ISRAEL’S HAREDIM EFFECT: THEOCRACY IN A DEMOCRATIC STATE

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ABSTRACT

As the sole stable democracy in the Middle East and the only Jewish democratic country in the world, Israel faces unique challenges. The intersection of religion and civic responsibility has been a central internal conflict since Israel’s founding in 1948, and today has reached a critical breaking point. The Haredim are a rapidly growing insular Ultra-Orthodox segment of Israel’s Jewish population that have wielded disproportionate political influence since the birth of the nation. Refusing to seek jobs in a secular economy or participate in the military, these Jews perceive themselves as an independent religious community and actively seek to preserve that distinction. As Ultra-Orthodox, this community embraces only the most stringent interpretations of the Jewish bible, called the Torah, and insists that Israel’s democracy incorporate central tenets of biblical law within its governing bodies.

The Haredim’s fervent rejection of the economic, educational, social, and military pillars that constitute the backbone of modern-day Israel comes at a high cost to the state. High unemployment rates and a refusal to participate in Israel’s conscription military place the Haredim at odds with the vast majority of Jewish Israelis who do not share their values and pay large sums of money to support them.

The Haredim currently comprise 11 percent of the total population and are
expected to reach 18 percent by 2030. The social, economic, and military implications of this growth are dire and the need for remediation is urgent.

A critical and thorough examination of evidence and primary sources supports this urgency. In 2014, a dramatic political shift in Israel enabled the current governing coalition to take a litigious approach towards addressing its shared future with the Haredim. Haredi compliance with new laws is unlikely given that the Haredim feel duty-bound only to the Torah, yet an emerging middle-class of Haredim who embrace secular values while retaining their religious roots may be the key to preserving Haredi values while encouraging more responsible civic participation. It is difficult to envision a future in which Israel is militarily strong, financially solvent, and able to preserve itself for future generations if Israel cannot thoughtfully address its complicated relationship with the Haredim.
DEDICATION

To my husband Josh, my parents and to Pups, without whose love, enthusiasm and support this thesis would not have been possible. You have my love and devotion always.
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INTRODUCTION

Israel holds the distinction of being the sole stable democracy in the Middle East and the only Jewish democratic country in the world. For the Jewish diaspora who reside in Israel and around the globe, Israel represents a safe-haven for a persecuted people, and its permanent preservation is an unparalleled priority. Jews currently comprise 75 percent of the eight million inhabitants living in Israel, a number which has grown steadily from the 800,000 Jews who resided there at the time of its founding in 1948.\(^1\) Preserving a democracy in which matters of religion intersect with the distinct needs of a Jewish state is a challenge unique to Israel. This challenge is intensified by a rapidly growing orthodox minority within Israel’s Jewish population whose political influence since the nation’s founding has been disproportionate to its size. These Jews, known as Haredim, perceive themselves as an independent religious community and actively seek to preserve that distinction.

The Hebrew word *Haredim* translates to “those who tremble,”\(^2\) a reference to the Book of Isaiah (66:5) when the prophet implores his followers to “Hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble (Haredim) at his word.”\(^3\) Today, this community embraces the most stringent interpretations of the Jewish bible, called the *Torah*. The Haredim staunchly reject the modern lifestyles commonplace among Israelis in favor of traditional lives in accordance with biblical law, or *halakhah*. In the book

\(^1\) Central Bureau of Statistics, “Population of Israel on the Eve of 2014-8


\(^3\) Ibid., 12.
Defenders of the Faith, Samuel Heilman describes the Haredim “as those singular people—along with the poor and contrite of spirit—who defend the faith and keep the law...and therefore share a special, exquisitely mutual relationship with God.”

Interestingly, most Haredim themselves do not use that term, preferring the Yiddish terms “Yidn (Jews) or erlicher Yidn, virtuous Jews” to describe their community.

This suggests that they do not perceive themselves as one religious sect among many, as others do, but as the “true Jews.” Also referred to as the ultra-Orthodox, their fervent rejection of the economic, educational, social, and military pillars that define modern-day Israel comes at a high cost to the state and has reached a critical breaking point.

The Haredim currently make up 11 percent of the total population in Israel and are expected to reach 18 percent by the year 2030. This is largely due to their exceptionally high birthrates. One of the highest callings for the Haredim is to bear children, a direct command from the Torah, which tells them to “be fruitful and

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 13.
multiply.”9 Currently, Haredi families average 6.5 children per household, which is double the rate of other Israeli Jews.10 They are growing at a rate of 6 percent per year, compared to 2.3 percent for the rest of Israel, and by 2030 every third child born in Israel will be Haredi.11 Together with an Arab minority that also has high unemployment and for political reasons does not serve in the military, Haredi growth is so significant that Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics projects that by 2059 the population of Haredim will outnumber secular Israelis.12 Statistics such as this one create urgency for Israel to comprehensively address its complicated relationship with the Haredim.

The large majority of Haredim devote themselves to full-time study of the Torah, which they treat as a lifelong learning process beginning in youth and continuing until death. Uninterrupted pursuit of Torah study is the highest calling for the Haredim, who bestow higher social status to those who demonstrate a thorough scholarly mastery of the Torah. According to Heilman, Haredi are traditionalists who believe “the new is never improved, only corrupted; our forebears were always greater than us and what they did must serve as the model

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for us today, tomorrow, and forever.”¹³ Thus the Haredim reject modern interpretations of Judaism. This rejection has its roots in their centuries-long lineage of orthodox life in Eastern Europe, prior to their emigration to Palestine in the 20th century. The scholarly pursuits of the Haredim preclude their active employment in Israel’s economy and exempt them from military service. This exemption causes Israel’s army to persist without significant numbers of able-bodied Haredi men and prevents those men from becoming employed. Full-time *Torah* study means full-time or even part-time jobs are out of the question; moreover, in Israel employers expect job applicants to have served in the military as that is often seen as precursory job training. For this reason, Haredi exemption from military service contributes heavily to high unemployment among the Haredim.

Israel distributes large amounts of government subsidies for Haredi unemployment as a result of their full-time *Torah* studies and rejection of secular norms. Israel’s policy-makers and economists warn that Israeli taxpayers cannot continue to foot the hefty bill. This community of the willfully poor is unable to financially sustain itself without the significant assistance of working Israelis. Despite comprising only 11 percent of the population, the Haredim and their leadership, which consists of rabbis and politicians, has continually benefitted from Israel’s unicameral Parliament, known as the Knesset, where smaller parties bargain with larger ones and are often able to wield disproportionate influence over matters of public policy and law. Furthermore, for religious reasons the Haredim do not consider themselves to be Israeli, nor do they accept Israel’s legitimacy as a state.

The Haredim perceive themselves to be absolved from responsibility to obligations of the state except those prescribed by the *Torah*. Due to their high birthrates, a Haredi majority is probable in the coming decades, and the national and economic ramifications of a population shift toward a population disengaged from ‘this-worldly’ affairs would be significant. Given the Haredim’s convoluted relationship to the current Jewish state, it becomes difficult to envision a future where Israel will be militarily strong, financially solvent, and able to preserve itself for future generations. The next chapters will attempt to demonstrate the influence of the Haredim in matters of state security, economy, education, and Jewish law, and illuminate the problematic effects such influence has within a Jewish state.
CHAPTER 1
FROM EUROPE TO PALESTINE: THE HAREDIM ARRIVE IN ISRAEL

Haredi Judaism did not exist in name prior to the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. Until then, the vast majority of Jews still lived traditional religious lives. The notion of Haredim as a distinct segment of the Jewish population only emerged when orthodox Jews distanced themselves from the philosophical movement sweeping Europe. Enlightenment values implored reason and rejected blind faith, striking the root of the traditional Jewish way of life, and the Haredim emerged as a direct response to this threat.

The Haredim find their roots in Eastern Europe where centuries-old prejudicial attitudes towards Jews did not allow them lifestyles equitable to those of non-Jews, and consequently prevented their assimilation. In the 19th century, Jewish populations still largely lived among themselves in small towns known as shtetls, where they were governed by their own rabbis. This living arrangement wholly condensed community life and religious life, maintaining an almost cloistered existence for Jews. The most important figures in their lives were the rabbis who presided over legal and social matters directly affecting their communities. Having a separate, rabbi-governed legal and economic system both responded to and reinforced Jews’ exclusion from their host countries. In these shtetls “the boundaries were gated by psychology and custom, rather than wood or iron. Inside these walls they maintained their Talmudic studies and special professions.”

1 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 40.
The Enlightenment of Europe in the second half of the 17th century and the entire 18th century would permanently alter both the religious and cultural trajectory of Jews. This new movement emphasized an empirical approach to understanding the world and encouraged its followers to challenge dogma with logic. Commonly referred to as the “Age of Reason,” the Enlightenment gave birth to the ideas of some of the most influential philosophers the world has known to date, including John Locke and Immanuel Kant. In Kant’s 1784 essay entitled, “What is Enlightenment,” the philosopher describes the movement this way:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. *Dare to know! (Sapere aude.)* ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the Enlightenment.  

During the Enlightenment people began to “turn away from medieval religious authority,” and towards “human reason,” which “infiltrated European society and brought with it, in its second wave, the origins of nationalism.” For European Jewry, the Enlightenment would force the issue of defining contemporary Jewry and redefining it to meet the needs of its population. Thus, a separate Jewish enlightenment was born. The Jewish Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe became known as the *Haskalah,* from the Hebrew word *sekhel,* meaning reason and intellect. The *Haskalah* was an offshoot of the European Enlightenment, and allowed Jews living cloistered lives to question for the first time what it might

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be like to be integrated with the rest of society. 4 This time of Enlightenment or Haskalah is also known as the Jewish Emancipation. It called for a “scientific approach to religion,” and encouraged European Jews to be more secular and to discontinue the practice of separating themselves from outside non-Jewish communities.

The Haskalah’s emancipatory effect would set the stage for a redefining of traditional Jewish ideals, and its implications and consequences were welcomed by many Jews but not by all. For a select group of Jews, this new and incremental freedom was not greeted as the long-awaited correction to hurtful and prejudicial policies of the past. It was perceived as an instrument whose very existence threatened to unwind and pollute a stringent faith that relied on the insular social structure that the Haskalah threatened to render obsolete. This led to the establishment of Haredi Judaism, which can be considered a direct response to the modern Enlightenment ideas. While the Enlightened masses were turning towards reason to explain the world around them, the traditionalist Haredim looked inward and backward, adamantly rejecting reason’s intervention upon faith.

The German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was one of the first advocates for a Jewish embrace of a more pragmatic and intellectual approach to understanding faith. He recommended purposeful integration into German society and included practical advice to those ends. As Jews began to

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5 Ibid.
respond to Mendelssohn’s counsel, “nationalism and the ensuing emancipation started the integration of the Jewish masses into European and American societies.” Mendelssohn was effective in presenting Judaism as a faith that could be deconstructed and better understood by thinking empirically. He argued Judaism should be open to modern interpretation and advocated for secular education. Known affectionately as the father of the Haskalah, Mendelssohn helped spread the ideas of the Haskalah to Jews all over Europe.

Two very different segments of European Jewry, the Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox, would both view this emancipation as an opportunity for redemption, but each had their own ideas about what form that redemption would take. For the ultra-Orthodox, redemption could only occur by returning to their “ancestral home, Zion, the Land of Israel, and rebuilding it by their own hard work.” In 586 C.E., the Babylonians destroyed their sacred temple and expelled the Jews from Jerusalem. In 70 C.E., the Romans decimated the second temple, which stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Within the next century, the Jews were again expelled from their holy land. Many interpreted this as God’s wrath towards Jews for not being holy enough. The consistent exile of the Jews is a central feature in their religious self-understanding. Redemption—tikkun—is built into their theology as much as it is into their politics. Indeed, the theological primes the political. The Haredim believe the Jews are divinely commanded to return to the land of Israel to restore

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6 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 40.

the Jewish homeland. Yet emigration alone does not have redemptive power. For the Orthodox, redemption meant the “miraculous arrival of the Messiah, who would gather all Jews back to the land of their forefathers.”

The ultra-Orthodox are committed to the belief that no state of Israel can exist prior to the return of the Messiah; for this reason, the Haredim do not recognize the legitimacy of the current state of Israel. This is also why their lives are spent preparing for that day. It is believed that prayer and strict Torah observance will hasten the coming of the Messiah. They believe Israel is the place of the Jewish homeland, but the time has not yet come.

Zionists, on the other hand, believe in the right and necessity of a Jewish homeland now, irrespective of the coming of the Messiah. Theodore Herzl (1860-1904), an Austrian-Hungarian journalist and playwright, is known as the first leader of the Zionist movement. His book Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State, 1896) became the founding text for the actual political strides toward the Israel we know today.

