

Ultraorthodox Jews in Israel – epidemic as a measure of challenges

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In Israel as in other countries, when the COVID-19 epidemic surfaced it exacerbated the existing divisions and tensions in society. A group that came under severe attack from the public was the Jewish Ultraorthodox population (the *Haredi*). This was due to disregard on the part of certain ultraorthodox groups of the restrictions imposed in response to the epidemic and an exceptionally high infection rate in that community – as much as 70% of cases recorded from February until May this year affected members of that community.¹

This non-conformity with the regulations by some *Haredi* (in fact a distinct minority) resonated broadly because it was an element of a decades-long heated dispute over the state's approach towards the group and its place in Israeli society. Over the years, the issue has repeatedly caused severe shockwaves (including collapse of government coalitions). The stance adopted by the *Haredi* during the initial phase of the epidemic provided critics of the *Haredi* with new arguments that they are *de facto* a law unto themselves, and as a result are becoming increasingly socially and politically problematic. While COVID-19 cannot be expected to significantly change the subjects under debate, the arguments used in the debate, or the balance of power, it will make the dispute even more complex than before the epidemic and lead to greater polarisation. This will further complicate Israel's efforts to meet challenges posed by the rapid increase in the community's population. The members of the community wish to separate from the rest of society, mistrust state structures, and make a negligible contribution to the national economy or for example to defence, being practically exempt from military service. At the same time, they are gaining more and more influence over public life due to powerful political representation.

Characteristics of the Ultraorthodox community

Israeli society is mosaic in nature, and is principally divided into the Jewish population (approximately

74%), Arab population (21%) and others (5%)². The Jewish majority can be divided further into numerous subgroups according to ethnic criteria (descent), and religious and political criteria. This is manifested not only in Israel's plainly visible cultural diversity, but also for example in the

¹ 'God is telling us something': Deri says 70% of Israel's virus cases are Haredim, *The Times of Israel*, 10.05.2020, www.timesofisrael.com.

² 'Israel's population at 9,136,000 on the eve of 2020', *The Jerusalem Post*, 1.01.2020, www.jpost.com.



political landscape, in which there are a range of formations associated with a very specifically and permanently defined group of voters (such as the Russian-speaking population).

The Ultraorthodox Jewish community is made up in total of approximately 1.1 million people, represents approximately 12% of the population (thought to be approximately 1% in 1948), and is one of the most distinctive groups in Israel's social landscape. The *Haredi* primarily inhabit the densely populated districts of Jerusalem, Bene Beraq (outside Tel Aviv), Bet Shemesh (outside Jerusalem) and many smaller towns. To outsiders, their separate identity from the rest of society is plain to see. They are distinguished by their historical dress, live in tight clusters, remain at a distance from the secular community, and lead a collective way of life governed by religious law. Community life is centred around institutions such as the educational institution (*yeshiva*) or the synagogue.

Rejection of the secular world and secular education, and creation of enclaves and, more broadly, a kind of cultural introversion, make the *Haredi* stand out from other groups of religious Israelis whose religious devotion does not prevent them from functioning in the secular world or exclude Israeli patriotism. The religious Zionists, who combine a high level of religious practice and radical nationalism, contrast with the *Haredi* the most in this regard, and at the same time have an extraordinarily powerful impact on public discourse in Israel. One of the ways in which the religious Zionists' radical nationalism is exhibited is the active settlement movement on the West Bank. For the *Haredi*, it is vital to be separate from the world to protect continuous study of the Torah from the destructive influence of modernity. In this sense, they consider themselves not only as not shirking their responsibilities towards the rest of society; they are the *de facto* custodians of true Jewishness, which they preserve for the rest of the Jewish world³.

³ See N. Leon, *The Haredi-Secular Debate and the Shas Approach* [in:] *Handbook of Israel: Major Debates*, vol. 1, Berlin – Boston 2016.

