# THE HAREDI MOMENT

## Introduction

To many observers, 2020 seemed to mark an important new moment in Haredi life. Both in the U.S. and Israel, these traditionally observant Jews strained against social distancing requirements that threatened to alter their decidedly communal way of life—in prayer, study, celebration, and mourning—requirements that they were convinced would be impossible to abide by in many of their small homes with large families, and went against their religious and cultural attachment to a rich collective life. The public display of opposition by Haredim to state distancing mandates went hand in hand with another trend: a growing identification with conservative political figures and parties, as well as increasing political visibility and engagement. In the U.S., this took the form of overwhelming Haredi support for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election; in Israel, it manifested itself in the growing affinity between Haredim and conservative, even far right Jewish nationalist political parties, actions that seemed to grate against their long-standing antipathy to Zionism.

These developments seemed to express a new kind of Haredi political and cultural identity, a shift from a quiescent to an activist stance that yielded public forms of opposition to state policy. Young Haredi activists took the leadership stage, while the older cohort of rabbis seemed powerless to control them. All this called out for deeper study and research.

It was this apparent shift that prompted a group of some thirty scholars of Haredim, Orthodoxy, and Jewish Studies to begin meeting in the spring of 2021 to explore the roots of the "Haredi Moment" of 2020, a moment that has continued into 2022. This report is the first fruit of that research collaborative known as the Haredi Research Group (HRG). It seeks to provide

broader context and deeper analysis in order to make sense of the present day. This report is the first piece of work that the HRG has produced. The group is intent on a larger-scale, multiyear undertaking that will generate different forms of analysis of Haredim in their various contexts around the insular world, with a particular focus on their growing sociological and political affinity with evangelical Christians in the U.S. and with secular nationalist or non-Haredi Jews in Israel, and on their significance for the societies in which they live.

## Who are Haredim?

Research on Haredi Jews around the globe has tracked the vibrant, diverse, and transnational project of rebuilding Jewish Orthodoxies after WWII—and traced these new beginnings to their nineteenth-century origins. The word "orthodoxy" was used originally in the nineteenth century to refer to the adherence to a correct belief (doxa), in contrast to those who aimed to reform Judaism. In the Jewish case, "orthodoxy" applies as much or even more to praxis, reflecting adherence to a set of ritual practices and behaviors that, according to its followers, are divinely mandated and timeless. Among Jews, Haredim claim to hold an even more authentic adherence to Jewish legal tradition (*halakhah*) and custom (*minhag*) than any other denomination.

The word "Haredi" is often translated as "ultra-Orthodox," though that term is regarded as derogatory by some in the Haredi world, who insist they are simply "yidn," Jews. "Haredi" has its origins in a biblical Hebrew word that connotes "trembling," as found in the book of Isaiah 66:2. Haredim tremble in awe at the presence of God and manifest their devotion through Torah study, piety, and acts of good deeds (*mitsvot*). They adhere to strict rules and norms of behavior that include

family behavior, gender roles, sexuality, food consumption, personal comportment, and Sabbath restrictions.

As a modern movement, Haredism has depended on adaptability, as well as the capacity to confront, control, and define change. Haredim are very much part of the modern world, though they are often described by those in the non-Haredi world as fundamentalist, staunchly conservative, illiberal, traditionalist, or anchored in the "eternal yesterday." Although they often define themselves as resistant to forces of modernity, Haredim make use of modern institutions, instruments, and political channels of the state to build up their communities.

Over the past two decades, Haredim in the United States and Israel seem to be reimagining and renegotiating their sense of belonging as Jews, and as Americans or Israelis. This shift can be seen in their interactions with popular culture, politics, knowledge, science, medicine, and the state. In Israel, some Haredim are forging a new social contract with the state in terms of allocation of resources and involvement in its institutions, including universities and the army. In the United States, Haredim have begun evidencing signs of a new political conservatism resembling that of white Christian conservatives. At the same time, generational tensions are growing: younger Haredi women and men are challenging traditional structures of authority, and bypassing explicit approval of rabbinic authorities, especially when the expertise necessary (political, technological or economic) is not commonly held by rabbis.

It is a fallacy to assume that Haredim are a monolith. There are many different sub-communities that answer to or can be called by that name, including diverse Hasidic courts, non-Hasidic Lithuanian traditionalists, and Mizrachi Jews in Israel. That said, Haredi communities share much in common with each other demographically, socially, and politically. They are also

connected by extensive familial ties between their communities. As a result, there is reason to think in terms of a global Haredi population. While Jews tend to live in geographically concentrated areas in their countries, this is even more so the case among Haredim, who typically live in dense neighborhoods or localities. Compared to other Jews, Haredim average lower levels of secular education (though religious education is a top communal priority), full-time professional employment, and household income; concomitantly, they experience higher levels of poverty and economic vulnerability, a situation often exacerbated by the expenses associated with large families that adhere strictly to Jewish ritual, educational, and communal practices. The profile of a Haredi family is different from that of other Jews, with marriage at younger ages, far higher fertility rates, and a tradition of men (in some Haredi communities) devoting themselves to full-time Torah study.

To understand the emergence of Haredim in greater depth, this report begins with a history of Orthodox—and more particularly, Haredi—Judaism, especially in the United States and Israel, homes to the largest Haredi populations. After the historical overview, the report provides a series of snapshots of Haredi life, highlighting recent changes in the key arenas of economics, gender, leadership, family formation, education, politics, and new media technologies. The report then turns to a discussion of several key phenomena that came to the fore in 2020: Haredi responses to COVID-19; support for Donald J. Trump in the United States; and an increasing identification with right-wing politics in Israel—all of which may foreground a new phase in the history of Haredim marked by an accelerated pace of change, decline in existing authority structures, growing internal division, and access to the internet as a gateway to a world beyond the gates of their community.

## A Brief History of Jewish Orthodoxy

Haredi Judaism claims Jewish authenticity through strict adherence to *halakhah*, but the diversity of Haredim becomes readily noticeable on closer inspection. Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrachi Haredim have different histories, experiences of marginality, engagements with the state (Israel, Europe, the United States), social structures, conceptions of *halakhhic* obligations, and everyday practices as well as structures of rabbinic authority. In the United States, the Haredi population is typically described as having two major segments, Hasidic and Yeshivish.

Although behavior that would later be termed "orthodox" existed for generations, the emergence of a Reform movement in Germany in the 19th-century led to an opposition movement that came to call itself "Orthodox," and that later flourished in Eastern Europe and elsewhere in a variety of forms. These range from "Neo-Orthodox" or "modern Orthodox" Jews committed to a measure of social and cultural integration into mainstream society, to the non-Hasidic Yeshivish community which is defined by the central role of the yeshiva and house of study, as well as of rabbinical leaders whose authority stems from their command of rabbinic law. Hasidim diverge from these groups via their attachment to dynastic leaders ("Rebbes") and tend to be the most self-protective form of Orthodoxy, as defined by cultural and social segregation and an ideological opposition to change.

Both Yeshivish and Hasidic groups trace themselves back to Eastern Europe, where the popular pietist movement known as Hasidism took rise in the late eighteenth century, as did the first modern yeshiva in 1803. The northeast region of Hungary was also a key incubator of the Haredi model of separatist Orthodoxy, with its stark opposition to acculturation and growing emphasis on ritual stringency. Meanwhile, it was in neighboring Galicia that the first Orthodox political party was formed in 1878, Machsike Hadas ("Upholders of the Faith"). This party was followed a generation

later by the better known Agudath Israel ("Union of Israel"), which brought together German Neo-Orthodox Jews and Polish Hasidim into a single organization in 1912.

The "Aguda," as it came to be known, was committed to fighting Zionism, then an emerging movement, which it considered a heretical effort to end the divinely ordained exile before its time. Paradoxically, the competition between the Aguda and the Zionists – and the socio-political environment in which it was produced – led some Aguda members to adopt their own version of Jewish nationalism, even as they remained steadfast opponents of the secular Zionist movement and its religious Zionist variant. Meanwhile, the Polish members of the Aguda–and even more their Hungarian ultra-Orthodox rivals–strongly opposed German neo-Orthodoxy's embrace of secular studies and acculturation. All of these groups shared a basic conservative political outlook and often allied themselves with right-wing political movements rather than with social democratic groups.

Although Orthodox Judaism took rise in Europe, it branched out to other sites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--and then again after the Holocaust. Orthodox and Haredi Jews who escaped or survived came to Mandatory Palestine and later the State of Israel. Even earlier, the Haredi community in Palestine, with elements from the Old Yishuv (the Palestine-based Jewish community in Palestine), and some more recent arrivals at the turn of the century, established the Edah Haredis (1921) in the Jerusalem neighorhood of Meah Shearim, which was created as a strictly observant bastion against the secular Zionist movement.