While living and studying in Europe, Herzl witnessed incidences of anti-Semitism, most notably in the infamous case of the Dreyfus Affair, a political scandal that began in France in 1894 with the arrest of Jewish French army captain Alfred Dreyfus. Dreyfus was falsely accused of spying for Germany and convicted of treason, before being acquitted in 1906. Many Jews, including Herzl, who covered the Dreyfus trial as a journalist, would conclude that Europe was not a secure place for Jews. Herzl argued that it was crucial to secure a Jewish homeland and came to lead this charge after witnessing mobs in France shouting, “death to the Jews”

8 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 40.
throughout the trial. Herzl outlined his vision for a Jewish homeland in Der Judenstaat:

We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. In vain we are loyal patriots, sometimes super-loyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens....In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still decried as aliens....The majority decides who the ‘alien’ is; this, and all else in the relations between peoples, is a matter of power....The Jews who will it shall achieve their State. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die....

Despite their differing theological and political lines of reasoning, both the Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox arrived in Zion where, living side by side, they clashed over their respective ways of life. From the start, “education, women’s rights, government budgets and military service” were contentious issues. Because the Haredim fervently believed that any return to Zion could only occur after the return of the Messiah, their arrival to that land required justification. Almost all of the Haredim believe that “the people of Israel are still in exile and that Zionism and the state of Israel are meaningless at best and at worst constitute a rebellion against God.” With nationalistic fervor flush in Europe, they believed they had no choice but to flee to Zion, which was then known as Palestine, to avoid assimilation and preserve their cultural and religious identity, if not their lives. “The

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10 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 41.

traditional excuse was that the arrivals came to pray and die in the Holy Land, not to build a new life there. With this rationale, they felt they had every right to expect full support from diaspora Jews, who would benefit indirectly from their prayers in the holy city of Jerusalem and thus speed the arrival of the Messiah.”

The Haredi concept of redemption has its earliest roots in the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 C.E. The Haredim interpret the destruction and the subsequent exile (galut) as God’s punishment of the Jewish people for not being sufficiently pious. Devout Jews believed the only way to earn God’s forgiveness was through strict adherence to God’s commandments outlined in the Torah. It is this belief that fuels the lifelong dedication to Torah study as they pray and prepare for the return of the Messiah.

The Haredim would not begin to acquire a political foothold in Palestine until the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Upon arriving in Palestine in the early 20th century, they continued to isolate themselves, which resulted in their exclusion from decision-making by the Zionist political parties in power. Their self-imposed insular lifestyle would deter newly-minted immigrants to Palestine from joining them, as most ambitious refugees recognized the non-Orthodox community offered more social and economic possibilities. The Haredim would not have any meaningful participation in Palestine’s politics or government until Israel’s first

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12 Elizur and Malkin, *The War Within*, 43.


14 Elizur and Malkin, *The War Within*, 45.
Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, invited them there in an effort to secure Israel’s future as a state.

Palestine had been majority Arab since the end of the 7th century and indigenous Arabs strongly objected to the minority Jewish community taking control over what they viewed as their state, and these objections were compounded by British interests. In 1917 the United Kingdom’s foreign secretary Arthur James Balfour penned a letter expressing his majesty’s support for a Jewish homeland. The Balfour Declaration articulated the following:

His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.  

The wording of the letter was ambiguous and intentionally written as “in” Palestine rather than “of,” and “national home” instead of the more formal “state.”

In 1919 Britain was granted a mandate over Palestine in by the League of Nations, “empowering them to govern Palestine, that included an explicit responsibility to help the Jews establish a national home in the country.”

Despite appearances, the

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16 James Gelvin, The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 82.

British weren’t sympathetic to the plight of the Jewish people; rather, the Balfour Declaration provides a look into Britain’s careful imperial maneuvering at that time.

Certainly, the British needed to protect their trade interests with India by safeguarding the Suez Canal but more subtle factors were also in play. The British government was influenced by an “overestimation of Jewish power in the United States and Russia...”\(^{18}\) Two of President Woodrow Wilson’s closest advisors, Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, were Zionists. The British recognized that while Russia was in the midst of its own revolution, “several of the most prominent revolutionaries, including Leon Trotsky, were of Jewish descent. Why not see if they could be persuaded to keep Russia in the war by appealing to their latent Jewishness and giving them another reason to continue the fight?” \(^{19}\)

Additionally, the British were hopeful that Jews would support their claims to Palestine over those of the French, as the future of Palestine was left open in the wake of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which sought to partition the Ottoman Empire. Both Britain and France wanted Palestine and could not agree over the future of Palestine.\(^{20}\) They reluctantly compromised and decided that Palestine should be governed by an “international administration.”\(^{21}\) In this climate, “the Brits realized that, by publicly supporting Zionist aspirations to make Palestine a Jewish

\(^{18}\) Gelvin, *The Israel Palestine Conflict*, 82-83.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.


\(^{21}\) Ibid.
state, they could secure the exposed flank of the Suez Canal while dodging accusations they were land-grabbing.”

Any overlapping of best interests of the British government and those of the Jewish people was unintentional; the British were focused on their own political interests.

Great Britain's jockeying to support a Jewish “national home” would collide with violent events when, in 1936, a group of Arab terrorists attacked Jewish settlements and began killing Jews. The Jews, who at that time did not have a formal army, fought back. This fighting provoked Britain to appoint a royal commission headed by Lord William Peel. In 1937, the Peel Commission built upon the Balfour Declaration by recommending the splitting of the territory west of the Jordan River into two states. The Arabs, who had lived in Palestine for centuries, fervently opposed this proposal and the violence continued. The Zionist leader, David Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, was thrilled at the prospect of a Jewish state and declared it as “an opportunity which we had never dared to dream in our wildest imagination...more than a state, government, sovereignty—this is a national consolidation in a free homeland.”

This enthusiasm was not shared by the Haredim.

Although the Haredim's vociferous objections to the Peel Commission’s recommendations in 1937 would later be their ticket to political relevancy, at the

22 Ibid.


24 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 60.
time their complaints and objections went largely unnoticed. As the Peel Commission’s recommendations for a Jewish state excluded the Haredim, the Royal Commission was unmoved by their arguments. Further, the Haredim were located primarily in Jerusalem, which was to remain under British rule. 25 Thus, there was no political incentive to meet them halfway. Ten years later, Ben-Gurion would recall the Haredi outcry against a Jewish state as he headed to the United Nations to make the case for Jewish statehood. He wanted no political hiccups and no distractions when the UN deliberated over whether Israel would or could exist. Although the Haredim had very little measurable political power in 1947, Ben-Gurion worried that their objection to Jewish statehood might rally support from Haredim overseas and influence the UN’s decision adversely. Moreover, he did not want the UN to question whether or not the newly-formed Israel could stand on its own against its enemies. Statehood was an ambitious proposal considering the ongoing conflicts between the Jews and Arabs. To introduce internal dissent among Jews could damage the chances of Israel becoming a state. The last thing Ben-Gurion wanted was for the UN to believe that any newly-formed Jewish state would cannibalize itself over internal disputes. He would have to make a deal with the Haredim just ahead of the November 29, 1947 vote on statehood in the United Nations General Assembly.

25 Ibid., 61.
CHAPTER 2

CONCESSIONS GIVEN TO THE HAREDIM

In 1947, Ben-Gurion had no choice but to seek out the political arm of the Haredim to make a deal. Agudat Israel was the first political party to represent the Haredim in Israel. Founded in 1912 in Germany, its primary purpose was to oppose the Zionist movement, whose political and nationalistic aims the Haredim perceived as a threat to religious Judaism. Agudat Israel’s anti-Zionist zeal softened after the Holocaust, but they still did not support the Zionist movement because Haredi faith denies the legitimacy of a Jewish state until the arrival of the Messiah. Ironically, the Haredim would gain political legitimacy and influence only through the formation of a Jewish state, which they would then use as a platform for their religious agenda.

The precarious situation surrounding Israel’s founding allowed the Haredim to leverage their opposition to the state to gain significant concessions, which Ben-Gurion offered to ensure that they would not block the official birth of the modern state of Israel. This pleased the Haredi minority, but caused umbrage among the Israeli secular majority who suspected the concessions would imperil their aim of achieving a modern secular democratic society. Indeed, these concessions would have long-term implications for Israel and would lay the foundation for institutionalized religious influence. In 1947, however, Ben-Gurion was focused on securing a Jewish state.

In a letter to the Ultra-Orthodox World Agudat Israel Federation dated June 19, 1947, Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the Jewish Agency, outlined the significant
concessions he was prepared to make in order to appease the Haredim in what
would become modern-day Israel. The outline proceeded as follows:

a) The Sabbath: It is clear that the legal day of rest in the Jewish state will be
Saturday, obviously permitting Christians and members of other faiths to
rest on their weekly holiday.
b) Kashrut: One should use all means required to ensure that every state
kitchen intended for Jews will have kosher food.
c) Marital Affairs: All members of the Executive recognize the serious nature
of the problem and the great difficulties involved. All bodies represented by
the Jewish Agency Executive will do all that can be done to satisfy the needs
of the religiously observant in this matter and to prevent a rift in the Jewish
people.
d) Education: Full autonomy of every stream in education will be guaranteed
(incidentally, this rule applies in the Zionist Association and “Knesset Israel”
at present); the Government will take no steps that adversely affect the
religious awareness and religious conscience on any part of Israel. The state,
of course, will determine the minimum obligatory studies—Hebrew
language, history, science and the like—and will supervise the fulfillment
of this minimum, but will accord full freedom to each stream to conduct
education according to its conscience and will avoid any adverse effects on
religious conscience. ¹

Known as the “Status Quo” letter, this list of significant concessions to the
Haredim would provide “a framework for determining the rules governing the
relationship between church and state in Israel from 1948 onwards.”² Among these
concessions, Ben-Gurion promised that, “in the new state, religious questions would
be resolved exactly as they had been under the mandate. There would be no
divergence from the ‘status quo’ in religious matters even under a secular
government, and he assured the Haredim that certain principles regulating

¹ Itamar Rabinovich and Jehuda Reinharz, ed., Israel In The Middle East:
Documents And Readings On Society, Politics, And Foreign Relations, PRE-1948 To The
Present (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 59.

² Ibid., 58.
important aspects of everyday life would be safeguarded—Sabbath observance, dietary laws, marriage and divorce, and education.”3 This gave rabbis enormous power in overseeing the quotidian activities of the Jewish people, blurring the balance between church and state governance and planting seeds of dissension. These founding concessions would make it difficult for Israel to operate fully as a secular democratic state.

It might seem strange that in the same letter that laid out a blueprint for the establishment of a state whose governance incorporates religious law, Ben-Gurion expressed his desire that Israel avoid becoming a “theocratic state.”4 In many ways this inherent contradiction defines the multiple personality disorder that marks Israel to this day. Indeed the concessions contained in the “Status Quo” letter cemented the integration of church and state governance, which made it impossible for Israel to operate fully as a secular state then and continues to today. Although Ben-Gurion’s secular personal preferences conflicted with these significant concessions, his pragmatic mind “saw no contradiction between his personal opposition to ritual observance and the need to ensure the widest political support for the state itself.”5 The primary goal was the establishment of a Jewish state, and although appeasing the Haredim may have been shortsighted, Ben-Gurion knew that without their support Israel might have faced insurmountable obstacles to statehood. In the post-Holocaust political climate of 1947, these concessions

3 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 61.

4 Noah J. Efron, Real Jews: Secular VS. Ultra-Orthodox And The Struggle For Jewish Identity In Israel (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 44.

5 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 53.
signaled to the Haredim that their version of Judaism would be protected thenceforth in the new state of Israel.

Appeasing the ultra-Orthodox was an important step towards ensuring that the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) would approve the legality of the Jewish State. The “Status Quo” letter came three days after the UNSCOP first arrived in Palestine to spend 15 days there in the course of a two-month visit to the region. During this time the UNSCOP held meetings and public hearings with parties invested in the creation of a Jewish state as well as with those who wanted Palestine to remain as it was. This visit was absolutely critical, and Ben-Gurion could not afford to have the Haredim create a political sideshow while the UNSCOP deliberated over the formation of a Jewish state. Ben-Gurion understood that “a forceful plea by a group of religious Jews like the Agudat to forestall such a state might affect the committee’s recommendation either by actually swaying its opinion toward opposition or by legitimizing the opposition the committee had already registered.”

Though the letter expressed Ben-Gurion’s desire that Israel would not become a theocracy, “buying the silence of the ultra-Orthodox” was the prudent thing to do as he took steps to ensure the positive vote of the UNSCOP. Within a few decades, concessions made to a tiny religious minority in a moment of urgency would come to overwhelmingly define the political, economic, and social struggles of Israel.

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6 Efron, Real Jews, 44.

7 Ibid.
Ben-Gurion himself lived a life that was secular and devoid of most religious customs. He opted for a civil marriage ceremony in New York City in 1917, and upon his return to Palestine after World War I, he flatly refused to have a religious ceremony. For Ben-Gurion, “ritual meant virtually nothing....” He did not subscribe to traditional customs, “opposed the regulations governing kosher food,” and even ...“ate bread instead of matzoh during Passover.”\(^8\) Additionally, he didn’t observe the Sabbath, and, perhaps most telling, he didn’t regard the Bible as a “holy text and refused to swear with his hand on it.”\(^9\) Despite these strong secular leanings, he believed in his deal with the Haredim because it secured their cooperation and would not distract the United Nations in their vote to establish a Jewish state. Ben-Gurion knew the UN investigation committee would solicit the views of all Jews living in Palestine. Any internal disputes among Jews, real or perceived, could influence the UN to vote against Jewish statehood. He knew, moreover, that “it was important to placate the ultra-Orthodox Jewish leadership and to ensure that when the UN investigation committee...approached the leaders of the party, they would express their unconditional support for the founding of the Jewish state.”\(^10\)

Presenting a unified Jewish front was critical, and these efforts paid off. On May 14,

\(^{8}\) Elizur and Malkin, *The War Within*, 53.

