

The Road Back From Utopia

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Like many computer programmers in Israel's burgeoning high-tech industry, Yisrael sees himself as part of an ongoing revolution. Unlike others in his field, however, Yisrael's revolution has nothing to do with computers, or with technology at all. His is a social revolution, one that moves quietly forward every day when he goes to work.

Yisrael is haredi, a strictly observant Orthodox (or "ultra-Orthodox") Jew, in a country where only a minority of haredi men are employed. While in the United States there is nothing unusual about a haredi computer programmer, attorney, or accountant, in Israel the situation is different. Self-imposed, ideological constraints have made it nearly impossible for haredi men to leave yeshiva early enough in life to study a profession and find satisfying, well-paying jobs. Most of them do not work at all, spending their days studying in yeshiva, where extracurriculars such as vocational training are forbidden. Those who enter the workforce only do so well into their thirties, and then find low-paying work as teachers, scribes, or *kashrut* supervisors. The fortunate ones have a family business to go into. Until he made his decision to leave the yeshiva and study computers, Yisrael was part of what the sociologist Menachem Friedman, a leading authority on the

haredi community in Israel, calls a “learning community” of some 150,000, which consists of students in kollel (advanced yeshivot for married men) and their dependents.¹ This rapidly growing community includes families that have seen three generations—grandfathers, fathers, and sons—who have never earned a living.

The result has been disproportionately high poverty among haredim, losses to the Israeli economy amounting to billions of shekels a year, and growing resentment from a secular public that feels it is being taxed unfairly to cover the shortfall from the haredi sector and to pay for coalition promises to the haredi parties. With every passing year, the poverty, dependence, and resentment have deepened.

But there are signs of change. Vocational training programs for haredim, in everything from computer programming to architecture, are having difficulty keeping up with demand. A haredi army unit has been formed with the approval of highly respected rabbis. Most significantly, haredi leaders have supported the proposals of the Tal Commission, a body appointed in 1999 by Prime Minister Ehud Barak to make recommendations concerning the exemption of yeshiva students from army service. The most controversial of these proposals calls for a “year of decision” that would allow students to leave the yeshiva at age 23 for a year of work or training, without losing their army deferrals as full-time Tora students. For the haredim, this is a major departure from the thinking of the past fifty years, according to which all men should aspire to remain in yeshiva their whole lives, and all women to bear the double burden of raising large families and supporting them financially.

The number of men who have taken advantage of the new opportunities is still quite small. However, many insiders see a definite change in attitude on the part of the leaders of Israel’s haredi community, including R. Aharon Leib Steinman and R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, two leading rabbinic authorities of the non-Hasidic (“Lithuanian”) Ashkenazi community, as well as the rebbes of the Hasidic communities of Gur and Vizhnitz, whose opinions set the tone for much of haredi life. Regardless of whether

the Tal Commission's proposals eventually become law, the fact that rabbis of their standing have given them tacit approval is taken by many to mean that something basic has changed. If this assessment is correct, it could ultimately mean a dramatic transformation of haredi life, improving the economic lot of tens of thousands of families, enriching the national economy, and reducing tensions that have bitterly divided secular and religious Israelis since statehood.

The phenomenon of so many learning in yeshiva for so long is unprecedented in Jewish history. In the past, the vast majority of religious Jews, including many of the greatest Tora scholars, worked to support themselves. R. Yehoshua, a mishnaic sage who lived in Jerusalem in the first century and was a candidate for the presidency of the Sanhedrin, eked out the barest of livings as a coal-maker.² Rashi, who lived in France in the eleventh century and whose commentaries on the Bible and Talmud are considered indispensable in yeshiva circles, was a vintner. Maimonides made his living in the twelfth century as a doctor in the Sultan's court in Egypt. R. Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulhan Aruch*, earned his living in sixteenth-century Safed through the fabric trade. And this pattern continued well into the modern era: R. Yisrael Meir Kagan (better known as the Hafetz Haim), who lived in Radin, Poland, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, supported himself for many years as a grocery store owner; R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, the twentieth-century Russian talmudic scholar who wrote the *Tora Temima*, worked in a bank.

The reason for this was not solely economics. For centuries it was accepted that a Tora scholar should prefer to support himself rather than take a stipend for his studies. For some, such as R. Yohanan, the third-century sage who lived in Tiberias, the motivation came from an ethic of self-sufficiency: "Even make your Sabbath profane," the Talmud quotes him as saying, "but do not become dependent on other people."³ For others, labor was not only fundamental to one's material well-being, but

also an integral part of one's spiritual development: In the opinion of the Mishna, "All study of Tora that is not combined with labor ultimately comes to nothing, and causes sin."⁴ It was such a belief that led Maimonides to declare that "whoever decides to study Tora and not to work, but instead to live on charity, desecrates the name of God and brings the Tora into contempt, extinguishes the light of religion, brings evil upon himself, and deprives himself of life in the world to come."⁵

With the passage of centuries, however, work came to be seen as an economic necessity, an activity that was worthy but nonetheless secondary to the ideal of full-time Tora study. The European yeshivot which emerged in the nineteenth century, including the famed academy of Volozhin, sought to create an elite of Tora scholars who dedicated many years to full-time Tora study "for its own sake," supported by donations from a broad base of working householders (*ba'alei batim*), who themselves studied during their free time. This elite was never meant to be more than a small fraction of the population; for the great majority of Orthodox Jewish men growing up in Eastern Europe, delaying one's entry into the workforce for even a few years in order to study Tora full-time was simply not an option, and pursuing a living through the work of one's hands was not considered problematic in the least.

In recent times, this model has continued to guide Orthodox Jewry in most parts of the world. As the waves of Jewish immigration reached North America in the early twentieth century, the American haredi community fashioned itself after the European pattern: A small number of yeshivot, in which an elite of young Tora scholars studied full-time for several years, supported by a base of working householders; a fraction of these scholars went on to rabbinical careers, while the rest entered the workforce in other fields. A recent study by Amiram Gonen, director of the Florsheimer Institute of Policy Studies in Jerusalem, describes the attitude of the leaders of the haredi community in the United States toward the passage of young men from the yeshiva into the workforce:

Although the rabbis and yeshiva heads make extensive efforts to widen the opportunities for full-time Tora studies, and encourage talented students to deepen their learning as much as possible, they do not put any pressure on those who want to go out and earn a living not to do so. They... understand that the haredi world has a thriving yeshiva culture, in which the most serious scholars have the opportunity to continue their study and enter into leadership roles, and that it is important that there be a strong component of *ba'alei batim* who not only support their own families quite successfully but also may constitute a base of support for the society's institutions, particularly its yeshiva world.⁶

Among North American haredim, the age of entry into the workforce varies according to the particular religious stream. In Hasidic communities, for example, men tend to begin working in their late teens or early twenties; in the Lithuanian communities, on the other hand, they leave yeshiva in their mid- or late twenties. Overall, however, the pattern is a consistent one, in which very few students beyond the age of thirty remain in full-time study.⁷ A recent study of the Hasidic community in Montreal, for example, shows that of working-age males in that community, only 6 percent are studying in yeshiva full-time.⁸

The need to prepare people for work has a profound impact on the education of haredim in the United States. The assumption that students will go on to gainful employment means that schools must conform to the rudimentary demands of a modern economy: The American yeshiva high-school student studies an array of secular studies, including math and English, and graduates high school with a recognized diploma. In most haredi communities in the United States, it is acceptable for a yeshiva student to attend college at night and earn a degree in fields such as accounting or computers, or even to go on to graduate school in practical subjects like social work, business, or education.⁹ Even those yeshivot that do not allow their students to attend college at night, such as Lakewood (New Jersey) and Mir (Brooklyn), arrange for them to receive a bachelor's

degree from colleges that grant credit for Talmud, Bible, Jewish thought, and Jewish law, enabling them to go on to advanced degrees when they leave the yeshiva. According to one study, fully 86 percent of the graduates of a representative haredi high school went on to pursue a college education, with as many as 48 percent undertaking some graduate study as well.¹⁰

According to Gonen, the adaptation of haredi education to long-term economic demands reflects a basic commitment to the value of *parnasa*, or economic self-sufficiency, which has been an anchor of Orthodox communal life for many generations. For this reason, the boys' schools created by the Agudath Israel movement in the early twentieth century in Russia and Poland dedicated afternoon hours to studying the essential skills necessary for participation in the workforce. When building their communities in the United States, Gonen writes, haredi leaders insisted on secular studies in the schools, in an effort "to build a haredi educational system that would ensure the continuity of the haredi culture, yet at the same time allow the young generation to take part in the American economic system, and to extricate themselves from the economic hardship characteristic of many Jewish immigrants."¹¹ To both the leadership and the general haredi public in America, it is clear that without the full participation of the great majority in the workforce, the haredi way of life cannot sustain itself.