With the immigration of Haredi Jews to Palestine from urban centers in Germany and Poland in the 1930s, tensions arose between Aguda immigrants, who were willing to engage in pragmatic cooperation with Zionist leaders, and other, more zealous Haredi members of the Edah Haredis. Ultimately, the later arrivals became the dominant element of Ashkenazi Haredism in Israel.

Whereas prior to the Holocaust, Haredim in Palestine constituted a peripheral part of the Haredi world; after the war, Israel became a major world center of Haredi Judaism, along with the United States. The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 deepened the rift between the new and old Haredi communities, requiring Haredim who had immigrated to Israel to reinvent themselves without relying on existing local Haredi structures. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, known as the Hazon Ish (1878 – 1953), became a figure of great importance. He established a center of Israeli Haredism in the modern city of Bnei Brak – which served as a contrast to Jerusalem, where the Edah Haredis remained. Similarly, in the United States, Haredi refugees and immigrants took exception to the modernizing tendencies of American Orthodoxy, especially under the influence of Rabbi Joel (Yoelish) Teitelbaum, the first Satmar Rebbe who settled in Brooklyn in 1946.

Most Haredim aspired to cultural separatism and the kind of sacred community that had been torn asunder since the late eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Emancipation movements.. To enable this separatism, Haredim who had immigrated to the Holy Land just before the creation of the state of Israel forged a contract with the emerging state known as the"status quo" that ensured an Orthodox monopoly over matters of personal status, Shabbat observance in the public sphere, Haredi education, and kashrut (Jewish dietary regulations) in state institutions. In Israel, Haredim largely maintained political neutrality at least until the 1990s, cooperating with both right- and left-wing governments that provided for Haredi needs.

According to Haredim, their mission was to recreate the Torah world that was destroyed in the Holocaust. In America this process centered on the re-establishment of schools, synagogues, and tight-knit observant communities. In Israel they had similar ambitions, but also focused on gaining exemptions from the acculturating force of the Israel Defense Force. As a result, yeshiva students

were excused from the draft. (Haredi women were already exempt, as were women from Orthodox and Religious Zionist sectors.) At first, the army exemptions applied only to a small group of several hundred yeshiva students. Over the course of decades, however, this small group grew exponentially into what sociologist Menachem Friedman called a "society of learners," a community that devoted all its resources to the project of full-time Torah study for men. Today there are about 140,000 yeshiva students and *avrechim* (married *kollel* students) in the "Torah world." The creation of a "society of learners" led to some unintended consequences for the state. First, financing yeshiva and kollel students, who study Torah full-time and are not in the workforce, requires significant government support. The greater the financial burden of maintaining a society of learners, the more the Haredi community is required to take an active part in Israeli politics in order to maintain that support. In addition, the "society of learners" turned Israeli Haredim into a more centralized body in which differences among them were blurred.

In their origins, Haredim in Palestine were largely Ashkenazi. But under the influence of the great Sephardic *posek* (arbiter of religious law) and later Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013), a new political movement, Shas, arose in 1984 to address long-standing discrimination against Mizrahim (Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin) and establish a Mizrahi-oriented Torah culture. Shas turned to non-Haredi Mizrahim and established itself as a counterculture, attaining unprecedented electoral success. In its wide-ranging outreach, Shas erased the boundaries between Haredim and non-Haredim, while also formulating a new Mizrahi Haredism that joined existing sectors in the Israeli Haredi world (old-school Haredim, Aguda members, and Lithuanian non-Hasidim) and challenged the political order in Israel.

**The Rise of Post-War Haredi Communities: North America and Israel**

Many Orthodox refugees arrived in the United States during and following World War II. They had resisted coming to the *trefe medineh* (unkosher country) because they felt that while Jews might survive the new liberties afforded them, Judaism would not. But after the Holcoaust, the United States becaome a viable and necessary option. Survivors made their way to the U.S. mostly through the port of New York, just as that city was beginning to experience dramatic demographic shifts that would eventually transform it and other urban areas around the country. In the following decades, members of numerous immigrant communities, including nearly a million Jews, would leave New York for the surrounding suburbs—a phenomenon that became popularly known as "white flight"—while the city's population of African Americans and Puerto Ricans grew, especially in the Bronx and Brooklyn.

It was in those parts of Brooklyn that often had a substantial pre-existing community of Jews, where many Orthodox Jews, among them Hasidim, settled. At the time, many observers predicted that most would either abandon Brooklyn, as had so many of their co-religionists, or disappear entirely, transformed irrevocably by the forces of assimilation, suburbanization, and secularization.. And yet European-born Hasidim replanted and reconstituted themselves in Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Crown Heights, Flatbush, and Borough Park. They thrived, growing in both size and influence, and laying the foundation for a major expansion of the Haredi community in North America and beyond.

By remaining in urban neighborhoods when so many other whites (including Jews) were leaving them, many Orthodox Jews came to share experiences with their working class African American and Puerto Rican neighbors, with whom they often had more in common than with

middle- and upper-class Jews in suburbia. But many members of urban communities of color saw the remaining Orthodox Jews as representative of white privilege, even if the mainstream white (and white Jewish) populations did not quite accept them as such. This perspective was cemented when some of those Jews became landlords and shopkeepers—making large profits when certain neighborhoods, such as Williamsburg, became gentrified. Indeed, Orthodox Jewry occupied an ambiguous and ironic position in post-war New York: they were considered white by neighbors of color in the urban settings where they lived, but were often regarded in the white establishment as different and not fully belonging..

Many inner-city Haredim participated in a wide range of anti-poverty programs, serving alongside African Americans and Puerto Ricans on local community boards charged with distributing government funds. Their poverty resulted from their large families, lack of secular education --particularly at the secondary and college level -- and few engaged in high-income-generating jobs. Like their neighbors, Hasidim suffered from "planned shrinkage," the disinvestment in city services, as well as from the environmental pollution concentrated in the city's impoverished neighborhoods. Eventually, Hasidic activists lobbied successfully to have a federal agency designate them—but not other Jews in the United States—as a disadvantaged minority group and therefore eligible for certain government programs. While Hasidim occasionally collaborated with their neighbors, more frequently they saw them as competitors over housing, government aid programs, school buildings, and other resources. In practical terms, this meant that they rarely sought alliances with other groups during this period, including with other Jews who did not follow their version of "Torah True Judaism."

Besides the struggle over affordable housing, street crime was the issue that generated the most tension between inner-city Orthodox Jews, especially Haredim, and their neighbors in urban settings during the 1960s and 1970s. Steeled by their brutal experiences and collective memory of the Holocaust, these Jews took a proactive and muscular approach to crime in their neighborhoods. They established the *Shomrim*, a neighborhood watch group first in Williamsburg and soon after in other neighborhoods. Hasidim also mobilized community members to chase and apprehend suspected muggers. The Hasidic approach to street crime led to charges of vigilantism from their neighbors and created tension with the police. Yet it also contributed to a sense of communal pride, self-reliance, and resistance, qualities that Hasidim frequently invoked in ways that resembled the message of ethnic pride movements then being established around the country--even as Hasidim took pains to differentiate themselves from groups such as the Jewish Defense League.

The fear of crime also influenced Hasidic voting patterns in the 1960s and 70s. As the city descended into what was called a *hefker velt* or "world of chaos," many Hasidim supported a series of "law and order" candidates, a phenomenon that continues today. Hasidim appear to have supported Richard Nixon in his 1972 presidential campaign in significant numbers and from Ronald Reagan and onwards voted for Republican candidate for President at a higher rate than other Jews, though precise information on Hasidic or, more broadly, Haredi voting in the 1970s and 1980s remains elusive.

## To the Suburbs

In many cities, as Orthodox Jews became more economically established, they joined the suburban migration. But Haredim generally did not, at least not at first. However, as New York City teetered on the verge of bankruptcy in the 1970s, as its antiquated infrastructure deteriorated, a

sense of dystopian lawlessness took hold. One result was an uptick in Hasidic flight to Long Island, Rockland County, and Orange County, and even to high-income Westchester. Non-Hasidic counterparts went to the Lakewood, New Jersey area, concentrating around the yeshiva established there by Rabbi Aaron Kotler already in 1943.