\(^{9}\) Ibid.

1948 Israel was given statehood and recognized fully by the United Nations. Finally: a Jewish home for diaspora Jews who had suffered so much.

Soon after Israel’s founding, Ben-Gurion exempted 400 ultra-Orthodox men from the army so they could pursue their Torah studies. It was Israel’s first chief rabbi, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who persuaded Ben-Gurion to accept Haredi military exemption. In a 1949 letter to Ben-Gurion, Rabbi Herzog argued that these men who had survived the Shoah (Hebrew term for the Holocaust), “in which tens of thousands of students in Europe, their teachers and sages were destroyed…should be released from the army in order to allow these few to continue to study our holy Torah, which is also a need and an honor for our state.”

The rabbi’s emotional letter was set against the recent tragedy of the Holocaust, which had been disproportionately devastating for the Orthodox community. It was estimated that in Eastern Europe “four out of every five Jews were Orthodox,” and they constituted 50-70 percent of Jews killed. In an interview, author of Defenders of Faith Samuel Heilman linked the reluctance of Israel’s Haredim to participate in open society with the losses suffered in the Holocaust. He explained:

...What happened to them (Haredim) during the Holocaust where, for reasons that their own leaders were responsible for, they didn’t leave and get

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out while the getting was good and so they took disproportionately a bigger hit than any other segment of Jewry.... \(^{13}\)

In the first half of the 19th century, not unlike now, there was a great amount of unrest in Palestine between indigenous Arab communities and Jewish settlers. These violent outbursts made military cohesion a priority for the young state. Despite Israel’s dire need for soldiers, Ben-Gurion was swayed by the Haredi plea. To allow 400 Haredi Torah scholars exemption from military service seemed reasonable to Ben-Gurion at the time, given the community had just suffered catastrophic losses in Eastern Europe and the future of world Jewry was in question as never before. The Israel Defense Force officially came into existence, less the Haredim, on May 31, 1948, just seventeen days after Israel was declared a state.

In response to the invasion of the country by its Arab neighbors, the IDF sprang to action to defend the new state. The fighting lasted 10 months before Israel emerged victorious, and with more territory than had been recommended by the UN. Despite the land gains, the War for Independence was a traumatic induction to Jewish statehood.\(^{14}\) Ten years later Ben-Gurion questioned his decision to exempt the Haredim in a poignant mixture of political and religious terms:

After the founding of the state, the sages came to me and told me: all centers of learning in the Diaspora were destroyed and this is the only country where some yeshivot were left. There are only a handful of students, so they should be exempted from military service. I considered their request...and gave orders to exempt yeshiva students. Things have changed since then: there

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\(^{13}\) Samuel Heilman. Phone interview with Shannan Adler, Boston, Massachusetts, February 19, 2014.

are many religious students here and abroad...The mother who lost her son may say: maybe if there had been more soldiers with my boy, he would not have died...I suggest that you reconsider this matter. We do not wish to see the destruction of the Third Temple. 15

While these significant and permanent concessions that Ben-Gurion granted the Haredim served their purpose to cement Haredi compliance in the face of UN scrutiny, Ben-Gurion was already beginning to sense they would have massive unforeseen collateral consequences for Israel. Due to the haste in which they were written, these concessions were not grounded in law and would require the state of Israel to pass laws to validate them. First, to satisfy the “Status Quo” letter’s promise that all state kitchens would be kosher, the Knesset passed the Kosher Food for Soldiers Ordinance of 1948. This guaranteed kosher meals for every soldier in the IDF in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. This was no small undertaking as keeping kosher requires that cafeterias be “designated as “basri” (meat only) or “halavi” (milk only) to facilitate observance of a central tenet of kashrut (Jewish dietary law): meat products and milk products must be certified kosher and scrupulously separated, with different pots, pans, dishes and utensils used to store, prepare and serve each.”16 Yet the law stipulated that not only the army must go out of its way to prepare kosher food. “All of Israel’s government kitchens—in the


Knesset, in government buildings, in the prime ministers house, in the army, in all state catering institutions,”--all must keep kosher. 17

The Work and Rest Law was passed in 1951 in order to uphold the weekly Sabbath observance in Israel. Sabbath begins just before sunset on Friday and concludes just after dark on Saturday. It is a time during which all work is prohibited, according to Jewish tradition, in imitation of God’s rest on the seventh day after toiling for six days to create heaven and earth. In a modern echo of the law of the Torah, the Work and Rest Law requires that most businesses be closed on the state’s official day of rest and exacts a fine from those who do not comply, with exceptions for farming and entertainment industries. Non-Haredi business owners and citizens, who make up the vast majority of Israelis, must comply with this law even if they do not personally observe the Sabbath. To this day, this presents a frustrating reality for many non-observant Israelis whose lives are affected by the intersection of religion and governance.

Israel would enact the highly controversial State Education Law in the same year. This law solidified a clear cultural divide between the Haredim and secular Israelis. The State Education Law provided autonomy to religious schools who benefited from state funding but whose curricula did not adhere to state public school standards. Although the schools started by Agudat Israel were not officially recognized by the state, they were financially backed by the government and legally empowered to educate their students as they saw fit with little to no government oversight. This separate government funding for secular public schools and Haredi

17 Ibid.
religious schools put students on very different vocational paths as the public schools taught traditional core subjects and the Haredi yeshivas only focused on religious studies.

The term *yeshiva* refers to a Jewish educational school whose primary purpose is to teach young students about traditional Jewish religious texts such as the *Torah*. Once married, Haredi men transfer to a *kollel*, where they continue their religious learning for the rest of their lives. Because these schools do not teach traditional curricula that include mathematics, science, English or other humanities, they serve as incubators for Haredi insularity. When 11 percent of the population is not instructed in the same curricula as the vast majority of Israelis, both sides become strangers to one another. The segregated education system and the exemption from military service virtually ensures that the majority of Israelis do not grow up interacting with the Haredim. In some ways, Haredi life in Israel resembles the shtetl life in the Old World, where Jews lived secluded lives detached from the culture that surrounded them. In that sense, just as in Eastern Europe, they live in Israel like foreigners in their own land. In Israel, however, unlike in Eastern Europe, the majority population has to abide by many of their traditional laws. This creates a psychological schism between the two segments of Israeli society, which, along with the perceived special treatment of the Haredim, fosters resentment and distrust among non-Haredim.

Among the most significant impingements upon secular Israeli life is the authority that rabbis hold over legal matters of personal weight. Two years after the State Education Law, the Rabbinical Courts Jurisdiction Law of 1953 declared
“marriage and divorce of Jews in Israel who are Israeli residents and citizens are within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Rabbinical Courts.” The Hebrew word that represents this decree is beis din which literally means “house of judgment.” Thus, rabbis were given ultimate authority over marriage, divorce, burials, and conversions, to the consternation of less-observant Israelis, who would prefer to maintain the right to treat these matters as secular. In essence, this law entrusted the rabbis with unchecked power over all Jewish Israeli citizens, which would create considerable dissension and foster long term implications.

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CHAPTER 3

MILITARY CONSCRIPTION, ISRAELI IDENTITY, AND THE HAREDI EXEMPTION

The decision to exempt the Haredim from military service was made during a very different political climate from that of today. In 1949, the horrors of the Holocaust were fresh wounds and the numbers of Haredim in Israel were relatively few. Exempting 400 men from national service so that they could devote their lives to Torah study seemed not only rational, but also respectful of a recent and painful past. As the decades wore on, this concession in particular became especially troubling for the rest of Jewish Israelis. Unlike most nations in the developed world, service in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) is compulsory for all Jewish Israelis and participation is an enormous part of the social fabric of the country. The role this national conscription plays in unifying Israelis cannot be overstated; in fact, Israeli national identity is very much shaped by military service as each Jewish citizen, male and female, begins their service at age 18. Not only does military service bond Jewish Israeli citizens through a set of shared experiences, it secures a country that has been under constant threat since the moment of its founding. This speaks to the urgent and imperative need for Israel to have a society in which all participate in the defense of the state.

The IDF defines its basic values as a matter of both defense and duty, stating “the IDF’s goal is to defend the existence of the State of Israel, its independence and the security of the citizens and residents of the state.”¹ All Jewish Israelis, both male

and female, must enlist in the IDF at the age of 18. The men then serve for a period of three years and the women for two. Despite this difference in length of term, Israel is one of the few conscription societies in which women serve alongside men. For both men and women, this service is essentially a rite of passage into Israeli society. Since its independence in 1948, Israel has engaged in numerous battles for its survival, each one critical for the continued existence of the nation. Noting the crucial link between the defense forces and the survival of the nation, the IDF unequivocally states: “Israel cannot afford to lose a single war.” Additionally, the IDF values a personal attachment between soldiers and country, evident in their claim that “at the core of service in the IDF stand the love of the homeland and the commitment and devotion to the State of Israel- a democratic state that serves as a national home for the Jewish People- its citizens and residents.”

The fact that a significant swath of the population does not participate in this defining feature of Israeli identity is at the core of the tension between those who serve and those who do not. At present, Haredi men compose a considerable 14 percent of all males eligible for conscription. A small handful of those men do actually serve, but that still leaves a significant number of able-bodied men who are not in the military. Haredi women are forbidden to serve in the IDF by their rabbis. Ben-Gurion’s original exemption of 400 Haredi scholars has received more scrutiny with each passing decade as the numbers of Haredim grow and the political realities

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.
of 1948 have given way to a more pronounced need for strength in military numbers.

Abolishing the military exemption for the Haredim has long been on the lips of politicians and citizens alike in Israel, signaling the long-standing resentment this has caused amongst non-Haredi Jewish Israelis. The precariousness of statehood in an Arab region is ever-present in the minds of Israelis. Non-Haredi politicians and citizens frequently stress that the Haredim should “share the burden”\(^4\) of Israeli citizenship in a Jewish state. This, of course would mean that the Haredim would serve in the military alongside sons and daughters of the non-Haredim and participate in the responsibility of protecting Israel from hostile powers near and far. The majority of Israelis favor drafting the Haredim with 85 percent approving any draft measures that would induce the Haredim to serve.\(^5\)

Yet this is more than a numbers game. The negative effects of the exemption of the Haredim exceed the loss of 14 percent of conscription-eligible males from the front lines in times of need. The inextricable tie between national identity and military service in Israel makes military service far more than weapons, training and defense. It has become an induction into Israeli society, with crucial legitimizing and


egalitarian functions:

In essence, the society and army are one, as a broad spectrum of the population serves periodically over many years, with those in and out of uniform virtually interchangeable. Since soldiers often hold ranks not necessarily corresponding with their status in civilian life, the IDF has become a highly effective equalizer in the society and contributes greatly to integrating individuals from all walks of life.”

The IDF is by far the most trusted of all of Israel’s state institutions, with a whopping 90.9 percent of Jews regarding it as trustworthy. The non-participatory attitude of the Haredim not only serves to weaken the military might of a state which can ill afford to lose healthy service members. The very social fabric of so small a nation becomes corroded when 12 percent of its Jewish population opts out of a passage so distinctly Israeli that not participate labels you as an outsider.

The Haredim, however, do not regard themselves as disengaged from the protection of the Jewish homeland. In fact, they believe they play a direct and important role in Israel’s security by being defenders of the faith through prayer and observance of divine law, which most of them claim are mightier forces than the IDF. When the question of military sacrifice was recently posed to a Rosh Yeshiva (Yeshiva Headmaster or Dean) in Israel, his answer reflected the belief of many Haredim that their lifestyle of Torah studies is equal to and surpasses the commitment of their non-Haredim neighbors. When asked "What do you say to a


father whose son went to the Israeli army, one whose son was killed or wounded
who comes and asks why should his son risk, lose, or ruin his life while your son sits
secure in the yeshiva and learns,” the Rosh Yeshiva replied:

My son sitting and learning Toyreh is the reason his son wasn’t killed. And if
his son was killed then my son sitting and learning was the reason the other
sons weren’t killed....We’re all in a risky business. And as far as pleasures of
this world, his son has more than my son. Our children have very little time
to take out for the many pleasures in this world because they have dedicated
their lives to Toyreh. So you see it’s a trade-off. They defend the land and we
defend the faith. 8

Thus, in the opinion of most Haredim, their efforts are a necessary
complement to those of the IDF. Even though they self-identify as pacifists, most
Haredim are right-leaning politically, tending to lend their support to politicians
who are pro-Zionist and place Israel’s military might as a top priority. This right-
wing support began after the Six-Day War of 1967 against Jordan, Syria and Egypt.
In a brief and intense war, Israel wrested possession of East Jerusalem, as well as
Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) from Jordan, through the intense and tireless
efforts of the IDF who delivered this sacred land to Jews. The swift, decisive victory
of the Six-Day War inspired a type of religious fervor that looked to Divine
intervention to explain Israel’s military success. This fervor took shape as follows:

Popular political rhetoric on Israel began incorporating religious—even
messianic—symbols, as the surprise victory and reclamation of Jewish lands
were framed in terms that credit God with this unimaginable triumph. Although the haredim did not—and still do not—assign significance to the
landmass that is Israel and its disputed territories, they nevertheless warmed
to the segments of mainstream Israeli society that shifted away from rigidly

8 Samuel Heilman, Defenders of the Faith, 271.
secular political oratory toward a religio-political platform. Unsurprisingly, these segments belonged primarily to the political Right.  