The separate identity of Ultraorthodox people from the rest of society is also clear from statistics. The *Haredi* have a high level of population growth. On average, there are seven children per woman, while the average for the overall Jewish population in Israel (and the Arab population as well) is three⁴. As a result, the *Haredi* are a community that is distinctly younger than the rest of society: almost 60% are aged below 19, while only 3% are over 65. Among other Jews, 30% are aged below 19, and 15% are aged over 65. If the current demographic trends continue, the community will double in number within fifteen years⁵. At the same time, despite the high percentage of people of productive age, only half of Ultraorthodox men, and three quarters of women, are gainfully employed on any basis⁶. The low level of occupational activity and lack of secular education mean that the *Haredi* mostly live moderately or in poverty. In turn, cultural differences are demonstrated for example by the fact that compared to the rest of Israel's Jewish citizens, among Ultraorthodox members of society, the number of people who use the Internet (often only at work or with filters switched on) or hold a driving licence is two times lower, and the number who travel abroad is three times lower⁷. These differences continue to be highly visible, even though over the last decade there has been a significant increase in each of these categories among the *Haredi*.

” The Ultraorthodox Jewish community is one of the most distinctive groups in Israel's social landscape.

However, despite the highly perceptible boundary distinguishing the Ultraorthodox community from the rest of Israeli society, which may give the impression that they are homogenous, the group is

⁴ See Y. Stern, 'Who Are The Ultra-Orthodox Jews Of Israel?', *Forward*, 8.01.2018, www.forward.com; O. Aderet, 'For the First Time in Israel's History, Jewish Fertility Rate Surpasses That of Arabs', *Haaretz*, 31.12.2019, www.haaretz.com.

⁵ G. Malach, L. Cahaner, *2019 Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel: Highlights*, The Israel Democracy Institute, 24.12.2019, en.idi.org.il.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ 49% of adult Ultraorthodox people use the Internet, 44% hold a driving licence, and 17% have been abroad. The same figures are 89%, 81% and 51% for other Jewish citizens of Israel. For: *ibidem*.

exceptionally diverse, does not have centralised leadership, and is split along numerous dividing lines. These dividing lines may reflect descent, a cultivated religious tradition, membership of a particular religious community, or the following of a specific spiritual leader. In addition, the *Haredi* do not hold uniform views on fundamental issues related to world view, such as their attitude towards the secular world, modernity, or even the State of Israel. With regard to the latter, the attitudes range from complete rejection to full affirmation, with numerous positions in between⁸. The most fundamental distinctions within the Ultraorthodox community – such as differentiation between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Judaic rites, or between the Chasidic and Litvak communities (within the Ashkenazi rite) – are common knowledge, but most of them for example differences between individual strands of Chasidism are only intelligible to the people concerned.

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In political life, the *Haredi* are represented by two formations – United Torah Judaism (Ashkenazi) and Shas (Sephardic). Thanks to a disciplined voter group, these formations regularly gain a combined vote of between 10% and 15% of seats in the Knesset. They do not aspire to gaining independent rule or to a major impact on aspects of state policy that do not directly affect the communities they represent. Instead, they focus on protecting the material and symbolic interests of their supporters, for instance providing social benefits and protecting young men from being drafted into the army (Ultraorthodox women are exempt *a priori*). This approach makes the Ultraorthodox parties relatively predictable, and therefore a stable and attractive coalition partner (especially in a situation in which there are traditionally government coalitions made up of multiple parties). As a result, one or both of these formations have

helped form seven out of eight governments in Israel in the last twenty years. In the first phase of the epidemic, Ultraorthodox politicians Yaakov Litzman and Aryeh Deri held the posts of minister of health and interior minister. When the new government was formed on 17 May, the former was appointed minister of construction, and the latter remained in his current post.

Course of the epidemic among the *Haredi*

The first case of infection with SARS-CoV-2 in Israel was discovered on 21 February. Only a few days later, the authorities began introducing restrictions on cross-border individual movement, and from the first half of March far-reaching restrictions on public gatherings, commerce, and operations of educational institutions, and regarding lockdown, came into force. The epidemic-related restrictions became most stringent at the beginning of April and remained in that form until the beginning of May.