Included in this larger movement to establish suburban enclaves among Hasidim were members of the Nitra, Kashau, Skvir, Vizhnitz and, most prominently, Satmar Hasidic groups. Already in the 1940s and early 1950s, newly arrived Haredi rabbis followed R. Kotler's lead, and later R. Joel Teitelbaum, R. Michael Weissmandl, and R. Yakov Yosef Twersky, all of whom understood the importance of establishing a presence for their followers beyond the allures and seductions of the American urban space. In 1949, the Nitra yeshiva was established in Westchester County, New York; in 1961, Skvirer Hasidim established a legally recognized village called New Square within the town of Ramapo in Rockland County; in the early 1970s, Satmar Hasidim began buying property in Orange County, which they developed into an all-Satmar neighborhood within the town of Monroe. Constant friction over zoning laws prompted the Satmars in 1976 to carve out a self-standing village that was officially recognized a year later as Kiryas Joel. Forty years later, in 2018, Kiryas Joel formally separated from Monroe and became the town of "Palm Tree," New York state's first new town in 38 years.

The move to the suburbs did not entail an escape from tension with neighbors. Rather, it created a tension of a different sort, assuming the form of conflicts over zoning and valuable natural resources (especially land and water), and the all-important need to handle sewage for rapidly growing communities. It also took the form of battles over the allocation of public resources—most prominently in recent decades over the way tax revenues have been spent on education. In fact, the

question of how to allocate public funds for education prompted Orthodox and Haredi Jews to seek and ultimately gain control of the public school board in East Ramapo, New York, despite the fact that none of their children attend the district's schools, preferring instead private religious schools in the area.

This effort provoked serious tensions between Orthodox and Haredi Jews, on one hand, and non-Jews (and non-Orthodox Jews), on the other. But tensions have also developed *within* the Haredi world as a result of differences in generation, socio-economic status, and adherence to established leadership. For example, the Rockland County village of Airmont has become home to several generations of Hasidic residents; the first wave came in search of more affordable housing and a less restrictive community outside of the enclave, whereas later generations were attracted by the existence of a religious infrastructure suitable for their Hasidic way of life. The process of exiting in search of greater affordability and lesser restrictiveness is played out today in "spillover" communities such as Toms River and Jackson Township in New Jersey and Pomona, NY.

**Exiters: Those Who Dissent**

Despite its steadfast commitment to preserving tradition and maintaining boundaries, the Haredi world is neither static nor uniform. In recent years, growing attention has been devoted to those who chose to leave the community and live a non-Haredi way or life–to those who have gone OTD, or "off the derech (path)"--as well as to those who remain with the Haredi world as "hidden heretics," outwardly observant yet inwardly straying. An expanding spate of memoirs from those who have left their communities, most notably *Unorthodox*, have garnered the attention of the mainstream media. There are organizations dedicated to supporting those who choose to leave such as Footsteps in the U.S. and Hillel in Israel; they receive generous funding from the broader Jewish

population. The phenomenon of leaving the community, though still statistically small, has reached the point that it is no longer unusual for Haredi families to have one child who has "gone OTD." This has led some Haredi parents to rethink whether they must cut off all ties in those cases, as was once customary. Custody cases in which one parent goes OTD tend to favor the parent who remains within the fold, with community members rallying to support the parent who remains in the community..

**Political Change**

In the North American context, Haredim are increasingly allying with other conservative religious groups. For much of their history in the United States, Haredim continued an older Jewish practice of relying on communal mediators or intercessors to help navigate the economic, social, and political landscape of the country. They have been open to working with political actors across the ideological spectrum in order to advance the interests of their community. They have also tended to see themselves, as is illustrated in the case of gaining recognition as economically "disadvantage," as an ethnic minority distinct from the dominant white mainstream. But recent events suggest shifts in both language and self-identity. Haredim are increasingly defining themselves in the language of religious and political conservatism, especially in defense of the paramount principle of religious liberty. This has brought them into alliance with other religious conservatives in the U.S. predominantly white and Christian, who use similar language in advancing a political vision of the country.

This shift hints at a new Haredi politics—a willingness to engage and compete in the wider realm of national and local politics. Yet it is important to emphasize that this new political behavior was not born in 2020, nor during the years of the Trump presidency. Its roots extend back to the

formative European environment in which Haredim evinced two distinct political strategies: engaging in cultural resistance against other Jews and Jewish groups, and forging political alliances with state authorities to enhance their communal interests. Both tendencies — combativeness and accommodation — carried over to the United States. Haredim in the New York area have developed an extensive network of political allies at local, state, and federal levels. These contacts have allowed the wider Haredi community to maintain a high degree of self-protection as it seeks to hold onto its way of life, as reflected in ritual, educational, gender, cultural, and even public health terms. But the constant engagement with elected officials and the electoral process also reflects a process of absorption, often unwitting, of American political values and norms. Indeed, for all of their self-segregation, Haredim are unmistakably and inescapably products of the broader social and political environment.

The fact that Haredi political behavior has increasingly resembled that of white Christian conservatives leads some to speak of a process of "Evangelicalization." This trend has deeper roots as well. Already in the 1960s, Orthodox Jews, especially the Orthodox Union's National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs and the Lubavitch Chabad movement, began to build alliances with Christians over their shared objection to what they perceived as efforts to remove religion from public schools (e.g., in the form of prayer). The emergence of the Moral Majority, founded by Pat Robertson in 1979, marked a major new effort by Christian conservatives to "deprivatize" religion and assert its central place in the American public square. This effort found a somewhat unlikely ally in Ronald Reagan, who grasped the growing political heft of white Evangelicals who lent considerable support to his victory over Jimmy Carter (an Evangelical Christian himself) in the 1980 presidential election. Reagan proved to be a reliable ally to religious

conservatives in their struggle against the long-standing "wall of separation" between church and state.

Religious conservatives across the denominational spectrum joined together to pull down the wall of separation. One especially germane example came in 1990, when officials in Kiryas Joel decided to address the problem of how best to educate special needs students by opening a public school within the village. The plan to create such a school won the strong support of key New York state politicians and was overwhelmingly approved by the legislature. However, it also drew condemnation as a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment from a variety of groups, including Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the American Jewish Committee. In fact, the issue of a proposed Kiryas Joel (KJ) public school became a key site in the intensifying battle between liberal civil libertarians and the newly fortified religious right. In the many legal challenges that the school district faced, the village of Kiryas Joel had the support not only of Orthodox Jewish organizations, but also of conservative Christian groups such as the American Center for Law & Justice (ACLJ), which was created in 1990 as a counterweight to the ACLU, with its signature support for strict separation between religion and state. In 1994, the United States Supreme Court weighed in on the matter, deciding that the New York State statute that created KJ did not pass constitutional muster, but offering guidelines on how to craft legislation that would. A decade of subsequent legislation and litigation followed before the KJ school district, which had been functioning since 1990, was declared by the courts to be formally legal.

The case of the KJ school district was an important example of the growing alliance between Jewish and Christian religious conservatives. Christian conservatives looked to the village—and its public school—as an example of a fully functioning and vibrant religious public square. The Satmar

group understood the instrumental value of mobilizing the organizational and political power of Christian conservatives to their cause. In doing so, they evinced a tremendous degree of political and legal sophistication that belied their reputation as insular, disconnected, and quietist in their outlook.

More broadly, Haredim have developed a great deal of experience in working with and exercising influence over political officials, especially in New York and New Jersey,– and of course in Israel where they actually have been part of the national governing coalitions. They have expanded their capacity and sense of entitlement to play the game of American and Israeli interest-group politics. Until recently, Haredim were motivated less by the ideological stances of politicians than by their ability to deliver to the community. It is this non-ideological, pragmatic, interest-group politics that has enabled Haredim to thrive and carve out islands of power for decades.

And it is this non-ideological pragmatic approach to politics that seemed to be discarded in 2020. Haredim voted overwhelmingly in favor of Donald Trump. It was not principally Trump's ability to deliver concrete economic and material gains to the Haredi community that attracted their support, since, for the most part, it is local politicians who are most able to do that. Rather, it was his unflagging support of "religious liberties" as a guiding American ideal (just as it was his unflagging support for Israel that earned him the adoration of non-Haredi Orthodox Jews).

## Haredi Demographics

Efforts to estimate the size and characteristics of the Haredi population in the United States and Europe face several challenges: reliance on periodic non-governmental surveys of Jewish populations; the need to distinguish between Haredim and other Orthodox Jews; the likely

under-representation of Haredi respondents; small subsamples sizes; and a mix of survey methodologies, some of which are more rigorous than others. Furthermore, Haredim are often suspicious of outsiders, including researchers who ask probing demographic questions.