The Haredim have several reasons for not wanting to go into the military. In a Skype interview conducted in the Fall 2013 with Dr. Benjamin Brown of the Israel Democracy Institute, Dr. Brown posited three main reasons why the Haredim refuse to serve. First and foremost is the importance of Torah learning. They see themselves as keepers of the faith and guardians of sacred Jewish tradition. They believe if they do not undertake that learning no one else will and Judaism will see its demise. Thus they make fulfilling this purpose—and sustaining Judaism—their lifetime vocation. Dr. Brown mentions that the military exemption applies to all Haredim, regardless of their Torah mastery or commitment to Torah learning, which is an added point of contentious among non-Haredim. While Ben-Gurion initially exempted 400 Torah “scholars” from military service in 1948, certainly not every single one of the more than 121,000 yeshiva students today could be deemed a scholar, nor is serious about his studies. Secondly, the Haredim and their leaders fear that the IDF, the great equalizer for all segments of Israeli society, will expose their young men to a secular lifestyle and corrode their value system which, in turn,

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would weaken young Haredim’s commitment to an insular life of sacred study
removed from their secular peers.  

The third reason the Haredim abstain from military service is one that is less
often addressed in the myriad articles condemning their military exemption.
According to Dr. Brown, the question is “to what degree a secular state may decide
on fatal issues.”  

This issue is decidedly theological, and hearkens back to the
question of divine authority that the Haredim have held in opposition to the
legitimacy of the state of Israel since before its official inception in 1948. What has
always distinguished the Haredim from other Jews is their conviction that their
dedication to God and the Torah supersedes any sort of this-worldly commitment,
which is why they have been defined as “other-worldly” soldiers.  

Thus, it follows that the Haredim would invoke divine authority as a reason to abstain from military
service.Echoing events from the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Dr. Brown continues, “if
a Haredi soldier is asked to desecrate the Sabbath or Yom Kippur (by being
commanded to fight) and “the government tells you to risk your life, do you listen to
your commanders or your rabbi?”

In the past twelve months, there has been significant agitation around the
question of renewed Haredi military exemption. Technically, there had never been a

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
law in place guaranteeing Haredim exemption until 2002, when the “Deferment of Military Draft for Yeshiva Students Whose Occupation Is the Study of Torah Law,” (Tal Law) was passed. This law allowed Haredi men to claim military deferments indefinitely. The Tal Law was set to expire in five years. When it ended, it was extended again for an additional five years marking its expiration in 2012. On February 21, 2012, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled the Tal Law unconstitutional, forcing the Knesset to once again take up the issue of Haredi military exemption which would, in theory, make “62,000 yeshiva students and ultra-Orthodox youths” available for the draft.

In March of 2014, history was made in Israel. For the first time since its founding, a law was passed that requires the Haredim to serve in the military. That law began as a draft bill whose approval was granted by Israel’s ministerial legislative committee in July of 2013 and, pending passage in the Knesset, had been widely expected to become law. In anticipation of this passage, more than 300,000 Haredim took to the streets in Jerusalem to protest in the weeks leading up to the vote and have continued mass protests every day since its passage. While the Haredim view this law as outrageous, some secular Israelis believe it does not go far enough to solve the Haredi military exemption special status. The law only calls for a

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fraction of able-bodied Haredi men to serve in the military. The law, drafted by the Peri Committee, “would require the army to draft an increasing number of ultra-Orthodox Jews each year, with the goal of enlisting 5,200 ultra-Orthodox soldiers—roughly 60 percent of those of draft age—by mid 2017.”17 The law proposes that 1800 Haredim who are given the distinction as being *Torah* scholars would be exempt from military service to continue to pursue their religious studies,18 and Haredi girls will continue their exemption from all military service. Since the expiration of the Tal Law and its ruling as unconstitutional, the Knesset had kicked the can down the road in order to avoid the showdown with the Haredim that is happening right now.

This controversial law would not have been possible were it not for the political maneuverings of Israel’s Yesh Atid Party (“There Is a Future”) in conjunction with the Jewish Home Party. Yair Lapid, Israel’s Finance Minister and chairman of the Yesh Atid party, campaigned vigorously to make Haredim military exemption a thing of the past with the bold proclamation “We cannot distinguish between blood of Haredim and others.”19 The day the draft bill was approved Lapid


18 Ibid.

expressed hope that the bill would make its way through the Knesset to become law, which he believed would be a step towards equality for all Jewish Israelis. Lapid said it only took the coalition three and a half months to bring about the draft bill whose existence would have toppled prior Israeli governments and caused political chaos.20

The momentum towards drafting the Haredi conscription bill was evident in February of 2014 when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that funding would be cut from yeshivas whose students dodged conscription into the IDF. This punitive stance set waves of protests into motion a few days later as thousands of Haredim took to the streets in Israel. In protest of the ruling, they blocked major highways, snarling traffic, and attempted to block the entrance into Jerusalem. This Supreme Court ruling and Finance Minister Yair Lapid’s freezing the yeshiva funds several days later set the stage for a prolonged showdown between the Haredim and the current government coalition.21 Dr. Haim Zicherman of the Israel Democracy Institute plainly states that if the Haredim are forced to serve in the military, “there

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will be a war...between the Haredim and the government.”

The internal strife that Ben-Gurion so carefully maneuvered to suppress is now forcefully erupting.

That the Haredi draft bill came into being is directly related to the fact that for the first time since 2003, and for only the second time in 35 years, the ultra-Orthodox parties in Israel’s parliament are not part of the governing coalition. This illuminates the political crossroads that Israel presently straddles and makes the Haredim leadership very nervous. The last time the Haredim were shut out of the governing coalition was in 2003, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whose majority Likud party joined forces with the Shinui party who were heavily opposed to Haredi military exemption and state funding.

The two ultra-Orthodox political parties that represented Haredi interests in the Knesset in 2003 are the same that represent Haredi interests in 2014: the Shas party and the United Torah Judaism Party. Shas was founded in 1984 by former Sephardic chief rabbi Ovadia Yosef to represent the interests of ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Jews. It has remained the largest ultra-Orthodox political party in the Knesset, and rabbi Yosef stayed active as their spiritual leader until his death at the age of 93 in 2013. The United Torah Judaism Party was formed in 1992 as part of an alliance between the two ultra-Orthodox parties, Agudat Israel and Degel Ha


Torah, Agudat Israel was the original ultra-Orthodox party in Israel whose founding preceded the establishment of the state. In Palestine, Agudat Israel represented the minority Haredim, whose beliefs conflicted with the larger Zionist parties prior to Israel’s founding and those conflicts persist today. Currently, both political and religious leaders of the Haredim are unhappy that they are not part of the governing coalition as it weakens their influence. They do not wield as much influence as they have customarily enjoyed, nor do they feel they can voice their interests with the assurance of support from the state.

The leadership of the Haredim is divided into two categories: religious and political. Haredi political leaders do not have the same influence as their religious counterparts. In an interview with Samuel Heilman, author of *Defenders of the Faith*, he explained the hierarchy of Haredi leadership this way: “the rabbi is the ultimate authority and he doesn’t answer to his followers, they answer to him.” The fact that the presumed permanent political status historically enjoyed by the Haredim is now tenuous underscores the changing political climate of Israel. That the Haredim are not part of the governing coalition in Israel opened the way for the Knesset to draft a bill so radical as to conscript Haredi service, which ultimately resulted in its passage into law. This resulted from deliberate political and campaign promises by those parties in the Knesset who were able to force the Haredim out, mainly Yesh

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Atid, whose campaign promises of requiring the Haredim to share the burden and providing relief for Israel’s financially burdened middle-class resonated with many Israeli voters. Their political platform was rewarded with votes, as they garnered 19 seats in the 120-seat Parliament and surprised pollsters who predicted they would come in fourth.  

Forcing the Haredim into compliance will likely encourage some Haredi factions to take more extreme positions. Moreover, the newly-passed law may only be a symbolic gesture to appease the masses. Dr. Brown believes a stick and carrot approach is a better way to approach the issue. He asserts that “the best way to get the Haredim into the military isn’t to threaten them with legal action but to offer financial incentives.” However, supporters of the law believe it ensures the Haredim will share the burden of Israeli citizenship and lead to their inclusion in the workforce, ultimately lessening the burden on Israeli taxpayers who currently support the Haredim. Another complexity is the fact that it remains unclear whether the Haredim will be a beneficial addition to the IDF. They have neither the life-training nor the education to support the duties of being a soldier. Samuel Heilman stated in my interview with him:

...it may be harder on the state to try to integrate them into the military than to find some other way for them to perform public service because the last


thing you need in the military are people who are physically unfit, who have not the educational and secular skills that are necessary….The truth is given the pool of people who could be useful to the military, that puts them (Haredim) way down at the bottom.28

If the new law takes a punitive approach to Haredi military avoidance, it might unduly harm the Haredi community with harsh legal consequences for non-compliance. Also, in light of past resistance and present protests, it is unlikely the Haredim will easily acquiesce. The passing of this law certainly will not offer an immediate solution to the complex challenge posed by the Haredim, and given the nature of Israel’s quickly-changing political climate, any law that is passed might be overturned within a few years. This raises the complicated question of how worthwhile it is to deepen the schism between the Haredim and the rest of Jewish Israeli society.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHIEF RABBINATE AND THE RABBINICAL COURTS

Rabbinic leadership is nothing new for Jews. For centuries, rabbis served as community leaders in Eastern European shetls, while ruling powers in the Middle East allowed groups of selected religious officials to preside over the social life of Jews in the region. When the Chief Rabbinate was founded in Palestine in 1921, it was intended to unify spiritual and halakhic authority among the growing population of Jews from all over the world in Israel. However, unlike ever before, major political change was afoot that would hand both state and local legislation to the Jews. As secular Judaism gained traction—owing much to the Haskalah of the 18th century, the pogroms of the 19th century, and the Holocaust of the 20th—the question of how Jews should govern Jews became a complicated tangle of theological, political, and cultural concerns.

Ben-Gurion’s 1947 Status Quo Agreement institutionalized the Chief Rabbinate, thereby introducing state power into the question of Jewish law. It was decided the Chief Rabbinate would be comprised of two Orthodox rabbis, one Ashkenazic and one Sephardic, to ensure that Jews from each of the two primary cultural-geographic lineages of Jewish heritage were represented in a balanced way. Despite this, the fact that Orthodox leadership was empowered by the state to interpret halakhic law (Jewish religious law) for all Jews would come to alienate Jews of less legalistic traditions within Judaism, such as Reform or Conservative
denominations, not to mention non-observant and secular Jews. Moreover, the Israeli people do not have a hand in electing their religious leadership; rather the Chief Rabbis are selected in a “complex and opaque process by a committee made up of 150 rabbis, mayors, religious functionaries, and government appointees.” Once selected, these rabbis serve a 10-year term as the highest religious authority dealing with personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, conversions, burial, and Jewish dietary laws. Today, the conflict between secular democratic values and religious law continues to inspire resentment and contention between the Haredim and the rest of Israel’s diverse Jewish population.

The decisions made by the Chief Rabbinate apply to all Jews living in Israel, not just the Haredim. The distinctly religious positions taken by the Chief Rabbinate on personal matters prevent the non-Haredim from enjoying the typical benefits of living in a democracy and highlight the challenges of a Jewish democratic state. In a telephone conversation this Fall with Italian-born Israeli demography expert Sergio DellaPergola, he described how the disproportionately influential Chief Rabbinate fosters resentment amongst the majority of the population:

All of the chief rabbis are Orthodox. They are appointed. Their appointment is highly related to the political system. Very orthodox parties have a saying in these appointments, which has been absolutely disproportionate. Even if they are not in the government, these appointments are for a minimum of 10 years so their influence continues well beyond the fact….This creates an image of religion in Israel, not only an image but also a practice which is

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much more religious and rigid than the average of the population in this country, that is the 10 percent create the decision making and lifestyle for the 90 percent who do not really believe that direction and so these influences have been problematic.\(^3\)

Israel’s judicial system contains two separate court systems: the secular courts and the religious courts. The religious courts are called rabbinical courts and exercise exclusive jurisdiction on matters of personal status issues for all Jews, most notably marriage and divorce. Thus, it is impossible to live a fully secular life as a Jewish Israeli, even if that should be one’s preference. When the rabbinical courts were established in 1953, the Rabbinic Courts Jurisdiction Law required all Jews to marry and divorce within the confines of *halakhic* law regardless of whether they are, “atheist, agnostic, Conservative, Reform, ultra-Orthodox or post-denominational.”\(^4\) Civil marriage and divorce do not exist in Israel despite the fact that Israel is a democracy. Any couple seeking a civil ceremony must travel abroad to marry. The rabbinical courts’ authority over marriage affects nearly all Jews as 97.7 percent of men and 96.8 percent of women marry in Israel.\(^5\) It is through these courts that the Chief Rabbinate upholds its influences.

