



Pray, work, study Torah

Achvat Hatorah sponsors 80 *kollels* across Israel for Haredi men who work

WHY DON'T ultra-Orthodox men work, when many of their wives do? Can modern Israel survive, when an eighth of the population – rising to one-third in two generations – remains largely aloof from society?

The answer is – increasingly, Haredi men pray, study Torah and also work. And increasingly the ultra-Orthodox community and its leading rabbis understand and accept that for those who choose to work, there need be no conflict with fervent Torah study.

A quiet revolution is sweeping through the ultra-Orthodox community. But it is somewhat fragile, in danger of being irreparably damaged by extremists on both sides of the fence, Haredi and non-Haredi.

For example, a Haredi organization known as Achvat Hatorah (Torah Brotherhood) sponsors more than 80 *kollels* (Jewish study institutes for married men) throughout Israel, designed for men who work and still want to study in a yeshiva environment. This was done with little fanfare and with very little media attention. The Haredi men work during the day and study together in the evening. They enjoy studying in *hevruta* (with fellow Torah students).

Achvat Hatorah was founded by Rabbi David Leybel and is expanding rapidly. Rabbi Leybel agreed to respond to several email questions. His assistant sent email responses, noting that Rabbi Leybel does not give media interviews.

The Jerusalem Report: When and why did you found Achvat Hatorah? How did you overcome opposition from leading Rabbis who strongly favor full-time yeshiva study?

Achvat Hatorah: “It was founded four years ago as a local initiative. I encountered a few of my students who had joined the work force. They had no *beit midrash* (study hall) at which to study. Thus, I became aware of the extent of the problem. Yeshiva graduates wanted to continue to study [after they begin to work] but had no way to do so. Our project continues to grow

and today has more than 80 *batei midrash*.

“We encountered no opposition in establishing Achvat Hatorah. Achvat Hatorah does not go against the *Gedolei Yisrael* [the leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis] because it tries to solve what is an existing fact of life. Those who decided to go out to work, and thus were separated from the *batei midrash*, found a solution in the *batei midrash* of Achvat Hatorah.”

The Report: For the past three years the percentage of ultra-Orthodox men in the labor force has declined somewhat. Three years ago, it was about 50%. Today it is less. What is the reason, in your opinion?

Achvat Hatorah: “I don’t believe there has been a decline. On the contrary – there is an increase in the numbers [of ultra-Orthodox men] who go out to work or to gain education. The main problem is there are many [Haredi] dropouts in academe, because of the way students are taught and take exams, something to which they were not accustomed during their years in yeshiva.”

The Haredi website Kikar HaShabat reports that today some 1,552 men study at Achvat Hatorah *kollels*, up from 247 in its first year of operation. Rabbi Leybel hopes to double the number of Achvat Hatorah students soon. And he has support from a surprising source – MK Moshe Gafni, powerful chair of the Knesset Finance Committee and a leader of the United Torah Judaism party.

Gafni told the annual gathering of Achvat Hatorah: “Some [Haredi men] who go out to work to make a living are called into question. These are “new Haredim” they say. No, they are not new Haredim. They are the Haredim who have maintained the Torah perspective. I too am a working Haredi! ...If you accept me, I too will join your group!”

On a Friday in June, at an Achvat Hatorah gathering at Jerusalem’s International Convention Center (Binyanei Ha’uma), a

working Haredi man told Haaretz reporter Aaron Rabinowitz, “He [Rabbi Leybel] lifted us into the air...it’s the first time there’s someone who’s come and said to us [working Haredi men] that we’re equals, that we’re not second-rate.”

I asked Rabbi Leybel and Achvat Hatorah about their position on the new Conscription Law. The spokesperson declined to comment, saying the issue was far too complicated for a short answer. And indeed it is.

The proposed new Law for Military Conscription is now being fiercely debated in the Knesset. This law and its predecessors are a classic study in how not to integrate the ultra-Orthodox.

The so-called Tal Law (named after the former Supreme Court justice Tzvi Tal, who headed a committee appointed by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak) was passed by the Knesset on July 23, 2002. The Law expired after five years and was renewed. It called for yeshiva students at age 22 to choose between a 16-month military service or a one-year civilian national service.

Several motions against the law were filed with the Supreme Court on the grounds that it was severely discriminatory between Haredim and non-Haredim, who do compulsory service for three years. On Feb. 21, 2012, the Supreme Court declared the law invalid for that reason.

