A Society in Motion

Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

Benjamin Brown

Abstract

THE ISRAEL DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE

A Society in Motion

Structures and Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism

Benjamin Brown

Text Editor (Hebrew): Yehoshua Greenberg

Bibliography: Dafna Lavi

Index: Rachel Yurman

Series & Cover Design: Studio Tamar Bar Dayan

Typesetting: Irit Nachum

Printed by Graphos Print, Jerusalem

Cover photo: Flash 90

ISBN 978-965-519-316-9

The Israel Democracy Institute

4 Pinsker St., P.O.B. 4702, Jerusalem 9104602

Tel: (972)-2-5300-888

Website: en.idi.org.il

To order books:

Online Book Store: en.idi.org.il/publications

E-mail: orders@idi.org.il

Tel: (972)-2-5300-800

This book is being published as part of the series "The Ultra-Orthodox in Israel" (ed. Gilad Malach).

Prologue

This book deals with the structures and processes of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel. By "structures" I mean all of the systems and institutions, both formal and informal, through which the Haredim function in the world, including the economy, politics, the media, the family and gender, education, passages into and out of the community, deviancy, and culture. In almost every one of these areas the Haredim have created mechanisms that are hard to describe in the terminology of political theory. On the one hand, we can see the Haredi social system as a "state within a state" (if we purge this term of its antisemitic connotations): Haredi society has its own leadership, its own symbols, a substantially separate sense of identity (not all of its branches but many of them), and an educational system almost free of external supervision. All it lacks are security services. But it has no need for an army because it does not wage shooting wars; and as for law enforcement (police, bailiff's office) it has its own versions, which operate chiefly by means of powerful mechanisms of social pressure and social dependence. All the same, these trappings of sovereignty are intimately linked to the power structures of the larger state. The Haredi economy is heavily subsidized, and were it not for the oxygen it receives from the state (and to some extent from philanthropy) it would soon be at death's door. Ultra-Orthodox politics would be totally different were it not involved with the Knesset, ministries, and local authorities. Ultra-Orthodox education, despite its ostensible independence, depends on the state not only economically but also with regard to occupational training programs, both for women (who have always had a high employment rate) and men (whose employment rate was very low but is now showing an uneven

increasing trend). Even the Haredi media would be radically different were they not indirectly linked to the Israeli public space, to which they react constantly. Thus Haredi Jewry poses a conceptual challenge to political theory: neither sovereignty nor an absence thereof, and not even autonomy, and certainly not in the conventional sense of that term. Instead of the binary categories of sovereignty, the philosophical heritage of Hobbes and his successors, we must allow room for a more nuanced idea based on *degrees* of sovereignty. On such a scale, Haredi Jewry would rank somewhere below the midpoint but not too close to the bottom.

So much for the structures—what about the processes? Here too the matter is rather complex. Ultra-Orthodoxy is a conservative society, whose raison d'être is preserving the tradition of the fathers and holding back the tide of modernity wherever it poses a threat. It is true that the slogan "anything new is forbidden by the Torah" is chiefly the watchword of the ultraconservative Hungarian wing; but other circles, too, which have not adopted such an extreme position, have always known that they are fighting a rearguard action to defend the past. Nevertheless, no human society can exist in a perpetual standstill; at some point every culture will undergo change and transformation. Ultra-Orthodox society is no exception; much of what it is trying to preserve is in fact the product of a revolution: not a drastic or dramatic revolution, certainly not a revolution like those that rocked traditional Judaism in previous centuries, such as Hasidism and the Musar movement. The first of these sent shock waves through Eastern European Jewry but eventually became institutionalized and fully Orthodox, while the latter had a decisive influence on the yeshiva world and Torah study and left its mark on more prosaic matters such as the standard attire of the *Litvish* ("Lithuanian"—i.e., non-Hasidic) sector. The truth is that even the ultraconservative Hungarian model incorporates changes from the traditional halakhah that preceded the crisis of modernity. As Prof. Jacob Katz, a pioneer of

