**Three labor strategies, three ultraorthodox stances**

**The resurgence of labor organizations among Haredi people in Israel**

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to overview the main patterns of labor Haredi organization activism in Israel. It is a rising phenomenon, an outcome of the growing rates of Haredis entering the labor market hence wishing to safeguard their rights. Drawing on in-depth interviews, websites, and digital networks, the paper aims to depict and explain the trend. The discussion begins with mapping the field and then elaborates on three primary Haredi labor strategies: hedging a safe Haredi existence inside non-religious workplaces, anchoring the voice of labor within the Haredi culture, and leverage Jewish orthodoxy to make a universal positive change. The conclusion is that each strategy has a conformist aspect as well as an innovative one. Additionally, each strategy also represents a broader and different stance regarding the Haredi existence vis-à-vis the Israeli secular society.

**Haredi society is changing**

Until the late 1990s, the Israeli Jewish ultraorthodox population[[1]](#footnote-1) had tended to be static. All Haredi streams shared the principles of conservation, obedience to spiritual-rabbinate authority, self-isolation, negating modernity and Zionism, and the supremacy of the sacred over mundane life.[[2]](#footnote-2) These features were an ultraorthodox reaction to the series of Judaism changes: modernization, secularization, Zionism, and the Holocaust. Ultraorthodox Jews saw them as a threat. Their answer was self-isolation and making bible-learning the ultimate goal of the community. Consequently, Haredi society has constituted itself as a "Society of Learners," *Chevrat Lomdim*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This model was sustained by pragmatic acceptance of the secular Zionist state, which, in turn, aided the Haredi community with financial support, dismissal from military service, and cultural autonomy.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Haredi way of life had strengthened since the late 1970s. The Likud party rose to power, forming right-wing coalitions in which Haredi parties played a key role. The Haredi community gained legitimacy, and they enjoyed bigger budgets.[[5]](#footnote-5) Consequently, Haredi society gained confidence. However, it kept its survivalist rhetoric[[6]](#footnote-6), particularly under Harav Elazar Shach and Harav Ovadia Yosef's charismatic leadership.[[7]](#footnote-7)

But a transformation is ushering Haredi success. Men and women are joining the labor market,[[8]](#footnote-8) acquiring occupational, academic, and professional training.[[9]](#footnote-9) Digital media has heavily penetrated the community, with the blossoming scene of Haredi websites and digital networks. It overcomes the long disapproval of Haredi leadership against free access to the outside world and becomes a platform for internal criticism.[[10]](#footnote-10) The change is also in the field of housing. The population is no longer confined to its traditional urban centers – Jerusalem and Bnei-Brak – but is spreading to new Haredi towns or enclaves within mixed towns.[[11]](#footnote-11) Growing numbers of Haredim enroll in military or civilian services.[[12]](#footnote-12) Others stop seeing the IDF and its soldiers negatively but rather develop a romantic view of it, though from a distance.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Torah learning is usually the raison d'etre of the Haredi existence. But now, the mundane aspects of life are becoming essential. Individualist trends rise.[[14]](#footnote-14) One expression is the development of leisure culture, for example, the flourishing scene of Haredi popular music.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The bottom-up rising of leisure culture also attests to the weakening of the top spiritual leadership – *Gdolei HaTorah* - and the upsurge of grass-root leadership, with a more popular[[16]](#footnote-16) or civilian[[17]](#footnote-17) character. Furthermore, Haredi politics is no longer confined to narrow sectorial matters. Instead, it addresses broad issues of nationality and ethnicity[[18]](#footnote-18) and even yields first signs of political movements, such as Haredi feminism.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Many Haredis find these transformations threatening. As a reaction, they build higher fences to prevent the external world from influencing their traditional way of life.[[20]](#footnote-20) Haredi society, then, is less stable than before. It becomes cracked,[[21]](#footnote-21) enabling additional change to grow. This article focus on one specific field of change – the growing participation of Haredis in labor organizations. But before I delve into this topic, it is necessary to discuss the state of Haredi employment.

**Employment among Haredim**

Due to multiple causes - an ethos of the Society of Learners, governmental benefits, and the preference for self-isolation – the employment rates among Haredis were substantially low relating to non-Haredi Jews. The lowest score was in 2002, when Haredis's employment rate was 37% for men and 51% for women, compared to 78% and 68%, respectively. However, Since 2003, Haredis' employment rates have gradually increased, and the gap between them and the secular got thinner. Haredis's employment rate was 51% for men and 76% for women, compared to 87% for non-Haredi men and 83% for women.[[22]](#footnote-22)

A central cause for the rise of employment among Haredim was the massive cut of the state's benefits, in 2003, among them cutting support for the Yeshivas. Meeting the monthly ends has become hard for many Haredi families. Thus they had no choice but to join the labor force. This entry was a starting point[[23]](#footnote-23). Henceforth, a growing amount of Haredis have acquired professional training, and their span of occupation has expanded. Haredis has become a part of the Israeli labor market.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The unique characteristics of employment among Haredis may accompany specific difficulties. First, Lacking in acquaintance with the job market leads Haredis to gather in only a few branches, such as education, computing, accounting, social work, business management, etc.[[25]](#footnote-25) Secondly, Haredi's attitude to work tends to be instrumental, merely for a living. They do not regard work as a career or as a source of identity.[[26]](#footnote-26) Bible learning is still their calling.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thirdly, Haredi employees do not tend to develop a robust organizational identity.[[28]](#footnote-28) Finally, many of them wish to control the extent of their exposure to the secular environment. They assume that sticking together will make it easier to maintain their way of life.[[29]](#footnote-29) Therefore, a newly emerging phenomenon is work enclaves for Haredi workers, often segregated by gender.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The training of Haredis is worse than the general Israeli population. Haredi's rates are less than their non-Haredi counterparts, 25% compared to 33% in 2016. More women are getting special training among Haredi employees than men (30% compared to 17% in 2016).[[31]](#footnote-31) Moreover, Haredis' secular education is relatively low, with only 20% having an academic degree compared to 45% among non-Haredi employees.[[32]](#footnote-32) Haredi workers are also less inclined to use digital or innovative technologies at work. They adapt to it only when they have to.[[33]](#footnote-33)