\(^3\) Sergio DellaPergola. Phone interview with Shannan Adler. Boston, Massachusetts November 18, 2013.


\(^5\) Ibid., xi.
According to Israel’s State Servants’ Code of Regulations, the chief rabbi of Israel is forbidden from any involvement in political activity.⁶ Legally, therefore, the power of the Chief Rabbinate is limited to religious matters. Because the Rabbinical courts carry out the Chief Rabbinate’s wishes, however, political strategy often drives the selection of rabbinical courts judges. Often, rabbinical court judges are not equitably appointed based upon their professional backgrounds because “positions in the courts and rabbinate are parceled out as patronage.”⁷ This preferential system can be seen in the political trends of the rabbinate. For instance, the “rising power of Haredi parties since 1977 has allowed them to fill more of those posts with their appointees.”⁸ Consequently, ultra-Orthodoxy, while accurately construed as insular in lifestyle, has become increasingly politically entrenched.

The Rabbinate draws its income from the state and has used its prominence to promote political and social agendas, technically violating the law stipulated in the Code of Regulations. In response, accusations have been lodged against the Chief Rabbinate for corruption and bribery and for turning matters of “Jewish Identity” into a lucrative business. One such questionable enterprise arises out of kashrut laws, which govern the dietary restrictions of the Jewish people. The Chief Rabbinate and their courts are in charge of ensuring the highest kosher standards in Israel, and each business must adhere to the standards dictated by the Rabbinate.


⁷ Efron, Real Jews, 181.

⁸ Ibid.
These standards often come at a high price for business owners and consumers because they must pay for official approval. Through the system of mashgihim, an official appointed by the rabbis (or a rabbi himself) is responsible for ensuring Jewish dietary laws are obeyed. Because food businesses require a kosher stamp of approval to operate legally, this official can leverage this need and charge high prices for his services. It is the consumer who absorbs these inflated rates, sometimes spending 10-15 percent more on goods so that business owners can recoup the money paid out for kosher approval. Every industry in Israel that must intersect with the rabbinate’s kosher system experiences this inflation, and it is the consumer that pays.9

It becomes more difficult for Israelis to accept the current system of rabbinical authority when stories of corruption are circulated and Israelis are left doubting the Rabbinate’s integrity. Israel’s former chief rabbi, Rabbi Yona Metzger, was arrested in 2013 under charges of “fraud, bribery, money laundering, breach of trust, obstruction of justice and tampering with witnesses.”10 Just short of completing his ten-year term, Rabbi Metzger was forced to step down in light of the investigation and of the accusations that he had accepted bribes from non-profits in exchange for advancing their cause. According to Israeli police, Metzger, “allegedly received...illegal sums worth millions of shekels in exchange for performing activities and making decisions in various areas related to his role as chief rabbi—

9 Ibid., 94.

donations, conversions, rabbinic appointments, corrupt ties to tycoons.”

Incidents like this one call into question the integrity and validity of the rabbinate system and are of considerable consternation to average Israelis whose personal lives are governed by the Rabbinate. Long before the Metzger scandal, Dr. Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, remarked that the office of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel possessed “not a scintilla of moral worth.”

Historically, the decisions made by the rabbinical courts have not been equitable to women, who often find themselves without any leverage in divorce proceedings. In Israel, if a couple wants to get a divorce, they must obtain one from both the civil courts and the religious courts. Even if a divorce is recognized in civil court, a couple is still technically married according to halakhic law, so they must also go to the rabbinical courts. Whichever court the marriage is filed in first has jurisdiction over matters of child custody, alimony and division of assets. Most problematic, a divorce, which is referred to in Hebrew as a “get,” is granted by the husband to the wife. If he does not grant it to her, she cannot be divorced, regardless


of the circumstances. In such a system, a woman’s freedom is contingent upon her husband’s permission. The document given by the husband to his wife states verbatim, “You are hereby permitted to all men.” Legislation such as this that subjugates women is not consistent with the values of a democratic state. Author Gershom Gorenberg describes it as follows:

Rabbinic court treatment of women has been particularly shameful. Under Jewish law, the husband grants the divorce to his wife. Rabbinic judges have allowed recalcitrant husbands to deny their wives divorces for years, or to use their advantage to dictate financial and custody settlements. Religious scholars concerned with woman’s rights have proposed innovative interpretations of Jewish law to solve the problem. The rabbinic judges show no interest in sanctioning innovation.”

Recently, however, there has been some movement to modernize the rabbinical courts. On October 28th, 2013, the Knesset passed groundbreaking legislation through the so-called Tzohar Law, which is named after the Tzohar national-rabbinical association whose more moderate stance placed them in a feud with the state’s religious establishment. The law permits couples to register for marriage with a rabbi in the municipality of their choosing rather than having to register with the rabbi in their town of residence. While this distinction may seem subtle, it is an important step towards lessening the significant influence the


Haredim currently impose over the rest of the country because it allows couples to seek non-Haredi rabbis with whom they may be better able to relate.\textsuperscript{17} Supporters favor this law because now couples will be able to “shop around for municipal religious council”\textsuperscript{18} that best suits their needs. This may in turn modernize the rabbinate in some ways, as councils will now have to compete with each other for bridal business, which will provide incentive for them to appeal to the masses. Critics say this law does not in fact reform the rabbinate; it simply enables couples to circumvent rabbis who are too stringent.

Authority over those who convert to Judaism is integral in a Jewish state and has particular resonance in the relationship of military service to national identity. It is the role of the Chief Rabbinate to determine what constitutes a valid conversion, but in 2010, 75 members of the Knesset constituting a 2/3 majority sought to allow the military rabbinate to approve “formal conversion of soldiers who had passed courses in Judaism without the supervision of the Chief Rabbinate.”\textsuperscript{19} Despite the majority’s favoring the law, the Haredim threatened to create a government crisis if the law was approved. Haredi resistance prevented “thousands of young immigrants from the old Soviet Union who could not prove their Jewish ancestry but were


\textsuperscript{19} Elizur and Malkin, \textit{The War Within}, 27.
nevertheless fulfilling the most important duty of Israeli citizenship, from which the ultra-Orthodox ironically remain exempt."\textsuperscript{20} The question of Jewish identity is deeply personal, yet the rabbinate trends towards a strict and exclusionary interpretation of \textit{halakhic} law. Currently it is noted:

The state rabbinate has never recognized non-Orthodox conversions. In recent years, it has become skeptical of Orthodox conversions, except those carried out by a select group of rabbis. What’s more, a radical thesis has taken hold among the rabbinic court judges: for a conversion to be valid, a convert has to have sincerely committed herself to keeping Jewish law—and her sincerity at the moment of conversion can be measured by her behavior years later. If the convert eats non-kosher food, works on the Sabbath, perhaps if she fails to cover her hair after marriage, a court can annul her conversion.\textsuperscript{21}

Such rigid guidelines, which inspire fear and doubt through threat of annulment, present significant obstacles for those who seek official recognition for their conversions. Moreover, they create a hostile, exclusive environment that discourages Jewish conversion and is counterintuitive to the goal of preserving a Jewish state. Ultimately, the rabbinical court’s refusal to recognize those who not only answered the Israeli national call to military service but who were called in their hearts to be recognized as Jewish through conversion serves to weaken the Israeli Defense Forces. The survival of the IDF depends upon the participation and service of Jews. That thousands of Jewish conversions have been annulled challenges the core of a Jewish nation founded as a homeland for all Jews, not just 11 percent. The question of Jewish identity is an old one; divisions and proliferations amongst types of practice, worship, and self-understanding have been present for

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{21} Gorenberg, \textit{The Unmaking of Israel}, 182.
centuries, especially since the *Haskalah*, from which burgeoned the myriad
expressions of modern Judaism, ranging from Conservatism to Reform to
Reconstructionist. The exclusionary legislation of the Chief Rabbinate and the
rabbinical courts do not serve the majority of Jews who do not subscribe to such
stringent interpretations of Jewish law, if they even subscribe at all.
CHAPTER 5

THE TANGLED HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN ISRAEL

The history of state education in Israel has complicated political roots. In 1949 post-war Israel was hobbled by massive casualties and financial losses, yet Ben-Gurion would declare free public education a top priority. This well-intentioned directive unintentionally separated religious and secular studies, forcing families to make hard choices within the context of a tangled education system begun under British Mandate (1922-1948). Prior to earning statehood, most Jewish schools in Palestine during the British Mandate were affiliated with political parties and belonged to one of three groups, known as trends. The general trend was connected to the centrist parties; the labor trend was connected to the Jewish labor movement; and the Religious-Zionist trend was connected to those parties supported by religious-Zionism. Ultra-Orthodox schools existed during the British Mandate but they constituted such a tiny minority that they did not compete with the three popular trends.

Depending upon its politics, each trend emphasized different pedagogical priorities for its students. As expected, the degree of importance afforded to religious studies was a distinct difference among the three. From the start, trends were in competition for students. Once Israel earned statehood, competition became fierce in an effort to attract students from the hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving in Palestine. The kind of education parents wanted for their children would momentarily take a back seat to the appeal of promises made by competing schools. Upon achieving statehood, Israel prioritized public education despite other pressing
concerns in the wake of its War of Independence. Israeli leaders, then and now, stressed the importance of education as central to the nation's future. The question of the place of religious education in Israel would become, and remain, a central issue for decades.

Israel's commitment to educating its youth held the potential to have a unifying effect. One of the first laws to be enacted in Israel was the Compulsory Education Law of 1949, which, despite Israel's beleaguered post-war financial status, guaranteed free public education to all students between the ages of five and thirteen. Yet, instead of creating a common purpose, the emerging education system deepened existing political divisions. This new law underscored Israel's priority to have an educated populace and was described as follows:

...did not eliminate the political-partisan trends, but even recognized a fourth, non-Zionist trend fostered by the small ultra-Orthodox party Agudat Yisrael (which had only three Knesset members). The Free Compulsory Education Law stated that all four Jewish educational trends and the Arab educational system would be recognized and funded.¹

This law would have unexpected consequences and would lead to intense rivalries among the trends as their efforts to attract students were directly related to their political appetites. The more students a political trend could attract, the more members that trend hoped would join its ranks, because more students meant more parents, and more parents meant more political pull. Promising perks to lure families in became known as “soul-stalking,” suggesting the extreme methods the

trends employed to encourage students and their parents to enroll in their schools. Parents were not simply promised benefits but also experienced direct threats. According to Dr. Zvi Zameret, former director-general of Israel’s Ministry of Education, “Parents were enticed by means of various benefits (employment, loans, etc.), and were threatened with other means (denial of a livelihood, denial of health services, etc.) to persuade them to enroll their children in specific educational systems.” These practices earned the Histradut labor trend the most students, but soon traditional religious families spoke out against the schools’ cutting their children’s payot (hair worn long around the ears in observance of Leviticus 19:27), calling their education coercive and charging “that the melting-pot society sought to turn them into modern secularists.”

A large movement of immigrant families and religious political groups arose in response to such “active coercion” and a solution was swiftly sought. Ben-Gurion attempted to solve the problem by drafting the State Education Law of 1953, which applied solely to Jewish students and expressed a desire that all Jewish education be based upon “the values of Jewish culture and scientific achievement, love of the homeland and loyalty to the State of Israel and the Jewish people….” This unified secular education by standardizing a curriculum, thereby eliminating the competition that had become so problematic.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Yet this solution did not apply to the ultra-Orthodox schools, because they did not fall under the category of state education. Instead, they were recognized by the state as “independent education.”\(^6\) Once so small a fledgling group they scarcely had a role in the competition between the three original educational trends, in the decades that followed the Haredi religious education system would increase tremendously. Dr. Zvi Zamaret attributes this considerable growth to three primary factors: significant financial support from the government since 1948, the growth of ultra-Orthodoxy amongst Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Middle East and North Africa), and the high birthrates of the Haredim.\(^7\)

The consequences of educational freedom for religious Jews in Israel has manifested in the Haredim’s dependence on state welfare. Traditional religious education lacks the core curriculum that would prepare the Haredim for careers in a modern secular society, and even if young Haredim were to be prepared, their system of beliefs denies secular careers as a viable option. Due to their rapidly-expanding population, more and more Haredi children will enter the cycle of need, welfare, and poverty with each passing year.

It is impossible to deny the direct correlation between Haredi poverty and the absence of secular education within Haredi communities. This inequitable reality for Haredi students, in play since the 1950s, has a complicated legal status. The Haredim’s strictly religious curriculum existed for decades in direct violation of the State Education Law, which forbade any state financing of any school or school

\(^6\)Ibid.