Even though the two ministries crucial for the fight against COVID-19 were headed by Ultraorthodox politicians, who in theory had especially close ties to their communities – the *Haredi* were distinctly tardy in their response, and some intentionally ignored the restrictions and continued studying in the yeshivas, holding prayers collectively, attending weddings and funerals, and so on. When, in mid-March, the state authorities announced that schools would be closed, the top religious authoritative figures of the Ultraorthodox world protested against the closure of the yeshivas, arguing that constant study of the Torah ensures the community spiritual protection. It was not until approximately two weeks later that there was a change in the rabbis' position⁹, and a vast majority of the *Haredi* complied with the government decisions. There were further cases of serious breach of epidemic-related restrictions and of clashes with police through April and May, but

⁸ L. Cahaner, *The Ultra-Orthodox Community on the Conservatism-Modernism Spectrum*, The Israel Democracy Institute, 31.05.2019, en.idi.org.il.

⁹ 'PSAK HALACHA: HaRav Chaim Kanievsky: "Assur To Daven In A Minyan', Din Rodeif To Anyone Who Violates Health Ministry Directives"', *The Yeshiva World*, 29.03.2020, www.theyeshivaworld.com.

these were confined to local areas and concerned a minority (although reported on by the media). For example, on the eleventh and twelfth of May, photographs were circulated in the Israeli media of large groups of Ultraorthodox people gathering in public places to light bonfires to celebrate Lag B'Omer. This was severely criticised by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said that the sanitary regulations would be more stringently enforced in the *Haredi* districts, and this would also involve dispersal of crowds by force¹⁰.

As a result of the neglect and violations described above, the effect of the epidemic on the Ultraorthodox community was disproportionate to its percentage share in society and low average age. Seventy percent of those infected were *Haredi* (figures for mid-May) and their residential areas were the main points of outbreak of Coronavirus in the country. At the beginning of April, the city of Bene Beraq – the ninth largest city in Israel, and the city with the second highest number of cases – was placed in lockdown, and a range of Ultraorthodox districts in Jerusalem followed¹¹. At the same time, other *Haredi* concentrations, such as the cities of Bet Shemesh, Elad, or Modi'in Illit, each recorded more cases than Tel Aviv, even though the total number of residents of these cities is only approximately half of that of Tel Aviv¹².

There are many reasons for the *Haredi* in Israel (like the Ultraorthodox communities in the US or UK as well, in fact) being affected more by COVID-19 than the rest of society. First of all, the epidemic spread quickly due to many conditions related to the community's lifestyle: the residential estates are among the most densely populated in Israel, there is a high number of children per family, and dwellings are small. In addition, life in the group revolves around communal religious rituals, which

have to be observed for the group to function properly. The slow response to instructions given by the authorities was also due to a high level of isolation from the outside world, which means not only not using secular information sources, but also not making use of devices through which information could have been obtained, such as smartphones, computers, or television. Equally, most *Haredi* are mistrustful of state institutions and fear attempts at outside interference in the life of the community. The issue that is most controversial and most difficult to judge is the personal accountability of the community's spiritual and political authoritative figures. A lot of evidence suggests that initially the most important of these, for example Rabbi Chaim Kaniewski from Bene Beraq, failed to appreciate the scale of the danger, and their opposition to closure of religious schools or to the stopping of collective prayer *de facto* delayed the community's response by approximately two weeks and made it easier for the epidemic to spread in its residential areas. Ultraorthodox ministers in Netanyahu's government, primarily the head of the ministry of health, Litzman, also seems to have underestimated the threat and primarily focused on protecting the community from

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restrictions that were too invasive in its lifestyle¹³. According to media reports, minister Litzman himself systematically violated social distancing rules for instance by attending group prayer. He was diagnosed with Coronavirus at the beginning of April, forcing Prime Minister Netanyahu and many other key government figures to go into quarantine.

Some secular commentators in Israel suggest that the *Haredi* themselves were surprised by the scale to which the community was unprepared for this emergency, and this caused confidence in the

¹⁰ 'PM Netanyahu Speaks with Senior Officials Following Violation of the Rules and Lighting of Bonfires that Led to Large-Scale Gatherings in Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh', Prime Minister's Office, 12.05.2020, www.gov.il/en.