the scholarly academic study of Haredi Judaism, perceptively observed (in an unpublished lecture), the slogan "anything new is forbidden by the Torah" was itself an innovation. The Israeli version of Haredi Judaism, too, was born as a revolution: the transformation of Haredi society into a society of scholars is the ultimate Jewish revolution, given that at no time and in no place in history of the Jewish people has there been an entire society that devoted itself exclusively to Torah study and exempted its men from the obligation of supporting their families. Ultra-Orthodoxy continued to change even after the emergence of the society of scholars. Almost every leading *Litvish* rabbi and Hasidic rebbe guides his flock in a different direction than his predecessor did. The differences are not only in fine distinctions. Change continues to roil the entire Haredi community. At some point the Haredim abandoned the purely defensive stance and launched processes to bring others back to strict observance. They switched from political passivity to involvement when they joined the first Likud coalition. The sector upended its internal balance when it almost totally obliterated the pro-Zionist Poalei Agudat Yisrael party. During the last decade or two the Haredim have begun to experience additional changes, manifested in a gradual and hesitant opening to Israeli society; this has spawned a fierce and belligerent reaction. The bottom line is that within a very short time Haredi society has changed in many ways, whether willingly or unwillingly.

Does this mean that Haredi Judaism is not preserving the past? Not at all. There is no doubt that it is doing so more than many other groups within Judaism; and from its own perspective, these changes are merely means to preserve the essential content—even if in the end they turn it into something different from that old-time Judaism (Israel Bartal and Immanuel Etkes believe that this is in fact the essence of Orthodoxy). Here I am reminded of the brilliant mot uttered by the dean of the Ohr Sameyach yeshiva in New York, Rabbi Nota Schiller. In an interview with an American journalist he repeated the Haredi slogans about preserving

the old traditions unchanged and so on. The journalist refused to accept this bill of goods and objected that there is no society anywhere in the world that never changes; to which Rabbi Schiller responded with a fierce partial confession: "We change enough to remain the same."

Despite the brilliance of this retort and its justification to some degree, we should treat it with a proper dose of criticism. We can ask whether it is truly possible to draw a clear-cut distinction between inner content and external means, especially according to the Haredi worldview itself. But even if we accept the division into content and means, the truly difficult question is to what extent this statement is grounded in reality. Those who know the ways of Haredi society from close up have often felt that it spares no effort to preserve the means, while sometimes undercutting the essential content. The immense energies invested in defending the institutions sometimes work to the detriment of the values they are meant to protect. Thus we find that a society that aspired to bring all those loyal to the Torah under its wing has created a harsh and discordant ethnic polarization; a society that the newly religious had perceived as exemplary does not do a good job of absorbing these newcomers; a society whose foundations are the sublime value of dedication to the life of the spirit has reduced its members to a situation in which they must be constantly running after material resources and sometimes even get caught up in activities that are not compatible with halakhah in order to acquire them. To this we should add that a society whose educational system places such emphasis on expressing gratitude for every small favor is not willing to adopt the same attitude towards the state in which its lives and which has assisted it so profusely. Many (but not all) Haredim view the state as if it were the Gentile estate owner whose wrath one must avoid, rather than an agent essential for a sound social order in which all are partners.

These phenomena did not emerge because the Haredim are bad people or because Haredi society is hypocritical. In certain respects Haredi

society was and remains exemplary—not in scare quotes or ironically. This applies especially to everything related to its internal solidarity, its charitable institutions, the powerful motivation it instills in its young men to display excellence in Torah study, the strong family and community bonds, and, above all, its principled commitment to the Torah as standing above every other consideration, a commitment that sometimes attains true spiritual depth. What is more, the society of scholars was conceived and born of a sincere and idealistic fervor to rebuild what had been destroyed and to construct in Israel (as well as in the West) the Torah world that had been wiped out—a world that the Haredim see as the crux of the existence of the Jewish people. The rough spots that have surfaced over the years are not due to fundamental flaws. Some may assert that history teaches that every society that sought to turn an ideal for individuals into the hallmark of the collective has always failed. Ultra-Orthodox society avowedly aspired to create a world in which "all your sons are students of the Lord" (Isa. 54:13)—and this is an impossible challenge. Still, it is very difficult to dismiss Haredi society as a failure. Most of its men do indeed study Torah, some of them with great zeal. Far fewer leave the fold than abandon the religious Zionist sector. Its crime rate, too, is low. Some may say that these achievements have been purchased at the cost of a strict social regimentation that severely limits the individual's freedom of choice. From the perspective of Haredi Judaism, though, there is nothing wrong with this and it is certainly not a failure, because the fear of heaven takes precedence over freedom, and certainly over freedom as it is understood by Western culture.

