Set apart: The Haredim in Israel

by Mordechai Beck in the December 28, 2010 issue

Haredi neighborhood Meah Shearim in Jerusalem. Some rights reserved by Gilabrand at en.wikipedia.

No week passes in Israel without an article being published—usually negative in tone—about the Haredi community. According to the Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, the Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, constitute about 8 percent of Israel's population, or some 600,000 to 700,000 people. It is the fastest-growing segment in Israel.

What worries many Israelis, religious as well as secular, about the growth of the Haredim is that they reject political Zionism, the enterprise that established the state of Israel in 1948. Their first loyalty is to their spiritual leaders, not the state.

While the term *Haredi* ("those who fear God") appears in the Bible (see, for example, Isaiah 66:5 and Ezra 10:3), its modern political use can be traced to the 1920s, when the Agudat Yisrael was founded in Poland to counteract the secular Zionist movement. Participants in this countermovement were called the Haredim. The term became even more commonplace after 1977 when the same Agudat party entered the coalition government in Israel under Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

The major points of contention between this group and broader Israeli society involve the group's refusal to serve in the armed forces, its unwillingness to join the workforce (the men engage in full-time religious study, supported by the government and donations from outside Israel), its growing political clout and the widespread perception that the Haredim receive a disproportionate amount of social benefits for their larger-than-average families. (Instead of having two or three children, like the typical Israeli family, Haredi families average eight or nine children.)

A recently released report by the Israeli Treasury noted that the country loses $1.5 billion annually as a result of this sector's nonparticipation in the workforce—300 percent more than in 2000. This does not include the billions of tax dollars going toward *yeshivot* (schools teaching classical Judaism), social security and child benefits for the Haredi population.

Twelve percent of Israelis define themselves as religious, 13 percent identify as traditional-religious, 25 percent as "traditional light" and 42 percent as secular. Among religious Jews can be found Zionists, non-Zionists and anti-Zionists. None of these groups can be described simply.

"Within the anti-Zionist Haredi group," observes social geographer Amnon Gonen, "are to be found both Hasidim (followers of the 18th-century rabbi Baal Shem Tov) and Mitnagdim (literally, religious opponents of the Hasidim)." In the Hasidic world today, many different schools of thought and practices have emerged, each following their own rebbe, many depending on the place that groups came from in Europe. Similarly, among the Sephardim there are different national groups—such as Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni. Add to this potpourri the increasing number of "born-again Jews"—secular Jews returning to an Orthodox observance—referred to as *ba'alei teshuva,* and the picture becomes even more complex.

In Europe these different groups were united—to a degree—in opposition to the perceived threat of modernity, which challenged Orthodoxy in a way that it had not been challenged since the rabbinical revolution in the first and second centuries of the common era. Generally speaking, the farther west you went in Europe, the more modern and assimilated Jewish communities became. Farther east in Europe, modernization depended on proximity to large cities. In Hungary, opposition to modernism was especially fierce. One of the country's most outspoken rabbis,

Hatam Sofer, declared, "Everything new is forbidden by the Torah."

When Jewish settlers arrived in Palestine toward the end of the 19th century, conflicts emerged. Some of these groups arrived as followers of specific rabbis in Europe who encouraged resettlement of the ancient homeland in anticipation of the final redemption. Others came to support Jews returning to Palestine in the name of Zionism, the movement to found a Jewish state.

The conflict came to a head in 1888, which had been declared the Shmita or sabbatical year when all agricultural work on the land of Israel had to cease. Groups sustained by rabbi-led groups abroad voted to keep the Shmita year in place. Other groups, supportive of more Zionist rabbis, wanted a compromise. According to anthropologist Jeff Halper, this was the beginning of the split that divided Zionist from anti-Zionist.

The Holocaust and its aftermath further divided these groups. The Zionist movement saw the Holocaust as an inevitable result of Jews remaining in the diaspora. It was evidence of the urgent need to develop a Jewish community in Palestine. The anti-Zionists—and they were then the vast majority—saw the catastrophe as a result of the Enlightenment and the abandonment of pristine Judaism.