Despite these challenges, researchers estimate that the global Haredi population is about 2.1 million people, about 14% of the entire Jewish population today. Of that number, it is estimated that some 700,000 Jew in the United States are Haredi. The largest concentrations of Haredim reside in the New York City metropolitan area and its outlying counties, as well as in New Jersey. They have built communities in the suburban New York areas of Westchester, Orange, Rockland, and Sullivan counties as well as in the Five Towns enclave in Nassau county on Long Island. Sephardic and Central Asian and Iranian Haredim have chosen to live in the borough of Queens. Important concentrations are also located in the Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami urban areas.. In the United Kingdom, Haredim comprise upwards of 25% of the total Jewish population, around 76,000 people, and tend to live in three main locations: the greater London area, Manchester, and Gateshead. Canada has a Haredi population of 30,000, with particularly notable concentrations in the Outremont section of Montreal (and Kiryas Tosh in Boisbriand). There are significant Haredi populations in Austria, Belgium (especially Antwerp), France, and Switzerland. The Haredi population of Austria, located in Vienna, comes to about 2,000, comprising roughly 20% of Austrian Jews. The Haredi population of Antwerp is estimated at 10,000, which makes it about one-third of the total Jewish population in Belgium. In France, the Haredi population is estimated at 12,000 and Switzerland 3,300.

Estimates of the Haredi population in Israel derive primarily from data collected by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), which operates under law to provide a wide range of information

on Israeli society, economy, regions, and population segments. Data is also gleaned from party affiliation and votes in national elections, with most Haredim voting with Haredi-affiliated parties. The Haredi population in Israel is estimated at 1,200,000, or nearly 13% of the country's total population and just over 17% of its Jewish population. Israeli Haredim are also subdivided, in this case into three groups: Hasidic, Litvak (Yeshivish), and Mizrachim, whose ethnic origins and religious rites distinguish them from the mostly Ashkenazi Hasidic and Litvak communities. The share of each group is about one-third of the total Haredi population, or roughly 400,000 in each group.

Haredim in Israel have expanded beyond their major population centers in Jerusalem, Bnei Brak, and Bet Shemesh to settlements in the occupied West Bank. For example, a Haredi town was established in 1985 in Beitar Illit and is now home to many Hasidic groups, including Bobov, Boston, Boyan, Breslov, Karlin-Stolin and Slonim. In 1994, the village of Kiryat Sefer was established on the land of five Palestinian villages and later renamed as Modi'in Illit, a separate town proximate to the city of Modi'in on the Israeli side of the Green Line. Beitar Illit has grown to 60,000 inhabitants; Modi'in Illit to 76,000. Other smaller such Haredi enclaves can be found in the towns of Elad (built in 1990), Telzstone, and Rechasim. Telzstone and Rechasim, located in the Haifa area and founded in 1951, have become increasingly Haredi as both Mizrachi and Ashkenazic yeshiva communities were established there.

## Changes in Haredi Life in and Attitudes in Israel

In Israel there have been ruptures in two central paradigms that shaped Haredi society: a crisis in the "society of learners," which is no longer considered a viable socio-economic structure;

and a fraying of the "enclave culture," due to greater engagement by Haredim with Israeli society, including in the workplace, commerce, leisure, the internet and media, civic activity, and politics. Since the 1980s, and at an increased rate in the twenty-first century, Haredi society in Israel has moved from considering itself a community under existential threat, one that is focused on survival, to feeling more self-confident and working to consolidate its power. There is a growing tendency to depart from the earlier strategy of resistance to modern culture in favor of being present and even asserting a dominant presence in wider Israeli society. The older conservative "survivalist" mode still exists, but sits alongside a move to expand Haredi cities and establish Haredi neighborhoods in mixed cities in Israel–and a broader openness to engaging secular Israeli society at large.

These trends should be seen in a wider context shaped by two major developments affecting the Jewish world at large. The first was the 1967 Six-Day War in Israel. Diaspora Jews were awed not only by Israel's massive military triumph by the striking images of Israeli religious leaders surrounded by soldiers blowing rams' horns at the Western Wall and uninhibited kippah- wearing men dancing at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Israel's victory unleashed a new sense of Jewish pride and even messianic fervor among American and Israeli Jews alike (and also among Christian evangelicals).

The land conquered in the War inspired the rise of the settler movement, Gush Emunim (Bloc of Faithful), in 1974. The settler movement pushed a resurgent brand of Orthodoxy–a new self-confident religious Zionism–to the forefront of Israeli politics. Buoyed by the immigration of Orthodox Jews to Israel from the United States (and other countries), the movement claimed the mantle of the new Zionist avant-garde. Between 1967 and 1973, upwards of 31,000 American Jews

moved to Israel, many of whom made their way to West Bank settlements such as Efrat, Ofra, Kiryat Arba, and Tekoa.

The emergence of a new activist religious Zionism contributed to the second key development, what political observers dubbed the "Overturning"(known in Hebrew as ha-mahapach). This was the moment in 1977 when long-time opposition leader Menachem Begin led his Likud party to power for the first time in Israeli history. In contrast to the previous secular left-wing Israeli governments in Israel, the election of Begin as prime minister ushered in a new moment for Orthodoxy. Whereas Israel's prior prime ministers tended to adopt a transactional and often dismissive view of Orthodoxy, viewing it as little more than a relic of the past, Begin, though himself secular, proudly drew from the well of traditional rabbinic Jewish texts and practices.

Begin's triumph was a boon to religious Zionists—and provided new opportunities for Haredim who, while included in previous government coalitions, now received added economic benefits, political encouragement, and exemptions for yeshiva students from military service. Since that time, they have remained key players in Israeli political life, although there were no Haredi parties included in the government of Naftali Bennett forged in 2021. Over the case of the last forty-five years, they, like much of Israeli Jewish society, have drifted to the right politically. As noted, they have also expanded their presence in the West Bank, as has Israel in general. Akin to religious Zionist settlers, Haredim were perfect beneficiaries of government-subsidized land. Meanwhile, for the settlers, the Haredim provided demographic heft to the settlement project.

On the surface, the bond between Haredim and religious Zionists would seem to be yet another transactional relationship. But when Haredim moved to new towns in the occupied West Bank , they began living in the world of the settlers. They shared markets, health services, *mikvaot*

(ritual baths), and *batei midrash* with settlers. The further they moved from the deeply anti-Zionist centers in Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, the less anti-Zionist narrative with which they were educated maintained a hold. West Bank Haredim shared with religious Zionists a belief in the importance of the land (for practical and spiritual reasons), and contempt for their common enemies: the Arab population and the political left. They also had a common desire to affect the political reality of Israel actively rather than quiescently. In turn, settlers often took on certain Haredi characteristics resulting in what came to be called "Hardal" Judaism, an amalgam of religious nationalism and Haredism.

Haredim have often functioned throughout their history with an identifiable enemy: the Gentile world, modernizing Jews, fellow traditionalists, and Zionists. For much of that history, the Zionists were a far bigger threat than the Arabs, who to many Haredim occupied a space outside of their ambit and were mostly irrelevant to their daily lives. By contrast, Zionism was a source of danger and contamination that threatened to uproot the very principles of the Torah.

One of the interesting turns in contemporary Haredism is the shift in enemy from the Zionists to the "Arabs." In part, this is an inescapable product of the Israelization of Haredim, including the slow, but ongoing integration of Haredi men into the Israel Defense Forces. As with many other Jews in Israel, they increasingly regard Arabs as the non-Jewish Other in their society. Those who dwell in the West Bank have also absorbed settler ideology with regard to the centrality and sanctity of the land that has then crept back into urban centers within the Green Line. What has resulted is a strong pro-Israel Haredism that would still not define itself as Zionist but that has much in common with Zionists.

## The "New" Haredim

Another recent development of note is the emergence of those who have been called the "New Haredim": a growing and diverse group of Haredim involved in academia, political activism, social media, and the internet, coupled with a commitment to maintain the community's commitment to ritual stringency. New Haredim are found on either side of the political divide, both liberal and conservative, and engage in intense social critique. They are no longer governed by a passive resistance in which they just seek to keep to themselves but instead serve as evidence of Haredi society's greater openness to integration on their own terms.

Shifts in patterns of authority and a willingness to challenge political and social structures are occurring as a result of the introduction of alternative, especially secular, sources of knowledge into Haredi society via the internet and other routes. Additionally, some communities are experiencing the rise of a "secondary leadership" tier who gain authority in addition to -- not as a replacement of-- traditional rabbinic leadership. Despite these significant changes, the impact of the New Haredim on Haredi society remains unclear. What is clear is that younger generations of Haredim are challenging the ideals, norms, and organizational structure of established Haredi authorities and institutions in an effort to reform them.