In Israel, however, a different model has emerged, according to which a far greater portion of working-age haredi men are engaged in full-time study—as many as two-thirds, according to one survey.¹² Following the rise of Nazism and the destruction of European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, a large number of Orthodox Jews came to Israel, including many rabbinical students and rabbis eager to rebuild the world of the yeshivot that had been lost. The most notable of these was R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, better known as the Hazon Ish, who arrived in Palestine in 1933 and was the foremost leader of the haredi community in Israel until his death in 1953; Karelitz led an effort to recast Orthodox life in a way that focused on

stringency in observance of Jewish law, isolationism, and, above all, Tora study.¹³ While many similarly minded rabbis immigrated to the United States as well during this period (most notably R. Aharon Kotler, founder of the Lakewood yeshiva in New Jersey), their influence was far more decisive in Israel. One reason was the difference in size: By the end of World War II, the haredi community in the United States was already well-established and institutionally organized; the community in Palestine, on the other hand, was tiny, numbering only a few thousand, and disorganized, giving the immigrant rabbis far greater say in shaping its ideological tenor.

Another difference stemmed from the powerful Zionist ideals that defined the identity of secular Israel. From before the founding of the state, the haredi community has been locked in an ideological battle with Zionism, which its early leaders saw as a direct threat to the haredi way of life. Ya'akov Weinrot, one of Israel's leading attorneys, who served as one of the Orthodox representatives on the Tal Commission, minces no words in articulating this view of Zionism. "Zionism was never content with gaining national independence," he writes in his addendum to the commission's report. "The mainstream expressed a desire to create a new culture, a new identity, of which a central tenet was the need to wipe out Orthodoxy as a precondition to opening new vistas."¹⁴

This Zionist "threat" was greatest in the early years of the state, when Israel's small haredi community, ravaged by the Holocaust and competing for the future of its children against the compelling image of the "new Jew" offered by Zionism, saw itself as struggling for survival. R. Binyamin Secharansky, director of the Beit Ya'akov girls' seminaries in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, recalls the spiritual climate in Israel in the early 1950s: "The haredi public in those days suffered doubly: The great centers of Tora and Hasidism of Europe... had gone up in flames, and those who survived had to rebuild from scratch; moreover, the young state had new ideals and launched new symbols and flags to obscure their uniqueness as Jews.... The image of the tanned sabra, smiling confidently and speaking and acting

brashly, whose whole being said youth and strength—this was the image that symbolized the new identity.”¹⁵ Jonathan Rosenblum, a well-known haredi columnist for *The Jerusalem Post*, describes the sentiment shared by secular and Orthodox Jews alike in the early days of the state: “In the early 1950s, there existed a virtual consensus concerning the future of the haredi community in Israel: Except for a few pockets of the old *yishuv* in Jerusalem, haredi Judaism would be a historical memory within one generation.... Even within the citadel of the old *yishuv* in Me’a She’arim, there was not a house in which someone had not been swept up by the Zionist movement, which was viewed as the vanguard of the future.”¹⁶

Nowhere was the threat felt more acutely than with respect to compulsory military service. According to the dominant Zionist vision, the army was meant not only to defend the state against foreign aggression, but also to serve as a central tool in forging a new national identity, through which immigrants from disparate lands would shed their cultural and linguistic baggage and adopt the language and customs of the new Jewish state. This was precisely what the haredi public did not want—and, for the most part, still does not want. Then as now, many haredi parents saw conscription as an attempt by the state to strip their children of the standards of behavior they had worked for years to inculcate. Retired Supreme Court Justice Tzvi Tal, who headed the commission that bears his name, says the haredim “do not want any contact between the yeshiva world and the dangerous—from the religious point of view—army, where people have different values relating to modesty and profane language.”¹⁷ The *Post*’s Rosenblum concurs: “After guarding their children’s souls like a Ming vase for eighteen years, haredi parents cannot be expected to expose them, at the most vulnerable stage in their lives, to an environment of casual sexual mixing and standards of modesty so at odds with their own.”¹⁸ A Gerrer Hasid who did four months of army service before joining the workforce relates that while he had no difficulty with the physical demands of basic training, he was shocked by the late-night discussions, which focused on women, movies, and sex. “Under no circumstances would I expose my son to a

world” like the one he found in the IDF, he says. “I can’t send my son to be under the supervision of [then Defense Minister] Ehud Barak or [IDF Chief of Staff] Shaul Mofaz. Barak doesn’t live my experience and doesn’t know what’s important to me.”¹⁹

In the early days of the state, a settlement was reached between David Ben-Gurion and the leadership of the haredi community, according to which yeshiva students would be exempt from army duty so long as they were engaged in full-time study. Students who declared that “their Tora is their trade” (*toratam umnutam*) could continue to defer their enlistment indefinitely, but would be prohibited from engaging in activities other than Tora study—including teaching or even volunteer work—without first serving in the army.

Over the years, as the haredi community increased in size and the ideal of full-time Tora study for as long as possible became increasingly accepted, the number of people taking advantage of the deferments rose dramatically. What began as a group of approximately 400 students exempt from army duty at the founding of the state had grown by 1980 to around 10,000, and by 1999 had blossomed into a corps of over 30,000 men who were exempt from service, a number that continues to grow by about one thousand each year.²⁰ These men, dedicated to full-time Tora study, are also bound to it by the threat of immediate conscription should they attempt to enter the workforce. This fact alone constitutes one of the most significant differences between the American and Israeli communities: While an American haredi youth is free to pursue college or vocational training without the worry of being drafted, his Israeli counterpart must remain in yeshiva or face months or years in an army environment that is, in his view, hostile to his way of life. The threat of army service, in the words of Justice Tal, “imprisons” haredim in their yeshivot.²¹

Driven both by ideology and by the fear of army service, the haredi community that has emerged in Israel is characterized by a far more decisive commitment to full-time study of Tora than its American counterpart. According to a study by Boston University economist Eli Berman,

77 percent of haredi men between the ages of 25 and 29 in Israel are studying full-time in yeshiva; even for men aged 41 to 44, this figure remains as high as 46 percent.²² Overall, about two-thirds of working-age haredi men in Israel are full-time yeshiva students.²³

The exclusive nature of the ideal of Tora study is felt especially strongly among those haredim who end up pursuing careers outside the yeshiva. “Every father wants his son to grow up and become a great Tora scholar,” notes Moti Green, who left the yeshiva at 34 to become the first haredi attorney to clerk in the Israeli Supreme Court. “Even though I’ve succeeded as a lawyer, I’ve failed in terms of my ultimate goals in Tora.” Reflecting the extent to which the haredi world has succeeded in driving home the message of “Tora learning for all,” Green concludes: “This is my tragedy... to go from a spiritual life to a life of work is a giant waste.”²⁴

This attitude is reflected in the haredi educational system in Israel, which prepares young men for a life of Tora study, with a far smaller emphasis on vocational training. From the age of three, when boys are sent to *heder* to taste cakes baked in the shape of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and coated with honey to symbolize the sweetness of Tora, until 13, when they graduate from *talmud tora* (which parallels elementary and middle school), study of subjects such as English, math, and science is a barely tolerated necessity. “I was 12 the last time I had secular studies, and that was for 45 minutes a day,” recalls Yisrael. “We used to say, ‘What do we need this for? Are we going to be grocery store owners? We’re going to be Tora scholars!’”²⁵ *Yeshiva ketana*, the haredi equivalent of high school, offers no secular studies whatsoever; boys as young as 14 are expected to study Talmud ten hours or more a day.²⁶ Students move on at age 17 or 18 to *yeshiva gevoha*, the equivalent of talmudic college, and then, after marriage at 20 or 21, to kollel, where they continue as long as possible; for some it is a lifetime, for many others it is until their early forties and beyond.