These difficulties can explain Haredis' inferior position in workplaces and the job market. One gap is in incomes. In 1997, Haredi workers' average monthly wage was 5019 NIS, while the average income of non-Haredi workers was 5956 NIS. In 2017 average incomes were 7,920 NIS compared to 11,459, respectively. Haredis are also ill-represented at the higher ranks of the echelon. Only 11% of them are doing a management role, corresponding to 24% of the general population. When they occupy management positions, these are usually junior ranks, only 12% of them – compared to 32% of the non-Haredi - hold a senior position.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Contrary to their objective position, Haredis' subjective stances regarding work experience are quite positive and very similar to those of their secular colleagues. They are quite pleased with the way their employers and workmates treat them. They do not feel harassed or discriminated. They do not report violations of religious beliefs. They also feel satisfied, even slightly more than other workers, with their jobs, their mates' assistance, and their work-life balance.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The data analyzed until now regards Haredis as one whole category. However, splitting this category by age reveals the beginning of a turn among the younger generation. Younger Haredi workers start seeing work as a career. More of them have academic and professional training, are much more at ease with digital technology, and move more up the organizational ladder. They are also willing to integrate with other groups at the workplace.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The growing importance of work among Haredis, and the difficulties they are coping with, raise a question about the role of organized labor in their community. Trade unionism is the central institution for representing workers in industrial societies. What kind of impact does it have on Haredim in the labor market?

**Haredis and organized labor**

Haredi labor organization is not new in Israeli history. The PAI (Po'alei Agudat Israel) was a Haredi movement that was also inspired by Socialist motives. Since the 1920s, it was an important agent, both within the Histadrut and within the Haredi public.[[37]](#footnote-37) It had stepped down in tandem with the Histadrut's downfall and the shift of Haredi political support to the right-wing Likud party. Since the disappearance of PAI, there had not been any significant religious labor agent.

In the past decade, and after a prolonged recession, there have been a few cases of Haredi workers' organization attempts.[[38]](#footnote-38) They do not correspond to a single pattern. The Histadrut is part of the scene. It formed *The Division of Religious Local Councils and Religious Services Workers* (from now on I this "The Religious Division" or as "The Haredi Division"). It also appointed a special Haredi coordinator (a woman) at the Trade Union Unit's headquarter.

The starting point of the new attempts was not promising. An encompassing report, published in 2012, provided a glimpse. Only 18% of the Haredi employees were registered members of labor organizations, compared to 27% among non-Haredi Jews. While the Histadrut was the most prominent labor organization among the non-Haredi Jewish workers (64%), teachers' associations unionized most Haredis (58%). Although Haredi teachers were suffering worse employment conditions than their non-Haredi equivalent,[[39]](#footnote-39) most of them did not have a workers' committee at their workplace. Finally, the report showed that most Haredis endorse the right of collective action. Still, they were less supportive of having a labor organization in their workplace, not to mention being an active member (2.3%, compared to 19.4% among non-Haredi Jews and 23% among Israeli-Arabs).[[40]](#footnote-40)

Thus far, there has been no scholarly writing about the subject. Only applied data is available, particularly reports which provide descriptive quantitative data. Therefore, the contribution of this article is manifold. It suggests an initial insight into this phenomenon and maps the field. It also tracks the phenomenon's social origins, cultural meanings, potential, and limitations. This article also has a potential contribution to understanding the broader topic of employment among Haredim. Here again, scholarly literature is scarce. A prominent scholar in this field is Avi Kay, who focuses on how Haredis see work and their workplaces or how the sacred texts see labor relations.[[41]](#footnote-41) My article adds to Kay's pioneer work by providing more detailed scrutiny into Haredis' labor organizations' realm.

**Organized labor and religion**

Social theorists hold different views about religion's role in society. As Karl Marx, conflict theorists see religion as an ideology that legitimizes controlling the oppressive forces over the oppressed groups. This tradition also sees religion as a projection of the material forces – a human creation that imposes itself upon them.[[42]](#footnote-42) The Functionalist school views religion as a driving force for itself. Emile Durkheim saw religion as a synonym to the collective consciousness, the pillar of society.[[43]](#footnote-43) Max Weber also contended that faith could operate as a cause that influences other institutions, such as work the economy.[[44]](#footnote-44)

I embrace the assumption that culture is part and parcel of class struggles and labor struggles, and plays an active role in them.[[45]](#footnote-45) Faith, for example, shapes work and business. The most classic illustration is Weber's thesis about the Protestant ethics and the developing ethos of work as a calling, the capitalist cultural foundation.[[46]](#footnote-46) A more recent account is of the Faith at Work (FAW) movement, whose goals are to restore the explicit link between work and religion.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Religious agents are also involved in labor disputes. Ethnographic studies reveal that religious actors could endorse both parties. Two examples are the strife at a factory manufacturing corn products in Clinton, Iowa,[[48]](#footnote-48) or a labor struggle in North Carolina.[[49]](#footnote-49) More decisive support of the church in workers is evident in two cases in the Chicago metropolitan area - of the nurses at St. Joseph hospital and the workers at O'Hare International Airport.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**The Research Questions**

The article addresses the following questions: What are Haredi workers' primary motivations for getting organized? In which industries or branches can we find them? How do they conceive the act of organization and their role as workers' representatives? What are their goals? What are their strategies and practices?

