

The Sacred and the Secular

Ultra-Orthodox Boys'
Education in the U.S.

Gilad Malach | Yair Ettinger



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June 2022

Translated and Edited by Lenn J. Schramm
Series and Cover Design: Alfabees Studio
Typesetting: Ronit Gilad, Jerusalem
Printed by Graphos Print, Jerusalem

ISBN: 978-965-519-394-7

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Printed in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community in the United States, which numbers around 650,000, is the second-largest in the world, after Israel. Like its Israeli counterpart, it too is gaining strength, both demographically and politically; and, again like the Israeli community, it must cope with problems old and new that relate to and threaten its fundamental values. Many attributes of the ultra-Orthodox community in the United States are rather different from those of Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy. These differences are frequently brought up in public discourse and scholarly literature regarding their means of support and employment. It seems, however, that there has never been a detailed study of their respective education systems. The present work seeks to fill this lacuna.

We analyzed two claims made about ultra-Orthodox boys' education in the United States: first, that the curriculum includes a larger volume of secular subjects than is offered by the ultra-Orthodox systems in Israel; and second, building on the first, that the quantity of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools in the United States has decreased in recent years.

Our conclusion is that with regard to the Hasidic sector, the differences between boys' education in Israel and the United States are not dramatic. In recent years, however, there has been a major effort by the State of New York, where most American Hasidim live, to upgrade secular studies in Hasidic schools. The differences between the schools of the non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox sectors in the two countries are greater: those in the United States devote more hours to teaching secular studies than their counterparts in Israel do, and for more years. We discovered, though, that there has been a decrease in the number of pupils from this group who have broad exposure to secular subjects, especially as a result of the ultra-Orthodox "emigration" from New York to Lakewood, New Jersey, where the curriculum of the schools affiliated with the flagship Beth Medrash Govoha (the second-largest in the world) devotes less time to secular studies. Still, in New York itself, and in other non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox communities in the United States, there has not been an appreciable decline in secular studies in recent years. Because of the unique features of the non-Hasidic sector in the United States, we devote an entire chapter to its schools, which educate roughly half of all ultra-Orthodox boys in the United States.

Our research turned up mainly pragmatic justifications for secular studies, but also arguments for broad exposure to these subjects as a matter of principle or philosophy. We were surprised to find that a significant percentage of the faculties in ultra-Orthodox schools are not ultra-Orthodox and that some teachers are not even Jewish. The principals of these institutions would prefer to have ultra-Orthodox teachers for these subjects, but encounter difficulties because of low salaries and the shortage of ultra-Orthodox men with appropriate professional training. We also learned about various stratagems for dealing with the challenge of making textbooks suitable for ultra-Orthodox boys.

Another premise we examined is that, because of the constitutional separation of church and state in the United States, government oversight

of ultra-Orthodox schools is minimal. It is also claimed that, for the same reason, there is almost no government funding of these schools. We learned, however that the laws of New York State (home to the majority of American ultra-Orthodox Jews) prescribe conditions that private schools must meet, though for many years they were effectively a dead letter. We found that even though there is still a significant gulf between the letter of the law and its enforcement in practice, the authorities have altered their attitude toward ultra-Orthodox schools in recent years. This change is reflected both in a clear definition of the legal requirements that schools must satisfy and in investigations of schools that fail to do so. This development has had many repercussions for ultra-Orthodox communities. Some put up a fight against the changes, while others try to reach some agreement with the authorities about raising the level of their secular curriculum.

At the same time, we also learned that there are many forms of state subsidies for private schools, which the state provides as a way of influencing content and pedagogy, and that ultra-Orthodox schools do accept these funds. With regard to these, our research emphasized the Hasidic sector and its schools, because they are coming under increasingly severe scrutiny by the state authorities. The issue of funding, on the other hand, is relevant for all communities and institutions.

This study of ultra-Orthodox education in the United States also aims at enriching the discourse about ultra-Orthodox boys' education in Israel. With this in mind, we have gone into detail about the justifications offered for secular studies, about how ultra-Orthodoxy in America deals with the challenge of finding suitable teachers and textbooks for secular subjects, and about tightening government supervision of how these subjects are taught. Knowledge regarding the education of ultra-Orthodox boys in the United States can help Israeli policymakers, as well as members of the Haredi community in Israel who are interested in opening new institutions, to develop novel ways of

thinking and action so as to promote a greater volume of secular studies in the ultra-Orthodox education system in this country as well.

A Tour of American Ultra-Orthodoxy

Israelis who walk the streets of Borough Park or Williamsburg in New York City may feel that they are in a familiar environment. The ultra-Orthodox areas of New York have the same typical rhythm and clamor of Bnei Brak or the Geula neighborhood of Jerusalem; the resemblance to Israel is also evident in the storefronts, the people, and even their facial expressions. The ultra-Orthodox (Haredim) in Israel and the United States look much the same: the Hasidic men with side curls, a beard, and a long coat; the non-Hasidim (known as “Lithuanians” in Israel and as “Yeshivish” in the United States) in a short jacket, with their side curls tucked neatly behind their ears. The women’s clothes and head coverings, which vary by their community affiliation—headscarf, hat, or wig—are also familiar to Israeli eyes.