### Education

Haredim do not send their children to public schools because they want to impart their own religious and communal values through education–and also control the knowledge to which children are exposed. To maintain this control, they run their own private schools, which are perpetually underfunded and, because of the high childbirth rate, crowded. A recent survey of North American

Jewish educational institutions conducted in 2018-19 (Avi Chai Foundation, 2020) found 906 day schools, elementary through high school, with 292,172 students enrolled, a figure that had grown by 107,839 since 1998. It noted that the vast majority of this impressive growth rate "is attributable to increased enrollment in the Chassidic and Yeshiva World sectors," with nearly 70% of students coming from Haredi families. These schools are concentrated in the New York area and in New Jersey. Schools affiliated with various Hasidic groups, most of them in New York, saw enrollment grow from around 40,000 in 1998 to over 94,000 in 2018. Outside of New York, strictly Orthodox schools are more likely to accept students from modern or non-Orthodox families, or be coeducational, especially in the younger grades.

Schools for Haredi children differ from sector to sector. In Israel, North America, and the UK, girls in Hasidic schools are much more likely to receive a higher dose of secular education and gain fluency in the vernacular language than are boys, who devote most, if not all, of their time to Torah and Talmud studies. Tensions have surfaced within girls' schools, particularly between the emphasis on excellence in secular subjects and the desire to prepare girls for their roles as supporters of the family, especially if their husbands are full-time learners. Various institutions of higher learning have arisen to provide "kosher" alternatives for young women, as well as for men seeking opportunities beyond Talmud study. These include such institutions as Machon L'Parnasa in New York and technological colleges such as the Lev Academic Center in Jerusalem. These institutions aim to provide training in secular subjects deemed essential for work in jobs outside the Haredi community.

In 2011, an alumnus of a Hasidic yeshiva, Naftuli Moster, founded Young Advocates for Fair Education (Yaffed) with the aim of compelling the New York State Education Department to

enforce its requirement that nonpublic schools in New York teach a curriculum that is "substantially equivalent to that provided in the public schools." The group has had some success in gaining public attention, but it efforts have been constrained by well-organized Haredi political pressure on public officials and by the fact that parents who might otherwise support its agenda are afraid to risk having their children expelled from school, which is an important form of social control in the Haredi world.

## Poverty in the Haredi World

Because of their large family structure and educational priorities, Haredi communities in Israel and the United States have high rates of poverty and reliance on government assistance and low median income. At the same time, Haredi communities typically include very wealthy individuals, who provide assistance to their communities on a grand scale. .

Despite their low median income, Haredim face a very high cost of living, which places great strain on their ability to maintain their lifestyle. Parents stretch themselves financially to pay for a yeshivah education, while community safety nets help subsidize tuition for parents who cannot afford it. Other major costs include holiday celebrations, weddings, bar-mitzvahs, kosher food, charity, and in Hasidic communities, tithing for the rebbes.. To survive with large families, many rely on state welfare systems and government subsidy programs (which in the United States include Section 8 housing and food stamps); there are often agencies within the Haredi community that help its members apply for welfare assistance. In addition, a private charitable *Gemach* system tries to ease some of the high cost of living through interest-free loans.

Important transnational networks for charitable support also help defray some of the costs tied to maintaining a Haredi lifestyle. Parents are expected to subsidize housing costs for a new couple as part of the dowry. For those without the means, an international network of collectors travel to Jewish communities to raise funds for dowries or sick people. Whereas in the United States, support comes from a mix of public and private sources, in Israel, Haredi political parties negotiate to receive funding for their institutions as part of coalition agreements to form the government.

In the Litvish/Yeshivish community, men are increasingly dedicating themselves to full-time Torah study, and thus working less; they start off in *kollel*, and a growing number remain there as "*kley kodesh*," holy professionals, who teach Jewish studies for minimal pay, serve as scribes, or work as administrators. If the trends continues, the generation to come will not have parents and in-laws to rely on as their parents had before them.

Meanwhile, the strenuous financial burden leads many members of Haredi communities to rely on loans. Credit card debt has risen dramatically along with an increase in vulnerability to fraud. Monsey and Lakewood, home to dense ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods, rank among the twenty-five worst cities for credit card debt in the United States. The strong tradition of borrowing from within the community, through local loan societies, the *gemachim*, comes with its own set of problems. Reports document *gemachim* being used to launder money. Additionally, some *gemachim* are accessible only to men, exacerbating women's reliance on their husbands. Women in Haredi communities often lack financial independence. It is a common practice for Hasidic women's paychecks to be deposited directly in their husbands' bank accounts and to remain in their husband's control. Even when women do have access to credit cards or a joint bank account, they are often expected to defer to

their husbands on financial matters. When husbands "bank" with community fee loan societies, some wives have no means of accessing their money at all.. This places women in the Haredic community in an especially vulnerable fiscal position within their marriages and creates barriers to their ability to leave their marriage or the community.

Some Haredim in the United States, both individuals and institutions, respond to economic pressures by underreporting income and benefiting from public assistance to which their income does not entitle them. Some have used insurance policy schemes for the same purpose. While problematic in its own right, fraud of this sort illuminates vulnerabilities specific to the Haredi community. Not only do large Haredi families try hard to make ends meet; they often find themselves in a state of legal limbo. Women become stuck in abusive marriages if they are afraid of what the divorce proceedings will reveal about family finances; work that is not officially on the books deprives Haredim of protections such as unemployment benefits. Similarly, few safeguards exist to prevent discrimination and wrongful termination in Haredi institutions and businesses.

The organization of economic and family life is different in Israel, reflecting a historical dynamic that resulted in divergent social, political, and cultural infrastructures including support for male religious study, which offered a reprieve from army service. High poverty rates among Israeli Haredim are the product of a decades-long state-supported infrastructure dating back to the early days of the state and based on a tenuous work/study balance that continues to shape Haredi life. But there is increasing resistance to maintaining the same level of support. The most recent Bennett/Lapid government, which has no Haredi parties in it, is responding to growing national support among taxpayers to cut back state subsidies for Haredi men.

In Israel, most Haredi schools are affiliated either with *hinukh `atsma'i*, the independent education network of the (Ashkenazic) Agudath Israel, or with *Ma`ayan ha-hinukh ha-torani*, which serves Mizrahi communities. In 2015, more than fifty formerly Haredi individuals sued the Israeli Ministry of Education for inadequate oversight of secular studies offered by yeshivas and Orthodox schools that are recipients of state funding and therefore are subject to penalties if they do not follow the state's core curriculum. Court cases that challenge public funding for religious Jewish schools that fail to meet state standards have been filed in multiple countries, including the United States, Belgium, and Canada.

A noticeable change in Israel is that more Haredi men and women are participating in the labor force. Haredi women are employed outside the home at the same rates as their non-Haredi counterparts, and more are obtaining higher education and credentials. More are working outside the Haredi sector, and more men are working outside the yeshivah as well. Nevertheless, the Haredi population still suffers from significant poverty. In 2020 Haredim accounted for 12.9 percent of the Jewish population in Israel, whereas they made up 20 percent of the country's poor citizens. Some 44% of the country's Haredi citizens live below the poverty line—a much greater rate than the general population (19 percent). The average family with a father in yeshiva lives in poverty.

A persistent income gap separates the income level of Haredim and that of their non-Haredi counterparts (the difference for women is not as large). Haredi men have lower job market participation rates, work fewer hours, and earn lower hourly wages as compared to other Jewish men. While the overall share of Haredi women participating in the labor force is almost equivalent to non-Haredi Jewish women, their work hours, occupations, and, therefore, salaries differ significantly from the secular workforce. More than half of Haredi women work fewer than thirty-five hours per

week, in contrast to about a quarter of non-Haredi Jewish women who work similar hours. Haredi women most frequently cite childcare responsibilities as the primary reason for their part-time employment (the number of children averages over six in Haredi families). Additionally, a small majority of Haredi women work in education, which carries a lower salary than other professions that are more popular in the non-Haredi workforce. These figures might begin to shift in the coming decades, as a growing percentage of Haredi men and, especially, Haredi women engage in academic study. With the establishment in the past decade of institutions of higher education specifically tailored to Haredim, the numbers of enrolled students have increased tenfold, with women representing almost 70% of students in 2020. Almost a quarter of Haredi women are pursuing or have pursued an academic degree, compared with 15% of Haredi men. Furthermore, their subjects of study have shifted as well, with a significant uptick in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and math), especially among women.

### Changing Gender Dynamics, Marriage, and Family Life

Although recent shifts can be observed, Haredim continue to maintain boundaries between women and men in domestic and social spaces. Boys and girls have little interaction growing up. Both are socialized from an early age to follow the defined paths for Haredi men and women. Haredi marriages are arranged through a formal matchmaking (*shidduch*) system, with partners matched according to *yichus* (lineage), ethnicity, social and economic status, popularity, and religious stringencies. Marriage usually takes place at earlier ages than among Orthodox Jews, and Haredi women are expected to marry between the ages of 18-21. Love and intimacy are expected outcomes

of marriage rather than a prelude to it, in contrast to the pattern in modern secular culture and society.