**Method**

The empirical data is from various sources. The first, and of minor importance, is data from my initial fieldwork with non-Haredi workers' committees at the Israeli private sector between 2006-2008. I found there some comments and insights, among some of my religious informants, about the interface of religion and labor activity. The second source is seven meetings with the chairman of The Religious Division at the Histadrut. The long sessions (an hour each) could take the form of either monolog by the chairman or open conversations between us. They spanned from 2017 until 2019. In a way, they were my induction to the field.

The third source of data is a series of six additional in-depth interviews, carried out between January-September 2020, with Haredi activists who were involved in organized labor attempts. Most of the interviews were face-to-face, lasted between one to two hours, recorded, and transcripted. Another interview, little less than an hour in length, was carried out by phone. The woman whom I interviewed asked for it. Her explanation was the fear of COVID-19 infection. Still, I had the impression that as a Haredi married woman, who was already criticized for being a part of a labor organization, it suited her to have a remote interview. Typical to my last five interviewees was their preference not to talk by video through Zoom application.

The fourth source of data was shorter conversations with Histadrut officials who are involved with Haredi workers. Although I did not record these conversations, I took valuable notes. The last source of data was virtual, starting from Youtube videos, columns in websites, reports, and websites. The websites were diversified: general websites (such as Yedioth Achronot), sectorial websites of the Histadrut (Davar1), and the Haredi sector (Be'Hadrei Haredim, Kikar Ha'Shabat), and digital networks such as Facebook pages and chats.

The multiple sources of data served in three ways. Firstly, they provided valuable information about the field. Secondly, they were a source for deciphering the meaning categories and narratives. Thirdly, the variety of data I used was, in many cases, overlapping, hence enabled me to the triangulation that helped to separate between facts and interpretations, therefore to be more cautious and confident in the analysis.[[51]](#footnote-51)

I used three strategies for data processing. One is a narrative analysis[[52]](#footnote-52) about what led the activists to organize and the ordeals they underwent. The second is a phenomenological analysis,[[53]](#footnote-53) whose goal was to extract the deep subjective meaning that those people ascribed to their actions. The third is a thick description, interpreting data by putting the actors' words and actions in contexts of both the immediate situation they maneuver in and the cultural system they belong to.[[54]](#footnote-54)

The names of the people and organizations I use in this article are pseudonyms. I did so to avoid any harm for them and respect their privacy. I used real names when there was no necessity nor possibility of disguising them.

**Mapping the field**

Before answering the research questions, I shall map the current types of Haredi labor organizations.

1. Organization attempts at workplaces that provide religious services. The employers are The Ministry of Religious Services or its proxies - the Local Religious Councils or subcontractors. One case I cover is of the *Balaniyot*.[[55]](#footnote-55) Another case-study is of *Kashrut* Supervisors.[[56]](#footnote-56) The third case is of the workers of the Local Religious Councils, including lay workers and Rabbis.
2. Organization attempts in Haredi workplaces – Haredi schools networks, Haredi medical Centers, an organization that runs a holy site for the state, a Haredi journalist website,[[57]](#footnote-57) and more.
3. A Haredi representative in a general workers' committee - many Haredis join secular workplaces. Some workers' committees choose to nominate a Haredi representative. His job is to ensure the company meets the Haredi workers' particular needs. An example is a Haredi representative in a workers' committee of one of Israel's biggest insurance companies.
4. Haredi activists at non-Haredi labor organizations – here, Haredis are active as a part of the unified collective. An example is "Jacob," a Chabad Hassid who founded the workers' committee in one of Israel's prominent food corporations.

**The argument**

Three strategies fuel the Haredi organization's attempts: hedging a safe Haredi existence inside non-religious workplaces, anchoring the voice of labor within the Haredi environment, and leverage Jewish orthodox cosmology to make a universal positive change. At the heart of these strategies lie several motivations: pragmatic, idealistic-conformist, and idealistic-reformist (Tikun Olam).

**Pragmatic approach: hedging a safe Haredi existence inside non-religious workplaces**

I am sitting with Yariv, the chairman of a workers' committee of "Calculus," a big insurance company, and Saul, representing the Haredi workers within the committee. Yariv tells me that not long before, there had been an election. He was running for the second term as a chairman. His list of candidates included people representing minorities within the company - Saul and an Israeli Arab woman[[58]](#footnote-58). The goal is to represent the cultural diversity of the company properly. Yariv tells me that they celebrate the three religions' main holidays, giving the relevant workers a gift. They also mark Women's day and the LGBT community's events.

Saul tells me about his activities. One goal is to ensure that every Haredi employee could find food in a suitable Kashrut brand or level. Another goal is to ensure that men have a place to pray. It could be a conference room adapted to public prayers (*Minyan*) or getting to an arrangement with a small, family-like synagogue close to the workplace. Saul had managed to arrange a modest annual donation from the company and the workers' committee to the synagogue, and religious workers would go there for prayers. A third goal is to set appropriate leisure activities for Haredi workers. In the woman's day, for example, Saul arranges lectures or movies by religious women artists. On holidays, when the committee gives small foodstuff handouts, Saul takes care that the bottle of wine or chocolate box is at the right Kashrut standard.