These positions have never really been reconciled. While Zionists rejoiced at the establishment of the state of Israel shortly after the end of the Second World War, the anti-Zionist Haredi community was in a state of shock. An apocryphal story has it that a Hasidic Jew was seen crying in the streets of Jerusalem. When asked the cause of his distress, he explained, "For 1,900 years we were in exile, and just my luck, in my lifetime, we get a state!"

The Holocaust likewise shifted the religious identity of Jews. Prior to the 1930s, the vast majority of Jews considered themselves traditional if not religious. After the Holocaust, 70 percent of what was left of world Jewry considered itself nontraditional or secular. While world Jewry lost about a third of its number in the Holocaust, ultra-Orthodox Jewry lost over 80 percent. Many of the smaller Hasidic dynasties were completely destroyed. It is a minor miracle that in recent years some have been resurrected.

The Haredim are reluctant to face up to the theological implications of the Holocaust. For them, God is still in heaven, and we his sinful children are still whoring after the twin idols of modernity and materialism. Many of these groups

indeed regard sin as personified by Zionism and the Zionist state.

Withdrawing from society has not been the Haredim's only strategy. Early in the establishment of Israel, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion made a pact with the leading ultra-Orthodox rabbi to make certain that basic Jewish elements were a part of the state's functioning. This included declaring Saturday the official Sabbath, making the rabbinate independent of the state, and deferring national service for students studying Torah. Ben-Gurion was sympathetic to these survivors of the Holocaust and was confident that secular Zionism had already triumphed. He was willing to let these remnants of diaspora Jewry have their way until they died a natural death in the new state.

For about three decades, Ben-Gurion's interpretation of the balance held steady. Occasionally a riot would break out in which a small cadre of Haredim would protest, say, an archaeological dig that allegedly exposed Jewish bones or an alleged breach of the laws protecting the Sabbath. Then in 1977 the Labor government gave way to the right-wing Likud party under Menachem Begin, and to strengthen his coalition he brought in the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael under Rabbi Menachem Porush. Formerly anti-Zionist, the Agudat partyfound benefits in this alliance for funding its school system, especially its *yeshivot.* This alliance led to a baby boom among Haredim and an enhancement of their political power.

The increase in Haredim power—they are now spread over more than one political party—was also aided by a sharp turn to the right by the Zionist religious parties. After the Six Day War in 1967, religious Zionist groups saw the capture of the West Bank and Jerusalem as confirmation of a divine plan. They began to spend all of their energies and resources on settling the new areas, leaving their traditional concerns for education and for preventing secularization in the hands of the Haredim.

Haredim have taken up more positions within the official Rabbinate Authority, and that has made policies on conversion and dietary laws more stringent, impinging more intensely on the lives of secular people. But most prominent Haredi rabbis and spiritual leaders are not within the Rabbinate Authority; they are loud outside agitators. From both within and outside the official rabbinate, Haredi leaders have a great deal of say over such sensitive issues as whether candidates for conversion to Judaism are accepted or not. This is an issue that affects both religious and secular Jews.

Generally speaking, the Haredi community is far less interested in foreign policy than in its internal needs. With regard to relations with the Palestinians, no one position unites the Haredim. One of their leaders, Iraqi-born Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, has become increasingly hostile to the Palestinians and recently caused a storm of protest when he prayed publicly for them and their leaders to be smitten by one of the biblical plagues.

On the other hand, Haredim view Zionism and the drive for land as a modern form of idolatry. As one Haredi rabbi put it, "For us the Torah study and practice take primacy over the land."

The late rabbi Elazar Shach of the Lithuanian Degel HaTorah party publicly announced that he would support any land-for-peace agreement with neighboring countries or with the Palestinians. He also famously accused the kibbutzim (collective communities) of breeding ignorance of Jewish tradition. This characterizes the Haredim's difficult and conflicted relationship with the state—from whom they nevertheless benefit financially.

