

What do they mean when they say “Haredim must share the burden?”

By Sever Plotzker

For those who are not proficient in Israel’s esoteric political terminology, it sounds pretty simple: The Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) sector is living comfortably in Israel at the expense of the secular population. While young non-Haredi citizens give several years of the life to service in the Israel Defense Forces, young Haredi citizens exempt from military service accrue money and advance their careers.

The perception is that Haredi public is celebrating while the secular public is financing the celebrations. So it is only logical that the time has come to take from the Haredim and give to the non-Haredim.

Is this really the case? We all know that it is not.

Here are a few facts about Haredi society that have gone by the wayside amid all the talk about “sharing the burden”:

When the State of Israel was established, there were 30,000 Haredim living here. By 1980, their number had risen to 140,000, but in 1990, they still only constituted three percent of the Jewish population in Israel.

Today there are between 750,000 and 800,000 Haredim in Israel, 10 percent of the total population, 13 percent of the Jewish population. The Haredi population grows by six percent annually; Israel’s general population grows by 1.8 percent annually.

The average Haredi household has more than five children; the average non-Haredi household in Israel has two children. By 2030, Haredim will constitute 20 percent of the entire Jewish population in Israel.

It is fair to assume that the Haredi community will then try to lead the country’s character in a more conservative, religious direction.

As the Haredi population in Israel grows, so will their aspiration to apply more and more aspects of Haredi values and lifestyle in Israel’s public spaces, as will their demands to integrate Halacha (Jewish religious law) in Israeli society.

According to Israeli demographers, the age structures of the Haredi community are similar to those in Africa and Southern Sahara: The median age is 16 years, which means half of the Haredi population is under 16 years old.

For the sake of comparison: The median age in all of Israel is 30 years: In the new Haredi cities, the median age hovers around 11 years!

The Haredi public is leaving Bnei Brak and Jerusalem due to a shortage of affordable housing and flooding the West Bank, concentrating in places like Ramat Beit Shemesh, where Haredim can lead their way of life in a supportive environment.

Haredi families live in high-density conditions, 1.4 persons to a room, as opposed to the much lower density of non-Haredi Jewish families.

According to manpower surveys conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics, the rate of employment among Haredi men aged 25 to 64 is 42 percent. (45 percent according to the Bank of Israel and 50 percent according to the National Insurance Institute of Israel), compared with 35.5 percent a decade ago.

These numbers reflect the quiet Haredi revolution taking place in the country's workforce: As the economic crisis deepens, more and more young Haredim are aspiring to break free of the pattern of poverty and ignorance.

The tipping point is still well beyond reach. The rate of employment among non-Haredi male Jews in the same age group is 85 percent.

The nascent Haredi working class works part time or runs small independent business that provide services within their community.

Women are still the primary providers in typical Haredi homes, working part time in teaching or nursing fields for meager salaries: NIS 3,700 a month on average.

For the sake of comparison: The average income earned by a non-Haredi Jewish woman in Israel is NIS 6,000 a month, and take into consideration the fact that Haredi families have many more mouths to feed.

It thus shouldn't come as a surprise that three-quarters of Haredi children live under the poverty line.

Are these children destined to pay the price of their parents' "chosen life in poverty"?

Two objective obstacles are keeping the Haredi community from generating a revolutionary shift in the workforce, and make the boundaries extremely difficult to break. These are the lack of a proper education, and the issue of military exemption for the purpose of Torah study. Without profound changes in these two factors that dominate relations between the Haredi community and the State, the potential for Haredi men to enter the workplace seems to have already exhausted itself.

About one third (!) of Israeli children aged 18 or younger are Haredi. What do they study and where?

In 1953, coalition agreements allocated two separate educational systems for the Haredi community: "recognized" and unofficial but partially supervised by the State, and "exempt" education that does not require supervision.

Five percent of Israeli students studied in one of these systems in the 1970s, and it doubled to 10 percent in the 1990s. Since then, Haredi education has seen a meteoric jump.

Last year over 400,000 students studied in these institutions, constituting 30 percent of the Jewish student population and 25 percent of all Israeli students.

The government funds 75 percent of the operating costs of recognized, unofficial educational institutions and 50 percent of the cost of exempt Haredi institutions.

Israel's 2012 education budget allocated NIS 1.7 billion for Haredi instruction and another NIS 1 billion to be transferred to "Torah study institutions."

Last year, after the finance committee approved the transfers, the Haredi education system received NIS 3.2 billion from the State budget. The funds were given on the basis of their promise (not a legal obligation) to incorporate core subjects, primarily English and math. It is unclear whether that promise was kept since Haredi educational networks evade the minimal supervision provided by the Ministry of Education regarding the required curriculum.

In recent years the Meitzav exams, which test the effectiveness and development of schools, were conducted in only a small number of eighth grade classes in two Haredi educational networks and only in two subjects – which showed dismal results in the boys' achievements.

According to senior education officials, the Haredi education system is continuing its tradition of isolationism, segregation, and rejection of any contact with the educated, outside world. However, they are happy to see some signs of increasing withdrawal from Haredi schools and enrollment in the state-religious education system.

And this is not without reason: Only one tenth of 12th graders in Haredi schools are eligible for a high school diploma and only 6 percent meet the requirements for enrollment in university.

For the sake of comparison: In the state-religious education system, 65 percent of students are eligible for a high school diploma and 56 percent meet university requirements.

While the number of both Haredi men and women enrolling in higher education has in fact increased threefold in the last seven years, only 1,500 Haredi men and 4,500 Haredi women study in the country's academic colleges, a drop in the ocean.

Only a handful of Haredi students are enrolled in research universities.

The low number of young Haredim in higher education blocks their entry into a labor market that would allow them to provide for their families. Poverty in the Haredi population in Israel is consistently high and widespread.

The primary factors for this stem from education that is not focused on imparting skills for earning a living. Only 28 percent of Haredi men have academic degrees of value in the labor market, as compared with 80 percent of non-Haredi men. Eighty-eight percent of Haredim live under the poverty line.

Another cause of poverty is the "Torah Omanuto" agreement that allows Yeshiva students to indefinitely postpone IDF service by undertaking to study Torah 45 hours a week within the framework of a yeshiva or a kollel (center for advanced Jewish study).

During his Torah studies, a Yeshiva student receives (partial) financial support from the State and income in kind, as well as funds from the Haredi community in which he lives. At the same time, he is prohibited from studying in academia or learning other skills.

He becomes accustomed to not being employed, and dependent on the support he receives and on occasional odd jobs in the black market. If he dares to try and enter the legal labor market, he won't be able to earn more than minimum wage and will lose his local, sectoral financial support. His family's economic situation will only get worse. This is the Haredi poverty trap, which has been written about extensively in a study by Israel's National Economic Council.

The problem began much earlier: Over the years, the Haredi education system has trained thousands of youth to be well educated in Torah study but deprived of any general, professional education.

In the absence of basic skills, Haredim are left without tools with which to improve their status. As their number and proportion in Israeli Jewish society increase, so will their economic inferiority.

The character of the State of Israel as a Western, developed country is being threatened by the continued existence of the segregated Haredi education system, which fails to teach essential, core subjects that provide the skills needed to make a living in the 21st century.

The change should begin with the more critical "equal share in education," before getting to the "equal share of the burden."

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