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# An Orthodox Revolution?

*Kimmy Caplan*

**Internal Popular Discourse in  
Israeli Haredi Society**

*Zalman Shazar Center, 2007,*

*346 pages.*

*Reviewed by Aharon Rose*

I srael's Haredi minority has an ambivalent relationship with secular Israeli society. On the one hand, Israel is witnessing the emergence of a new generation of Haredi politicians and journalists, a generation that no longer speaks "diaspora Yiddish," but rather fluent sabra Hebrew, and maintains strong ties with its secular surroundings. On the other hand, most Israelis still tend to identify Haredi culture with a cult of elderly rabbis, zealously guarding the embers of the old world's traditions. This duality is also evident in the apparent contradiction between the Haredi community's involvement in and contribution to wider Israeli society through political parties and charitable organizations, and the anti-Zionist ideology to which it

continues to adhere. To be sure, this duality does not only confuse and perplex secular Israelis; the Haredim themselves often find such contrasts difficult to explain.

Enter the new book *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society* by Kimmy Caplan. Caplan, a lecturer in Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University, sets out to provide an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of shifts in Haredi society. In doing so, he chooses to abandon the traditional role of the historian in favor of that of the sociologist, documenting social changes occurring in the field. He takes as his premise the idea that important parts of the Haredi community "are undergoing a selective process of Israelization, that is to say, an internalization of cultural values and patterns of behavior, the source of which is the surrounding society." According to Caplan, "this process is at odds with the separatist and isolationist goals that continue to characterize official Haredi rhetoric." In other words, Caplan believes that there is a gap between the day-to-day life of Haredim and the ideology that

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purports to represent and define it. To expose and analyze this dissonance is the primary goal of *Internal Popular Discourse in Israeli Haredi Society*—and the book makes a praiseworthy, if only partly successful, attempt to do so.

In the book's introduction, Caplan explains the methodology underlying his research. Specifically, he differentiates between the ideological-rhetorical ethos of the Haredi elite, and what he calls "popular religion," a somewhat vague concept that refers, generally, to the values and beliefs of "ordinary" believers and their practical expression. On this basis, Caplan identifies a conspicuous flaw in previous research on Israel's Haredi community: Whereas the popular aspect of Sephardi religiosity—both "traditional" and Haredi—has been systematically researched by both academics and the media, the equivalent phenomenon in the Ashkenazi community has been virtually ignored. According to Caplan, scholars and journalists have consistently tended to approach the study of Ashkenazi Haredim "from the top down"—that is, by focusing on the viewpoint of their leadership. As such, he maintains, they have neglected to investigate those changes that occur "from the bottom up." Consequently, the image formed of the Haredi

community is shaped almost entirely by its elite:

Researchers' disregard of popular religion in the Ashkenazi Haredi community is connected to the image that this community continues to display towards the outside world. According to this image, the Haredim are a hierarchical and ordered community, in which everything that happens is directed by the leadership, whose subjects act in absolute compliance with its guidance and instruction. However, it appears that the picture is far more complex. Certainly, there is no doubt that the leadership occupies a central and important position in this community and its various sub-groups, but the challenges of real life on the one hand and theological uncertainties on the other have laid the foundation for a broad internal popular discourse, as they have for other phenomena in the realm of popular religion. Moreover, it appears that this discourse is not in keeping with the direction set by the senior leadership.

In other words, unlike the religious texts distributed by the Haredi elite—the extent of whose distribution and influence is, in any case, open to doubt—the popular religion draws its energies from a vibrant and internal discussion, one in which broad swaths of the community participate. Moreover, the popular religion allows for the emergence of alternatives to the established leadership. Thus, for example, lectures

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by Haredi marriage counselors and psychologists draw wide audiences, despite—or rather, precisely because of—the speakers’ professional, and not merely religious, authority.

