

HAREDIM AND THE STUDY OF HAREDIM IN ISRAEL: REFLECTIONS ON A RECENT CONFERENCE

Kimmy Caplan and Nurit Stadler

The scholarly study of Orthodoxy by Israeli academics began in the 1960s with a few students of Jacob Katz, among whom Moshe Samet deserves pride of place. In 1967 Samet completed his PhD thesis, devoted primarily to the halakic responsa of Rabbi Moses Sofer (1762–1839). Shortly afterwards he published a few articles that outlined the historical context within which, he argued, Orthodoxy ought to be situated as a modern phenomenon. This conclusion stands in sharp contrast to the common perception of many Orthodox believers that Orthodoxy is the only authentic and direct continuation of traditional Judaism. Samet went on to indicate the main trends within Orthodoxy, elucidating the differences between them. Samet’s overall conclusions have generated a great deal of scholarly discussion among students of Orthodoxy in both Israel and other countries.

A few years later, another student of Katz, Menahem Friedman, embarked upon a pathbreaking study of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) community in Mandate Palestine. As Friedman himself has observed on more than one occasion, several leading scholars of Jewish history looked askance at his choice of topics, wondering why he would devote so much attention to a marginal and in all likelihood doomed community. But when Friedman’s book, entitled *Society and Religion (Hevrah Vedayat)*, appeared

toward the end of 1977, it was clear that it would have a strong impact on the existing scholarship on the Yishuv in general during the period of the British Mandate. To be sure, Friedman was by no means the first scholar to address the history of the “Old Yishuv” in Palestine. More than his colleagues, however, he placed and categorized the “Old Yishuv” within a scholarly context of Haredi society and Haredism.

Friedman’s book appeared only a few months after the occurrence of a momentous development on the political plane: Following the victory of the Likud party in the elections in May 1977, Menahem Begin formed a coalition that brought the Haredi party, Agudat Israel, into the government for the first time in twenty-five years. This led many

Israelis to the sudden recognition that Haredi society had not disappeared after all and had in fact re-established itself in Israel. The revitalization of this society was evident in the growth and expansion of its educational and communal institutions, and primarily in its self-confidence.

The strength of Haredi society as well as the appearance of additional Haredi political parties (Shas in 1982, representing Sephardi Haredim, and Degel Hatorah in the mid-1980s) gradually drew the attention of students in the fields of anthropology, Jewish thought, political science, and sociology. Thus, for example, following Shas’s rise, political scientists and political sociologists analyzed this party’s performance since 1984, and tried time and again to explain its unprecedented and ongoing success.

This mounting scholarly interest did not remain limited to the aforementioned fields but soon spread to other disciplines, including communications studies, geography, medicine, psychiatry, and psychology. A recent, partial bibliographical essay on the study of



Panel at Van Leer Jerusalem Institute’s conference on Israeli Haredi society, November 2007. Reprinted with permission of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute.

Israeli Haredim since 1970 lists nearly six hundred scholarly theses and publications. Unfortunately, however, there is very limited cross-disciplinary discourse among scholars studying Haredi society. Most of them are largely unaware of the wide range of studies of Haredim in disciplines other than their own.

Remedying this situation has been one of the main goals of a working group on Haredi society that has been active now for approximately seven years at The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. The group's most recent step in this direction consisted of a two-day scholarly conference devoted to Israeli Haredi society that took place at the institute in November 2007. Among the topics addressed during this conference were recent trends in the occupational arena and Haredim in the workforce, identity, and citizenship—discourse and reality, linguistic changes and developments, ethnicity and Israelization, geographical developments and patterns of consumption, voluntary action and medical care, communication and education, halakah and theology.

The conference was well attended. In almost all of the sessions there were between one hundred and one hundred and fifty men and women in the audience, including students, scholars, senior citizens, religious Jews representing different camps, secular Israelis, and government employees. In each and every session at least a few and sometimes as many ten to fifteen Haredi men and/or women were present in the audience. Judging by their garb, these Haredim represented almost every Haredi subgroup. In certain sessions Haredi listeners did not hesitate to take part in the discussions following the lectures.

The conference was broadcast live through the Internet, and close to

WHAT WAS PARTICULARLY STRIKING WAS THAT SO MANY SCHOLARS SUCCEEDED IN GATHERING INTERNAL INFORMATION AND DATA FROM HAREDI SOCIETY AND DEVELOPING TIES WITH SPECIFIC GROUPS. THIS EXPERIENCE CONTRASTED SHARPLY WITH POPULAR IMAGES OF THE HAREDI “ENCLAVE CULTURE” AS BEING VIRTUALLY UNAPPROACHABLE BY ACADEMIC OBSERVERS AND CAST DOUBT ON CERTAIN SCHOLARLY REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES OF STUDYING THIS SOCIETY.

1,400 entries were recorded during the two days. The average observing time was more than one hour (although this figure is somewhat misleading, since there were very short entries of a few minutes alongside others that were several hours in length). Even though the identity of Internet observers remains unknown, it is clear that some of them were Haredim, as we learn from Haredi Internet sites, such as “In Haredi Rooms” (*Behadrei Haredim*), in which observers commented even as the lectures were in progress.