Most girls attend Beit Ya’akov schools, where they are taught that nothing is more important than the study of Tora, and that marrying and supporting a scholar-in-the-making is the most noble mission of all—even

if it means a life of poverty.²⁷ The success of the Beit Ya'akov system in inculcating this message is largely responsible for the phenomenal growth of the yeshivot. Some sixty years ago in Europe, R. Haim Ozer Grodzinski, one of the leading figures of Orthodox Jewry through the start of World War II, remarked that whenever he saw an unattractive or disabled girl, he would stand in her honor, "for she is likely to become the wife of a Tora scholar."²⁸ In those days, most of the women who would consider marrying yeshiva students were those with no other option. Today, in the words of a psychologist in Jerusalem who works with haredi women, "Grade A marries Grade A"—the top girls want the top boys, which means someone who will sit and learn for many years.²⁹ Some 30,000 young women attend Beit Ya'akov high school and seminary, a six-year program that offers job training, mostly as teachers, and imparts a reverence for Tora and those who study it.

The rabbis who crafted this model were not under the illusion that every man is cut out for a lifetime of learning, or that every woman can bear and raise an average of seven or eight children while being the sole breadwinner in her family. But they nonetheless encouraged young men who had little chance of becoming serious Tora scholars to pursue an education that left them few opportunities to succeed in anything else, because this approach was seen as the only way to rebuild the Tora world after the devastation of the Holocaust. Only by creating a single track, it was believed, would the exceptional scholars remain in yeshiva long enough to realize their potential. And only by demanding compliance with a rigid model of what a Jew should be could the less-than-stellar scholar be protected from the lures of secular society.

The result of all this is a pattern of haredi life in Israel that differs markedly from the way religious Jews have ever lived, both in Europe before the war and in America today. As Justice Tal points out, even the great yeshivot of Lithuania never had more than a few hundred students—as compared to the nearly 4,000 students who are now learning at the Mir yeshiva in Jerusalem or the 1,500 at the Ponavez yeshiva in Bnei Brak.

“This is how it always was,” Tal says. “There was never a situation when a boy learned his whole life. Even Volozhin, the flagship of the yeshiva world, only had four hundred students at its peak.... The situation in Israel is an anomaly.”³⁰

In recent years, however, it has become increasingly clear that the Israeli model cannot sustain itself indefinitely. The foremost problem is economic, resulting from the rapid growth in the size of the learning community. In the past two decades, as the ideology of lifelong, full-time Tora study has taken a firmer hold, the percentage of haredi men over the age of 25 choosing to study in kollel rather than earn a living has increased dramatically—from 41 percent in 1980 to 60 percent in 1996, according to one study.³¹ At the same time, haredi families are growing larger, and therefore the financial burdens are increasing: In 1980, the average haredi woman would bear 6.5 children in her lifetime; by 1995 that number had risen to 7.6, a 17-percent increase. This means that the number of children growing up in conditions of poverty—and the corresponding economic burden on Israeli society—is far higher than in the past. According to Berman, the portion of Israeli children overall whose fathers are studying in yeshiva full-time has more than doubled, from 2.7 percent in 1980 to 5.9 percent in 1996; according to one estimate, that number could exceed 10 percent by the year 2006.³²

These families tend to live in conditions of significant poverty and significant dependence. According to Berman, the average haredi family in which the father does not work has a total annual income of about \$14,000, less than half that of the average two-parent family in Israel, while supporting 4.5 children, as opposed to the nationwide average of 2.1.³³ Of this income, only 18 percent is earned, almost entirely from the wife’s efforts, while the rest comes from a variety of government stipends and transfer payments. As a result, Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, cities with large haredi populations, consistently top the poverty figures released each year by

the National Insurance Institute.³⁴ According to a recent study by the economist Momi Dahan of the Bank of Israel, over 50 percent of haredi families in Jerusalem lived below the poverty line in 1995.³⁵

And yet, while the poverty and dependence of haredi families are increasing, their traditional sources of income are showing signs of drying up. The three principal sources are government subsidy, family assistance, and working wives. Government subsidy takes up the lion's share, coming in a number of different forms: A monthly allocation per student in the amount of around \$200, paid by the Religious Affairs Ministry to yeshivot (and largely passed on to students in the form of stipends); generous child allocations from the National Insurance Institute, which increase with the number of children in the family; and supplemental income for those below the poverty line, paid by the National Insurance Institute. In 1998, this assistance included \$219 million paid directly to yeshivot and \$29 million in income supplements.³⁶ Moreover, haredim receive generous discounts on municipal property taxes and nursery-school fees. According to journalist Shahar Ilan, whose recent book, *Haredim, Inc.*, is a thoroughly researched account of the haredi community, the average haredi family with six children, in which the father does not work, received in the year 1999 between \$17,600 and \$22,500 in transfer payments, tax relief, and other subsidies.³⁷

As poverty deepens and the dependent haredi population expands, the politicians of the religious parties press for more social spending that will benefit their constituents, fanning what Menachem Friedman terms the "awesome hatred of haredim" among the general public.³⁸ The situation prompted Vered Dar, deputy head of the Finance Ministry's Economics and State Revenues Department, to remark: "I don't know where it will explode first: Will the secular population say they are no longer willing to bear the burden, or will the haredim say there is a limit to poverty?"³⁹ According to Friedman, there is no way the government can continue funding the haredi sector at current levels. The last two decades have seen a dramatic shift away from the traditional statist economic policies in Israel,

and an increasing belief that there is something wrong with widespread dependence on government transfers. As Friedman puts it, “People are sick and tired of giving money.”

This problem will only get worse. According to Finance Ministry figures presented to the Tal Commission, the total number of yeshiva students above age 18 grew from 63,000 in 1995 to 77,000 in 1999, an increase of 22 percent in just four years; the number of yeshiva students over the age of 40—mostly heads of households with sizeable families—increased by 24 percent during the period of 1995-1999.⁴⁰ And these figures seem bound to continue rising: Based on long-term demographic projections, Berman estimates that the haredi population in Israel, which in 1995 stood at 280,000, or 5.2 percent of the population, is likely to reach close to a million people, or 12.4 percent of the population, by the year 2025.⁴¹ Given the rapid growth of the learning community in Israel, retaining that community’s already low standard of living will require an increase of government transfers to the tune of 4 to 5 percent each year, much higher than Israel’s rate of per capita growth. “At current levels of transfers and taxes,” writes Berman, “the ultra-Orthodox population growth rate will make Israel’s welfare system insolvent and bankrupt municipalities with large ultra-Orthodox populations. The status quo is not sustainable without transferring an increased proportion of output to welfare programs”—a shift in spending priorities that the Israeli public is unlikely to accept.⁴²

The second traditional source of support has been family assistance. When a couple marry, it is expected that both sides of the family will help get them started; this means, among other things, purchasing and furnishing an apartment. But the expectation is getting harder and harder to meet—especially for those whose parents and grandparents have never worked. As Justice Tal writes in his report: “If in the 1950s those who were learning had parents who could support them, in the 1970s and 1980s there was a second generation of Tora scholars, and in the 1990s a third generation. This latest generation does not have the economic backing their

parents had, and as a result the economic situation among those learning full-time in yeshiva has become overwhelming.” Again, this is a problem which will only become worse over time, given the growth rate of the haredi population: According to Berman, the number of haredi children in Israel under the age of 18 is likely to increase from around 150,000 in 1995 to over half a million by 2025—children who will have less and less support from their increasingly poor parents as they come of age. As summed up by Yishai Weiner, editor of the Bnei Brak haredi paper *Kol Ha’ir*: “The generation of Holocaust survivors had money, from reparation payments and other sources. My grandfather helped my father and my father helped me. But the money’s run out. This third generation can’t afford to support its children, marry them off and buy them apartments.”⁴³