Caplan analyzes four main areas in and around which the internal discourse is being conducted in the Haredi Ashkenazi community: First, recorded lectures by popular Haredi sermonizers not connected to the rabbinical leadership. Second, the phenomenon of *hazara bitshuva*, the “return to faith” by secular Jews, which brings elements from the outside world into Haredi society. Third, the vigorous discussion of the Holocaust in the Haredi press and literature, despite the rabbinical elite’s longtime policy of avoiding it. Last, Haredi women’s going to work outside the community. This final trend is accompanied by yet another internal discussion, this time among Haredi women themselves. Moreover, this discussion is not necessarily bound by the conventions of the prevailing conservative ethos—which has, Caplan argues, lost much of its relevance in the face of these new developments.

The first area examined by Caplan is that of sermonizing, known to the Israeli public mainly through the activities of prominent Sephardi rabbis such as Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who, despite his significant halachic stature, does

not eschew populist appearances. But Caplan directs most of his attention to the bustling industry of popular sermons, whose practitioners constitute an alternative “sub-elite,” distinct from the established religious leadership. These sermons provide a window into the internal discourse occurring within the Haredi community and the subjects that occupy its intellectual energies, beginning with matters affecting the family unit and extending to fundamental theological topics such as the principle of “reward and punishment.” Moreover, a thriving subculture of modern oral folklore exists on the periphery of these sermons—such as stories about séances and autistic prophesying—which validates beliefs held by the audience even as it arouses the wrath of the Lithuanian rabbinical leadership, which sees them as a form of idolatry. To Caplan, these phenomena reflect the blurring of cultural boundaries between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Haredim.

Among the most prominent subjects in popular sermons are attitudes toward secular Israel. Haredi “high” culture tends to deal with the challenge posed by secularism through weighty halachic discussions and ideological polemics. Popular sermonizers, by contrast, favor entertaining their listeners through ridicule and satire. As an example, Caplan

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cites the genre of “dog stories”: Stories that satirize the central position a pet can attain in the lives of a childless secular couple. Caplan quotes a joke told by Rabbi Shabtai Yudelevitch:

A woman went to a Tel Aviv store to buy clothes for her dog. She was there for four or five hours and all the clothes were rejected as unsuitable. Finally, the salesman got angry and said: “Bring the dog and we’ll measure him and see what fits.” The woman said: “Impossible.” Why impossible? Because she wanted it to be a surprise!

Caplan explains that along with the obvious satire and contempt, these “dog stories” also reflect the Haredi community’s fear of a perceived threat to their world from a secular culture they often find inscrutable.

Unlike popular sermonizing, which is essentially an internal cultural pastime, the phenomenon of secular Jews joining the religious fold truly puts the Haredi community’s ability to protect itself from the outside world to the test. Caplan examines the influence of *hazara bitshuva* on popular Haredi discourse, evidenced, for example, by a greater concentration on issues of faith that are problematic for “returnees,” such as proofs of the existence of God. The real problem presented by these new adherents, however, is the secular baggage they bring with them, and their ambivalence towards

the Haredi society they want to join. Indeed, many returnees are disturbed by the inconsistencies they encounter in Haredi culture, which they view as hypocrisy. Because of this, a plethora of Haredi literature deals with the extent to which the newly repentant Jew must renounce his old life and sever all connection to it. Another weighty issue is the problematic status of returnees in the Haredi community’s stratified society, which is reflected, for example, in the restrictions placed on their choice of a suitable marriage partner, and in the paucity of professional opportunities open to them. In this regard, Caplan cites statements by members of the Lithuanian rabbinical elite opposing attempts by returnees to use the knowledge they acquired in the secular world to secure positions in the Haredi educational system.

One of the most striking implications of the *hazara bitshuva* movement for internal Haredi discourse is a revival of the religious and moral debate surrounding the Holocaust. To Caplan, this revival is proof of the tension between the ideological stance adopted by the community’s rabbinical leadership and popular religious needs. The prominent rabbis of the post-Holocaust generation, from Rabbi Avraham Isaiah Karelitz (the Hazon Ish) to the *Admorim* (Hasidic leaders) of the Gur and Belz communities, avoided

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discussing the subject, and opposed the composition of elegies and the establishment of memorial days to mark the destruction of European Jewry. Today, by contrast, Haredi discourse is in the grips of what Caplan calls a “Holocaust obsession.”