Procreation is of the highest spiritual priority. The Haredi commitment to raising large families reflects a divine commandment "to be fruitful and multiply." Sexual intercourse occurs only within marriage. For Haredi women, pregnancy is a way of life, and having many children is embedded in definitions of Haredi womanhood, and a source of high social status.

In Israel, rising fertility rates have been linked to a rise in government support to the ultra-Orthodox community. These rates have recently dropped to six children per woman following a decrease in government stipends—a decrease that has hindered Haredi men's ability to devote themselves exclusively to Torah study, leading some to view the ascetic yeshiva-based ideology as an onerous burden on the average household. As poverty and unemployment ballooned, the cutbacks in government subsidies forced couples to move out of geographically central, religious neighborhoods to more peripheral, smaller communities, including settlements across the Green Line.

Economic hardships, have stoked intra-communal tensions, and are prompting far-reaching changes. While Haredi leaders continue to promote large families, anecdotal evidence suggests Haredi couples debate, critique, and doubt whether and how they should live up to the high fertility norms that are customary in their communities. These doubts also lead some to question the family ideal according to which women bear most of the economic responsibility for the home along with paid employment while men study Torah full time.

Until the 1970s, Israeli Haredi women had traditionally found employment within the safe contours of the Haredi job market, particularly as teachers and in related professions that aligned

ideologically with their role as caretakers and allowed them to balance their responsibilities as mothers and educators. In the American context, Haredi women often worked outside of their neighborhoods. Today the neighborhoods have grown so much that many Haredi women are employed by small businesses or as teachers in the extensive private Jewish school system. For Israeli Haredi women, working in the Haredi job market also ensured that they would remain within the fold, under the watchful disciplinary eye of employers, parents, and the educational and rabbinic institutions. Yet, with the rapid rise in population, with lower salaries and benefits, and with a saturated Haredi teachers' market, more women were forced to find employment "outside," sometimes even in non-gender segregated and secular workplaces. In order to meet the demand, Haredi women's education expanded to include professional training and even academic study. Covid and access to the internet have made working from the home easier and more acceptable.

Given the greater flexibility yeshivah students have in their schedules, the division of labor in the domestic sphere has also changed, with some men taking on more active roles as caretakers and contributing to housework. Though an overt rethinking of the gendering of such roles has not occurred, rabbinic leaders have been encouraging Haredi men to take more active roles in family duties to lessen the toll on their wives. Communal publications encourage men to be aware of women's emotional needs. Nevertheless, the mainstream Haredi media's message continues to present women's work as a means to enable men's learning and support families, not as an end in itself. Indeed, this new reality creates an ongoing and deepening discrepancy between the de facto reality of what Haredi women "do" and the rhetorical ideal of what a "Haredi woman" is -- a gap between who she is and who she ought to be.

There are other changes afoot in Haredi gender dynamics. Although ultimate religious authority resides with male rabbis, Israeli Haredi women often are empowered to make decisions without needing to consult with their rabbis, husbands, or doctors when they are pregnant. Because Haredi women tend to believe pregnancy and birth to be ordained by God and entrusted to them as women, they at times feel empowered to take some control over their reproductive lives, including making autonomous decisions regarding the use of contraceptives, prenatal testing, fetal ultrasounds, and other reproductive practices.

In the United States, as Haredi neighborhoods continue to grow, new employment opportunities for women and men have risen. On the one hand, more Hasidic women and men attend college and participate in specialized degree programs, something that was not acceptable decades ago. This has opened up new career avenues beyond those in local communities to include information technology, social work or, for women, work in modest fashion and the arts. On the other hand, new opportunities have also created new challenges. For example, the private Haredi ambulance corps, Hatzolah, now has a women's division, that has created tensions with the male corps. Nonetheless, the group continues to assert the need for women to serve their communities.

In the Israeli context, Haredi women's entry into "secular" spheres has had a profound impact on gender dynamics. A diverse group of Haredi women in Israel has taken up various causes related to promoting Haredi women's rights, opportunities and status. Areas of activism include leadership building, women's empowerment, legal struggles for women's political representation within Haredi parties on a municipal and national level, and running in various political races for elected office. They also collaborate with secular and modern Orthodox feminists on legal struggles and public campaigns against gender segregation in the Israeli public sphere (buses, streets,

academia, Haredi radio and media, IDF etc.), establishing support networks, raising awareness and fighting stigmas related to the plight of divorced women, domestic violence, and survivors of sexual abuse. They are also involved in struggles around access to education, including establishing new institutions, and pushing for reform in existing institutions and programs that aim to improve Haredi women's conditions in workplaces and provide access to higher quality work, better working conditions, and ensuring basic economic and social rights for disenfranchised Haredi women employees. They also work discreetly to create opportunities for Haredi women to study Torah and Talmud.

Haredi women activists are diverse, with some living in distinctly Haredi neighborhoods and cities, and others in mixed cities and towns. Their ethno-religious identifications range broadly, as do their education levels, economic position, familial status, and professional occupations. These women have developed new social networks and grassroots leadership. Some work within the Haredi community, while others have public-facing roles within a variety of social initiatives in a range of institutions. Haredi feminism has emerged as a powerful force, tackling and critiquing a myriad of social inequalities such as gender erasure and sexual violence. In 2020, the first Haredi woman, OMer Yankelevitch, was sworn in as a member of the Israeli Parliament. (Meanwhile, the in the United States, Rachel Freier, a Hasidic woman, was elected in 2016 as a Civil as well as a Criminal Court judge for the Kings County 5th judicial district in New York.) While some activists adamantly refuse any connection to "feminism," others identify as "Haredi feminists," a recently minted term whose meaning and scope is still being formed but whose aim is to challenge the power structures that limit, discriminate against, silence, and disenfranchise Haredi women in symbolic and material ways.

One key arena of activism among Haredim has been exposing and responding to sexual abuse within Haredi communities. Haredi leaders and institutions have often defended abusers and punished victims for speaking out. In recent years, however, this response has caused splintering within communities in both Israel and the United States, with activists speaking out, forming organizations, and rallying in support of victims on Twitter and social media. Against the backdrop of a widely institutionalized and normalized culture of denial, inaction, and silence surrounding sexual violence, over the last decade a new Haredi consciousness has emerged that resonates with the emergence of new movements within non-Haredi Orthodoxy, and Haredi communities outside of Israel. These movements are advanced by survivors of sexual violence, relevant professionals, activists, and functionaries, and are aidedr by alliances with state and municipal institutions. For example, Jewish Community Watch (JCW), a U.S.-based NGO, "erected" a Wall of Shame, publicizing names of alleged offenders. Organizations such as Zaakah and Amudim are also engaged today in fighting sexual abuse and providing support to sexual abuse victims in the Orthodox and Haredi communities. . Meanwhile, in 2022, Haredi women led a powerful campaign to force communal leaders to acknowledge the sexual abuse of well-known Haredi author and therapist Chaim Walder.

**New Media**

The past two decades have also seen dramatic changes on the information technology, media, and communications landscape in the Haredi world. Internet use and mobile phones have become quite common in the United States and Israel. Unlike Amish communities, Haredim embrace technological advancements provided they conform to and support religious principles and

institutions. And yet, there is a tension since many Haredi leaders have called for bans or limitations on internet use, except for purposes of economic livelihood.

In the United States, earlier adaptation of analog media, such as phones or cassettes, became part of Haredi life after initial struggles to "kasher" them (that is, to limit them to "approved" apps or filters). In the 21st century, digital media has had a similar and significant impact on Haredi life, as can be seen in the growth of local sources, Yiddish and English magazines, news programs, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. Here too, Haredi communities endeavored from the 1990s to make the internet "kosher," either through changes to content or form. By the early 2000s, Haredi dissenters began to use social media anonymously to find one another, first on the "Jewish Blogosphere," and then on other platforms and social media sites. There they critiqued, parodied, and mocked "the system," the structures of rabbinic authority and affiliated institutions. They also wrote about their changing sense of themselves and arranged to meet up in person, secretly creating new relationships and experiences as they explored their evolving ideas and feelings. Their activities created a heretical counter public that was gendered, as is all of Haredi life; women had less access to technology, fewer avenues for dissent, and fewer resources to leave or live as "hidden heretics."