\(^7\)Ibid.
system which did not teach the standard curriculum.\textsuperscript{8} State funding for these schools has nonetheless covered approximately 60 percent of each school’s total operating costs. For decades this infringement was intentionally overlooked, and ultra-Orthodox schools were able to operate as they pleased with little to no supervision from the state. In July 2008, the Knesset made it legal for ultra-Orthodox schools to continue to ignore the standard core curriculum.\textsuperscript{9}

The law was passed due to the consistency with which Haredi leadership has staunchly guarded its community against the integrated and secular curriculum. The 2008 Knesset ruling was a victory for the Haredim in this regard, but as recently as November 2013, the Education Ministry, which oversees Haredi school funding and is responsible for supervising the Haredi curriculum, attempted to force the Haredim to incorporate traditional secular education subjects such as math and science into their classrooms.

The Education Ministry and the ultra-Orthodox leadership have since been in negotiations over the future of Haredi education. As is often the case with political negotiations, financial support is a core concern for the Haredim. If the two sides are able to compromise, the resulting change would have the Haredim agree to “teach part of the core curriculum in exchange for having the state fund 75 percent of their

\textsuperscript{8} Paul Rivlin, \textit{The Israeli Economy from the Foundation of the State through the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 178.

Moreover, the talks have led the ministry to consider “granting permission to individual rabbinic courts to open small schools of 150-200 children each.” This strikes many secular Israelis as one step forward and two steps back. To allow the Haredim to open small schools for every sect is almost guaranteeing the continuation of the problems presented by a lack of core curriculum and government oversight.

In December of 2013, Education Minister Shai Piron indicated that in exchange for 100 percent state funding, 20 Haredi schools have signed up to teach the core curriculum of mathematics, English, and Hebrew. There is no doubt that the question of funding brought Haredim to the negotiating table. Despite their strident commitment to religious independence, the Haredim are ultimately reliant upon the state for funding, so they must exercise a careful balance between outrage and cooperation. This has long been a precarious political issue as the ultra-Orthodox have consistently leveraged their influence as a minority party by lending their votes to larger parties who would not have a majority without their cooperation.


11 Ibid.

For instance it is noted:

...after each election between 1977 and 2003, ultra-Orthodox parties have made joining the government coalition conditional upon receiving massive increases in funding to their schools...To many Israeli’s this recurrent spectacle seems a lot like a corruption of the political process, like buying votes, like blackmail, and the resentment many harbor toward it is keen.  

The issue of failed education for the Haredim is more prevalent than ever in 2014; Israel finds itself in unprecedented territory as “registration for the 2013 school year indicates that for the first time in Israel’s history, the number of six-year olds in Orthodox and religious schools will exceed the number of secular students.” Additionally, over a fifth of the Haredi population is younger than four. With an average birthrate of 6.5 children per family compared to 2-3 children for non-Haredi families, this staggering educational disparity threatens to uproot the economic, social, political and military pillars that Israel has counted on for survival since its founding in 1948. The Haredi population is bursting at the seams. Their educational trajectory is an economic dead end not just for their community, but for Israeli taxpayers, who shoulder the financial burden of Haredi choices.

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CHAPTER 6

THE ECONOMY OF RELIGIOUS WELFARE: AN ORCHESTRATED IMBALANCE

The Haredim’s desire for public funds for education and welfare increases annually. With many mouths to feed at home and only one spouse, if any, contributing financially, Haredi families have locked themselves into a cycle of poverty sustained by sly political maneuvering and reinforced by a complicit parliamentary system. Historically, the state of Israel has distributed a per-child stipend to all parents of Jewish, Christian and Arab families. This has caused consternation among the majority of Israelis who object to the Haredim using these stipends as their main source of income. These child allowances were established during the 1980s when the Haredim rallied to push a law through the Knesset that would amend the guidelines for all aid qualifications. As a result of this legislation, couples with one or two children received very little aid from the state, while families with three or more children received significantly higher stipends per child. This change in the law provided an extra “cash infusion” to the ultra-Orthodox community, where families average 6.5 children.¹

This “free money,” so to speak, allowed the Haredim to stay out of the workforce and rely instead on government assistance. The policy of paying higher stipends to larger families was established during Menachem Begin’s government (1977-1983). The legislation to provide the extra stipends, like many of Israel’s policies towards the Haredim, was a short-term decision whose long-range impact was not adequately considered. When asked about the institution of the pay per

¹ Gorenberg, *The Unmaking of Israel*, 176.
child policy, Ayre Naor, Begin’s cabinet secretary, spoke to the political expediency of the decisions saying “the changes were a product of immediate coalition needs and ‘mutual dependency’ between the Likud and the ultra-Orthodox. No one thought about the long-term impact.”²

In August of 2013, however, Israel underwent a historic transition when it reduced child allowances for all families living in Israel. This measure was included as part of a package of austerity measures in the new budget, and disproportionately affected large Haredi families who are already poor.³ Yair Lapid supported the measure saying the reduced child allowances marked a big transition from a “culture of having children to a culture of work.”⁴ Under the new rules, families with children who were born after June 1, 2003 will receive a flat rate of $39 per month per child. A family of three children born before June 2003 will receive $117 as compared to $196 under the old system.⁵ These reduced allowances are particularly painful for Haredi families, many of whose financial situations already place them in poverty. Many Israelis rejoiced at the new equitable distribution of child allowances as a tangible indicator that the Haredim will be

² Ibid.


⁴ Ibid.

forced to participate in the Israeli workforce, thereby reducing the burden on taxpayers.

In an exclusive interview with the Israeli newspaper La Haaretz, Yossi Silman, the new director general of Israel’s Social Affairs Ministry, made an official statement of the government’s intention to address entrenched patterns: “The fight against poverty is carried out through employment and education. A real fight is needed here rather than the trick of raising child allowances.”

Child allowances have long been a sensitive issue for many working Israelis who lose a sizable percentage of their salaries each month to support the non-working Haredim. Silman spoke directly to this: “Unfortunately, there are populations that are living on child allowances [and]...it is more common in the Haredi sector.” Sergio DellaPergola agreed, adding that “a very significant proportion of a secular Israeli’s salary goes to the Haredim.”

Finance Minister Yair Lapid, whose political party Yesh Atid had nominated Yossi Silman, offered his support to the new policy of reduced child allowances. He issued a statement naming the reduced payments as “one of our major election promises” that has “come to fruition,” adding that child allowances have only been

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7 Ibid.

8 Sergio DellaPergola. Phone Interview with Shannan Adler, Boston Massachusetts, November 18, 2013.
shown to “perpetuate poverty.” His position is steadfast and directly opposes the welfare concessions of the last three decades: “[T]he only thing that allows families to get out of poverty...is a job. When a person brings a child into this world, he is responsible for them....The state should not support them, and not even their parents.” Lapid’s words spoke to a changing political landscape in Israel, wherein the Haredim are increasingly confronting secular resentment in ways that are litigious as well as emotional.

Historically, the way the Haredim have been funded by child stipends has led them to rely on an unsustainable “pyramid scheme” sort of economy. In Haredi communities, adult men engage in full time study of Torah in an institute called the kollel. In addition to their personal studies some seek employment teaching in religious schools. Early in modern Israel’s development, Haredi women shouldered the financial burden by working as teachers in Haredi elementary schools so their husbands could study full time. During the time that religious education was breaking away from secular trends and new schools were in need of teachers, Haredi women were easily able to find work. Soon, however, as community schools became better established, the numbers of Haredi women looking to teach far exceeded the demand for teachers.

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10 Ibid.

11 Gorenberg, The Unmaking of Israel, 173.
While Haredi women struggled to find work, options were even fewer for the men. Upon leaving kollel, men were expected to find jobs teaching Torah in Haredi yeshivas or in schools run by religious Zionists where the core curriculum is supplemented by significant emphasis on Talmudic studies. These jobs became harder to find as the Orthodox Zionist school systems began seeking out their own teachers and Haredi men were left with few options. Branching out from education, Haredi men began to find work in “the state's religious bureaucracy...supervising kosher food production for factories and restaurants that wanted the Chief Rabbinate’s seal of approval.” Yet this brought another set of complications. According to Gershom Gorenberg, working for the state “was another paradox: their livelihoods depended on the outside society from which they wanted to segregate themselves.” Unlike the previous Haredi generation in Israel who were regularly employed in the yeshivot, as the latter half of the twentieth century advanced, Haredi families had less money, fewer options for employment, and more mouths to feed. The mounting unemployment and growing family size would further pitch the Haredi community into permanent state-sponsored welfare.

This reality leads to the frustration felt by much of the Israeli population. An unsustainable environment is created when over 11 percent of the population does not participate in the workforce and consumes an enormous portion of the state’s taxed income. Not only are the economics precarious, but they also tear at the social

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
fabric. Secular Israelis grow increasingly resentful as they watch large chunks of each paycheck go directly to unemployed Haredim, while the rest of their paycheck is swallowed whole by the rising high cost of living and price of food, which stems at least in part from kashrut laws and Haredi schemes. This compounds secular anger over the Haredi military exemption and sharpens the critique that the Haredim do not “share the burden” of living in a Jewish nation. Moreover, the national expenditure to relieve poverty surpasses the money spent on the military in Israel. This statistic is especially remarkable, given that Israel has seen war in every decade since its founding, and defense and military spending has been absolutely critical to its survival.

(127,546,897 shekels) in 2014.\textsuperscript{17} While these figures provide a rough idea of the disproportionate sums spent on social services, it is impossible to ascertain the exact numbers for Israel’s annual spending to subsidize the Haredim, because they have found subtle ways to channel government money into their community.

The late Tommy Lapid, founder of the Shinui party and father of Yesh Atid founder Yair Lapid, held highly critical views of the Haredim. His perspective provides a glimpse into the avenues through which the Haredim fleece the Israeli economy. When Lapid served as president of the Israeli Chess Federation, he noticed that at least tens of yeshivot were receiving government funds though the organization. The Haredim weren’t playing chess, but they had discovered that if they registered up to twenty yeshiva students a month, they could get 370 shekels per month ostensibly to subsidize a chess program. This may seem a paltry sum, but it is an example of a larger phenomenon in which the Haredim regularly take advantage of the system. Tommy Lapid suspected that the sums of money going to the Haredim are “huge because money is at every moment passing through hundreds of these paths simultaneously.”\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, Lapid claimed all government ministries run by the Haredim are well known for funneling money to themselves. Consider the former minister of health and Shas (ultra-Orthodox) party member, Rabbi Shlomo Benizri, who was sent to prison in 2008 on charges of


\textsuperscript{18} Efron, Real Jews, 92.
“bribery, fraud and breach of trust,” for crimes committed during his tenure as health minister. Lapid described a questionable transaction that had occurred under Benizri’s leadership, wherein Rabbi Benizri denied a personnel request from a psychiatric hospital in Israel. The hospital requested that they be allowed to use their funds to employ a psychiatrist, but Benizri turned them down and instead demanded they use precious resources to pay a mashgiah (kashrut overseer) despite not having a kitchen. As Lapid stated, “this sort of thing trickles through to the secular public, who see it and understand it, and who feel they are being exploited and extorted.” He continued: “this sort of corruption is endemic in government but has an equal impact, perhaps greater, in the private sector, where it dampens productivity, drives up prices, and generally stifles the economy.”

The lack of a core curriculum education and military participation in Haredi communities directly contributes to the staggering numbers of Haredi families living below the poverty line. In addition to not being prepared for employment by their religious education, the Haredim face additional barriers as military service is a required component for most job applicants in Israel. The absence of such service often serves as a disqualifier to secular employment. The significant numbers of Haredi men who are unemployed due to full time Torah study compounds Haredi poverty as a matter of course.

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20 Efron, Real Jews, 93.

21 Ibid.
Because the Haredi population has increased exponentially, it has forced Israeli policymakers as well as Haredi families to consider viable alternatives for providing for their families. Israel cannot afford to continue to subsidize a rapidly expanding portion of the population. In 2010 there were about 830,000 Haredim living in Israel, which represented about 11 percent of the total population. As a result of rapid growth of the community, that percentage has climbed steadily.22 Currently 60 percent of Haredi families live in poverty, and with their significant birthrates, Haredim are expected to comprise more than 25 percent of Israel’s population by 2050.23 These large numbers have only increased over the last several decades and are on trend to continue into the future.

The current reality of high Haredi unemployment and poverty was not always the case in Israel. As each generation stands on the shoulders of the previous, so must each generation wrestle with the inherited practices and commitments that constrict internal progress or conflict with external change. The insularity of second generation Israeli Haredim reflects the political strength of the


first generation. The Haredi moderates emerging today must contend with the social, political, and personal consequences of their more insular forbears.