To a large extent, the rough spots were produced by Haredi society's difficulty in dealing with its growth and success. What is more, the Israeli branch of Haredi Judaism is an excellent example of a religious revival movement, if we accept the definition that this means a movement that motivates a group of people to effect a change in their way of life, a change in which they deviate from the norms of routine religion in

order to achieve what they perceive as a higher spiritual level. In fact, the Haredi revolution has chalked up a number of achievements. (1) For the first time in Jewish history, a large group of young men gave up the idea of occupational advancement, economic well-being, and self-realization, and decided to live modestly and devote themselves to Torah study even after marriage. (2) For the first time in Jewish history, a sizeable group decided to follow the most esteemed rabbis not only in religious matters but in every area of life. (3) For the first time since the advent of the crisis of modernity, not only has Orthodoxy successfully defended its borders, it has been able to extend them and attract new adherents. If this is not a religious revival movement, I do not know what the term means.

But religious revival movements, too, do not preserve their ardent fire forever, and can be seen to pass through five stages of development. (1) growth; (2) struggle and consolidation; (3) flowering and triumph; (4) routinization and normalization; (5) nostalgia and romanticizing of the past (even by its former opponents). In Israel, Haredi Jewry has progressed through the first three stages with great energy. Like many religious revival movements, the stage of routinization arrived in its third generation. This is a difficult stage, in which the ardor of construction and creation yields to the need to preserve what exists, to maintain it and to patch up the spreading cracks in the structure. Religious revival movements meet this challenge with varying degrees of success. This challenge is especially difficult for Haredi Judaism, because of the conservatism that hinders adaptation to change, because it does not like to criticize itself aloud, and chiefly in light of its success in the earlier stages. The institutions it built sometimes seen to be like monsters that have risen up against their creators.

With these problems in the background, signs of crisis have begun to appear in recent decades: the rabbis' control of the public is waning, more and more individuals are leaving the fold and doing so more vocally, the voices calling for change are growing stronger, the percentage

of young men who elect to serve in the Israeli armed forces is rising, the percentage of those who acquire a secular academic education is climbing, and exposure to the internet and the temptations of modern culture is becoming more widespread. In reaction to these trends, the voices that demand fanatic preservation of the old are also growing louder. The battle against the modernizers known as the "new Haredim" is taking shape. The result of these tendencies is to make the internal fissures deeper and more pronounced.

The picture painted here is one of an emerging crisis. But there is no need to deliver a eulogy for Haredi society. Many religious movements have experienced crises, and the crisis of the third generation is almost inevitable. Not every crisis ends in a final collapse. While there are movements that prove unable to navigate the shoals and founder, others pass through peacefully. Some movements even emerge fortified and stronger. There is no reason to assume that Israeli Haredi Judaism will be one of those that die. Not only is it sufficiently large and robust; it has also demonstrated that its pragmatic ability to adapt is greater than it seems—both to itself and to outside observers. There are many vital forces within Haredi society, many talents, and much good will that can help it steer past the stage of routinization. When it emerges it will be different, more open and diverse than it was, having developed tools and behavioral patterns that can absorb this openness and diversity. There is no reason to assume that it will totally sever its continuity with its past.

In recent decades, haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society has undergone significant changes in several critical areas: More ultra-Orthodox men are going out to work; the haredi education system is becoming more diverse; The ultra-Orthodox media is becoming more open; The ultra-Orthodox woman is more aware of her important place as a breadwinner, and thus as a pillar of the existing social order; Ethnic discrimination is more acute; Those joining the haredi community are gradually taking their place as a semi-independent sector; The numbers leaving the fold are growing, as are the numbers of school dropouts, many of whom adopt delinquent behavior; and the move of many ultra-Orthodox families to Israel's periphery often serves as a lever for development in these areas, yet in some cases generates tensions. At the same time, changes are emerging in the ultra-Orthodox intellectual world: new variants of halakhic scholarship, and especially of halakhic rulings, are developed and an ever-expanding variety of books on religious thought add new products to the Jewish Torah library. The current book seeks to presents the dynamics that characterize this society, in sharp contrast to its static and fossilized image, in an academic-yet-easy-to-read style.

Prof. Benjamin Brown is a research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute and teaches in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

www.idi.org.il