Even though there is no halachic ruling or a clear instruction on the matter, it can be assumed that Lithuanian Judaism withdrew from any historical or theological treatment of the Holocaust, and that it set the trend for those in Hasidic circles whose Admorim chose silence after the Holocaust, a silence that was interpreted by their followers as a guiding principle in religious and educational matters. But that is not how things are.... It would appear to be difficult for the Haredim, like many others who are not Haredim, to keep the decree of silence or satisfy themselves with the explanations given by their longtime leaders.

In contrast to the polemical Haredi historiography of the last two hundred years, which strove to refute secular history and prove the existence of divine providence, the new Haredi Holocaust literature shows a willingness to acknowledge the theological complexity of the subject, understanding that it cannot be interpreted with the simplistic formulation of reward and punishment. Growing interest in the Holocaust has even led to a rare collaboration between the

Haredi educational system for girls, Beit Yaakov, and one of Zionism’s most prominent symbols—the Yad Vashem Institute for Holocaust Research. Not surprisingly, a visit to Yad Vashem by Haredi teachers was furiously attacked by the Haredi newspaper *Yated Ne’eman*, a mouthpiece for the elite’s official ideology.

Arguably, women are inclined to be more active in popular religion than in elite religious culture, which is dominated and ruled by men. And indeed, Haredi women play a significant role in all three phenomena previously described: Popular sermons and lectures; *hazara bitshuva*; and the writing of textbooks on the Holocaust. Thus, Caplan devotes a separate discussion to the vigorous internal discourse that has developed around the issue of Haredi women working outside the insular community framework. Such work is considered a necessary evil, because Haredi women must support their families financially in order to allow their husbands to devote themselves to Tora study. In the 1980s, Menahem Friedman, the foremost scholar on this subject, claimed that a Haredi woman exposed to modern culture would inevitably import its values into her native community. Her status as a link between her family and the outside world would grant her the ability to bring about a

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profound change in Haredi society, and even undermine its traditional male hierarchy. However, Friedman later admitted that he was mistaken in his prognosis, as he had failed to fully appreciate the power of Haredi indoctrination and its capacity to resist the temptations of the outside world. Caplan cites similar predictions about women in Hasidic communities in the United States, which have also turned out to be mistaken. He takes a more cautious position on the matter, and looks to popular sermons and literature that tackle problems for which the old ideology has still not provided a solution. Caplan mentions, for example, sermonizers who lament the fact that the Haredi woman's role as financial provider has changed over time from an emergency requirement to a secular careerist value. He also points to the flourishing of educational literature written by women, which has taken on the task of dealing with the sensitive situations in which working Haredi women often find themselves.

Finally, Caplan discusses the "Israelization" of the Haredim, a process he describes as "the controlled internalization of values, language, and modes of behavior similar to those existing in various Israeli Jewish groups." According to Caplan, there are several noteworthy expressions of this Israelization on the level of

popular discourse: The involvement of the Haredim in the public domain and their participation in voluntary civic associations; their increasing use of modern Hebrew, which infuses the Haredi discourse with the imagery and slang of secular Israeli culture; the willingness of the Haredim to avail themselves of academic experts in a variety of fields, from medicine to technology; and the growing popularity of leisure activities that bring Haredi families to places identified with Zionism: Yad Vashem, the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, museums of the history of the *Yishuv* (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine), and even IDF camps open to the general public on Independence Day.

Caplan explains, however, that Israelization is not necessarily secularization; there is, he insists, no essential contradiction between strict adherence to God's commandments and the internalization of certain elements of Israeli culture. Moreover, "the process of 'Israelization' is, in truth, a partial return to certain characteristics that typified Ashkenazi Haredi society in the mid-twentieth century," before it elected to follow the path of isolationism and separatism. Caplan stresses that this process "is composed of many stages, various layers, and a variety of expressions," and that one can see parallels to it

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in other Haredi societies around the world that have also internalized elements of the surrounding culture. The book ends on a note of extreme caution: “We must remember,” writes Caplan, “that processes of this kind, the emotional sensitivity of which is especially high in Haredi society, occur slowly and are sometimes introduced unconsciously.... Only systematic observation over the coming years will reveal if we are truly speaking of an ongoing process or a transient phenomenon.”