¹¹ 'Jerusalem ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods go into lockdown to stop virus spread', The Times of Israel, 12.04.2020, www.timesofisrael.com.

¹² 'Three ultra-Orthodox towns surpass Tel Aviv in active coronavirus cases', The Times of Israel, 23.04.2020, www.timesofisrael.com.

¹³ 'Ministers Litzman, Deri ask to soften closure on cities', Arutz Sheva – Israel National News, 4.06.2020, www.israelnationalnews.com.

religious and political leadership to waver. They further suggest that in the long term this could speed up individualisation processes, and thus provide conditions favourable for Ultraorthodox people to become closer to mainstream Israeli community life. This was said to be confirmed among other things by telecommunications providers' statistics, showing an increase in Internet use in *Haredi* residential settlements as a result of the epidemic¹⁴. At the moment it is not possible to verify this claim. However it does not seem to take account of how firmly culture models are rooted in the Ultraorthodox community, and could be an example of wishful thinking on the part of secular Israelis.

***Haredi* as a political issue**

The controversy surrounding the stance taken by the Ultraorthodox community towards the epidemic is an element of a discussion that has continued for many years on the state's approach to the *Haredi* and their place in Israeli society. This is a discussion concerning both identity and politics, and intensifies before almost every parliamentary election in Israel. A range of secular formations, on the left and right alike, have proposed that the state should adopt a firmer policy towards the community, for instance by making them subject to military service and by introducing secular subjects to religious schools, and forcing them to be more active professionally (for example by cutting funding for religious education). A major portion of secular voters see the *Haredi* as an unreasonable burden on the rest of society, especially in view of the rapid increase in the community's population, as they do not make a contribution to the country's security and prosperity in proportion to their numbers, and also obtain significant grants from the budget. Meanwhile, despite public and political pressure to limit the autonomy of the Ultraorthodox, the strength of their political representation makes it extremely hard to realise significant changes of any kind in the state's approach. As a result, issues

concerning the *Haredi* (in particular military service) regularly send shockwaves across the Israel political scene, and caused government coalitions to collapse in 2012 and 2018. An inability to act or lack of political will on the part of successive governments to create conditions for the *Haredi* to share with the rest of society responsibility for the country's defence and prosperity cause frustration and growing hostility on the part of many secular citizens. An epidemic in which Israelis conforming to the lockdown rules saw on television that *Haredi* continued to study in yeshiva or organise weddings caused the situation to deteriorate further. The unsympathetic and fierce reaction towards Ultraorthodox people is encouraged by the fact that the entire community is perceived as a uniform organism and by an inability to identify the extreme strands within it responsible for the most blatant breaches of the epidemic-related restrictions. The delay in response on the part of the *Haredi* to the outbreak of Coronavirus also caused fear among the secular elements of society that the *Haredi* would spread the epidemic beyond their own residential settlements. One clear indication of this tendency was the situation that arose at the beginning of April, when the authorities of the city of Ramat Gan, which borders the Ultraorthodox Bene Beraq, decided by themselves to begin installing fences separating the two towns. The level of tension was plain from a statement made by President Re'uven Rivlin on 5 April, denouncing attempts to castigate the *Haredi*, and emphasising that the entire community could not be blamed for the conduct of a few people.

The state and religion in Israel

The discussion on the subject of the place of the *Haredi* in Israeli society is in fact only one aspect of a much broader debate on the relationship between the state and religion, and the country's identity, which dates back to before the creation of the State of Israel, and in a deeper sense – disputes over the definition of Jewish identity that existed among the diaspora in the 19th and 20th centuries. Despite numerous references to biblical tradition, the Jewish national movement is histori-

¹⁴ T. Cohen, S. Scheer, 'Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jews take to internet in coronavirus lockdown', Reuters, 23.04.2020, www.reuters.com.