Haredi generally keep a low profile on political issues. Rabbi Bezalel Cohen, a Haredi who works for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, says that "even over the withdrawal from Gaza—which was traumatic for the religious Zionist camp—Haredi leaders tended to sit on the fence. . . . Large groups of Haredim are very pragmatic; their concerns are with far more practical issues. They are not looking for political controversy."

In many ways, the Haredim have created their own ghettos, separating themselves as much as possible from their fellow Jews and making it difficult for researchers to penetrate their world. One thread that seems common among all the Haredi groups is their reliance on their rabbis as both spiritual mentors and practical guides for daily living.

For many of Rabbi Yosef's followers, for example, his word is law. Although his followers are largely Sephardic Jews, they have taken on the practices of many Ashkenazi Haredim (of eastern European origin), including rules on dress and against television and use of the Internet. Men's prescribed clothing is usually a black wide-brimmed hat, frock coat and laceless shoes. For married women head coverings are de rigueur, though not necessarily the wig favored by the Ashkenazi Haredi women.

While the Haredim still live in tension with Israeli society, Gonen argues, they have "tacitly accepted" the existence of the state. With Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu defining Israel as a Jewish state, Haredim believe they have an important stake in determining the meaning of this state. After all, who can best define what a Jewish state is if not those who strive to maintain their tradition in its most pristine form? Zionism may have defined the outer form of the Jewish state, but only the religious can supply the content of "Jewish."

The numbers of those who claim to be Haredim are spreading beyond its traditional boundaries. Religious Sephardim now identify themselves as Haredim, as do the most observant members of the settler movement (mainly on the West Bank).

The reaction of secular society to these changes has been increasingly hostile, mainly because it fears being swamped by Haredim or entering a culture war. Secular Israelis are afraid, too, that coalition politics will give the Haredim far more power than is healthy for the country, forcing the state to support people who offer nothing tangible in return.

Yair Lapid, a preeminent Israeli columnist, recently spelled out these fears in graphic terms. He predicted that in 12 years close to a majority of today's Haredi first graders would refuse to serve in the army and three years later would make themselves ineligible for higher secular education and be unprepared for the workforce. But in fact Lapid exaggerated the figures. He claimed that 50 percent of today's first graders are Haredim, whereas the number is closer to 26 percent. His exaggeration reflected a certain hysteria that grips the secular media when dealing with the Haredim community. He even used what might be considered the ultimate insult, calling the Haredim "parasites."

But Lapid is right in seeing cause for concern. Even a quarter of the population is far too high a percentage of people to remain outside an economy already strapped with a massive military budget and an uncertain future on the international stage.

The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies is one of a number of organizations trying to find practical solutions for these problems. A recent study by the institute found that between 60 and 70 percent of young Haredi men are interested in studying at institutions of higher secular learning—despite the fact that to do so could mean having to take on military service and losing the stipends given to full-time Torah learners. (As of now, however, the Haredi students lack the basic education that

would allow them entrance to these institutions.) One of the authors of the institute's report, Dan Kaufman, notes that it would take young Haredim at least four or five years to catch up in order to earn a degree, during which time many of them would need to support a family—an enormous task given the indigent nature of this particular population.

"The positive side of this development," said Kaufman, "is the willingness expressed by these students and their rabbis (though often only privately). They realize how dire their prospects are without some sort of professional training. The question is whether there are ways that can be created to help them, while allowing them to remain within their Haredi world."

Will the fundamentalism that has gripped this section of Israel's population give way to something more pragmatic or will it remain separate from the rest of the society? Will the baby boom among the Haredim continue and thus condemn tens of thousands of families to lifelong impoverishment? Will the government be able to rise above coalition politics and offer sustainable solutions? Will other political developments, internal or external, push the whole issue to the side? The Haredim pose one of the biggest tests that the state of Israel will face in coming years. The only thing predictable in this volatile region of the world is that the future is unpredictable.