More challenging is the company vacation and leisure activities. It is a tradition that big organizations send their employees to an annual retreat, a few days in a hotel at popular sites in Israel (Eilat, the Dead Sea) or even the nearby countries. Another related role of workers' committees is arranging entertainment shows. But not every style of activity fits the ultraorthodox lifestyle. Consequently, a few workers' committees of companies that employ a significant amount of Haredi workers joint together to arrange the operation. They booked some hotels in Eilat at the beginning of the off-season so that the Haredis could enjoy it without being exposed to un-modest behaviors and have the proper kashrut standard. They also managed to collect a sufficient sum of money to recruit Haredi top-stars for the concert, such as Avraham Fried, Ishai Ribo, and Ishai Lapidot.

The last goal Saul is striving to accomplish is to bring the orthodox Jewish input into the general organizational culture. Few examples attest to it. One is adding religious books to the little library the committee created for all workers' benefits. The second is adding, every week, the times of Shabbat's entry and exit, and the weekly Parasha,[[59]](#footnote-59) to the Workers' committees' Facebook page.

The workers' committee of "Calculus" also took care of mundane matters concerning the Haredi workers. Most of the Ultraorthodox workers were young mothers. The company enabled them to start their workday earlier in the morning and finishing the workday at 15:10. With the committee's support, the company also provided them with shuttles to pick them up and return them to three different Haredi urban centers, where most of them live.

According to Saul and Yariv, the provision of suitable activities, gifts, and services to Haredi employees positively impacts Haredi employees. They feel a part of the organization, and therefore their motivation increases.

The Haredi workers of "Calculus" are a minority in a secular company. Saul kept letting me know he is aware of it. Thus, his main concern has been to ensure that Haredi employees feel comfortable holding the observant way of life in a non-religious environment. He has no ambition of transforming the secular identity of the company. He keeps being cautious and modest in his demands. For example, when the workers' committee marks the LGBT day, he refrains from any reaction whats or ever - neither bless the community nor condemning them.

The pragmatic approach Saul represents has further indication. I asked him whom he does include as Haredi. His answer was whoever defines himself as one. Another indicator Saul uses is technical. He serves whoever join his mailing list or attend activities he arranges. This practical approach is in sharp contrast to the strict and segregative Haredi discourse about the group boundaries.

Then, Saul's primary task is to enable Haredim to keep the dictations of Judaism and maintain their lifestyle. He tries to be prudent and avoid projecting any impression that Haredim are a privileged group.

**An idealistic-conformist approach: anchoring the voice of labor within the Haredi culture**

At the heart of the legitimizing effort of organized labor lie three primary strains. The first is the gap between the ultraorthodox society's aspiration to be an ideal society of spiritual supremacy against acknowledging that it is complexed just like any other community. The second strain is between the ambition to get more open to the secular society against such a move's fear. The third is the ambivalent stance towards the labor movement. Haredis contempts it because of its blatant secularity. At the same time, they respect the activities for the benefit of the weak and needy.

The Haredis' opinion of organized labor also depends on the changes that Haredi society has been going through lately. Since the 1970s and until the previous decade, the Haredi ethos of Torah learning had pushed aside mundane matters and rejected any action that might defy authority. The decisive negation of organized labor was an outcome. Labor struggles raise the connotation of leftism and socialism, the alternative to religion.

Haredi labor organizers need to overcome this opposition. One tactic is to push labor relations to the heart of Haredi public discourse. They do so by getting involved in Haredi media's growing scene, especially on websites. Consequently, the coverage of labor issues has become quite regular. It contains two types of items. One is about labor rights (including inside Haredi workplaces), and the second is profile stories about labor Haredi activists. No less than three of my interviewees enjoyed highly positive items at the Haredi media. At least one of those activists, Jacob, got a long story at the weekly magazine of Israel's largest newspaper – Yedioth Achronot.[[60]](#footnote-60)

But gaining legitimacy also requires obtaining Rabbinical consent. Shmuel, chairman of The Religious Division at the Histadrut, told me that he was urgently summoned to the Rabbinical, during a labor dispute at Hassidic education institution. The judge expressed his disappointment that a Haredi man is representing the Histadrut. He reminded the harms that the Histadrut had inflicted upon religion. Shmuel replied that it had happened in the remote past. But now he is standing, a Haredi man wearing a Kipa, a Histadrut's representative of Haredi workers. It is an outstanding achievement.[[61]](#footnote-61) Then, it seems that the first tactic to re-legitimize the Histadrut is by claiming that the Haredi movement has come back to the Histadrut as a winner. The Histadrut is changing and opening to Judaism.

Legitimizing labor through rabbinical consent goes further. Another practice was appealing the spiritual leadership and asking for support, such as issuing a Halakha[[62]](#footnote-62) rule. An example is the appeal of a group of women education workers to the Bnei Braq[[63]](#footnote-63) Haredi Rabbinical Court of Justice, under Rabbi Nissim Kerlitz. They asked for a ruling as to their right to organizing and their struggle to improve their labor conditions. The verdict was that "Organizing is acceptable as long as it does not lead to actions incongruent with the Halakha."[[64]](#footnote-64)

Besides the Halakha rules, Haredi labor activists pursue the great Haredi leaders' public and moral support. Two of my interviewees told me enthusiastically about an endorsement by the most prominent figure in the Sephardi biblical world, the late Ha'rav Ovadia Yosef. Ha'rav Yosef declared that the Histadrut is Israel's greatest *Gemach*. A Gemach is a common Haredi social mechanism based on charity, solidarity, and cooperation, creating a provisioning system. Also, Haredi's Histadtut's officials are cultivating connections with rabbis to normalize workers' organizations. These rabbis are from all the main branches of Haredi society, not only Sepharadim but also Lita'im (Lithuanian Haredis) and Chasidim. While some rabbis are publicly endorsing workers' rights, others are not going against them, which is an indirect way of expressing support.

