
The Best of Both Worlds? Rabbi Menachem Bombach, Educational Reform, and the Quest to Integrate Ultra-Orthodox Jews into Israeli Society

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Introduction

Rabbi Menachem Bombach grew up in a sheltered, tightly-knit Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood in Jerusalem, where the community was strong and always ready to support one of its members. But despite growing up here, Bombach is not welcome by all. Today, he cannot enter his childhood neighborhood without being harassed and even assaulted upon being recognized. Ever since August 2014 when he founded Midrasha Hassidit, an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish school that educates boys in both secular and religious studies, Bombach has become an incredibly controversial figure in the Ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, community. Me'ah She'arim, Bombach's childhood neighborhood, is reminiscent of a pre-WWII Eastern European shtetl. Me'ah She'arim is the epitome of the traditional Haredi Jewish lifestyle, where men wear long black coats and hats and women wear at least knee-length dresses and stockings year-round, where Yiddish is spoken rather than Hebrew, where life revolves around strict adherence to Jewish law, prayer and practice. To some in this Ultra-Orthodox community, Bombach represents a heretical

movement that strays from tradition and threatens to wipe out the Haredi community. But to others, he is leading the way towards integration into society and a better quality of life for Haredim.

This paper will discuss the significance of Netzach educational network, Haredi schools that include secular studies, analyze the implications of the community reaction to Netzach, and examine the role of such schools in the future of the Haredim in Israel.

This paper draws upon a wide variety of sources, but is based mainly on a documentary featuring interviews with Bombach and students of the yeshiva as well as an interview with Menachem Bombach himself. In addition to these main sources, other sources such as newspaper articles, journal articles, op-eds, and statistical reports were used as supplements to research for this paper.

This paper will begin by providing an overview of the Haredi lifestyle and practices in Israel, focusing on traditional Haredi education conventions. This section will discuss the growing issues within the Israeli Haredi community and the challenges presented by the Haredi education system. The next section of the paper will describe the relatively new style of Haredi education that provides secular education in addition to religious education, and focus on the benefits of this type of schooling. It will explain how these new educational networks are helping bridge the gap between the Haredi world and the outside world, helping them shift into inevitable integration. The paper will then go on to analyze different reactions to this school and the extent to which they reflect the true feelings of the Haredi community. It will conclude that the Haredi world is splitting into two directions, one a more moderate and integrated version of the current community, and the other a more radicalized version, and that Haredi educational networks including secular studies are leading the way for the former.

Background

Haredim, a sect of ultra-orthodox Jews that make up 12 percent of the

population in Israel,¹ are often defined in the minds of secular Jews by the way they dress. Though each sect has their own variation of acceptable dress, the typical dress for men is a full black suit and white shirt, black shoes, and a version of a black hat over a black *yarmulke* (brimless head cap). Women wear long sleeves and thick stockings underneath long skirts, and high necklines. Haredi men often have beards and long sidelocks called *peyot*, and married Haredi women cover their hair, sometimes with a wig, and sometimes with a scarf or other method.

While Haredim may seem homogenous to outsiders unacquainted with their culture, there is a surprisingly large amount of diversity in the many sects within this religious group. Sects are divided into Hasidic sects, Litvishe-Yeshivish sects, and Sephardic sects, each of these containing many sub-sects and differing significantly from one another. Because of this spectrum of diversity, there is not one, concrete definition of what it means to be Haredi. For the purposes of this paper, I will define Haredim as Ultra-Orthodox Jews who strictly adhere to religious law and are characterized by their isolation from secular society. It is also important to differentiate between Haredi Judaism, which remains isolated from secular society, and Modern Orthodox Judaism, which is relatively open to secular society. This paper focuses on the former, not the latter.