A third source of income for the haredi family has been working wives. Again, the phenomenal growth of the yeshiva world was made possible by the Beit Ya’akov educational system, which is now raising a third generation of women who would rather endure financial hardship—and carry the double load of raising and supporting their large families—than see their husbands leave the study hall. The system has been so successful in imparting the message of Tora study at all cost that it is often the women who plead with their husbands to stay in yeshiva and “allow” them to carry the financial burden. Today, says Rivka Rappaport, an American-born educator who opened an innovative haredi elementary school in Jerusalem, poverty is honorable for most haredi women. “It is a sign of one’s willingness to sacrifice oneself for Tora.”⁴⁴

But the woman who at 22 can support her husband and two children has a much more difficult time when she is 30 and has six children (and many more expenses). Though this is the role she has been raised to fill, and she enjoys a certain status in her community for filling it, there comes a point where the responsibility of making a living and raising a large family is so great she can do neither in a satisfactory manner. According to economist Dahan, as many as 80 percent of working haredi women can work only part-time jobs, as compared with 41 percent of working women

nationwide.⁴⁵ “Wives are overwhelmed by the burden of being the main financial support,” says Rosenblum. As a result, “they can’t raise their families properly.”⁴⁶

Part of the problem stems from the kind of training women receive before entering the workforce. Adina Bar-Shalom, daughter of R. Ovadia Yosef, the most widely followed Sephardi rabbi and spiritual leader of the Shas party, says the situation in the haredi community is “very difficult.” The typical Beit Ya’akov graduate who has a degree in teaching—not a great income-earner to begin with—finds that there are no jobs in her field. “Last year,” she notes, “some eight hundred girls graduated seminary in Jerusalem as teachers, but there were only thirty teaching jobs available.” As a result, most women are forced to take even lower-paying work as secretaries, nursery-school teachers, or aides to nursery-school teachers. “They come home tired and worn out after taking care of other people’s children and then are expected to take care of their own children,” says Bar-Shalom, who is planning on opening a “Shas College” to train women for better-paying work.⁴⁷

The severe financial pressures are having an effect on marriages, as well. “People are breaking down,” laments one mother who says that she has no intention of supporting her newlywed daughter so that her son-in-law can study. While the wife has to be up early for her job, even after a sleepless night nursing a baby or caring for a sick child, her husband can get to kollel at 9:15 or 9:30. “It is very hard for the women, and families are collapsing,” says former Finance Minister Ya’akov Ne’eman, who is well connected with the leadership of the haredi community. Dudi Silbershlag, publisher of the weekly *Bakehila*, who is also close to R. Aharon Leib Steinman, says there is increasing recognition that women cannot be expected to support their families. “The bottom line is that women just can’t keep doing this over time.”⁴⁸

Economics, however, is only one reason the current model is unlikely to hold up. Another is that many haredi men are simply not cut out for the rigorous demands of full-time Tora study, isolation from the outside world, and poor standards of living which define the Israeli haredi experience. There have always been those who rebelled against the system completely—including famous cases such as Efraim Schach, the only son of R. Eliezer Schach, perhaps the most prominent Ashkenazi haredi rabbinic leader in Israel during the last quarter-century. The younger Schach served in the army and earned a doctorate in history and philosophy because he was “too curious” about the outside world to remain in yeshiva and fulfill his “destiny” as his father’s successor as head of the Ponavez yeshiva.⁴⁹ In recent years, the number of such cases has risen dramatically; and many of those who do not fit into the yeshiva world do not make the successful transition into a career in the way that Schach did. Moreover, a large portion of the men who remain in yeshiva find their lives unfulfilling, a problem that has been increasingly recognized by rabbinic figures, social workers, and laypeople alike. “People are sitting there, in yeshiva, broken,” Yisrael says. “I’d say 60 to 70 percent don’t belong there; they feel they’re going nowhere. Psychologically, it’s rough. They don’t want to be second-grade teachers in a *talmud tora*—the only jobs that are available—and there are very few positions available for lecturers in leading yeshivot.”⁵⁰ Yosef Shilhav, a scholar at Bar-Ilan University who studies the community, concurs. “There is tremendous pressure in the haredi public coming from people who are in yeshiva but don’t belong there. It’s only natural that most people are not capable of learning all day; only the intellectual elite can handle it.”⁵¹

As a result, many younger haredim have abandoned their studies altogether. Resigning themselves to failure at the only occupation they have been told is legitimate, and prohibited by law from working, many youths spend their days wandering the streets while remaining formally

enrolled in yeshivot. Rabbi Y., an independent counselor for these youths, known as *shababnikim*, explained the phenomenon in a recent interview in *Ha'aretz*:

Shababnikim are simply kids who are unable to sit for a whole day in yeshiva and learn Talmud. They need fresh air, to let off steam. The problem is that from the moment they start hanging out on the streets, meeting different people, girls, and perhaps coming into physical contact with them—things that are quite acceptable in secular society but which are considered very serious by the haredim—they are rejected by haredi society. From the moment they view themselves as criminals, there is no difference in their eyes between touching girls and much more serious things, like drugs, for example.⁵²

In many cases, these youths are no longer welcome in their own homes, and wind up living on the street or in government-run youth hostels. According to figures reported in *The Jerusalem Post*, of the 120 homeless youths who received assistance in 1997 from the Jerusalem municipality, fifty were haredim, and it is safe to assume that there were many others who did not receive such aid. According to Shabtai Amedi, director of the municipality's Division for the Advancement of Youth, most of these simply could not handle the demands of full-time study. "They can become homeless because they just didn't cut it in yeshiva. In the haredi sector, yeshiva dropouts drop out of the entire community, because for them, if you're not studying in a yeshiva, it's a problem. Sometimes the families are so embarrassed by such a kid that they tell him to leave. And sometimes economic conditions at home are so terrible that living in Lifta"—a *shababnik* hangout in Jerusalem—"is better than living at home."⁵³

In recent years, the problem of the *shababnikim* has reached alarming proportions. In May 1998, a number of haredi educators sent a letter to several leading rabbis in which they stressed the dimensions of the problem:

We are not discussing a few dozen youths, or even a few hundred—but rather thousands of former yeshiva students who have crossed the line, leaving the yeshiva to wander the streets, movie theaters, city squares, and anywhere that a yeshiva boy should not be.... We are not speaking about the marginal types; even those from the best homes, the most promising students.... In recent times these youths have tarnished our name with the awful depths they have reached—even to the point of committing murder, in the literal sense of the term.⁵⁴

This was no exaggeration. According to Shahar Ilan, of the three thousand to four thousand *shababnikim* in Israel, several hundred have become involved in serious crimes including extortion, armed robbery, male prostitution and, in rare cases, murder—such as the August 1997 killing of an Arab gas station attendant in the Sheikh Jarah neighborhood of Jerusalem. Ilan tells the story of “Chupchik,” a haredi gang leader convicted on twenty-one counts of auto theft, fraud, and disturbing the peace—all committed within one year of quitting the Mir yeshiva in Jerusalem. And according to Hanania Chulak, director of the Ezer Mitzion volunteer organization, bands of roaming *shababnikim* have turned the city of Bnei Brak into a “crime center reminiscent of New York City’s Harlem. People are afraid to walk the streets. Violent, criminal gangs in this city do whatever they please.”⁵⁵ Haim Walder, a columnist for the haredi daily *Yated Ne’eman*, reports that after many attempts by the community to control the hoodlums of Bnei Brak on their own, in the end they were forced to give up. “Agents from the police anti-terror unit arrived, some on motorcycles, and imposed order the way they know how—affording us a golden opportunity to understand that we cannot control our fringe elements on our own.”⁵⁶

One indicator of the inability of many people to handle the community’s standards is the rise, in recent years, of people exiting the haredi world entirely. “There’s been an explosion of kids leaving religion,” says Sharon

Slater, a psychologist who works with the haredi community in Jerusalem. “Everybody knows a family it’s happened to.”⁵⁷ While the numbers are very difficult to estimate and probably still quite small, there is little doubt in anyone’s mind that they are increasing rapidly. For example, the Hillel organization, which assists haredim who choose to leave the Orthodox way of life, reported that in 1999 its caseload more than doubled compared to the previous year.⁵⁸ Moreover, cases are often highly publicized, adding to the sense of crisis in the haredi community.