Anyway, the new activism movement has one undeniable achievement. It provokes internal discussion about what Jewish sources have to say about labor rights, especially the right of organizing and the freedom of striking – the two fundamental principles of organized labor.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Another sophisticated tactic for gaining support is to instill the idea that strengthening labor rights among Haredis may entail expanding Judaism in the Israeli public life. The case of the *Balaniyot* demonstrates this contention. The ritual bathing of women is a pillar of the orthodox perception of the pure Jewish home.[[66]](#footnote-66) However, the Balaniyot, who assist and supervise the bathing, are working in unconventional hours and often fulfill additional duties as maintaining the place. Their salary is low. Since the state is paying their salary, it is to blame for these ill conditions. However, my informants told me that the religious establishment, particularly the local religious councils, is also to blame.

The campaign for improving the *Balaniyot*' conditions took two trajectories – negotiating with the Ministry of Treasury and lobbying inside the religious establishment to amend their poor treatment*.* The activists claimed that the religious establishment could not overlook women who play such a crucial daily role in sustaining the orthodox Jewish way of life.

The same logic goes for the Kashrut attendants. The Kashrut apparatus is undergoing reorganization. In 2017, the Supreme Court ruled against its predominant employment arrangement. In the former system, the attendants were supervising kashrut in the places that hired them. The new ruling disqualified it. The Ministry of Treasury saw it as an opportunity to restructure the branch. They offered to form new corporations that would function as contractors and hire the Kashrut attendants. Fearing that the latest move will worsen their conditions, the kashrut attendants formed a national workers' committee affiliated with the Histadrut. Their primary strategy was to portray themselves as proxies of the Haredi community to make the Israeli society more Jewish-orthodox. Thus, they claimed, their act of organizing was indispensable.

The constant efforts to gain legitimacy teaches about the fierce opposition against it. One of my interviewees told me that although the Bible approves the working people's rights, labor activism has arisen antagonism in Haredi circles. Four explanations were heard to explain the resentment. One is the clash between workers' rights and Haredi employers' interests, which many of them are ties to Haredi politicians and the great rabbis.[[67]](#footnote-67) The second is the labor activists' willingness to expose inside tensions, an unusual move in a Haredi culture of unity.[[68]](#footnote-68) The third pertains to Haredi labor activists' readiness to appeal to civilian authority. Such a move is regarded as contradicting the Halakha, except for specific topics.[[69]](#footnote-69) To sum up, for many, the meaning of labor activism is defying the authority and unity of the Haredi community.

At the heart of Haredi society lies the idea of the individuals' unquestionable obedience to the supreme spiritual leaders and their proxies - the politicians and other local leaders.[[70]](#footnote-70) Absolute submission is crucial. Haredi labor activists are "playing" with this authority. On the one hand, they stick to it by seeking spiritual leadership approval in a labor dispute. On the other hand, sometimes they ask for external, secular authorities.

A good example is the case of schools or kindergartens.[[71]](#footnote-71) The Haredi education system is a major economic enterprise. Funded by the state, private donations, and parents' fees, it has become attractive for Haredi entrepreneurs, many of them with tide connections to the political system. It is also a critical source of jobs, especially for women. In a Society of Learners, where men are supposed to spend their lives at the Yeshiva (or "Kollel" for married men), women's employment is crucial for the families' living. However, in recent years the supply for teachers has become higher than the demand. Moreover, governmental support is not as stable as in the past, and there are fewer private donations due to economic crises. Therefore, when the financial pressure is getting stronger, the employers have an excuse to violate their obligations. They use sophisticated ways to pay their workers less than they deserve. One way was to prevent teachers from registering at the Ministry of Education, therefore cutting the seniority component at their paycheck. When teachers intended to complain, they faced the threat of losing their job, pressure not to defy their leaders, and got the feeling that the fate of Torah learning among the young generation is on their shoulders.

Haredi labor activists reacted assertively. They put the pressure back on the employers' shoulders and appealed to the rabbinical court. They claimed that according to the great Jewish religious authorities, like the Rambam, abusing workers disobeys one of the Torah's must-not commandments. It is not something to negotiate or compromise.

Another example of the clash between Haredi labor activists and the Haredi leadership was the nurses' organization in a prominent medical center. The nurses had the following goals: better employment conditions, equality between nurses with the same job but different salaries, and accountable management. The reaction to their demands was adverse. The activists found an open letter, hanged on the medical center's walls, allegedly claiming that a top Rabbi denounces the nurses' campaign. Surprised, the activists used their networking to access the Rabbi who signed the letter. They elaborated their claims and convinced the Rabbi, so he ordered his close assistant to see how he could help the workers. To sum up, the Haredi employers and labor activists are both endorsing their claims by recruiting spiritual leadership.

So, it appears that struggling against Haredi employers requires creativity in justifications and practical measures. We can witness both of these in the following incident. "Praise" is an NGO that operates in a holy place of national importance. It is affiliated with The Prime Minister's office and financed by it. It employs hundreds of workers. The management, which has strong ties with the local Haredi leadership, opposed the organizing. The activists could not risk going on a strike and shutting down the holy place. Therefore, they threatened to embark on a unique strike that will leave the site open and free to visit. They would not charge any fees or provide paid guidance. So, the damage was more to the employers than to the place or the visitors.