cally a secular movement, and the state founded in 1948 was also intended to be established as such. Meanwhile, in 1947, the leader of the movement, and subsequently long-serving prime minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, entered into a political contract with religious parties, called the 'status quo' arrangement, in an effort to avoid a situation in which any part of Jewish community in Palestine refused to provide support for a proposal for the state's independence. Under the contract, in the future state, the Shabbat would be a day of rest, kitchens in public institutions would keep kosher, matters concerning marital status would be regulated according to religious law, and religious education would continue to be autonomous. Ben Gurion also agreed that students attending religious schools (at that time approximately 400 per year) would be exempt from military service. Although the 'status quo' was never formally enacted, it became the foundation governing the relationship between the state and religion in Israel. References to it, whether direct or indirect, can be found in many coalition agreements, and elsewhere. The reaching of a compromise and the need to preserve the fragile balance between the various strands within Israeli society had far-reaching implications. One result was that Israel does not have a constitution, and another is that many especially sensitive issues, such as the definition of the Shabbat, and thus whether public transport and trade is permitted, have never been settled in statute, and are regulated indirectly or in lower-level legislation. Because these matters have not been resolved definitively, Israel is regularly engulfed in heated debates on subjects not addressed or not addressed in sufficient detail in the 'status quo', or where the established arrangement is contested. These issues include military service for the *Haredi*, the rules for recognition by the state of conversion to Judaism, introduction of civil weddings and divorce, and the rules for observing the Shabbat. In almost all of these issues the law as it stands at a particular time is tested or contested by one of the parties to the dispute. This often causes social or political turmoil, and in many cases the conflicts are dealt with on an interim basis by way of Supreme Court decisions. The discussion on the

place of the Jewish religion in the life of the state intensifies as the face of Israeli society changes and the political and demographic dominance of the secular elements of society fades (which has been fading since the 1970s). Today, four main groups can be identified in that society. The largest group, which is historically the dominant group, is secular Jews (approximately 40%), while the others are religious Jews (and these include Ultraorthodox Jews), traditionalist Jews (who only nurture certain elements of Jewish tradition) and the non-Jewish population (mainly Arabs) – each approximately 20%¹⁵. Although the secular element of society remains the largest, it does not have an absolute majority and is spread across a very broad political spectrum. Forecasts show however that its 'current holdings' will continue to decline.

” The discussion on the subject of the place of the *Haredi* in Israeli society is one aspect of the debate on the relationship between the state and religion.

President Re’uven Rivlin made a reference to the demographic situation outlined above and its political implications in his symbolic address at Herzliya University in 2015, when he talked about the 'four tribes' that make up Israel's modern society. At that time, he appealed for a departure from the perception of society in terms of the secular majority and the remaining minorities, and to look to a vision in which four main demographic groups share responsibility for the state, and at the same time retain the right to separate identities and lifestyles.

Summary

The course that the epidemic has taken in Israel, and the disproportionately high rate of infection among the *Haredi*, not only confirmed the scale of tension between the Ultraorthodox and secular elements of society, but have exacerbated them

¹⁵ K.J. Starr, D. Masci, 'In Israel, Jews are united by homeland but divided into very different groups', Pew Research Center, 8.03.2016, www.pewresearch.org.

further. This provided critics of Ultraorthodox people with arguments for condemning them as a fanatic community that is above the law, and, in circumstances such as an epidemic, potentially dangerous to their fellow citizens. Due to the fact that the situation caused by Coronavirus is so compatible with the negative stereotype (already established) of the community, it will probably place an additional, long-term burden on its image, even if the *Haredi* do not give their opponents cause for criticism in later stages of the epidemic.

As a result, conducting a debate in which there is already severe polarisation, and which is becoming

more and more urgent for demographic reasons, on finding a *modus vivendi* enabling the *Haredi* to retain their cultural autonomy but also requiring them to bear the appropriate portion of civil obligations, will become even more difficult. At present it is not possible to answer the question about the long-term effects of the epidemic in the *Haredi* community, and possible strengthening of individualistic tendencies within that community, bringing them closer to mainstream Israeli society. In the interim, however, the epidemic will certainly raise the temperature in the debate, reinforce stereotypes, and hamper the reaching of a compromise.