But a closer look reveals differences between the ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and their counterparts in the United States. The vast majority of ultra-Orthodox men in the United States work for a living, and only a very small minority are full-time yeshiva students—very different from the situation in Israel. Furthermore, most American ultra-Orthodox Jews feel comfortable in secular settings and are even at home in the surrounding American culture, in contrast to the constant ultra-Orthodox polemics in Israel against Zionism and the state.

By countering the widespread notion that the ultra-Orthodox way of life found in Israel today has always existed, these differences can teach us that the ultra-Orthodox milieu is changeable, diverse, and multifaceted. When Israel was founded, the ultra-Orthodox in Israel could not have imagined that one day a majority of the men in their society would be studying Torah full time and not working, whereas today the majority cannot conceive of the opposite situation (Friedman 2006). What is more, the ultra-Orthodox communities in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust rarely isolated themselves geographically from other Jews; today, however,

the segregation of most of the ultra-Orthodox communities in the world is almost taken for granted (Shilhav and Friedman 1985; Cahaner and Shilha 2012).

A number of scholars have written about the changes that have affected and continue to affect the ultra-Orthodox world. There have been notable studies produced on the creation of the “society of scholars” and its implications (Berman 2000; Friedman 2001, 2003), on the crystallization of the concept of *da'at Torah*¹ (Brown 2005, 2011), on changes in the ultra-Orthodox leadership (Brown and Leon 2017), and on the social and economic changes experienced by ultra-Orthodox society in recent decades (Caplan and Stadler 2009, 2012; Zicherman and Cahaner 2012; Malach, Cohen, and Zicherman 2016; Malchi 2017; Malach and Cahaner 2020). Several scholars have examined the differences between the ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel and abroad. In this category we should cite the studies on ultra-Orthodox employment in the United States and England (Gonen 2001, 2006) and on the historical context that led to the disparities between the communities in Israel and in other countries (Caplan 2006).

The present study turns the spotlight onto ultra-Orthodox education in the United States, and draws attention to how its fundamental concepts and substance differ from those of ultra-Orthodox education and ultra-Orthodox identity in Israel. The most obvious differences relate to the

1 “Literally ‘the Torah view,’ ‘the opinion of the Torah,’ ‘the knowledge of the Torah,’ or ‘the Torah mind,’ which arose in the first half of the twentieth century in Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) circles. It can be summarized in a single sentence: The great religious authorities hold the power to issue rulings not only in their specific areas but in all areas of life, including the political realm” (Benjamin Brown, “Jewish Political Theology: The Doctrine of Da’at Torah as a Case Study,” *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 3 [July 2014]: 255-289).

hours devoted to secular studies, the non-Haredi textbooks used in the schools, and the identity of the teaching staff: in most ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States, including those deemed conservative, teachers of secular subjects are not necessarily ultra-Orthodox and frequently are not even Jewish. These would be rejected as a “non-Haredi” element in Israel, but American ultra-Orthodox Jews take their presence for granted. This is precisely why we want to focus on these phenomena and study how the ultra-Orthodox in the United States have for many years lived in close and continuous contact with a non-Haredi environment, which in Israel would be thought threatening.

Ultra-Orthodox education in Israel has been studied from various diverse angles, while some scholars have endeavored to provide an overall view (Horowitz 2012; Barth, Spiegel, and Malach 2020). There has been much less research into ultra-Orthodox education in the United States, though several attempts have been made to profile Haredi boys’ education there (Kramer 1984; Helmreich 2000). The present study provides a current picture of ultra-Orthodox boys’ education in the United States.

The study also considers the relations between government authorities and the ultra-Orthodox community with regard to religion. A series of studies have considered how the State of Israel regulates ultra-Orthodox education through legislation (Perry-Hazan 2013), budgets (Schiffer 1999), and practices (Barth 2018). In recent years, there have also been comparative surveys of government regulation of ultra-Orthodox education in several countries (Perry-Hazan 2014, 2015, 2019; Zehavi 2019). Here too we would like to offer a current snapshot, in light of important developments on this front, chiefly in New York State.

Our research was based on a qualitative narrative method and included interviews with more than 25 teachers, school principals, heads of ultra-Orthodox educational organizations, and academics who study ultra-Orthodox society in the United States, conducted in April and May 2018

(see the list of interview subjects in the appendix). At that time we also visited five schools in large ultra-Orthodox communities in New York and New Jersey and attended the annual conference, in Pennsylvania, of the umbrella organization of Orthodox schools in the United States.