Three generations of Haredim have lived in Israel since the British mandate. Each has had a distinct character. The first generation arrived from Europe in the late 19th century due to anti-Semitism in Europe and settled throughout the country. The majority of this initial immigrant community was actively employed, along with the rest of the Jewish population. They were a ‘normal working society,’ whose fertility rate was comparable to the rest of Israel’s.24 The next generation of Haredim began to close themselves off from the rest of Israeli society and turned towards deliberate self-seclusion during the 1970s and 1980s. As they moved into communities that were exclusively Haredi, the numbers of Haredim participating in the workforce plummeted. In 1979, 84 percent of ultra-Orthodox men worked. This was not so different from the 92 percent of other Jewish men who were employed. Yet second generation employment rates declined precipitously, “largely because those skirting army service by citing Torah study as their vocation were blocked from seeking jobs.”25 The third and current generation of Haredim are trending more towards modernity and are “starting to connect again and find a solution to be more Israeli.”26 This is leading to an emerging Haredi middle class who are still

24 Gershom Gorenberg, The Unmaking of Israel, 165-166.


26 Haim Zicherman. Phone interview with Shannan Adler, Boston, Massachusetts, February 13, 2014.
keepers of the flame but who want to be able to provide for their families and expose their children to a more secular education and lifestyle. In this emerging middle class there may be hope for positive change. Still, in the year 2000, 63 percent of Haredim were unemployed, compared to less than 20 percent twenty-one years before in 1979. In 2008 that number rose again to 65 percent and has remained there.27 It could be stated more broadly as follows:

...the share of the ultra-Orthodox men in the labor force has until recently been the lowest in the developed world: 65 percent between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five are not gainfully employed, or more than five times the average male unemployment rate in the same age group in Western societies. 28

For the Haredim, leaving the cloistered life of religious study for traditional employment proves difficult for several reasons. Not only does leaving kollel pose the challenge of straddling religious and secular life, many moderate Haredim pay an “identity price” for leaving their communities.29 Yet for the younger generations of Haredim, to attempt to maintain an insular life is growing impossible. Torah jobs are few and far between despite rapid population growth and the related growth in pupil numbers. Statistics showing the income of the Haredim are hard to measure as many Haredi communities operate on a “cash economy.”30 In many instances the

27 Gershom Gorenberg, The Unmaking of Israel, 177.


29 Haim Zicherman, phone interview with Shannan Adler, Boston, Massachusetts, February 13, 2014.

30 Samuel Heilman, phone interview with Shannan Adler, Boston, Massachusetts, February 19, 2014.
teachers are paid “off the books, with no social benefits, no pension fund,”31 and they often “keep teaching until they’re ninety.”32 With aging teachers who are not stepping aside for younger teachers, the opportunities for employment diminish significantly.

Currently over 1/5 of the Israeli Haredi population is under the age of four, and they are on track to become “lifetime dependents on the shrinking number of working Israelis.”33 These children are destined to join their parents in a poverty cycle whose reliance upon the state is parasitic and continues to strangle the Israeli economy. In 2012, Stanley Fischer, then Governor of the Bank of Israel, discussed the issue of the non-working Haredim while speaking on the overall health of Israel’s economy:

Figures show, not surprisingly, that poverty is prevalent among large families, with the probability of poverty being greater if two parents are not working, and that poverty declines with an increase in education. Figures also indicate very large—and growing—prevalence of poverty among the Arab and ultra-Orthodox populations. Poverty among those populations is considerable because of the low rate of participation in the workforce by those populations, and I believe this situation is not sustainable. The situation is especially worrying when looking at demographic trends. The rate of increase of the Arab and ultra-Orthodox populations is much higher than the Jewish, non-ultra-Orthodox, population, and the share of these populations in the general population is increasing....I would like to point out that I very much respect the ultra-Orthodox population, but I must say that a continued increase in the share of the population which does not participate in the workforce cannot continue forever, and so will have to stop.34

31 Gorenberg, The Unmaking of Israel, 177.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 178-179.
In an email correspondence with Dr. Fischer dated November 11th, 2013, I asked him to comment further on the financial burden posed by the Haredim. He reiterated the relevance of his prior remarks, and indicated that he and others had “delivered that message consistently” over the years and that “the message did seem to get out.” His successor, Dr. Karnit Flug, has echoed Dr. Fischer’s concern over the conflict between a growing unemployed Haredi population and a shrinking non-Haredi working age population. In her remarks at the Prime Minister’s Conference in October of 2013 she aired the following concern:

In the long term, demographics are expected to have far-reaching ramifications on employment.... While those sectors with low levels of employment are expected to grow as a share of the population, the working age population is expected to decline as a share of the total population. If there are no changes in employment patterns, these demographic trends will reduce the annual growth rate by about 1.3 percent, every year: This is a strategic threat for the Israeli economy and for Israeli society—one that we must not ignore.35

The high numbers of unemployment among the Haredi are a stark contrast to the rest of the population in Israel. Israel holds a unique position as one of the youngest and most educated countries in the world. In 2012, Israel was ranked as the second most educated country in the world with 45 percent of its adult

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population having completed tertiary education.\footnote{Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, (OECD) “Education at a Glance 2011,” accessed January 3, 2014, http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/48631582.pdf.} The Haredim rely on the hard work of this educated young population to fund the welfare system that supports them. As Dr. Fischer and Dr. Klug have stressed, the numbers of unemployed Haredim are rapidly approaching the numbers of working and contributing Israelis. This unsustainable financial strain comes at an especially bad time, as the Israeli economy is currently suffering from “a low rate of increase in productivity” compared to other OECD countries. This widening gap is explained both by low rates of investment and by bureaucracy in Israel, which impedes the growth in the business sector. \footnote{Bank of Israel, “The Remarks of Dr. Karnit Flug, Incoming Governor of the Bank of Israel, at the Prime Minister’s Conference—Partnership and Growth,” October 29, 2013, accessed November 4, 2014, http://www.bankisrael.gov.il/en/NewsAndPublications/PressReleases/Pages/29-10-13-Remarks.aspx.} This is bad news for the working population in Israel, who contend with bureaucratic impediments to production as well as the 11 percent of Israelis that require subsidization. In an effort to triage the economic wound posed by the Haredim, the budget for 2014 has significantly cut Haredi subsidies with the intention of spurring more Haredim to enter the workforce. Still, these measures have not appeased the masses who are fed up with the inequitable distribution of taxpayer money for the Haredim and rising living costs for the burdened middle class.
Israelis took to the streets in the summer of 2011 to express their frustration with the exorbitantly high cost of living in Israel. Affordable housing and wage stagnation had grown untenable. The price of everyday goods, such as cottage cheese, increased by 40% over the course of three years. Enough is enough was the message of the 150,000 protestors who showed up to air their concerns at what became the largest protest over social and economic issues in Israel’s history. The fact that these demonstrations could take place attests to the stability of the country in 2011. While many Israelis had been frustrated for years over the high cost of goods and services, they quieted their complaints in a climate that always put the security needs of the country first. In a relatively stable time in Israel’s history, long-suppressed social and economic concerns came forcefully to the fore. Prime Minister Netanyahu tried to placate the middle class by offering a housing bill that targeted “young working families with government loans that, unlike grants to the Haredim accounting for a large part of the housing budget, offered some likelihood of being repaid.” The Haredi parties balked at the bill because it would diminish their funding, but Netanyahu uncharacteristically stood his ground against Haredi interests and the bill passed.

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40 Elizur and Malkin, The War Within, 35.
Despite the recent protests, a prosperous Israel is somewhat of a new concept for older generations of Israelis. Until the 1960s Israel was a rather poor country. Despite boasting a highly educated population, it could not boast similarly high revenues. After the 1990s, however, the standard of living in Israel improved significantly due to an influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This massive immigration was thanks in part to the Law of Return, which granted all Jews worldwide the right to live in Israel, and in part to then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s allowing Jews to leave the country. In the year 1990 alone, approximately 185,000 Russian Jews immigrated to Israel and became the majority among the 200,000 immigrants who arrived that year from all over the world.  

Many of these immigrants were highly skilled and their arrival en masse helped spur the Israeli economy.

The improving standard of living has directly affected the Haredim, who see more money allocated to them when Israel prospers financially. In 2012, Israel ranked 16th on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) out of 186 countries which placed it in the category of “very high human development.” The HDI measures development “by combining indicators of life expectancy, educational


attainment and income into a composite human development index."\(^{43}\) Despite this high rank, inequality is stark in Israel. While the standard of living is much better now than when Israel came into existence, when Israel experiences economic success, the fruits of those who labor trickle down to the Haredim, who labor little and gain much. They are able to maintain this sort of lifestyle through a mixture of their own political savvy and a system that has consistently facilitated Haredi maneuvering.

The Knesset provides a crucial platform for the Haredim, who rely on political pull to maintain their status as legal dependents of the state. The Knesset is the legislative branch of the government with exclusive authority to pass and enact laws.\(^{44}\) In Israel’s brief history as a nation, the Haredim have disrupted the Knesset numerous times when they are dissatisfied with political proceedings. They have been able to force early elections by causing chaos and undermining the governing coalitions. The origins of the Knesset system date back to the British Mandate when Israel did the following:

...inherited the rigid system of proportional representation from the political system of the yishuv (the organized Jewish community)....This system was based on the zeal with which the various political parties—in which ideology and personalities played a major role—fought to preserve their independence. The justification given for the large number of parties resulting from the system was that in a period in which major, far-reaching and rapid changes were still taking place in the population make-up as a


result of immigration, it was important to enable maximal representation for various groups and opinions.\textsuperscript{45}

In a more settled Israel, some say this mode of representation is outmoded. Moreover, many feel that it allows Haredim to wield disproportionate power. There are currently 12 different political parties who have seats in the Knesset. The political platforms of those parties cover a wide spectrum of beliefs. Two of those parties, Shas and the United Torah Judaism Party, represent ultra-Orthodox interests and comprise 18 seats in the 120-seat Knesset.

Shas is the largest and most powerful ultra-Orthodox party in the Knesset, wielding 11 seats, but it currently resides outside of the governing coalition along with the United Torah Judaism party due to their opposition to the military conscription of the Haredim. Shas represents the Sephardic Jews and has had significant influence over Israeli politics since their founding in 1984. Their leaders have garnered as much reverence as they have controversy.

The longtime spiritual leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, died in October 2013. As the "leader of a Sephardic council of Torah sages that founded Shas...he harnessed the underdog sentiment of many non-European Israeli Jews, worked to restore their pride and turned them into a potent political force."\textsuperscript{46} His death at the age of 93 was greeted by throngs of mourners. Police estimate that 700,000 people, almost one-tenth of Israel's population, poured out into the streets in and rooftops

\textsuperscript{45} The Knesset Homepage, “Power and Functions of the Knesset,” accessed March 18, 2014, \url{https://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/eng_mimshal0.htm}.

in Jerusalem along his funeral procession while many recited prayers and tore their clothes in displays of grief. Rabbi Yosef was instrumental in developing Shas into the influential political party it has become, and his legacy was both as a spiritual leader and a shrewd political negotiator.  

The current political leader of Shas is the controversial Aryeh Deri, an Israeli politician who was previously a party leader (1992-1999) before he served two years in prison (2000-2002) on charges of bribery and fraud. His thirteen-year hiatus from political life ended in 2012 when he was reinstated as leader of Shas. Deri was beloved by Rabbi Yosef, and both men were adept at political maneuvering to advance the causes and influence of the Haredim. Haredi politics, though deeply rooted in religion, are every bit as complex as secular politics. It is more eloquently stated:

There is a tendency to assume either spiritual leaders simply make decisions, and outcomes follow; or little attention is paid to the politicking within the parties....But Haredi politics is not for the faint of heart. In religious party politics, the stakes are high in part because the delineations between groups and identities are so stark and clear. You won’t find many politicians switching back and forth between the religious parties, and certainly not


49 Ibid.
between religious communities, the way you’ll find politicians moving easily between Kadima, Labor, Likud, and others.\(^5\)

As the current leader of Shas, Deri has had an uncanny ability not only to work with non-religious parties but also to control fighting amongst the Haredim, who do not vote with one uniform voice.

The other ultra-Orthodox party in the Knesset, United Torah Judaism, represents the interests of Ashkenazi Jews and does not always agree with Shas, particularly in regards to the expansion of the settlements, which United Torah Judaism does not take a strong stand against, while Shas vehemently opposes. Deri has been instrumental in bringing both Haredi parties together, particularly for issues most sensitive to the Haredim. In January of 2013, both parties announced they would forge an ultra-Orthodox voting bloc in opposition to the conscription of the Haredim into the military.\(^5\) United Torah Judaism is led by two Israeli politicians, Yaakov Litzman and Moshe Gafni, each representing the two ultra-Orthodox parties, Agudat Yisrael and Degel HaTorah, that joined to form United Torah Judaism in 1992.

Currently the plurality of the parliamentary seats are held by Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Likud party, which has 31 seats in the Knesset. The existence of twelve parties represented in the Knesset leads to much in-fighting among members, which

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

undermines the current coalition and makes it especially difficult to tackle the complex choices that come with governing a Democratic state. While the debate over whether this parliamentary system best represents Israel is both timely and appropriate, the answers are better left for a more in-depth review of the political process which cannot be undertaken in this thesis. However, the Israelis’ perspective of their governing system is telling: almost 68 percent of Israelis think it would be better to have a smaller number of large political parties represented in the Knesset, rather than many small ones.\textsuperscript{52}

The Haredim, while constituting only 11 percent of Israel’s population and an even smaller percentage of political representation in the Knesset, have long enjoyed significant political influence over the rest of the country. The members of the Knesset are elected for four-year terms through a system of proportional representation by which each political party earns seats that reflect the percentage of votes received in elections. Unlike any other Western parliamentary democracy, Israel adheres to the system of proportional representation in an extreme fashion, such that a party only needs to receive 2 percent of the vote in order to be represented in the Knesset. In this system, the voters “vote for a party list and not

for a particular person on the list.”\textsuperscript{53} The ultra-Orthodox parties are the only parties whose members are appointed by spiritual leaders.\textsuperscript{54}

Early elections are forced when there are political stalemates. These stalemates occur often which means elected governments rarely serve out 4-year terms. The Haredim are frequently at the center of such impasses, and have consistently thrown the government into chaos by calling for new elections when they do not get what they want. Unfortunately, these temper tantrums wield considerable power. In 1968, the Haredim were upset that warplanes supplied to Israel by the United States had landed close to sundown thereby violating their strict interpretation of Sabbath law. They decided the appropriate response would be to sell their voting interests to the “religious Zionist party” in retribution for the decision made during Prime Minister Levi Eshkol’s tenure. The result of this calculated political move was to force early elections in the Knesset, creating chaos and prohibiting the state from functioning normally and protecting the very people they were meant to represent.