The crisis has become too widespread to sweep under the rug. In a rare display of openness on the subject, the haredi weekly *Hamishpaha* recently ran a series of articles on the difficulties facing haredi youth, called “The Fifth Son,” in which it referred to yeshiva dropouts as “the most burning problem facing the haredi public, even if it is not discussed in public.” According to *Hamishpaha*, as many as fifty-three organizations have been set up to attempt to address the problem.⁵⁹ One of these is Lev Shomea, a hotline for troubled haredi youths, which offers young people a chance to openly discuss things that were once considered taboo: Doubts about religion, sexual desires and frustrations, questions about the legitimacy of the haredi lifestyle. Every day, a small notice runs in the two daily newspapers that serve the haredi community, *Hamodia* and *Yated Ne’eman*, just below the notice telling readers where to call to hear the Talmud page of the day, which reads: “For information relating to doubts and distress, call...,” and telephone numbers are given (separate for boys and girls) throughout the country.

R. Yoel Schwartz, a veteran educator who has been closely associated with the haredi army unit since its founding in January 1999, says that the biggest reason for problems such as the *shababnikim* and the decision of many youths to leave religion entirely is the lack of legitimate alternatives to full-time study. “With just a little more choice, we could have kept these kids in the framework,” he says. Justice Tal, himself a product of haredi yeshivot, agrees. “The yeshivot today are choking with those who are

burned out and cannot go on learning,” he says. “They cannot work because they haven’t done army, and they cannot learn because they’re burned out. The situation is awful.”

The extent of the crisis is slowly becoming apparent among the leadership of Israel’s haredi community, without whose approval little is likely to change. In the past few years, a number of leading rabbis have changed their tone with respect to key areas of policy, resulting in changes which, while still modest, signify a recognition that the Israeli model of haredi life, in which full-time Tora study is considered the only legitimate occupation for most men, may ultimately be untenable.

One such development is the emergence of vocational education programs for haredi men. The most ambitious effort so far is the Haredi Center for Technological Studies, which opened in 1996 with thirty-five students in a single Jerusalem branch and within four years had more than 1,400 students in four locations (Jerusalem, Bnei Brak, Ashdod, and Kiryat Sefer). “There are few projects that have changed the face of haredi society in the way that ours has,” explains R. Yehezkel Fogel, director of the program. “The goal was to provide solutions for people who needed to earn a living and who had no suitable program that could train them. If they don’t get any training, they’ll be forced to find work that does nothing for their minds.”⁶⁰

The center offers courses in computer programming, graphics and multimedia, accounting and bookkeeping, business and marketing, electrical engineering, and architecture. Students can earn a certificate (after one to two years of study), an engineering degree (three years), or a full-fledged B.A. issued in conjunction with Bar-Ilan University. The center has received the approval of some of the most important rabbis, including R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, the leading legal authority in the Lithuanian yeshiva world; R. Shmuel Wosner, head of the Hachmei Lublin yeshiva in

Bnei Brak; R. Aharon Leib Steinman; R. Ovadia Yosef; and the Gerrer Rebbe, R. Ya'akov Alter, who is the leader of the largest Hasidic sect in Israel.

Despite these endorsements, those in charge of the center have had to walk a fine line; they can promote their program, but not so aggressively that they could be accused of luring students away from yeshiva. To allay fears that the center might nip the budding careers of young scholars, Fogel's policy is to accept only those men who are at least 25, married, and fathers of four children. Courses for men are given at night, to allow them to continue in kollel during the day, thereby easing their transition from the learning community to the working world.

The fact that a branch has opened in Kiryat Sefer, a center of the more ardent elements in the Lithuanian yeshiva world, is one sign that the idea of men leaving the yeshiva to work is gaining acceptance. Another is the appearance of favorable articles on the center in the daily *Yated Ne'eman*, widely seen as a mouthpiece for the leading rabbis of the Lithuanian yeshiva community. A lengthy feature ran in the paper's English-language edition in March 1998, followed by a similar piece in the Hebrew edition the following October. "Virtually all the men who study there have spent many years in yeshivot and kollels, and are married and have growing families," the paper stresses. "By equipping them with the skills that are needed to obtain productive, well-paid jobs in the technical professions, the center hopes to relieve some of the pressures on those who wish to work but lack the necessary background." The paper's endorsement of the center was outright, describing it as "a body that was set up with the blessing and approval of the Tora sages." The Hebrew article, which ran alongside a picture of haredi men in a computer lab, notes that the English edition received a hugely favorable response from its readers, and that "at the request of the rabbis, and for the benefit of the community, *Yated* is running a Hebrew story on the center, which has undoubtedly brought blessing to many families."⁶¹

Yated Ne'eman praised the center for the quality of its programs and for its reputation among employers, particularly in the high-tech sector. "People who didn't know a word of English, who had never seen a mathematical equation and didn't know what a computer mouse was, have, thank God, overcome these gaps through preparatory and enrichment courses that enable them to complete matriculation exams," Fogel tells his interviewer from *Yated Ne'eman*. "Melem Systems, for instance, took fourteen of our graduates and came back to ask for more. It's been the same story with other software companies and businesses like Telrad and Digital." In a clear message to the reader that there is work out there for the taking, the paper quotes Hanan Achshaf, director of the electronics division of the Israel Manufacturers' Association, as saying: "The solution to our manpower problems is in the haredi sector."

The success of such programs is driven by the fact that haredi men are surprisingly well-suited for work in high tech, particularly as programmers. Despite some significant gaps in their education, their many years of talmudic study, which stresses not only logic but also independence and study in pairs, or *havruta*, have prepared them well for the intellectual demands of the job. "They definitely have self-study skills," says Meir Komer, who is in charge of a computer-programming course catering to the religious community at Machon Lev, a technological college in Jerusalem. "They learn in *havruta* and need much less frontal teaching than others. Gemara prepares them well for programming." Laser Rotshtein, managing director of JBE, a high-tech company in Jerusalem that has hired fifty haredi programmers, agrees. "The system of *havruta* learning helps them in programming," he says, adding that while students require intensive remedial training in English, the deficit in mathematics is not so difficult to overcome. "Boulian algebra is relatively easy for someone who has learned Talmud." Rotshtein is not the only employer who is pleased with the quality of his haredi workers. Shlomo Pe'eri, head of manpower at NDS in Jerusalem, a Rupert Murdoch-owned company that produces smart cards for satellite and cable television,

also gives high marks to his company's haredi employees. "Our haredi workers have no trouble adjusting," says Pe'eri. "They work well with others and carry their weight. We're very satisfied with their work."⁶²

Hillel is a rising star at JBE. He studied computer programming at Machon Lev after trying unsuccessfully to earn a living as a teacher of four- and five-year-olds; he moved around to Safed, Beersheba, Migdal Ha'emek, and Jerusalem, never earning more than a few hundred dollars a month, and never being paid on time. In addition to his regular programming duties at JBE, Hillel's pet project has been to create a three-dimensional model depicting Maimonides' calculations on the rotation of the new moon. "I taught myself three-dimensional trigonometric algorithms," he says, as he demonstrates the angle of the moon in relation to the earth at different times of the year. "Without this model it's very difficult to understand what Maimonides is after. I wanted to break down difficult concepts to a level people could understand." Hillel took on the Maimonides project because "I wanted even my secular work to have a holy dimension." But purely secular applications also have a spiritual dimension, he believes. "Until you get involved in some kind of secular activity, you're not actualizing your Tora."