Reading Caplan’s book is a fascinating experience. Its primary achievement lies in the material it presents, the majority of which is taken from Haredi culture as it is lived “in the field.” Caplan relies on an abundance of sources of which most secular readers are certainly unaware, and deserves praise for directing the spotlight towards aspects of the Haredi discourse that, until now, have not received appropriate scholarly attention.

However, the book suffers from some conspicuous deficiencies of its own. For example, Caplan does not deal with the foremost challenge facing Haredi society—the Internet. From the Haredi point of view, it is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, the Internet allows the Haredim to communicate with

each other in online forums and to discuss the specific problems of their various communities. On the other hand, the Internet also exposes the Haredim—and particularly their children—to modern culture with all of its temptations, and threatens to render decades-old prohibitions on the secular media irrelevant.

Caplan is also silent on another interesting development: The phenomenon of the “non-Zionist Right” that has blossomed in Haredi circles since the Oslo accords. The breaking down of the traditional isolationist barriers in regards to Zionism and the recruitment of the Haredim by Benjamin Netanyahu in the prime ministerial elections of 1996 are not to be taken lightly. Persistent rumors claim that strict rabbis who normally took a stubbornly isolationist position towards Israeli politics were forced to support a right-wing secular candidate for fear that any prohibition they might impose on doing so would encounter resistance from within the rabbinical leadership and outright disobedience from the public. In this context, it is important to recall the phenomenon of Haredi membership in the power centers of the secular parties, mainly the Likud central committee, and the bitter power struggles between “modern” Haredim appointed to religious councils by these parties and the old

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Lithuanian elite. This is a point of decisive importance, and its absence from the book is surprising.

But the book does not stand or fall solely on its documentary material. It must also be judged on the basis of its claims and conclusions. One such claim, made by Caplan in his introduction, is that previous research on the Haredim has tended to focus only on their elite and the ideology that it promotes. Yet throughout the book, Caplan complains again and again about the lack of proper scholarly attention paid to key figures in Haredi “high” culture. In this regard, he mentions Rabbi Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman, the head of the Ponevezh yeshiva in Lithuania and later in Bnei Brak, and the Admor of Klausenberger, Rabbi Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, one of the great post-Holocaust leaders of Hasidism.

A glance at the bibliographical appendix that surveys “studies of Haredi society in Israel over the last generation” raises further doubts regarding the accuracy of Caplan’s claim that there has been excessive scholarly focus on the rabbinical elite. The articles cited in the section on “personalities” deal with only four prominent and well-known Haredi leaders: The Hazon Ish and Rabbi Shach of the Lithuanian Haredim; the Satmar Rabbi, Yoel Teitelbaum;

and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. In the same manner, the list of studies treating “the religious way of life, ideology, theology, and worldview” of the Haredim is quite short. In general, most of the items noted in the appendix deal with anthropological and psychological aspects of Haredi society, such as Yoram Bilu’s essay on the structuring of manhood through Lag Ba’omer rituals, or Yehuda Goodman’s research into the struggle over identity in the context of psychotherapy.

Ironically, a further demonstration of the problem is provided by another of the author’s books, the anthology *Israeli Haredim*, published in 2003 and edited by Caplan and Emmanuel Sivan. Of the nine essays that appear in the anthology, only two—“Changes in the Sephardi World of Halacha: From Tradition to Literature” by Benjamin Lau, and “To Earn a Living or Wait for a Miracle: The Haredi Trap and Its Reflection in Relation to Tora and Work” by Nurit Stadler—discuss the writings of the rabbinical elite in depth. The other seven articles deal with, among other things, the phenomenon of *yotzim lishe’ela* (religious Jews who lose their faith and become secular), types of leisure activity among Haredim, the struggle against archaeological digs at holy sites, and the “Haredi body.” None of these articles contain even a

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single reference to the vast religious literature that forms the basis of official Haredi identity; instead, as is customary these days in academia, they prefer to cite the likes of Michel Foucault or Walter Benjamin.