Though flawed, the Tal Law was accepted by the ultra-Orthodox community and under it, recruitment of yeshiva students began to rise. By invalidating it, the Supreme Court has generated a new fierce controversy, which threatens the existence of the coalition government. Current practices, which jail some ultra-Orthodox “draft dodgers” who fail to report for IDF service, or even request an exemption, are highly counterproductive, and only make things worse.

The Supreme Court has set a September deadline for the government to submit a new law replacing the Tal Law. Prime Minister Netanyahu may ask for an extension; experts think only a short extension, if at all, will be granted.



An Achvat Hatorah *kollel* study group

Does the IDF really need Haredi soldiers? It surely does! According to Haaretz reporter Hagai Amit, in 1990 fully three-quarters of young Israelis who qualified for service were drafted; in 2017 the percentage fell to less than two-thirds, and it is declining.

According to Amit, the new proposed Conscription Law calls for enlisting 3,348 Haredi men in 2018, out of the 10,000 who reach draft age, while another 648 will do civilian national service – a total of 3,996. That number, under the new law, will rise to 5,737 by 2027. The IDF does need those Haredi soldiers.

To understand why many leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis fiercely protect full-time yeshiva learning and oppose the draft, we need to go back in history to the Shoah.

The ultra-Orthodox community in Europe was decimated. The rabbis who survived debated how to rebuild. Their response: Fierce focus on full-time yeshiva learning. And, on their terms, it worked.

The post World War II Haredi leaders decreed that to rebuild the Jewish people you have to rebuild Torah. Their most influential leader, known as the *Chazon Ish* – Rabbi Avraham Karelitz – was quoted as saying, “Two generations of full-time learning are necessary to rebuild from the ashes of Europe.” That value has now been deeply ingrained in the ultra-Orthodox DNA.

Three generations have passed. So far it has worked. Why not maintain it?

Ultra-Orthodox men living in the US and Europe largely do work and study, as well. They do so, because their governments do not support them. Full-time yeshiva study in Israel is possible only with government stipends. And those stipends are lubricated by ultra-Orthodox political parties holding the balance of power in the current government coalition.

Someone once defined economics as the science of incentives. According to a report by the Israel Democracy Institute, workforce participation among ultra-Orthodox women rose, between 2002 and 2014, from 50% to 73%, and for ultra-Orthodox men, from 35% to 52%. But in 2015 and 2016, the steady rise has stagnated. Why? “... Policies of the current government, which reduced incentives to enter the workforce and increased support for full-time yeshiva students.” Why not study Torah full-time if you are paid to do so? Party politics skewed the incentive to work in the wrong direction.

Full-time yeshiva learning demands either massive government resources or abysmal poverty. The average monthly income of an ultra-Orthodox household is 12,616 shekels, a third lower than other Jewish households. Per capita, the gap is huge – 2,168 shekels for Haredim compared with

5,876 for non-Haredi Jews. But the poverty rate among the ultra-Orthodox is falling, thanks to increased workforce participation. Some 45% of Haredim were poor in 2016, the lowest percentage in a decade.

Achvat Hatorah reflects the growing recognition among the ultra-Orthodox that abject poverty is not a viable long-term option.

Today, there are a million ultra-Orthodox in Israel, or about one person in every eight. By 2030, that proportion will rise to one in six, and by 2065, one in three, or 40% of the Jewish population. So, there is simply no choice. Non-Haredi and Haredi communities must live together, cooperate and communicate.

We need to prevent debacles, like the annulment of the Tal Law. We need to understand Haredi values and find ways to integrate Haredim into productive society, without impairing their core Torah values. We need more role models – like Yehuda Sabiner, a Gur Hasid, final-year Technion medical student, who says he “maintains his Hasidic identity as a family man deeply involved with the community.” Yehuda says he is “proud of the Divine opportunity given him to reach the end of his medical studies that were challenging, full of ups and downs and great uncertainties.” Yehuda will be the first Haredi to graduate from Technion as an MD. We hope for many more.

Above all, the secular political opportunists like Yair Lapid, who try to leverage anti-Haredi sentiment for narrow political interests, must be restrained. Perhaps Achvat Hatorah can show the way forward for us all.

The Report: Are you likely to enter the world of politics?

Achvat Torah: “No!” ■

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