No less important than the personal satisfaction Hillel has gained from his "secular activity," however, is the fact that he is also received well in his community—an indication that the taboo on work has been significantly eroded in recent years. "The guy who sits next to me in shul in Beitar [a religious community south of Jerusalem] asked me how to get into computers and then went and signed up at Machon Lev," he says. "Many people, from all walks of haredi life, ask me questions about work. People even stop me on the street. There are people who are literally hungry; they are suffering." Those who suffer most, he says, are those who have to pay rent because their parents could not afford to buy them apartments, and as a result are taking one interest-free loan to pay another. That was the life Hillel knew for years—hunting down new sources of loans, getting calls

from the bank manager about his overdrawn account and from the local grocer about his monthly bill. Now, he says, “I have a chance to live instead of just worrying about meeting my basic needs. I can give to others financially. People look at you differently when you earn a salary.”

Vocational training, however, is not the only indicator of change. Another is a new flexibility in the attitude of a number of leading rabbis towards military service. The most striking example is the establishment in January 1999 of the Nahal Haredi, a military unit aimed at accommodating the particular needs of haredi soldiers, including Tora study sessions, stricter standards of *kashrut*, and minimized contact with female soldiers—a program that could never have gotten off the ground without the backing of leading figures, most notably R. Steinman.⁶³ The three-year tour of service offers recruits the opportunity to fill in the gaps in their secular knowledge and earn high-school equivalency diplomas. Even before they finish their first stage of active duty, two teachers are sent to their outpost to teach math, Hebrew, and other basic subjects. After their first eighteen months of service, which include a four-month basic training program, they are sent for a year to work in a community and to learn a trade. Some of these soldiers have ended up at Machon Lev. “When a person feels that he is worth something, then he’s motivated to do better,” says R. Yoel Schwartz, a rabbi in Jerusalem’s haredi neighborhood of Me’a She’arim, and one of the Nahal Haredi’s supporters.

The number of haredi inductees is still quite small, attracting only a few hundred out of the thousands of potential recruits who come of age each year. However, because of the backing it has received from some rabbis, it has become a matter of significant controversy within the haredi community. “The Lithuanian rabbis are afraid that the Nahal Haredi will become highly popular,” writes Shahar Ilan. “They are concerned that not only will the *shababnikim* enlist, but so will the regular, less successful yeshiva

students, who will jump at the chance of going out and earning a decent living.”⁶⁴ Both advocates and opponents of the Nahal Haredi believe that if army service becomes legitimate, the result could potentially be a flood of students leaving the yeshiva; Dudi Silbershlag estimates that as many as 40 percent of yeshiva students might sign up. For now, however, the importance of the Nahal Haredi is mostly symbolic, a signal to the wider haredi community that alternatives to full-time Tora study are gaining legitimacy, and that the army need not be a hostile environment for haredi recruits.

A more significant indicator of the new openness to change has been the acceptance by several leading rabbis of the proposals put forth by the Tal Commission in the spring of 2000. In December 1998, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Ressler v. Minister of Defense* that the Defense Ministry had exceeded its authority by granting unlimited deferrals and exemptions of military service to yeshiva students. The court allotted the Knesset one year to pass legislation that would set forth rules governing the exemption of yeshiva students; if it failed to do so, the Ministry of Defense would be obligated to begin drafting them. (The one-year period has since been extended several times, most recently by an act of the Knesset.) In August 1999, Ehud Barak, acting in his capacity as defense minister, appointed a commission to investigate the issue and propose relevant legislation; the commission, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Tzvi Tal, a religious Zionist who favors military service, included representatives of the haredi community, as well as the defense and legal establishments.⁶⁵

After a careful investigation of the social, economic, and political implications of drafting yeshiva students, the Tal Commission presented its report in April 2000. For the committed Tora scholar, the commission’s main proposals amounted to a formal legalization of the present situation: An unlimited number of full-time yeshiva students would be allowed to defer their army service indefinitely, but would be obligated to complete their service as soon as they chose to end their full-time study. What was to

change, however, was the introduction of a “year of decision,” according to which a yeshiva student who had deferred his army service could, at age 23, take a year off his studies to pursue work or vocational training without being drafted. If, at the end of that year, the student chose to return to full-time yeshiva study, he could continue deferring his military service indefinitely. Otherwise, he would serve a shortened tour of a few months of army duty, and would then be free to pursue his career or studies as he saw fit.⁶⁶ The idea behind the year of decision was to allow the serious students to continue their study, while offering a relatively painless way out for those whose principal reason for being in yeshiva was to avoid military service.

Predictably, the proposals met with strong opposition from secular activists, who had seen the court’s ruling and the subsequent appointment of the Tal Commission as an opportunity to compel at least part of the haredi community to shoulder the burden of defending the country, and who now saw the commission’s findings as nothing less than a sellout. MK Yosef Lapid, head of the anti-clerical Shinui party, declared the proposed law to be a “shirkers’ law,” with Meretz MK Mussi Raz chiming in that the Tal proposals “essentially say that haredi blood is redder than secular blood.” Nehemia Stressler, the respected economics editor of *Ha’aretz*, moaned that “the injustice cries out to the heavens,” while Moshe Negbi, then *Ma’ariv*’s legal affairs correspondent, called the proposed law “repugnant.”⁶⁷ A student protest movement called *Awakening* (*hit’orerut*) arose in response, and the poet Yehuda Amichai went so far as to declare that “the struggle against implementing the Tal recommendations is equal in importance to the struggle for the independence of Israel.”⁶⁸

However, a number of people who had closely studied the haredi community, including a few secular journalists with no particular affection for haredim, understood that a breakthrough had been made in the Tal report. Most significant, they noted, was that Bnei Brak mayor Mordechai Karelitz, a figure close to R. Steinman, signed on to the report, and that it received the tacit approval of R. Elyashiv, as well as the support of the leadership of the Hasidic communities of Vizhnitz and Gur. “We should

see it as a very positive thing that... Karelitz signed on to the report...,” wrote Shahar Ilan in *Ha’aretz*. “For the first time in many years, the secular majority has a partner for dialogue on the haredi side—those who are prepared to agree to painful concessions, to take the heat [from others in their community] and fight for their beliefs.”⁶⁹ Avirama Golan of *Ha’aretz* pointed out that the concession of the haredim to a year of decision “is itself a backhanded admission of the need to reduce the ranks of the yeshivot.”⁷⁰

This is not to say that all, or even a majority, of the rabbinical leadership has come out in support of the Tal proposals. While a few of the top communal leaders have supported them, others, particularly the heads of the leading yeshivot, have assailed them as a threat to the integrity of the yeshiva world. *Yated Ne’eman* called the Tal report a “dangerous legal precedent, a revolutionary reform in the approach toward the world of yeshivot, a diminution of the value of Tora, and the advocacy of assimilation into secular society.”⁷¹ Fliers appeared in haredi neighborhoods accusing the Tal Commission of bringing a “holocaust” upon the yeshivot. R. Asher Tannenbaum, chairman of the Yeshiva Council, an umbrella organization representing the haredi yeshivot, resigned from the Tal Commission in protest over the year of decision, and did not sign his name to the report. R. Avraham Ravitz, a member of Knesset for the United Tora Judaism party and himself a supporter of the Tal proposals, explains the position of the yeshiva heads. “They don’t want to institutionalize a system for leaving yeshiva at age 23,” says Ravitz. “There’s no problem when people leave [yeshiva] as a matter of individual choice, but the Tal Commission would standardize an exit from the yeshiva world.”⁷²

If this is the case, why have some leading haredi rabbis been willing to support the Tal Commission’s proposals? Ravitz suggests that they had little choice in the matter. “The Supreme Court ordered the Knesset to legislate on the matter of deferrals,” he says, “and Tal was the best offer.” Others, however, see in the new policy a recognition of how hard things are getting economically for the haredi community. “What the *gedolim* say is most important,” says elementary-school principal Rappaport, who is a

granddaughter of R. Moshe Feinstein, the leading Orthodox rabbinical figure in the United States until his death in 1986. “If they say the current situation of everyone learning should continue, people will continue. But they apparently recognize the extent of the poverty, and that’s why they went along with the Tal Commission.” *Kol Ha’ir’s* Yishai Weiner expressed a similar sentiment. “The real revolution in the haredi world relates to money,” he says. Weiner, who attended the prestigious Ponavez yeshiva and served in the army, feels that the haredi public supports the Tal Commission recommendations. “It’s too hard for things to continue the way they have been. People want to go out and work,” he adds, predicting that 30 to 40 percent will leave kollel and go to work if the threat of army service is removed. Dov Elbaum, who grew up in a haredi community in Bnei Brak and now covers haredim for the national daily *Yedi’ot Aharonot*, agrees. In his view, the idea of a year of decision “would never have gained the approval of the leaders of haredi society were it not for the fact that the yeshiva world is in a deep state of crisis. The commission’s secular members essentially offered a wide, convenient lifeboat to a haredi society faced with the prospect of drowning.”⁷³

Few moments in history were as precarious for Tora scholarship as the immediate wake of the Holocaust. Not only had the great centers of Tora study been destroyed, and most of their students killed, but the Orthodox way of life had come to be seen by a great many Jews as vestigial, something that would disappear within a generation. It is understandable, then, that the response of the haredi leadership in Israel was uncompromising: The Tora must be studied, as much as possible by as many as possible, at all cost.