To understand Haredi culture is to go deeper than the attire. Haredi lifestyle revolves around religion, family and community. The Torah and is regarded as the principal determining consideration in all matters of life, and Haredim often consult their rabbi (Jewish religious leader) when making important decisions. Education is valued in these communities; the majority of Haredi men dedicate their entire adult lives to studying the Torah, leaving the role of primary breadwinners to women. Typically, Haredi families are larger than non-Orthodox families with as many as 12 or more children per family. Most Haredim live in neighborhoods mostly or exclusively populated by other Haredi families, in tight-knit communities that share the same

religious values and practices. Living in Haredi neighborhoods allows them to enjoy a close community, but it also functions, in part, to separate them from things they deem inappropriate. Haredi communities typically have negative attitudes towards excessive contact with the outside world, seeing too much outside influence as endangering their way of life. Interaction with the non-Haredi society is limited to varying extents. Most Haredi households do not have televisions. In Haredi households with access to Internet, which is considered dangerous and corrupting, it is filtered to prevent exposure to pornography, secular or heretical ideas, and other content considered indecent. In this way, their communities are able to preserve their lifestyle and remain untainted by the secular world. Typically, Haredim do not hold Zionist values. Most Haredim disregard national Israeli days, such as the national day of the Holocaust, or Remembrance Day to commemorate Israel's fallen soldiers. Unlike secular Jewish Israeli citizens, Haredim are not required to serve in the Israel Defense Forces, and although a small but increasing amount of Haredim are choosing to do so, most do not. In this way, they separate themselves from secular Israeli Jews and Zionists, an important distinction for them. This is often seen by secular Israeli Jews as disrespectful, something that creates even more distance between them and Haredim.

For this paper, it is critical to understand the modern Israeli education system, and how traditional Haredi education conventions fit into it. In Israel, schools are split into four types — state, Arab and Druze, state-religious and independent — in order to serve a diverse population with different needs.² This four-school system is meant to meet the needs of Israel's diverse population, but the separation results in lack of contact between the segments of Israeli society, as students in each system have no contact with each other. State schools teach mostly secular Jewish students secular subjects in Hebrew, Arab and Druze schools teach Israel's Arab and Druze population similar subjects in Arabic while emphasizing Arab history, religion and culture, state-religious schools teach mostly Modern Orthodox Jewish students secular

subjects and additional religious studies, and private independent schools, called *chinuch atzmai*, can take on different roles depending on the school. Some *chinuch atzmai* schools reflect certain parental ideologies (for example, Democratic Schools) or are based on a different country's curriculum (for example, the American International School in Israel), but most *chinuch atzmai* schools in Israel are religious-independent schools that serve Haredi girls.

These Haredi *chinuch atzmai* schools are recognized by the state, because girls are generally taught the standard curriculum including math and English—reasonably because they will most likely go on to provide for the family while their husband studies Torah. Boys learn in schools that are partially funded by the state, but are operated by religious institutions unaffiliated with the state. These are not considered *chinuch atzmai*. Elementary-aged Haredi boys are enrolled in a *cheder*, where they are taught Torah in addition to a small portion of the secular curriculum—enough to ensure that they are literate and have a basic grasp of general studies such as arithmetic—before moving on to yeshiva, where education shifts to intensive Torah study only. They typically remain in yeshiva until marriage, at around age 23.

Despite having larger families, the average income for a Haredi family is 35 percent less than a non-Haredi family, and the difference between the per capita income of Haredim and non-Haredim is even greater, at 171 percent. Only 65 percent of this income comes from employment compared to 78 percent among other Jewish households. Almost half of Haredim live under the poverty line, due to the fact that only about half of men and three quarters of women work, and of those who do work, most work in part-time jobs offering lower salaries.³ This is a huge economic concern for the state of Israel, which pays Haredi men, many of whom may never be a part of the workforce, a monthly stipend to study Torah. Many of these growing issues within Haredi society can be traced back to the aforementioned education

system, in which boys learn only a basic level of general subjects.

These are the consequences of stopping general studies in pursuit of only religious studies in the eighth grade or earlier. To continue higher education in Israel, students must pass matriculation exams, called *bagrut*, which test general subjects such as English, mathematics, world history, and various electives including the sciences.⁴ In Israel, *bagrut* scores are considered to be incredibly important in attaining employment and higher education. But to prepare for a *bagrut* requires years upon years of studying math, English, history, and more. Only 10 percent of students in Haredi frameworks earned a matriculation certificate in 2013, compared to 70 percent of students in non-Haredi frameworks. Of these Haredi students who earned certificates, the large majority were girls.⁵ This makes sense, because Haredi boys stop learning general subjects covered on the *bagrut* in the eighth grade, and therefore would not have the skills required to earn a *bagrut*. Not having a *bagrut* certificate to prove competence in these subjects makes it more than difficult to get a job. Simply put, the Haredi school system does not prepare Haredi students with the tools they need to participate in the workforce. This inability of a large population of the country to contribute to the workforce poses a huge concern for Israel, economically and socially.