To conclude, Haredi labor activists expressed their adherence to the ultraorthodox principles and rabbinate leadership. So far, their success is partial. There is still a significant resentment against organized labor, and there is big interests determent to block it, or as one of the interviewees contended:

*The Torah is very clear about the necessity of treating the worker fairly and paying his accurate salary with no delay. But sadly, when money and political power mix, the outcome is an unfortunate overlooking of the Torah commandments.*

**Idealistic-reformist approach (Tikun Olam): leverage Jewish orthodoxy to make a universal positive change**

Haredi labor activists' third approach is Tikkun Olam ("fixing the world"), a universal attitude that defines the Jewish people's destination to seek social justice.[[72]](#footnote-72) The Tikkun Olam approach is a more open strategy than the other two. The orthodox Jew has the legitimacy of reaching out to the secular population.

The clearest example for this approach is an attempt - made by Jacob, a Chabad's Hassid - to organize the workers of "Ultimate," a giant corporation that manufactures, imports, and distributes a variety of food products through its multiple divisions. Soon after joining the company, Jacob has become overwhelmed by what he described as the uncivilized management attitude. He reported that managers coursing employees. Other claims referred to the quality of life at work. Jacob told me that the company avoided replacing the old forklifts with new ones to the employee's inconvenience. He asserted no reason for this, other than putting the workers in a secondary place. So Jacob decided to organize the workers and asked for the Histadrut's organizational umbrella. The foundation of the workers' committee was in secret to bypass the managements' anticipated thwart attempts.

Over the years, my field experience has taught me that an organizing attempt's success depends on secrecy and credibility. The organizing core must be loyal, and the workers would support the risky move only if they would feel that the new committee is representing them. Hence, to reduce the risk of licking, Jacob turned first to fellow Haredi colleagues. On the other hand, to gain representativity, Jacob sought establishing a diversified committee, with members from all the corporation's departments, and from the multiple groups of belonging: secular Jews, Ethiopian Israelis, Russian Israelis, and two Arabs, one of them (his closest assistant), from East Jerusalem. Jacob not only broke the Haredi walls, but he also broke the Israeli known lines of segregation.

At first, the organization was a success. Jacob and his partners got signatures from at least a third of the employees, which is the minimum required to make the committee eligible. However, the victory was short-lived. The management did not acknowledge the new committee and aggressively tried to oppress it. The case got to court. The judge convicted the company for violating the right of organizing and ruled a 500,000 NIS fine.

Nevertheless, the intimidation continued in a handful of ways. Gradually all the workers' committees' members except Jacob found themselves out of the committee or out of the company.[[73]](#footnote-73) Jacob is still standing alone and endure all kinds of harassments. The company guards beat him, and the company also violated his privacy by publishing personal details about his business ordeal in the past. Jacob also reported indirect attempts to buy him off, to which he refused.

What made Jacob break the Haredi barriers and establish a universal workers' committee? He said It was his Hassidic-Chabadic faith. Before joining the company as a distributor, Jacob had been working as a teacher and a schoolmaster. He also had an unsuccessful adventure as a Hi-tech entrepreneur. Becoming a worker of a food corporation was, in a way, downgrading to him. However, his faith made him see it differently:

*I did not come here to sell hotdogs. God has a mission for me - to establish the workers' committee and take care of them. Though the company has broken the workers' committee, I have done my share. Currently, the management improves its treatment of the employees. […] They want to divert the workers from joining us. At the bottom line, all the grievances that had led me to organize the workers are addressed now. One thousand two hundred workers are smiling now. […] But it is not my success but God's. He put me on a mission.*

When I confronted Jacob with the claim that his approach contradicts the separatist strategy that most Haredi take, his reply pointed to his membership in Chabad and its unique theological approach to the world:

*In Chabad, we look for your internal essence as a Jew and as a human being. That's what counts — the love of Israel, but not only Israel. Our Rabbi[[74]](#footnote-74) told us that a man has to go out to the world, do good wherever he is, and spread light. His predecessor[[75]](#footnote-75) said that darkness, particularly spiritual darkness, can only be removed by light, not by the stick. This a Haredi view that you should also take into account.*

To sum up, Jacob's motivation was cosmic. He articulated it by a universal idea of fixing the world.

**Change and boundaries**

Recently, Avraham Asaban and Rachel Bahar Cohen pointed to a new type of Haredi leaders with more civilian orientation and innovative ways of practicing Haredi life. One of the leaders they refer to declared:

"I don't want to change. I wish to preserve what is already operating in the same way for at least two hundred years. I do wish to improve, to fix, and to update wherever necessary. There is no point in staying stuck at the *Shtiebel*[[76]](#footnote-76)."[[77]](#footnote-77)

The Labor activists are part of this new leadership and are following its logic. They see themselves as proud Haredi and announce their indefinite commitment to Haredi principles and lifestyle. At the same time, they have ties with the secular world and make innovative moves that depart the Haredi ethos. How have they been doing it? In this article, I overviewed three strategies: a pragmatic approach of hedging a safe Haredi existence inside non-religious workplaces, an idealistic-conformist approach of anchoring the voice of labor within the Haredi environment, and finally, an idealistic-reformist approach that leverages Jewish orthodoxy to make a universal positive change. Although different from each other, these approaches share the duality of adhering to ultra-orthodoxy tenets while broadening its boundaries. I claim that these three strategies reflect three existential Haredi stances vis-à-vis the secular parts of Israeli society. I will illustrate my claim by briefly overviewing the three cases introduced in this paper.