But in their effort to regain what was lost, the haredim in postwar Israel set in motion a project that took on dimensions undreamed of at the time. What began as a response to catastrophe and immediate cultural threat transformed, within a few decades, into a learning community far greater in

size, and far more demanding, than anything the Jews have ever experienced. This new model, however, depended on assumptions that have grown increasingly questionable with time: That a large and growing segment of society could stay out of the workforce, living off government subsidy, the residual wealth of parents and relatives, and the extraordinary sacrifices of kollel wives, without incurring unbearable poverty and generating intense resentment from a larger Israeli population that does not share its ideals and is not willing to continue its own sacrifices in order to subsidize them. Sooner or later, the Israeli model was bound to reach its limits.

Thus, the new developments in the haredi community signify not merely the fine-tuning of an existing pattern of life, but the correction of an ideology—an admission, in a limited way, that the effort to create a vast learning community in which only the Tora scholar and his devoted wife are honored has run its course. This is the beginning of what will probably be a slow and painful awakening. It will likely catch on more quickly in Sephardi and Hasidic circles, where the classical Jewish respect for those who work for a living still has some currency, and will be most fiercely resisted in the Lithuanian communities. But there is good reason to believe that once it has begun, the transformation of haredi society in Israel will be difficult to stop: The increasing number of skilled, successful, working haredim will act as a constant reminder that a dedication to Tora study and a traditional way of life need not be equated with poverty and dependence. As Justice Tal, who studied in haredi yeshivot before going to law school, says: “It will be painful from a spiritual point of view for people to leave the Tora world, but with time they will see that it is possible to leave and still be okay.”⁷⁴

The new openness to alternatives in the haredi world, born of necessity, could have a far-reaching impact on Israeli society. The application of this community’s disciplined minds in skilled professions such as programming and communications would improve Israel’s already strong position in these areas. Shifting thousands of men from the study hall to the workplace

would give a boost to economic growth, expand the tax base, and reduce demand for social spending for the haredi sector. Most important, perhaps, would be the interaction of haredim with the rest of Israeli society that is likely to result from their participation in the workforce and their enlistment in the military. According to Yisrael Segal, who left the haredi community as a teenager and went on to become one of Israel's most respected television journalists, "The very contact between the two worlds will bring about a greater degree of openness, and a shattering of preconceived notions each side has with respect to the other."⁷⁵

But it is the haredim themselves who stand to gain the most from the change. A rediscovery of the traditional pattern of religious life, along the lines of the European and American models, would mean a restoration of the balance between scholars and laymen. The immediate effect would be to ease poverty and the accompanying social problems. The community would stop losing those who cannot fit its mold of scholar-in-perpetuity, but who can remain within its bounds once these are expanded to include good technicians, programmers, or even soldiers. The yeshivot, whose leaders have staunchly opposed the Tal recommendations because they make it easier for students to leave, would revert to the role of elite institutions marked by intensive learning and an interest in excellence. In addition, when the balance between scholars and laymen reached a level that would allow the community to support its institutions, this would reduce the dependency of the haredim on transfer payments.

For this rosy scenario to be realized, several things will have to happen. The Tal proposals, or something like them, will have to become law, so that yeshiva students can begin vocational training at a relatively young age. The government will have to redirect much of the funding it gives to yeshivot and invest it in job training programs and night school for haredim. Most importantly, the first waves of young haredi professionals will have to prove themselves, in two ways: To potential employers, that their talents and relatively low salary requirements make it worth accommodating the workplace to their needs; and to their own community, that it is possible to

leave the yeshiva without lowering one's spiritual standard of living—that they have not, in the talmudic phrase, “gained this world at the cost of the next.” Without the cooperation of employers, politicians, and rabbis, the community's journey back from its Israeli experiment will be a long, arduous one, and might even be delayed indefinitely. With it, the next generation of haredim may be the most productive, self-sufficient, and socially responsible that Israel has seen.

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Notes

1. Menachem Friedman, interview with author, October 2000. Most of the people interviewed for this article refused to be pinned down on numbers relating to the haredi community. Researchers once used the number of votes garnered by haredi parties as an indication, notes Friedman, but Shas, a Sephardi haredi party that draws support from many non-haredim, has made it impossible to continue using that gauge. Examining the roster of kollels is also not accurate, because they are not properly updated and monitored, and while it is clear when people begin their studies, it is not at all clear when they end them—and how many are full-time students with no outside employment.

2. Brachot 28a. Rashi brings a second opinion that he was a blacksmith.

3. Shabbat 118a.

4. Mishna Avot 2:2.

5. Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Tora Study 3:10. For further material and discussion on the concept of labor in the rabbinical sources, see Yosef Yitzhak Lifshitz, “Secret of the Sabbath,” *AZURE* 10, Winter 2001, pp. 85-117.

6. Amiram Gonen, *From Yeshiva to Work: The American Experience and Lessons for Israel* (Jerusalem: Florsheimer Institute, 2000), p. 90. [Hebrew]

7. Gonen, *From Yeshiva to Work*, p. 46.

8. Eli Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice: An Economist's View of Ultra-Orthodox Jews* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1998), p. 19.

9. Touro College in New York, for instance, offers a wide range of degree programs at night. And students at the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore earn degrees at night from Johns Hopkins University, Loyola College (ironically, a Jesuit institution), or a local community college.

10. William B. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva: An Intimate Portrait of Orthodox Jewry* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 2000), p. 220. "Among the alumni responding to the questionnaire, 48 percent had completed some form of graduate training, 23 percent graduated college only, 15 percent attended but did not graduate, while only 14 percent failed to go beyond high school. Although no statistics are available, it is likely that even those yeshivas, such as Lakewood and Telshe, which forbid college attendance for those in residence at the school, have substantial numbers of alumni, perhaps even a majority, who attended college either before they enrolled or after they left the yeshiva." The study was of 878 graduates of a haredi high school, located in its ideology somewhere between the more extreme, haredi Lakewood yeshiva and the modern-Orthodox Yeshiva University, "permitting but not specifically encouraging college studies." Helmreich, *World of the Yeshiva*, pp. 343-344.

11. Gonen, *From Yeshiva to Work*, p. 40. Cf. Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi Society: Sources, Trends, and Processes* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1991), pp. 26-29. [Hebrew]

12. Eli Berman and Ruth Klinov, *Human Capital Investment and Non-participation: Evidence from a Sample with Infinite Horizons (or: Jewish Father Stops Going to Work)* (Jerusalem: Maurice Falk Institute for Economic Research in Israel, 1997), p. 11, table 4.

13. See Lawrence Kaplan, "The Hazon Ish: Haredi Critic of Traditional Orthodoxy," in Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The Uses of Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 145-173.

14. *Report of the Commission for Forming a Suitable Arrangement Regarding the Enlistment of Yeshiva Students*, April 2000, appendix 3, p. 118 (hereafter, "Tal Report"). [Hebrew]

15. Elad Peled, ed., *Fifty Years of Israeli Education* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport, 1999), p. 1047. [Hebrew]

16. Jonathan Rosenblum, "In Defense of the Tal Commission," *The Jerusalem Post*, April 21, 2000.

17. Justice Tzvi Tal, interview with author, July 2000.

18. Jonathan Rosenblum, "Confessions of a Haredi Dad," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 11, 1998.

19. Interview by author with Gerrer Hasid from Jerusalem, July 2000.

20. See Tal Report, vol. i, table on pp. 64-65. In 1979, 9,084 yeshiva students were exempt from military service; in 1989, the number stood at 20,762; in 1999, 30,414 students were exempt.