An Alternative Option

The aforementioned Rabbi Menachem Bombach, who grew up in the Ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem community of Me'ah She'arim, is a direct product of the traditional Haredi education system. Only after searching for employment and being hired as a counselor at a boarding school, he realized the extent of what he did not know. After catching up on his own education, he decided to found an academic preparatory course for Haredim in similar situations at Hebrew University. This preparatory course was meant to help Haredim who have received their education at a traditional Haredi school fill in the inherent knowledge gaps that came with years of studying only religion,

with the end goal of attaining a degree and integrating into the workforce. But it became clear that these gaps were far too large; it was too difficult for many of the grown students, a majority of whom were already married, to learn these basic concepts, and many gave up. The problem, it appeared, needed to be prevented rather than treated.⁶

This realization motivated him to search for some way to satisfy the practical educational needs of Haredi children, while providing them with the equally important spiritual education that no Haredi is willing to abandon. The issue here was how to walk on the fine line between studying secular studies for economic benefit, and moving closer to a secular lifestyle. To convince Haredim to study secular studies, he had to ensure that the spiritual aspects of Haredi education would not be compromised for this. From this need for the best of both worlds, Bombach opened Netzach education network, an option for Haredi parents to send their child to a place where they learn religious studies in the morning, and secular studies in the afternoon.⁷ The network is made up of both boys' and girls' schools. This type of education allows Haredim to maintain their devout lifestyle, without ignoring the need to teach secular subjects and prepare students for practical life. Most importantly, education at Midrasha Hassidit and similar schools enables Haredi students to earn a coveted bagrut certificate - 90 percent of graduates from 2017 were able to earn a full certificate.⁸

Outstandingly, Bombach's Midrasha Hassidit does not shy away from discussing taboo topics, such as Zionism, Israeli Remembrance Day, and individuals who choose to leave the Haredi lifestyle. These topics are complex and often covered up in the Haredi world, but the school chooses to address them rather than ignoring them. This willingness to even discuss topics like these shows huge strides in the potential integration of Haredim into secular society. While some parents of students disagree with this, this open discussion is the price they must pay for a quality education and a better chance in life for their child.

It is important to note that Midrasha Hassidit and other Netzach institutes are not alone. While Netzach is the biggest player, there are others who have created similar schools with similar levels of success. The previous Minister of Education, Shai Piron, also made an initiative to create state-funded schools for Haredim, similar to those of the Netzach network.⁹ These schools require Haredim to study these secular studies, but allow them to study religion as well, with the same goal: integration into the workforce, and eventually into society. The difference here is that these schools are supervised by the Ministry of Education in Israel, while schools such as the ones in the Netzach network are independently supervised.

The significance of an option like this cannot be understated. This new way of education is challenging the norm, revolutionizing and redefining the arena of Haredism to include academia. Haredim are the fastest-growing population in Israel, with a growth rate four times that of non-Orthodox Jews. Twelve percent of Israel's population in 2015, they are expected to constitute 27 percent of Israel's population by 2059 (this is in part due to the high fertility rate of Haredim, 6.9 children per woman as opposed to 3.1 in the general population).¹⁰ This means that a massive portion of Israel's population is going through an educational system that does not provide them the tools to participate in the workforce and renders them unemployable. Not only does this threaten the Israeli economy, it is also incredibly detrimental to the people that are left unequipped to provide for their families. An exponentially growing population that once had no choice but to live in poverty and sometimes unemployment, or leave their family and lifestyle, is being offered an option to live the full spiritual life they are unwilling to abandon while receiving the education they deserve.

A Community Reacts

The founding of Midrasha Hassidit and similar institutions stunned the Haredi world. The initial reaction was one of hate and fear. Opponents of the

schools accused them and anyone who supported them of being “heretic,” “soul trappers,” “evil villains” and “gentiles”; they called for leaders like Bombach to “take [his] hands off of Jewish boys,” believing that he wishes to convert them. Haredi protesters demonstrated outside of Bombach’s house and the school, threatening violence. A flyer read: “Fire is burning in our city. In our city, there is a dangerous nest in the garb of a Hassidic Midrasha that forces boys of the city to convert. Go and demonstrate, and lift your voices in protest to expel this affliction from our midst. Who knows what dangers and disasters, Heaven forbid, we will prevent by our protests.”¹¹ This opposition continues today, and is not limited to words and threats; sometimes, Bombach and his family are confronted with physical violence.