The first case introduces Saul, who is securing a Haredi zone in a secular company. However, he also expands Haredi's boundaries in the following manners: 1) he chooses not to inspect who sticks to the Haredi lifestyle; 2) he decided to coexist with the gay community, although not publicly accepting them.[[78]](#footnote-78) However, Saul's innovation is limited in scope since he is aware that the Haredi employees are financially dependent on their company. Therefore, I claim that his stance represents a Haredi broad existential position vis-à-vis the Israeli society – of a minority that seeks to preserve its resources without irritating the secular majority.

The second case describes labor activists who ensure that their moves obey Halakha rules and following Jewish sacred texts. Simultaneously, they expand the Haredi public discourse by including labor relations, particularly the workers' side. Such a move is significant. The Haredi community has neglected many realms of life that religion traditionally covers,[[79]](#footnote-79) economic life not to escape. But in Judaism, mundane life follows the holy logic[[80]](#footnote-80) and the labor activists wish to put that approach back on track. They innovate within the community. Seldom they would go to a civilian court. I contend that this strategy reflects the second and the most prominent stance of the Haredi community vis-à-vis the Israeli society – of an autarkic entity, with its own culture, norms, and institutions. Although eroded, it is still valid.

The third case shows Jacob's adherence to Chabad's unique worldview that encourages contact with the non-Haredi environment to influence it.[[81]](#footnote-81) Nevertheless, Jacob adds another layer to Chabad's relative openness. Most of Chabad Chassids' connections with the outside world are with secular Jews. Making Judaism more available and attractive is the goal. But Chabad's cosmology contains another mission that pertains to the rest of the world's nations. The task is to make Gentiles accept the seven commandments that the Torah is obliging them.[[82]](#footnote-82) Jacob innovates by defining his mission as enhancing universal social justice, and he does it by cooperating with all his fellow workers, including non-Jews. I argue that his stance reflects a third Haredi position vis-à-vis the Israeli society, of an ambition to reach it to mold it according to the divine will.

**The meaning of it all**

In previous ethnographic research, I found a few labor activists who combined a relatively coherent social-democratic discourse with Jewish devotion. The religious faith was their main driving force, their passion.[[83]](#footnote-83) Social-democrat ideas were a supplement and heard in specific discussions. The labor Haredi activists who are the subject of this article are much more pious. Their Haredi reverence is unquestionable. I assume their exposure to the liberal, egalitarian, and secular ideologies will not immerse them in the secular society.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Understanding the labor activists' inseparable bond to their Haredi identity enables us to explain why their dual strategies. Khalid Arar and Tamar Shapira discuss Arab Muslim women-managers' obstacles in the traditionalist and the patriarchal environment surrounding them. One tactic of overcoming these obstacles is adopting the veil. This act is a way of expressing commitment to tradition and sensitivity to the local community. Consequently, those women-managers gain legitimacy and respect, and the change they represent seems less threatening.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Arar and Shapira's thesis is relevant to Haredi labor activists. As Arab women-managers, the Haredi labor activists suffered an inferior power position inside the Haredi system. Therefore, they kept expressing their subordination to the Haredi system and used the Haredi cultural tool-kit[[86]](#footnote-86) to articulate their claims and choose acceptable practices. It facilitated communicating their messages and gain legitimacy.

The duality of conservation and innovation is not new to Haredi communities. It also appears in Tamar El-Or's account of the primary education to girls at the Gur Hassidic community.[[87]](#footnote-87) It attests to the ability of Haredi existence to incorporate outside challenges without losing its core principles.

Is it a modest change? It could be. But there are other possibilities as well. One option is that we are witnessing a trend in which the current model - Society of Learners – is losing its exclusiveness. As Haredis in the United States and western Europe, the modern Israeli Haredis find mundane issues essential again.[[88]](#footnote-88) By triggering the high rabbinate authority to address labor issues, the labor activists contribute to taking Torah from the ivory tower of the high Yeshivas back to the ground, to laypeople and daily lives. Therefore, the change is more profound since it affects the symbolic order, the Haredi cosmology.

Haredi labor activism has not brought an eruptive, revolutionary change. One cannot also assume the scope and depth of the incremental, gradual change.[[89]](#footnote-89) We need a time-perspective to evaluate it. However, in a conservative society like the Haredi one, any effort to overcome the gatekeepers and influence the symbolic order is substantial. It is an expression of a charismatic social action.[[90]](#footnote-90) The contention between conservative Haredis and modern Haredis is going to continue. The former will see the change brought by labor activists as effacement or, the latter will perceive it as an innovation.[[91]](#footnote-91)

**Future's prospects**

The entry of Hardi people into the labor market is not an episode. It is will probably expand. Many Haredi workers are vulnerable. Well established secular companies, the government, and new Haredi entrepreneurs are eager to cut labor costs and are interested in disciplined employees. Haredi workers seem to fit those criteria. Many of them are anxious to work, used to a modest lifestyle, and accept authority. However, they also become conscious of their condition and seek their rights. Some of them are getting organized. While doing it, they reiterate their commitment to their faith, identity, and community. Although they are just looking for modifications in the workplaces, their activity can propel a more remarkable change. Unknowingly (most of the time), they challenge the core Haredi ethos. They are returning the Torah to mundane matters, to class politics. Thus it is no wonder that many traditional leadership members are intimidated by the move and block the new trend.

The future is hard to predict. Will labor Haredi organization be immersed in the Haredi hegemonic ideology, lose their "edge," and stay isolated enclaves? Will they enrich the Haredi discourse to include more egalitarian ideas and respect for the working person? Will they create a new form of Socialist Haredi movement? I do not exclude a future with a mix of all these possibilities. Further research is needed to follow this trend's development and analyze its other facets – its leadership, its manifestation in other labor organizations (as Ko'ach La'ovdim), and more.