As the heretical counter public grew louder, Hasidic and Yeshivish leadership in New York and New Jersey began to unite to try to control the internet, especially smartphones, which they saw as Gentile contamination. The internet was seen as a danger in many regards by leveling authority, undermining family structures, erasing gender differences, introducing pornography into peoples' lives, and wasting time that should have otherwise been spent serving God. It was seen as a source of religious doubt and an existential threat to Jewish survival. Rabbinic authorities (Yeshivish and Hasidic) and private entrepreneurs began collaborating to control access to social media specifically

through the installation of filters and by linking compliance with school attendance for children. Public events and rallies against the internet sought to display united rabbinic opposition. But in many cases, community members kept a smartphone with unfettered access in one pocket along with a filtered kosher phone in the other.

Over the course of the past decade, and even more during the pandemic, with its isolation from community members and traditional authority figures, the internet increasingly became a way to remain in touch with sympathetic others, argue with "enemies," sway public opinion, pass or even fabricate news, and create group initiatives. This prompted a wider crisis of authority in which a generational backlash of Hasidic and Yeshivish men and women in their late twenties, thirties, and early forties, who had become frustrated with the "system" and cynical for a range of reasons, rose up against the traditional hierarchy. As one Hasidic man texted, "What we're seeing now in my generation is a rebellion." This has resulted, in 2022, in a renewed fight over access to smartphones.

In Israel, rabbinic authorities had more control over the infrastructure of cell phones and were able to assert it earlier. Internet use was accompanied by filtering ISPs (internet service providers) and other means to control undesirable information, which led to an upswing in Haredi internet use. Today, mobile phones have undergone a transformation. The old kosher phones with downgraded technologies have been replaced by more contemporary smartphones with filtered apps that are adjusted to fit the needs of the Haredi individuals without breaching their moral boundaries and rhythm of life. This includes access to the popular WhatsApp and Telegram apps, which provide a key outlet for addressing everyday life, commerce, and political matters.

## COVID-19

During the coronavirus pandemic in Israel, the Haredi community made noticeably greater use of the internet. The share of Haredim using the internet for telephone or video calls doubled, from 14% in 2018-2019 to 30% in 2020. 17% of Haredim had purchased goods via the Internet in 2015; some 29% did so in 2020. These statistics reveal a striking difference between the pre-pandemic and the pandemic periods with respect to social media use. Indeed, one expert estimates that 60% of Haredim in Israel made use of the internet during the pandemic.

Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of this turn to technology during COVID-19 has been the diminution of "social capital," the relationships that are developed by interaction among people. The Haredi community is highly social; for its members, "life is with people" in the synagogue, study hall, neighborhood shops, and an endless stream of wedding celebrations and funerals. The social distancing mandated by COVID-19 lowered face-to-face interactions and replaced them with the solitariness of screens. To be sure, the community created many more forums such as WhatsApp groups, internet chat rooms, and listservs in order to maintain its life with people, and their large families and crowded home environments did not disappear.

Nevertheless, an unexpected decline in social capital impacted the authority of rabbinic leaders whose actual presence "in the room," especially in large gatherings, is an essential feature both within the community, and also in the society of learners in which the yeshivah head regularly makes an appearance. Many Haredim resisted the mandates of social distancing and the closing of their gathering places in order to protect these lines of authority, as well as to sustain a vibrant sense of community. The daily obligation to pray in the presence of a quorum of men was jeopardized; Sabbath and festival meals with friends and family were deemed off-limits, and the educational and social networks that provided care for children and the elderly people were suspended. Ultimately,

though, the impact of COVID-19 did lead to change. Recognizing that digital connections were better than no connection at all, various elements in the Haredi community relaxed rules regarding cyberspace in order to avoid a solitude that was hard to bear.

In Israel, internet access also created an anonymous space for dissent, which eroded rabbinic authority, a process that has accelerated over the past year and a half, and has led to increased participation of Haredi journalists and activist citizens, including women. Growth in internet use has spurred the establishment of Haredi news websites, particularly since 2005. These websites differ from more conservative print-media, which are guided by the communities' old elites and by a high degree of deference that is quite distinct from a Western journalistic ethos of objectivity. The rise and increased popularity of Haredi news websites led to a newfound vibrant press that was less dependent on rabbinical leaders and more on a lay public. Although these media outlets have struggled to contend with rabbinic objections, and many have ceased operations, others flourish and continue to become important informational agents in Haredi society; they form growing platforms for civil society and grassroot associations that compete for space at the heart of the community's public sphere.

In both Israel and the United States, Haredim are exposed to multiple sources of information and so are open to a more negotiated culture of meanings, data, and truths--scientific, "fake", spiritualistic, or otherwise. This arena has allowed for the growth of competing narratives---shaped both by activists, on one hand, and establishment figures, on the other--about the COVID-19 pandemic and the political crises in Israel and the United States. These two groups diverge by age and employment. They contest each other's truths, thereby revealing a widening fault line within Haredi communities. Older Haredi Twitter users tend to be establishment voices, as are

Haredi PR-type organizations. These include those employed by Agudat Israel and editors at Haredi publications such as *Mishpacha*. The speed of digital media also expands opportunities for younger Haredi users, who take advantage of anonymous yet intimate dissent, and thereby reshaping Haredi boundaries and modes of participation with society at large.

Haredim in Israel and the United States reacted variously to the call to wear masks, social distance, and get vaccinated. As a group, they were widely portrayed in the press–and not unjustifiably so–as refusing to follow public health mandates, resisting the shutdown of educational institutions, and continuing to meet in large groups in public places. The pandemic has indeed challenged long-standing community norms and expectations. Some have blamed intra-communal media outlets for not reporting the coronavirus' dangers sufficiently, while others have pointed to the ways that social distancing disrupts the core of Haredi life, which is based on fulfilling religious obligations performed in the presence of other Jews. As with other religious groups that have struggled with social distancing mandates, Haredi Jews found it difficult to close places of worship. In addition, large Haredi families depend heavily on schools and public spaces because they generally have very little space in the home.

It is important to add that the Haredi community's response to the pandemic was far from monolithic. There were rabbinic authorities such as the late Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky who openly flouted social distancing regulations or used their power to encourage the rejection of regulations. Breslover Hasidim proceeded with their annual pilgrimage to Uman, Ukraine. Some yeshivas and synagogues, however, permitted mask-wearing but did not encourage it. In these settings, social pressure often led people to drop masking in order to fit in.

There were pockets in the Israeli Haredi community that were more compliant. For example, the Ger (Gur) sect in Israel was in favor of COVID-19 vaccination. The group held outdoor *minyanim* throughout the pandemic in contrast to other sectors of the Haredi communities in Israel and abroad that flouted social distance rules. Ger wields considerable heft in Israel, politically and demographically. Its adherence to COVID-19 guidelines is a result of the Gerer Rebbe taking a strong stance on the issue along with the fact that Ger is a highly controlled community – even compared to other Hasidic sects. Another example is the Karlin-Stolin group, a more open Hasidic sect that was among the most compliant of the various Hasidic groups in adhering to COVID-19 guidelines.

Among Lubavitcher Hasidim, those who remained in Crown Heights, the home base of the group, were vaccinated at a lower rate than those who were engaged in outreach campaigns, the emissaries or shluchim whose rate was almost twice as high. Thirty-six percent of Crown Heights Lubavitchers often or always wore masks in public, while 73 percent of the shluchim did. The latter were clearly influenced by their "keruv" or outreach work, which made them understand that a refusal to vaccinate or wear masks would discourage others from visiting their Chabad Houses.

While the mainstream Ashkenazi-Haredi leadership was divided on how to cope with the pandemic, and to what extent their constituents should cooperate with state authorities, the Mizrachi-Haredi leadership of SHastook a decisive stand. Shas demanded that its adherents strictly comply with health authority directives. Also, in contrast to the wavering and equivocal messages of the Ashkenazi-Haredi leadership, the Shas spiritual and political leadership communicated directly and resolutely. A key figure was Rabbi David Yosef, son of the late spiritual leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who has become a member of Shas' authoritative rabbinical body. Rav David Yosef

appealed directly to the public through social media videos that conveyed an unequivocal message: abide by the Ministry of Health guidelines. He framed this not as a matter of adherence to the state, but as explicit obedience to the dictates of *halakhah* and its principle of preserving life. Rav David Yosef and other major rabbis in the Shas world disseminated their messages through WhatsApp groups to which Mizrachi Haredim belonged, such as those created for prayer-service scheduling, building maintenance, and family discussion. The disseminators would often accompany these videos with sayings aimed at reinforcing the message, e.g., "Must see!", the Biblical injunction "Guard your health!", and "Da'at Torah!", a term expressing deference to Torah wisdom as transmitted by major rabbinical figures.