The clout of Haredi parties in the Knesset can be understood as a presence that “holds the balance of power in Parliament: since they can sell their support to a coalition of the left or of the right, they can drive up bids from both sides.”\textsuperscript{55} Yet this explanation does not go far enough, as the Haredi parties have traditionally


\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Gorenberg, \textit{The Unmaking of Israel}, 183.
preferred right-wing governments.\textsuperscript{56} This has been the case despite consistent Haredi claims that they are indeed pacifists. It is appropriate that the words “sell” and “bid” are used when explaining the ways the Haredi political parties participate in the wheeling and dealing of the Knesset. It is as much transactional for the Haredim as it is ideological. The Haredim exist on money given to them by the state and from patronage abroad. Their political parties are moneymaking as well: they know they can sell their votes to large political parties, thereby giving those parties a majority in the Knesset. This transaction earns the Haredim not only money but also the promise, whether explicit or implicit, that their special concessions will be upheld.

Aside from selling their minority votes to the highest bidder, another factor has allowed the Haredim to sustain political power, namely: the “exclusion of Arab-backed parties from power.”\textsuperscript{57} Arab parties have been excluded from every Israeli cabinet and governing coalition. The explanation for this is two-fold. First, due to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has been deemed a threat to Israel's security to allow the involvement of Arab parties in any politically influential way, lest they undermine the national interest. Second, most Israelis would not recognize the legitimacy of a Knesset with significant Arab votes. This leaves the Haredim a significant minority party that is often willing to join either a right wing or left wing

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
coalition, which serves to increase their influence. This has put the Haredim in a good position to continue having their financial needs met.

Gorenberg puts it shrewdly in *The Unmaking of Israel*: “Coalition building is like shopping: the major party must pay its smaller partners in some political coin. If there are several potential partners, each must set a lower price for its support. Because the Arab parties are eliminated, the ultra-Orthodox can charge more.”

Indeed, the Haredim take advantage of this market, which, free from competition of Arab minority parties who could also sell votes in exchange for influence, effectively serves as their insurance policy towards future deals.

The Haredim continue to peddle their disproportionate influence by threatening the political stability of Israel to ensure their demands are met. Remarkably, Israel, the only Jewish-majority state in the world, does not even have a constitution or a “founding formal document.” This is because at Israel's founding, the Haredim insisted that “biblical law must take precedence over any constitution, or indeed all matters of state.” Yet despite the expectations of the primarily secular leadership in the late 1940s, Israel has come to look a lot like a theocratic state. The concessions made to silence potential opposition from the Haredim have burgeoned into systematic and legal entrenchment of religious principles to the detriment of the secular population. In his wildest dreams, Ben-Gurion could not

58 Ibid., 184.


60 Ibid.
have imagined the tremendous impact his concessions would have, nor how directly they would handicap the secular democracy he intended for the state of Israel.
CONCLUSION

Israel’s dual character as a theocracy operating within a democratic parliamentary system presents unique and pressing challenges to the state. Simultaneously, the urgent need for remediation demands change from a Haredi culture whose values stand staunchly opposed to modernization. Both secular Israelis and the Haredi population must learn to coexist and collaborate in ways more fitting to the 21st century. The Status Quo concessions offered in the nascent stages of statehood had both moral and political motivations: to honor the wishes of a freshly wounded Jewish population in the wake of the Holocaust and to secure a nation-state for the Jewish people. In 1948, the Haredim presented themselves as the sole vestige of Old World Judaism, which had scarcely three years prior narrowly escaped wholesale annihilation. Indeed, to salvage Orthodox Judaism was a spiritual, moral, and political imperative in response to the Holocaust. Yet today the same danger does not exist, and the extent to which conceding religious tenets to the Haredim would control the developing democracy was gravely underestimated. At the time of the state’s founding, the Haredim were generally considered a “negligible minority many believed would soon vanish.”¹ This has proven to be wholly mistaken, and the political implications have shown this to be a costly error.

The climate in Palestine, and around the world, in the first half of the 20th century was uncertain for Jews. Ben-Gurion’s shrewd political jockeying and arguably shortsighted decision-making are understandable given the urgency of the

need to establish a Jewish homeland in such deeply troubled times. While the viability of the Jewish state in the Arab world is to this day a quotidian question, the nationhood of Israel itself is no longer precarious. What troubles the Israel of today is its inability to maintain a secular democratic state in which the future safety of the nation is secure, and labor, taxes, and welfare are equitably managed. Modern day Israel cannot function cohesively with outmoded Haredi concessions still in place, and the status quo is unsustainable. Serious restructuring is necessary, and, fortunately, has begun to take its first tottering steps.

One possible corrective to the willful disconnect between the Haredim and the rest of Israeli society is emerging in the form of a Haredi middle class. They constitute a relatively new movement amongst the Haredim and are a minority group. Though their numbers are small, they may yet pose a solution to the complexities posed by the Haredim. These moderate-minded Orthodox belong to the third generation of Israel’s Haredim, and have begun in the last decade to associate culturally within the “Israeli public sphere.”

Keen on earning academic degrees and having their own professions, some of them serve in the army while others seek employment after performing national civil service. Despite their interest in working in and with Israeli secular society, they self-identify as Haredim and wear traditional dress, both at home and in the workplace, the men donning traditional black yarmulkes and the women wearing wigs. For a mix of reasons,


3 Ibid.
Haredi politicians largely ignore the unique challenges the emerging middle class faces in straddling both worlds, despite the fact that the Haredi middle class almost always lends their political support to ultra-Orthodox parties. While Haredi politicians view the middle class as un-influential, and therefore an inconsequential segment of Haredi society, Haredi society more generally does not view them as Haredim at all. On the other side of the equation, secular Israelis treat the straddling middle class as outsiders and exclude them from social interactions. Thus an identity price is exacted both at home and in the workplace.\(^4\)

Recently, Haredi leadership has slowly begun to show some accommodation towards their emerging middle class. According to researcher and professor of Jewish philosophy, Benjamin Brown, the Haredi leadership has unofficially formed two branches. One branch will continue the stringent path of traditional Haredi life while the other looks to become more mainstreamed within Israeli society. According to Brown, though certain factions of Haredi leadership have become more accepting of mainstream values, they continue to have significant reservations about its role in Haredi life. However, unlike the previous generations of leadership, this one will not turn its back on more moderate members. This is indeed to their benefit. As increasing numbers of middle class Haredim emerge, they may provide the financial support for traditional Haredim who chose Torah study over employment: “The sense of failure felt by a Haredi man who abandons yeshiva and

\(^4\) Ibid.
'Kollel' studies could be relieved by becoming a 'Torah supporter,' who supports Torah study to the best of his financial abilities.”

If financial support for scholarship could substitute for personal study in Israel, it would mimic the established model of Haredi communities around the world. Unlike the Haredim of Israel, Haredim living elsewhere are expected to work and provide for themselves and their families without relying on state support. The working majority also provides for those who commit themselves to full time Torah study. If Israel’s Haredim were to adopt this model, it would serve to both preserve Haredi Torah study and relieve Israel’s burdened economy. Speaking to the urgency of the situation, Israeli Deputy Finance Minister Mickey Levy warned in February 2014 that if Israel does not find a way to incorporate the Haredim into sharing the burden, “soon only 35 percent of the population in Israel will be paying taxes and performing military service.” Such disproportion would plunge Israel into dire financial circumstances; thus the need to develop an alternative plan, wherein the Haredim contribute, is acute.

The exact number of Haredim who can be considered middle class is unknown, as their gradual assimilation into the secular world has been subtle, and they remain a minority. What is certain is the enormous increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox students enrolled in Israeli institutions of higher learning. At this

5 Ibid.

time, “some 7,000 ultra-Orthodox students are enrolled in Israeli institutions of higher education, an increase of 250 percent in just five years. The combination of ‘ultra-Orthodox’ and ‘college education’ has become possible.”

Another hopeful blend of tradition and modernity is emerging through technology. In the past, Haredi rabbis forbade the Haredim from having television sets. Compliance with this prohibition was obvious: if you looked at the roofs of Haredi homes you would see no wires or antennae, and if you peeked in through a window into a living room you would see no television. In 2014, it is impossible to know the contents of someone’s pocket, or whether they have a smart phone that connects them to a world outside their gates. Yet Samuel Heliman points out the Haredim “increasingly know more about the outside world than the outside world knows about them.” Truly, the appeal of modern life has begun to pull at the tightly woven Haredi community, and the informational age is uniquely suited to gently coax the Haredim out of their imposed self-seclusion.

In 2013 a new kosher “smart phone” was marketed to the Haredim community with rabbinical approval. While these phones do not have web-browsing capability, the fact that they are allowed within the community at all speaks to the changing culture of the Haredim in a modern world. With the new phones, users can

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8 Samuel Heilman. Phone interview with Shannan Adler. Boston Massachusetts, February 19, 2014

9 Ibid.
send and receive text messages and emails, as well as use apps that have been specially approved by rabbinic advisors. Shlomi Gulian, manager of the cell phone company marketing the rabbi-approved phones, addressed why these phones were desperately needed:

Digital banking, satellite, navigation, interfaces for booking health appointments and Haredi-style religious reading are in; secular news and most other general content is out. There are currently 600 approved apps, and the company hopes to increase that eventually to 20,000....In today’s business environment it is becoming increasingly hard for Haredi professionals and businesspeople to manage without connectivity on the go and without SMS messages.10

The addition of the smart phone into Haredi society speaks the fact that despite their self-seclusion and reluctance to participate in the social norms and customs that define the majority of Jewish Israelis, this community still has distinctly Israeli characteristics. Samuel Heilman states:

Israeliness is not just a political reality. It’s a cultural and social reality. They speak the language and they are integrated unto the cultural life. Just because they don’t consider themselves to be Israeli doesn’t mean that they aren’t.11

By encouraging the Haredim of Israel to be more like their ultra-orthodox counterparts in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, where equitable participation in the workforce is normal and expected, Israel will be better able to ensure both the survival of this religious community as well as the financial


solvency, national security, and social cohesion of the state. Israeli Haredim are unique in that they are the only Haredi community in the world that is financially dependent upon the country they inhabit. Therefore, Israeli Haredim are, in the words of Gershom Gorenberg, a “creation” of the state of Israel:

Rather than being a diorama of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust, as many Israelis and visitors believe, Israel’s present-day version of ultra-Orthodoxy is a creation of the Jewish state. Policies with unexpected effects fostered this new form of Judaism, at once cloistered and militant. So did successful measures by haredi leaders to revive a community that was shrunk by modernity and then devastated by the Holocaust.\(^\text{12}\)

Although the Haredim fostered this particular mode of existence out of fear that any alternative would trigger the demise of “true” Judaism, they have survived and thrived elsewhere in a much more fluid exchange with their host cultures. It would follow that adapting modern patterns like their counterparts around the world would not dilute their value system or make them somehow less Haredi.

Ultimately, Israel’s highest obligation is to preserve itself for future generations. The cornerstones of Israel are military strength, economic growth, and a populace of almost unparalleled education. While it has been morally honorable as well as politically expedient for Israel to indulge the wishes of the Haredim, it is “not a democracy’s legitimate business to intervene and finance a religious subculture. Nor should a democracy promote a kind of education that makes its graduates into economic captives of the sectarian community.”\(^\text{13}\) If the Haredim continue their non-participation in the workforce, the “labor force participation rates” will become so

\(^{12}\) Gorenberg, *The Unmaking of Israel*, 167.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 173.
low that Israel will plunge into dire poverty. Currently half of the Haredi population is under the age of 14 and heading towards unemployment. Benjamin Brown points out that “there is no other society in the world” where half of the population is so young. Throughout its modern history, Israel has made significant strides towards becoming a country in which all Jews contribute to the upkeep and cohesion of the state, and in recent years the country has galvanized to bring the Haredim up to pace. The passage of the draft bill in 2014 combines Haredi military conscription with decreased child allowances and more government funding for yeshivot that include core curricula in their classes. These monumental changes result from the pressure-cooker situation that has been building steam since 1948. The backlash that Israel is currently experiencing from the Haredi community must not lead the country to undermine these crucial and decidedly progressive steps. While immediate social outcry from the Haredim unsettles Israel for the moment, the focus must be on securing the future of the sole stable democracy in the Middle East and only Jewish state in the world.

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