Due to media coverage of this strong and sometimes violent resistance to the school, it may seem that there is a general consensus in the community that these schools are negative. But if we look past this overwhelmingly visible opposition, we can see that the majority of Haredim remain silent. Today, there are above 300 Haredi children, both boys and girls, enrolled in the Netzach educational network. Within the next three years, they hope to enroll more than 1,000.¹² Another similar school reported that after receiving negative exposure to the Haredi press, not only did no current students cancel their enrollment, but the school actually received eight more applications.¹³ There is a high demand for schools like these. *Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper, reported that there are actually not enough spaces in the state-run Haredi schools to keep up with the demand. In the past year, according to ministry education figures, the enrollment in these schools has increased from 4,675 in 36 institutions in 2017, to 5,562 students in 43 institutions in 2018.¹⁴

Looking at the bigger picture, we can see that these criticisms come from a specific, radical and very vocal group, not representative of the opinions of the entire community. A Haredi research institute found that 48 percent of Haredim agreed that academic studies are worth the investment, and that higher education improves a person’s earning ability.¹⁵ This same study also

found that the most admired professions in the Haredi world are hi-tech, law, health, and accounting.

This goes to show that the Haredi attitude towards secular education is slowly changing.^{16,17} Haredim are beginning to realize that it is possible to integrate into secular society without compromising their values.¹⁸ Thus far, no student from Midrasha Hassidit has left the Haredi community for a secular lifestyle, which is a great success in the eyes of those who want to prove that a secular education does not mean renouncing religion. Regardless of their stance on whether integration means secularization, Haredim may no longer have a choice but to accept the fact that integration is inevitable. A study found that a quarter of Haredi families suffer from food insecurity, and the share of Haredi children defined as poor is extremely high.¹⁹ With wages and employment levels well beneath the average secular Jew, Haredi families desperately need a solution. Simply put, they may not be able to afford not integrating.

Not only is it almost impossible financially to remain isolated and work only within the Haredi community, but advancements in technology are making it so that no amount of Internet filters can prevent outside information from reaching the community. Once, they were able to put up a wall to block out the world. But today's internet and smartphones have broken down the wall that separates Haredim from the rest of Israel. Because of this new reality, it is nearly impossible for Haredim to shield themselves from the outside world. In an interview with Rabbi Bombach, he told me:

The Haredim must integrate into secular society. There's no way around it. I'm not talking about merging into the same society. But there is a common good. This means that different people, with different emphasis, with different essences - each one can live together in a society, with common interests.²⁰

Analyzing the reactions to integration and this new approach to education reveals important truths about the Haredi community in Israel.

The statistics show that in recent years, Haredim are integrating more and more into society. The rate of Internet use in this community continues to increase, rates of employment are rising, and more and more Haredim are pursuing higher education than ever before.²¹ There is even a moderate Haredi political party, called Tov, which defines itself as an “address for people [who are] involved in society while not compromising their Haredi identity.”²² A large portion of the community is realizing the need for modernization and is taking steps to get there. But, there is still a significant group that furthers itself even more from secular culture in fear of merging with it. This is the group that opposes steps towards integration such as the Netzach school network and the state-run Haredi schools. Slowly, the Haredi community may see a split into distinct groups, that no longer identify with one another: one moderate, more integrated into secular society, and the other a by-product of this, a group that lashes back and pulls away even harder in response to this integration. This second group may become even more isolated, more extreme in its strict adherence to literal translation of Jewish law in an attempt to counter the modernization.

Conclusions

This traditionally isolated community is ready to come out of its shell, and these schools are paving the way for that. This divide in reactions to the new way of education poses many questions about the Haredi community. Will these schools solve the disproportionate poverty faced by Haredim and lead them to perfect integration into secular society? Most likely not. At least not right now. These are just first steps in a long process that must eventually occur if Haredim are to continue living as part of a greater society. But these steps are critical ones, showing that it is possible to integrate into secular society and still remain Haredim; they do not need to choose between succeeding economically and assimilating into a non-religious lifestyle, as the opponents of Netzach fear. Backlash is reflective of an internal division in the

Haredi society about the future of the sect. In the future, we may very well see a split in the community, between those who are willing to take steps towards integration, and the more unwilling who resist, who may become even more radical in their ways.

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Endnotes

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