

English and the Ultra-Orthodox

A Very Foreign Language

The study of what are often referred to as “core” subjects such as math, English, and science in the curriculum of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) schools is an issue which is prominent on the public and political agenda. For the most part, the discussion relates to Haredi education in these subjects as a whole. The current research takes a different path and focuses specifically on the study of English, analyzing its unique characteristics in Haredi society.

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Abstract



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Abstract

One of the most controversial issues on the public agenda in Israel and which has profound implications for the integration of the Haredi community is the opposition of the Haredi mainstream to including core subjects—such as science, math, science, and English—in the curriculum of Haredi schools, especially schools for boys. These subjects, and essential to ensure that graduates of Haredi schools are equipped with those tools that are vital tools for their functioning as informed and involved citizens and for finding employment in today's job market.

Core curriculum studies in Haredi society are usually discussed as one package. This study takes a different path, focusing only on English—and pointing out its unique status in Haredi society. The importance of this subject is not in question: English is currently the international language, and proficiency in English is a prerequisite for studying in institutions of higher education and for integration into the job market. Moreover, language study differs fundamentally from studies based mainly on imparting knowledge (science, history) or logical skills (math), making it more difficult to catch up and fill gaps later in life.

The Extent of English Education in Haredi Schools

Whereas a clear majority of Haredi girls in elementary education attend schools that are required to teach English, and virtually all of them do indeed study the subject, the situation is far different among boys: While 58% of boys in Haredi elementary education attend schools that are required to teach a complete or partial English curriculum and are budgeted to do so, in practice only 24% of Haredi parents report that their sons actually study English in school. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education rarely cuts the budgets of schools that do not teach English as required, despite having the authority to do so. Studies reveal that much higher percentages of Haredi boys study other core subjects, especially math. Moreover, the proportion of Haredi boys who study English in school has been declining over the years: Whereas 24% of boys are currently studying English, 54% of graduates of Haredi schools aged over 45 say that they studied English in school as children, as did 40% of Haredi men aged 35–44.

As for secondary education, 78% of Haredi boys attend a unique type of educational institution—the yeshiva. Yeshivot are not required to teach core subjects at all, including English. There is no systematic data on the extent of English studies among the remaining 22% of Haredi boys, but there are clear indications that some of them do not study English even though the institutions they attend are budgeted to teach the subject, or that they study English only to a minimal extent. Furthermore, few Haredim take the English matriculation exams: In 2019, only 6% of Haredi boys and 34% of Haredi girls did so. Nevertheless, among the girls, there has been an increase in this percentage in recent years.

Underlying Factors: Teachers, Curriculum, and Textbooks

Overall the Israeli education system suffers from a shortage of teachers qualified to teach English, but the problem is even more acute in the Haredi system. The shortage of teachers qualified to teach what are often referred to as “secular” subjects, including English, is especially prominent

in boys' schools. Even among Haredi men who hold teaching certificates, this certification is usually for teaching religious subjects. According to the State Comptroller, while the Education Ministry exerts significant efforts to prevent the employment of teachers lacking the appropriate professional credentials, this policy is not applied in Haredi schools. In practice, in Haredi boys' schools it is customary for one teacher to teach all subjects. Because some have no knowledge of English, another teacher who does know the language may sometimes be asked to teach the subject.

Israeli schools—including Haredi schools—are required to follow a curriculum which is presented in textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. For some grades there are no up-to-date, approved English textbooks for use in Haredi schools. Moreover, all the books approved for teaching English in Haredi schools are tailored to Haredi girls; there are no books tailored to Haredi boys at all.

The Level of Proficiency in English and its Ramifications

The absence of English studies, or studies which are substandard naturally results in a low level of English proficiency among Haredim. Although only a tiny minority of Haredim take the English psychometric exams for university entry, it is notable that English is the subject in which Haredim—and particularly Haredi men—score the lowest, as compared with non-Haredi Jews.

This study presents the findings of a series of comprehensive surveys by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) attesting to the low level of proficiency in English among Haredim. The CBS Social Survey found that 71% of Haredi men report that they cannot speak English even on a routine conversational level, compared with 30% of non-Haredi men. In the CBS Household Survey, the same was found to be true of 74% of Haredi men, compared with 24% of non-Haredi men. As for women, 56% of female Haredi respondents to the Social Survey reported that they are unable to hold a conversation in English, compared with 35% of non-Haredi women,

whereas in the Household Survey, the rates were lower for both groups, at 45% and 24%. Respectively. These data reveal that Haredi men are the only group among which younger adults are less proficient in English as compared with older adults; among non-Haredi Jews and Haredi women, the reverse is true: younger people are more proficient in English.