21. *Makor Rishon*, January 12, 2001, pp. 14-16.

22. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, p. 19.

23. Berman and Klinov, *Human Capital Investment*, p. 11.

24. *Ma'ariv*, July 21, 2000.

25. Yisrael, interview with author, August 2000. All subsequent quotes from Yisrael in this article are taken from this interview.

26. In the 1980s, when a noted American haredi educator in Jerusalem opened Ma'arava, a high school offering secular studies leading to matriculation, he sparked a huge controversy. In the end, he was not allowed to set up shop in Jerusalem or to call his school a yeshiva.

27. As R. Secharansky explained in an interview with the author in September 2000, "The girl understands that the study of Tora is the highest value and she wants a husband who will be in this elite group of learners."

28. R. Yoel Schwartz, interview with author, October 2000. All subsequent quotes from R. Yoel Schwartz in this article are taken from this interview.

29. Secharansky recalls a condolence visit he received after the death of his father, Meir, founder of the Beit Ya'akov in Tel Aviv. The visitors, prominent heads of Lithuanian yeshivot with whom he had no close ties, explained why they felt obliged to honor his father. "We arrived as refugees from Vilna in 1941," one of the rabbis said. "We looked around and saw that we would have to go to work because we wouldn't be able to get a *shiduch* [match] if we learned. We came to your father and told him our problem, and he responded, 'Dear boys, listen to me; go and learn Tora and let me worry about setting up a Beit Ya'akov that will supply you with wives.'"

30. The members of the Tal Commission visited the Mir yeshiva and, as stated in their report, were "deeply impressed by the concentration of so many students who spilled out of the main study hall into the hallways and [even occupied] the podium and the small platform in front of the holy ark, and filled nearby houses... all were engaged in independent learning with study partners." Tal Report, p. 16.

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31. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, p. 11.
32. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, pp. 8, 12; Berman and Klinov, *Human Capital Investment*, p. 28.
33. Figures depicting the average number of children per family are naturally lower than fertility rates. The former reflect the average number of children in families at a given time, including those younger couples who have not yet had many children; the latter reflect the total number of children the average woman is likely to bear.
34. The National Insurance Institute figures for 1999 showed Jerusalem leading the country with 33.3 percent of its residents living under the poverty line, followed by Bnei Brak with 30.3 percent.
35. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, pp. 13-15; poverty line figures from Momi Dahan, *Ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Municipal Authority* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, 1998), p. 50. [Hebrew]
36. These figures were presented to the Tal Commission by senior Finance Ministry officials. Tal Report, vol. i, p. 37.
37. Shahar Ilan, *Haredim, Inc.* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000), table 3:3. [Hebrew] The lower figure refers to families in which the mother works, the higher figure to families in which the mother does not work.
38. Friedman, interview.
39. Dar's testimony to the Tal Commission; quoted from Tal Report, supplement B:1, p. 151.
40. Tal Report, supplement B:1, pp. 160, 163.
41. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, p. 10.
42. Berman, *Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice*, pp. 13-15.
43. Yishai Weiner, interview with author, September 2000. All subsequent quotes from Yishai Weiner are taken from this interview. Describing this phenomenon as "the great tragedy," Friedman, of Bar-Ilan, says, "You have great wealth that disappears in a generation or two. The money has to be divided among many people who only take and don't put back." Friedman, interview.
44. Rivka Rappaport, interview with author, August 2000.
45. Momi Dahan, cited in Ilan, *Haredim*, pp. 272-273.
46. Jonathan Rosenblum, interview with author, October 2000.
47. Adina Bar-Shalom, interview with author, November 2000.

48. Interview by author with mother from Jerusalem, August 2000; Ya'akov Ne'eman, interview with author, November 2000; Dudi Silbershlag, interview with author, November 2000. Silbershlag is correct that the phenomenon of women supporting their families began in the Lithuanian yeshiva world, but it has spread over the years to Sephardim and Hasidim because of the Beit Ya'akov education they are receiving. "The girls attend Beit Ya'akov and won't consider marrying someone who doesn't learn full-time," says Bar-Shalom. Bar-Shalom, interview.

49. Shach, who was considered a talmudic genius, told *Ma'ariv* that he had a "hunger for secular studies, so I started looking for it outside. I used to sneak into bookstores and libraries in secular neighborhoods and would devour books. I read history and poetry and philosophy. Through books I learned math and English." *Ma'ariv*, November 24, 2000.

50. Moti Green echoed this sentiment. "I reached a point at which after years of learning in yeshiva I didn't find a Tora position that was fitting for me... I felt sharp distress. I had to do something. I could have covered up the problem by taking a teaching job in a *yeshiva ketana* [high school] in the boondocks, but I thought I should find something with a challenge and satisfaction. I didn't want to wake up in ten years with financial hardships and look back bitterly. It's possible that I'll be confused and angry with the way I've chosen, but at least I won't be hungry." *Ma'ariv*, July 21, 2000.

51. Yosef Shilhav, interview with author, August 2000.

52. *Ha'aretz*, January 18, 2001.

53. Aryeh Dean Cohen, "Angels' Whose Wings Droop from Cold," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 17, 1998.

54. Ilan, *Haredim*, pp. 175, 177.

55. Ilan, *Haredim*, pp. 181, 177.

56. Quoted in *Ha'aretz*, January 21, 2001.

57. Sharon Slater, interview with author, October 2000.

58. Daniel Klaidman, "Israel's New Defectors," *Newsweek*, December 13, 1999, pp. 34-35. The Hillel organization bears no connection to the Jewish campus education organization of the same name.

59. *Hamishpaha*, cited in Ilan, *Haredim*, p. 176.

60. Interview with Dov Elbaum, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, May 12, 2000; R. Yehezkel Fogel, interview with author, September 2000.

61. *Yated Ne'eman*, English-language edition, March 20, 1998; *Yated Ne'eman*, October 30, 1998.

62. Meir Komer, interview with author, July 2000; Laser Rotshtein, interview with author, August 2000; Shlomo Pe'eri, interview with author, August 2000.

63. Hillel, interview with author, August 2000. There was a similar Nahal program for haredim until the mid-1970s, but it was disbanded in 1976 due to opposition from the leading figures in the haredi community.

64. Shahar Ilan, "How to Resolve the Dispute over Drafting Haredim," *Ha'aretz*, June 9, 1999.

65. The Tal Commission was set up to formulate recommendations that would lead to this legislation. It comprised Tal; Cabinet Secretary Yitzhak Herzog; Bnei Brak mayor Mordechai Karelitz; R. Asher Tannenbaum, head of the Yeshiva Council, the umbrella organization for haredi yeshivot; haredi attorney Ya'akov Weinrot; Defense Ministry Assistant Director-General Haim Yisraeli; former IDF Manpower Branch head Moshe Nativ; Defense Ministry attorney Rachel Stovetsky; and Deputy Attorney General Yehoshua Shoffman.

66. At the end of the year, those who decide to return to the yeshiva will be able to continue receiving their deferment, while those who want to pursue work will have two options: Four months of army service in the Home Front Command, to be followed by annual reserve duty; or civilian service in the fire department, the traffic police, or rescue work, where they will subsequently do their reserve duty. A third option relates to yeshiva students living in areas deemed by the army to have special security needs. These students would patrol in the communities' civil-guard units for twenty-four days a year, starting at age 21. After ten years they would be exempt from further service.

67. *Ma'ariv*, July 7, 2000.

68. *Ma'ariv*, July 2, 2000.

69. *Ha'aretz*, April 14, 2000.

70. *Ha'aretz*, July 4, 2000.

71. *Ha'aretz*, April 13, 2000.

72. R. Avraham Ravitz, interview with author, July 2000.

73. *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, May 12, 2000.

74. Tal, interview.

75. *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, July 3, 2000.