This lack of sufficient research into elite Haredi culture also throws into question Caplan's claims about the prevailing tension between this culture and the popular religion. It appears that Caplan was forced to ponder this issue himself, and wonders if there really is such a wide gap between these two discourses. After all, what appears to the outside observer as tension may in reality be its exact opposite: A sign of a vigorous ideology that harnesses popular thinking to diversify its message, adapting it to different audiences and changing conditions. Caplan opines, for example, that "a study of the ways Haredi women deal with working outside the community teaches us first and foremost that the central role of official Haredi ideology is weakening," because it does not provide these workers with satisfactory tools to cope with the reality of their lives. And then, in the following paragraph, he proceeds to qualify his statement:

This situation shows that there are tensions and even contradictions between the Haredi establishment religion and the popular one. But

we must remember that the popular discourse is being conducted under the patronage of the official ideology, which emphasizes tradition and continuity, and that a basic obligation to these ideological principles is what enables the popular religion to withstand the shifting challenges of real life.

These words suggest that Caplan finds it difficult to explain the complex role of Haredi ideology in the context of his overall thesis. And, in truth, a more comprehensive examination of the "Haredi establishment religion" might well have turned some of Caplan's claims upside down. The popular discussion of the Holocaust, for example, which Caplan sees as proof of the tension that ostensibly exists between the official viewpoint of the elite and popular thought, actually reflects past disagreements among the rabbinical leadership itself. Indeed, although the position of the Hazon Ish on the subject was ultimately accepted as the official line, it did not express an absolute consensus; esteemed halachic scholars and Hasidic leaders dealt with the issue of the Holocaust in philosophical works, and even composed elegies to the memory of the slaughtered. One of those scholars mentioned by Caplan is the Admor of Slonim, Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky, who saw the Holocaust as a "unique event, exceptional and unprecedented

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in the history of Israel.” One should also add the Rebbe of Bobov, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam, a Holocaust survivor who lost his wife and children, and Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Wosner, one of the great Haredi authorities of our generation, whose name is missing from Caplan’s book. The Lithuanian rabbis were also divided on the topic, and two of the most prominent among them—Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, leaders of the Orthodox camp in the United States—signed a leaflet calling on lamentations to be recited on the Ninth of Av in memory of the Holocaust.

This lack of clarity regarding Haredi ideology leaves the picture sketched by Caplan incomplete. In the book’s introduction, Caplan claims that his work describes Haredi society “from the bottom up”—that is to say, from the viewpoint of the popular discourse. In this, he sets himself in opposition to previous academic researchers, who have tended to focus on the community’s elitist discourse. However, his focus on this perspective does not relieve him of the need to show how the “bottom” actually changes the “top,” or, in other words, how the processes he describes are likely to influence the Haredi leadership. After all, even if there is something to Caplan’s arguments, and this leadership can no

longer be seen as the sole authority in Haredi society, it is clear that it does continue to have a decisive influence. No change worthy of note will occur without the ideological and halachic approval of the community’s elite.

Overall, Caplan takes a palpably cautious stance: He raises questions and tries not to make risky predictions (perhaps in view of Menahem Friedman’s bitter experience). In a rumination that appears at the end of the book, he asks whether “the hard core of Haredi society is showing any sense of commitment to Israeli society and a willingness to share the national burden?” This is a question that must occupy the mind of every reader, but Caplan leaves us with no definite answer. He does not offer any long-term prognosis regarding the practical consequences of Israeliization, and seems satisfied with the admission that “we do not know what the future holds.” This is, perhaps, deference to academic responsibility, but it is difficult to overcome the feeling that the scholar has been defeated by his subject.

These are real defects, but they do not negate the importance of Caplan’s book and its scholarly contributions. *Internal Popular Discourse* is an informative, instructive, and enlightening document, some of whose insights deserve further and more profound examination. Although

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Caplan is not fully successful at lifting the veil from “Haredi discourse,” and despite the fact that his arguments occasionally rest on problematic assumptions, he has unquestionably contributed to the clarification of the subject. Anyone seriously interested in the changes the Israeli Haredi community is currently undergoing

should not pass over this book, and one hopes that others will follow in Caplan’s path and continue the work he has begun.

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