Various assessment studies have identified the poor English skills of Haredim as one of the factors in their high rates of dropout from higher education. In addition, inadequate English skills are a major barrier to finding employment in high-quality jobs and in finding jobs with favorable compensation : Haredi men who can hold a conversation in English earn 22% more than Haredi men who are unable to do so.

Attitudes Toward English in Haredi Society

It is hard to attribute the limited scope of English studies among Haredi boys solely to the fact that English classes are considered a waste of time, that should be spent studying Torah, since other core subjects are taught to a greater extent. The study reveals that the basic attitude of Haredi society toward the English language is negative, and highlights two main reasons why Haredim—even women—are averse to English studies. The first concerns what English is used for: Knowing English is a tool for entry into higher education and employment, which are often perceived negatively. The second reason has to do with a deeper cultural issue: English is a symbol of secular modern Western culture. It serves as a pipeline to this culture, and in a certain sense is even considered a carrier of it, liable to “contaminate” the Haredi public with Western norms and ideas. Thus, the English language is perceived as intrinsically problematic.

Nevertheless, the study shows that today there is greater openness among Haredim to teaching English to boys. The percentage of Haredim who would like their children to learn English in school exceeds the percentage of those actually studying the subject. There is considerable support for English studies in nonformal education frameworks such as

afterschool classes, particularly among younger parents. Similarly, a survey of principals of Haredi boys' schools indicates that, given suitable financial incentives and with rabbinical consent, there are more schools that would teach English.

Recommendations

The following are the main recommendations for promoting English studies in Haredi society. The recommendations are diverse in their nature and in their target populations, such that some of them are relevant only to specific groups.

(1) Increase enforcement

The Ministry of Education should be more stringent in the enforcement of its regulations on the teaching of English and take action to ensure the compliance of Haredi schools. This enforcement should take the form of revoking the formal recognition of schools that do not teach English as required, and of budgetary sanctions.

(2) Require “exempt” institutions to teach English

Haredi elementary schools with “exempt” status are required to teach 55% of the core curriculum (subjects such as math and science), but are not required to teach English at all. We propose applying the same requirement to the study of English—55%.

(3) Strengthen State-Haredi education

In State-Haredi schools, English is included in the core curriculum. Promoting State-Haredi education as a realistic option for the Haredi population will naturally bolster English studies “from the bottom-up” without having to negotiate with the Haredi leadership, which generally tries to keep English out of the curriculum.

(4) Offer financial incentives for teaching English, subject to meeting standards

Some Haredi streams are interested in introducing English into the curriculum of boys' schools in exchange for budgetary allocations, without switching to the State-Haredi model or joining one of the school networks. We propose implementing this model in these streams.

(5) Introduce a program to promote four- and five-unit English courses, focused on Haredi girls

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Haredi girls who take the English matriculation exams, but half of them take the three-unit exam only (the lowest level). We propose developing a special program to encourage five-unit, or at least four-unit, English courses, similar to the programs that the Ministry of Education has promoted in the non-Haredi education system.

(6) Promote afterschool classes in nonformal education frameworks and community centers

The study found that afterschool English classes have only a limited impact, but that there is significant demand for them. Therefore, it is worth investing in this avenue as well, for more conservative groups that would have difficulty introducing English classes in their schools.

(7) Design a curriculum and write textbooks

The Ministry of Education should design an English curriculum for boys with a stipulation as to students' expected progress. The curriculum should be tailored to the legal status of the target schools and to the scope of English studies required of them. Furthermore, because there are no English textbooks tailored to Haredi boys, and given the shortage of up-to-date textbooks for girls in some grades, we propose that the Ministry of Education fund the writing of course materials in English for the Haredi sector.

The study of what are often referred to as “core” subjects such as math, English, and science in the curriculum of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) schools is an issue which is prominent on the public and political agenda. For the most part, the discussion relates to Haredi education in these subjects as a whole. The current research takes a different path and focuses specifically on the study of English, analyzing its unique characteristics in Haredi society.

Study findings reveal a troubling situation: The percentage of Haredi boys studying English at school is steadily dropping, and today stands at less than 25%. Even among those who do study English—both boys and girls—the level of studies is inadequate, leading to a unique situation in which knowledge of English among younger Haredi men is lower than among older age groups. The research also reveals that the low level of English is a significant obstacle to the integration of Haredim into higher education frameworks and into the workforce.

The study not only provides a snapshot of the current situation, but also analyzes the barriers to promoting the study of English in the Haredi community and the attitudes of its leadership, educators, and the general Haredi public on this issue. On the basis of this analysis, the study generated a series of policy recommendations on how to advance and upgrade English studies in the Haredi education system.

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