movement. Such an organization would hold conferences and round tables on issues that concern the Haredi public, and would publish its positions and plans on an appropriate public forum. An organization that would bring together tens of thousands of members and connect hundreds of entrepreneurs and social activists would also be able to enlist the support of public figures in the Knesset, in government, in local authorities, and in other public bodies.

**Leadership programs**

Over the past decade, several leadership development programs have been run in the Haredi community, but it seems that there is still a need for more programs across the country to meet the needs of the younger Haredi generation (aged 25–30), with an emphasis on community and social organization of this new trend within the Haredi community, and on the coexistence of the Haredi community with wider Israeli society.

**Communities**

The best response to the identity confusion of young Haredim is to create a new, diverse, and inclusive Haredi community that will provide every Haredi youth with a sense of belonging and of being a member of a large community where he or she is one among equals. Furthermore, local communities should be established around synagogues, as well as with members have shared experiences, such as having undertaken military service, or having studied at the same academic institution, etc. Also needed are virtual communities based on areas of interest and more. These communities would provide each person with the social structures that they need to successfully address changes, difficulties, and confusions.

**Education**

The need for suitable educational institutions for the children of the “new Haredim” is probably the central issue for most people within this community. Haredi parents seek places where their children will be accepted as equals, without discrimination or prejudice, a place where they will be educated in a manner consistent with their worldview, an educational institution that combines religious studies with general studies at a high level, and where students excel in piety and virtue. There is a great need for such educational frameworks across the country, for both boys and girls, and across all age groups. This requires the mobilization and cooperation of many actors, both inside and outside the Haredi community, notwithstanding considerable difficulties and challenges, including the opposition of some within the Haredi community to the opening and development of such institutions.

As well as formal education, there is ample space for the development of informal education frameworks across all age groups, such as a Haredi youth movement and other initiatives.

Because many parents are unfamiliar with the various education options that are available, knowledge and guidance centers must be opened for parents and students that can also disseminate information to the public about existing frameworks and what they offer.

Due to the complexity of this area, an annual conference of Haredi educators is needed, where educational issues can be discussed and clarified at a broad and a local level.

**Higher** **education**

The integration of Haredi students into academic studies is vital, both to facilitate their entry into a wide range of well-paid jobs, and to help them integrate as equals into Israeli society.

However, graduates of the Haredi education system face a number of difficulties and barriers when trying to join academic life: not only do they suffer from academic and economic gaps, but they must also contend with the possible harm that the secular academic curriculum and worldview could have on the Haredi faith and lifestyle. To overcome these barriers, the academic gaps must be bridged, scholarships should be offered to Haredi students, and the religious and social identities of Haredi students must be strengthened through dedicated programs and student communities. In addition, of course, assistance must be provided to Haredi graduates to help them successfully integrate into the Israeli workforce.

**Programs to integrate Haredim into the Israeli space**

The future of the relationship between the Haredi community and Israeli society may very well be decided by the younger generation of Haredi students, if they can succeed in finding an appropriate, delicate balance between their Haredi identity and commitment to the Haredi community’s values and lifestyle, and their need to acquire a higher education and integrate into Israeli society in a variety of areas. This is a difficult and complex task, and can be realized only through the combined forces of a number of significant elements both within and outside the Haredi community, designing programs for these students that can strengthen their social and religious identities while preparing them for successful integration into wider Israeli society.