Rather than entering into specifics, we would like to reflect on the conference and its contribution to contemporary scholarship on Israeli Haredi society. Close to half of the presentations were based upon quantitative data, such as national statistics, or data that was processed into quantitative terms, such as interviews and questionnaires. Certain speakers tended toward descriptive presentations, focusing on data relating to such matters as the changing attitudes toward Yiddish and shifting patterns of using this language in various Israeli Haredi groups, as well as recent trends surrounding Haredi participation in the workforce and attitudes toward secular studies. Other presentations were based upon qualitative approaches, such as

participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis—be it movies, halakic responsa, or popular theology. What was particularly striking was that so many scholars succeeded in gathering internal information and data from Haredi society and developing ties with specific groups. This experience contrasted sharply with popular images of the Haredi “enclave culture” as being virtually unapproachable by academic observers and cast doubt on certain scholarly reflections about the difficulties of studying this society.

Unlike the work of earlier scholars, such as Friedman, Samet, Yosef Salmon, and others, who related to the “Old Yishuv” Haredim and their society in historical terms and based their studies primarily upon archives and other documents, contemporary research on Haredim is characterized by a wide variety of methodological tools and concepts. This has shed much new light upon various aspects of Haredi religiosity, norms, and values. Consequently, several new themes in the study of Haredi society emerged throughout the conference, of which we will mention three:

- (1) The centrality of gender and the role of women as agents of change and transformation within almost all the subgroups of this society.
- (2) The importance of newly

affiliated and “converted” groups and their fusion into Haredi society, such as newly religious or national-religious Haredim (*Hardal'im—Haredim leumi'im*).

(3) Changing approaches toward the state, citizenship, and civil society, especially evident through voluntary work, various new institutions, social aid, and education.

It should be noted, too, that all of the speakers emphasized the fact that Haredi society is composed of numerous groups and subgroups, and therefore cannot be treated as an undivided whole. Most presentations were devoted to specific case studies and dimensions of Haredi life, and consequently included important observations and conclusions regarding distinctions between various groups as well as within them.

With very few exceptions, all speakers were either junior scholars or graduate students. Approximately half of them were male and half female (but not as the result of any intentional pursuit of gender parity on the part of the conference’s academic committee). The criteria for participation were strictly scholarly, and the conference was open to studies from all disciplines. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fact that two or three lecturers identified themselves after the selection of their papers as Haredim, several Haredi individuals protested the fact that a conference on Haredim did not include Haredim as speakers—that is, as exemplars of Haredi life and not as Haredim who happen to study Haredi society from a scholarly point of view. Such a complaint is highly interesting, both because it coincides with other recent developments within mainstream Israeli Haredi society and because it exposes a lack of basic understanding of the nature of an academic conference and academic scholarship.

The fact that our conference was made up primarily of junior scholars has enabled us to identify certain

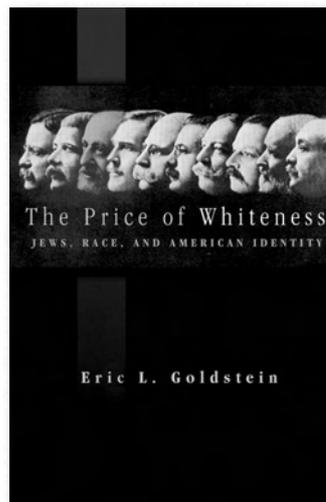
scholarly trends that have developed since the 1970s as well as a number of gaps that need to be filled. For example, there was a noticeable shortage (although not an absence) of younger participants carrying on the older tradition of historical or historically oriented study of Haredi society. As a result, a host of historical aspects of the subject remain unexamined. For example, we still await a critical history of any Hasidic court in Israel or of a significant Haredi educational institution, or a full-scale critical biography of a Haredi leader (though one should not leave unmentioned the recent, valuable analyses of the writings of such figures as Avraham Y. Karelitz, Yoel Teitelbaum, and Ovadia Yosef).

Since the late 1960s, American and Canadian sociologists and anthropologists, including George (Gershon) Kranzler, Israel Rubin, and William Shaffir, have studied specific Haredi communities, primarily Hasidic ones. Some of them returned to the communities they studied twenty or thirty years later in order to re-examine their earlier findings. This type of work is similar in general to several communal studies of various Christian fundamentalist and other religious communities during the same period. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge, there exists no such study of any similar Haredi group in Israel.

Notwithstanding these omissions, the overall situation is quite promising. Among

students and scholars of Israeli Haredi society, we see growing evidence of a new cross-disciplinary dialogue that will enable all of the scholars involved in it to gain a better understanding of the multiple, inter-related dimensions of their studies and the extent to which they complement and/or contrast with one another. In this sense, our November 2007 conference offers additional proof of the advantages of multidisciplinary scholarly discourse with regard to contemporary religious societies and movements.

Kimmy Caplan is senior lecturer in the Department of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University. Nurit Stadler is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. They are co-editors of Leadership and Authority in Israeli Haredi Society: New Perspectives (Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute [forthcoming, 2008, in Hebrew]).



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