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4. Leon, Nissim. (2014). Is there a future for the Society of Learners? *Academot*, *29*, 129-144. (Hebrew). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Asaban, Avraham (Avi), & Bahar Cohen, Yael. (2020). *Trailblazers: New Civic Leadership for Haredi Society*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute. (Hebrew). Pp. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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21. Leon, Nissim. (2014). Is there a future for the Society of Learners? *Academot*, *29*, 129-144. (Hebrew). (Pp. 135-137). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cahaner, Lee; & Malach, Gilad. (2020). *The Yearbook of Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel 2019*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.(Hebrew).Pp. 50-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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38. Labor organization is any independent organization that paid-workers form for collective action. Its goals are to improve the material, social and political conditions of employees vis-à-vis the employers. At a macro-sociological level, labor organizations form an institution that I refer to as "organized labor." Labor organizations have many designs. They may organize on the basis of branch, region, craft, profession, specific workplaces, gender, political or religious belonging, and many others. In this article, I use the term "labor organization" when I refer to general labor organization, such as the Israeli *Histadrut*. When I use the term "trade union" (or simply "unions") I refer to a more specific labor organization that operates at the national level. In the Israeli context, trade unions are usually a part of the wider labor organization. For example, The *Israeli Social Workers Union* or the *Israeli Transportation Workers' Union*, are both affiliated with the *The Histadrut*. A "division" is a subunit of a union. For instance, *The Naval Division* is a subunit of the *Israeli Transportation Workers' Union*. The workplaces' level of labor organizations is referred to as "workers' committee." An example of an Israeli workers' commitees is the *the general workers' committee of El Al workers*. Workers' committees must be affiliated with a national labor organization. All the terms I mention here appear in article. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
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55. Balaniyot are female attendants of the Jewish ritual bathhouse. Ritual bathing is considered to have a crucial role in the Jewish concept of purity and recreation ascribed to women and the Jewish home. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Kashrut Supervisors overseer that the food manufacturers, food stands and restaurants abide by the sacred Jewish Kashrut standards. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See the following link (in Hebrew): [https://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?cat\_id=4&topic\_id=3034567&forum\_id=771](https://www.bhol.co.il/forums/topic.asp?cat_id=4&topic_id=3034567&forum_id=771%20%20%20%20%20%20) (retrieved Sept. 30 2020) [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. The workers' committee contains fourteen representatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. The Torah is composed of separate sections, *Parashot* (*Parasha* in single). Every week has its own Parasha, and the main event is reading the whole Parasha during the Shabat's service at the synagauge. Reading one parash a week enable to conclude the reading of the whole Torha's five books within excactly a year. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. The activity of Haredi labor activisits is also covered by the daily news website of the Histadrut – Davar1. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Shmuel told me this story in two different interviews I had with him at the Histadrut headquarter in Tel Aviv, on November 29th and December 14th, 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The Jewish religious law. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Next to Jerusalem, Bnei Braq is the most important Israeli Haredi city. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. See <https://www.davar1.co.il/66126/> (In Hebrew) (Retrieved October 7th 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. For more elaboration see the following link (In Hebrew). <https://www.davar1.co.il/66126/>. (Retrieved October 7th 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. This was the explanation of my interviewees, Rivka, a prominent figure in the campaign to improve the Balaniyots' employment conditions, and to to improve the image of the ritual bathing in the Israeli public. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. The interviewees who told me about the strong ties between Haredi employers, politicians and Rabbis, asked it to be off-record, therefore I do not cite them. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. There are many cases og inner tensions in the Haredi society, but they are tolerable only if they are concerning the matters of faith (*Le'shem Shamayim)*. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See <https://www.davar1.co.il/66126/> (In Hebrew) (Retrieved October 7th 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
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74. He referred to the last Rabbi of Lubavitch, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. I assume he referred to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson (1880-1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. A Shtiebel is a small place for praying and community gatherings that was common in Eastern jewish communities before the Holocaust. When the interviwee said that he/she did want to be stuck in the Shtiebel, the actual meaning was not to be left in the old practices with no justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Asaban, Avraham (Avi), & Bahar Cohen, Yael. (2020). *Trailblazers: New Civic Leadership for Haredi Society*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute. (Hebrew). P. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. A similar and interesting equivalent is the case of Yigal Guetta who was a member of the Israeli Knesset (parliament), representing the Haredi-Sepharadi Shas party. Guetta was forced to resign the Knesset after it was published that he had attended his gay nephew's wedding. Though he said that as orthodox man he does not legitimize homosexuality, he reiterated his attendance at the wedding, claiming that he would not be estranged to a member of his close family. For elaboration (In Hebrew) see <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3096719> (retrieved in December 3rd 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
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83. Nissim, Gadi. (2011). *Workers' Committees in the Private Sector in Israel in a Neo-liberal Era*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Tel Aviv University. (In Hebrew). Pp. 259-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Among the Israeli liberal left, there is an anticipation that Modern Haredi people will eventually turn into a partner for a construction of a political coalition, alignment, or a block. However, the encounters I had in the field taught me that no matter how similar were these activists' economic views to those of the secular left, most of them expressed their undoubted support in Haredi parties and Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister and a leader. For further elaboration see Itamar Ben Ami, 2020. Overlooking the New Haredis. *Hazman Hazeh*. (In Hebrew). Retrieved December 15th 2020. <https://hazmanhazeh.org.il/benami/> [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
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