Shas's unmediated communication with the public through social media reveals the complexity of the party's form of Haredi Judaism: while Shas displays commitment to Haredi ideological principles, it is aware of the social and communal reality from which it derives its power, namely a diverse public of yeshiva students, *ba'alei teshuva* (returnees to religious observance), people ``strengthening'' their religiosity, and observant Jews and *masorti'im* (traditionalists who are neither fully religious nor completely secular). An entire range of religious behaviors are bound together ethnically by Shas. This duality also manifests itself in the use of social media: Shas can condemn Internet use on principle and prefer traditional written communication such as notices, manifests, and pamphlets, and Torah classes, while also acknowledging social media as an important medium to be used by its rabbis. COVID-19 turned social media employed by Shas-sponsored religious outreach organizations into a major vehicle for capturing the public's attention. This did not, however, keep internal disagreements from surfacing, especially once the issue of vaccination reached the public agenda. Within the Shas movement's large and diverse camp, many rabbinical

voices expressed doubt about the vaccines. These voices resounded over social media. But these views, again, were aggressively rebuffed by the senior leadership--through social media.

In the United States some moderate Yeshivish Haredi yeshivas followed COVID-19 guidelines. In addition, some Yeshivish communities outside of New York (e.g., in Baltimore and Chicago) followed guidelines more carefully than many of those in New York, where neighborhoods such as Boro Park, Williamsburg, Kiryas Joel, and Lakewood were more flagrant in ignoring public health mandates.

There were also nascent critics among Haredim of the approach taken by community leaders. These critics viewed a lack of compliance as a failure of civic responsibility or as a prioritization of the educational system over public health. Often younger community activists took these critical positions, positioning themselves against rabbinic authorities. While the breadth and extent of the counter movement are not known, evidence from Brooklyn, Modi'in Illit, Beitar Illit, and Bnei Brak shows that some Haredim, on their own accord, decided not to send their children to school or yeshivah although they were open.

The selective hostility toward scientific authorities and healthcare professionals throughout the COVID-19 crisis indicates more than just "suspicion" on the part of Haredim. In fact, widespread and deep-seated opposition to certain kinds of secular expertise and authority figures is central to the Haredi ethos. In one sense, Haredim are not unique. Healthcare and public health education are key arenas where religious minorities and the state negotiate each other's positions with a measure of wariness toward each other, each navigating its own systems of authoritative knowledge, as well as that of others.

Indeed, despite Haredi rabbinic and popular acceptance of most kinds of medical care, public health services have struggled to engage with Haredim. In Israel and the United States, Haredi rabbis and other religious authorities serve as intermediaries between doctors who treat Haredi patients and the patients themselves. Haredi patients turn to their rabbis for advice and guidance in navigating medical care. Important distinctions separate the United States and Israel in terms of COVID-19 behavior and vaccine uptake, suggesting the need fo further research on Haredi responses to COVID-19 vaccines within different national contexts (even when considering transnational dynamics). In the United States, no major Haredi religious authority endorsed or mandated compliance with public health measures such as social distancing during COVID-19. Agudath Israel operates as an authority to support the Haredi rabbinic establishment's agenda. IN fact, the Aguda sued the state for enforcing restrictions on large gatherings in synagogues, bringing its case to the U.S. Supreme Court where it ultimately won. Those who spoke out against these violations were framed as "*moserim*"—disloyal informants. In other sectors of the Haredi community, mask-wearers were denigrated, and masks were burned.

The broader context for struggles between state public health authorities and American Haredim also highlighted the transnational component of specific national communities. For many Hasidim in New York, the intervention in Jewish circumcision rituals (especially *metsisah be-peh*) by the state in the early 21st-century cast both medical professionals and the state as threats to Orthodoxy, but also led to negative representation of Haredim in mainstream media. In addition, the 2018-2019 measles epidemic in Haredi communities in the United States and Israel foregrounded dynamics that would surface in the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of measles was enabled by the return of Haredi men (Israeli and American) from pilgrimage in Uman, who brought the disease

back with them to their respective countries, which then quickly spread among those who had declined the MMR vaccine.

While Haredim in Israel and the United States had similar responses to COVID-19 behavior, including defying public health mandates, vaccine hesitancy in the United States seems to be a more potent force in than in Israel. Jewish and non-Jewish anti-vaccine activists have worked to spread their perspective to Haredim through online and phone-in webinars and in person gatherings. The vaccine rollout in Israel went more smoothly, with the Israeli government courting Haredim with campaigns in which city workers handed out *cholent* and other foods, while offering a vaccine shot without waiting in line or for an appointment. In fact, despite their reluctance early on and their high Covid numbers, Israeli Haredim ultimately embraced vaccination.

More research is needed to understand vaccine hesitancy dynamics, with attention paid to national and transnational contexts, since some American Haredim look to rabbinic authorities in Israel and vice-versa. Exploring how parents make vaccine decisions is also important, since initial studies indicate that mothers are primarily in charge of healthcare decisions for children.

## Conclusion

Against all predictions the Haredi community enters the twenty-first century as the fastest growing sector of Jewry. Increasingly, its members have taken on more active political roles that point to a new presence in the public square in both Israel and the United States. In recent years, many Haredim were supportive of the populist, right-wing governments of Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu. They also evinced a new and quite public resistance to COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, the past year and a half—signaling what we have called the "Haredi moment"—has laid bare ongoing struggles over leadership and authority, sources of knowledge, and exposure to and

embrace of the outside world within the Haredi community. In the United States, the Haredi moment hints at a new affinity with politically powerful white Christian conservatives intent on upholding their religious liberties.. Meanwhile, in Israel, struggles over the extent of integration and the authority of the state continue in the Haredi community, with differing variations according to gender, class, and generation. The roots of these recent events are deep, extending back decades; but they exploded with new force in the year 2020, and their future implications warrant much continued observation, analysis, and research.



**Glossary:**

Agudat Israel: Literally translated as "Union of Israel." Brought together German Neo-Orthodox Jews and Polish Hasidim into a single organization in 1912. Also known as Aguda.

Ashkenazi: Jewish person of central or eastern European descent. More than 80 percent of Jewish people today are Ashkenazim.

Askunim (sometimes spelled askanim): Religious authorities.

Avrechim: Married kollel students.

Ba'alei teshuva: Returnees to religious observance.

Bais Yaakov school: a girls' school loosely affiliated with the Bais Yaakov school system founded in interwar Poland (where Hasidic girls formed the majority).

Beth Medrash Govoha: Also called "Lakewood". One of the largest advanced "higher" yeshivas in the world, with an enrollment of over 7,000 students.

"Chaptzem": Yiddish for "Grab him." The name given to street patrols that were created in response to a sharp uptick in street crime in Brooklyn in the 1960s and 1970s.

Da'at Torah: Literally translates as "knowledge of Torah." A term expressing deference to Torah wisdom as transmitted by major rabbinical figures.

Gemach: Locally organized interest-free charitable organizations for Haredim.

Halakhah: Literally translated as "the way." The code of Jewish law.

Haredi: Literally translates as "those in awe" or "those who tremble." Today refers to ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Hasidic: Literally translates as "pietist." A subgroup of Haredi Judaism that arose as a spiritual revival movement during the 18th century and spread rapidly throughout Eastern Europe.

Hefker Velt: Yiddish. Literally translates as a "lawless world," or a "world of chaos"; anarchy; chaos.

*klei kodesh*: Religious professionals who tend to receive low pay.

Kollel: Program that supports full-time study for married men with small stipends.

Machsike Hadas: Literally translated as "Upholders of the Faith." First Orthodox political party; created in 1878.

Masorti or Masortim: Traditionalists who are neither fully religious nor completely secular.

Mesivta: High schools for Haredi boys.

Minhag(im): Jewish customs.

Mizrachi(m): Jew(s) of Middle Eastern or North African origin.

Moserim: Traitors or disloyal informants.

"Neo-Orthodox" or "modern Orthodox": religious denomination, committed to a measure of social and cultural integration.

"Off the Derech": Literally means going "off the path"; refers to abandoning the practices and strictures that define Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox living.

*Posek*: Arbiter of religious law.

Seminary: post-high school education for young women that typically lasts a year or two, after which they are expected to marry.

Sephardic: Jews whose origins extend back to the Iberian peninsula.

Shas: An Israeli Haredi religious political party primarily representing the interests of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Founded in 1984 under the leadership of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the Israeli Sephardi Chief Rabbi.

*Shomrim*: Formal street patrols first created in Williamsburg and soon after in other neighborhoods that were an effort to target and reduce street crime.

"Society of scholars": A system in which most Israeli ultra-Orthodox men devote themselves to study over the course of their adult lives with state support.

Yeshivah: Elementary schools for Haredi boys; also, Talmudic academies for young men.

Yeshivish: a designation to a community that practices a commitment to halacha that is to the right of modern Orthodox but not ultra-Orthodox because of a greater willingness to interact with secular communities.