The quantitative data we employ are based primarily on the AVI CHAI Foundation's long-term study (1998–2018) of Jewish day schools in the United States. We also drew on surveys conducted by the Pew Institute, the Jewish People Policy Institute, UJA–Federation of New York, and the Bureau of the Census.

The first chapter functions as an introduction and surveys ultra-Orthodox Jewry in the United States. After reviewing the relatively late consolidation of American ultra-Orthodoxy in the twentieth century and its flourishing in recent decades, the chapter analyzes ultra-Orthodox society's attitude toward the American society around it. Distinguishing between the relatively open "Yeshivish" community, which boasts reasonable levels of education and earned income, and the more insular and poorer Hasidic sector, it shows that the differences between these two groups are greater than those between their counterparts in Israel. The last section of the chapter looks at the major differences between American and Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy and explores the reasons for these differences.

The second chapter comprises a historical survey and sociodemographic analysis of ultra-Orthodox education in the United States. Even though the ultra-Orthodox constitute only 12% of all Jews in the country, their children account for almost three-quarters of the pupils in Jewish private schools in the United States.² Ultra-Orthodox education has grown rapidly—by 3.5% a year—and doubled its enrollment between 1998 and 2018. Divide almost evenly between the Yeshivish and Hasidic sectors, it

2 These are known as "Jewish day schools" and are to be distinguished from "Sunday schools" and afternoon "Hebrew schools."

is concentrated in New York City and New York State, though in recent years there has been a significant migration of the Yeshivish (as well as Hasidim) to Lakewood, New Jersey. About 90% of all ultra-Orthodox pupils in the United States live in those two states, with only 10% scattered elsewhere in the country.

Chapter 3 deals with secular studies in ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States; it focuses on the Yeshivish sector, which spends more time on them than Hasidic schools do. The number of hours devoted to secular studies, especially at the secondary level, varies from school to school, but in general there is a correlation with geography. In Lakewood, the curriculum resembles that of the classic ultra-Orthodox yeshiva in Israel; in Brooklyn it is more like Israeli ultra-Orthodox high school yeshivas (and includes taking the Regents Examination); outside New York and New Jersey it comes very close to the curriculum of national religious yeshiva high schools in Israel. Unlike in Israel, most teachers of secular subjects are not themselves ultra-Orthodox. The secular curriculum is intended to socialize the pupils to their ultra-Orthodox identity, but also to allow them to be part of American society. For many years the ultra-Orthodox schools used general textbooks, employing a variety of means to make them suitable—choosing those that are more appropriate, skipping problematic passages, adding supplements, and imposing censorship. Other methods have emerged in recent years, such as adapting and revising existing books and even writing new textbooks tailor-made for ultra-Orthodox schools. The chapter presents a series of practical and religious justifications for studying secular subjects and their importance in the eyes of teachers, parents, and pupils.

The fourth chapter considers the encounter between ultra-Orthodox education and state laws and government supervision. It looks at the increasing scope of government regulation that challenges Hasidic schools, with their limited volume of secular studies, and is forcing them to change. Educational legislation and regulation are much stricter in

New York, where most of the Hasidim attend school, than in New Jersey. This applies to syllabuses, teacher training, and statewide examinations. Despite the separation of church and state in the United States, the ultra-Orthodox school system has found many ways to obtain financial support from government sources; we show how educational administrators employ these methods in many areas, but also how the authorities endeavor to use financial incentives as a way to push the introduction of secular subjects and improve pedagogy.

Chapter 5 offers the lessons of our research that can be applied to ultra-Orthodox education in Israel. We believe it is important for Israelis to be familiar with the American model of non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodoxy, whose are far less isolated from surrounding society than we are used to in Israel. The enclave we studied is indeed rigid in its religious observances, but it is more flexible with regard to education and employment, and even leaves space for its members' American identity. This deeply rooted ultra-Orthodox model could provide inspiration for ultra-Orthodox groups and individuals in Israel who would like to find their place in society and the job market without abandoning their identity. It also reveals the importance of the community's desire to maintain and develop secular studies. Here, the parents' attitudes and initiatives are decisive factors in effecting change. At the same time, the situation on the ground in the United States is liable to change as a result of increased public awareness of the situation, growing attention from decision-makers, and the consequent increased supervision of ultra-Orthodox education. We also mention softer means, such as persuasion and encouragement, that must be part of any changes in this field.

We discovered that the tension between ultra-Orthodox autonomy and the demands of the authorities, especially from the insular Hasidic institutions, has increased in recent years. Throughout our study, we endeavored to determine what forms of pressure the state can exert on the ultra-Orthodox community, whether the resulting changes are deep

or merely superficial, and whether ultra-Orthodox politics may stymie the process of change.

The double perspective on secular studies in ultra-Orthodox education in the United States and on government supervision of those institutions emphasizes the differences between the ultra-Orthodox communities in the United States and Israel, and especially their education systems. Yet we believe it possible to divine from the situation in the United States possibilities for change in ultra-Orthodox education in Israel, from the perspective of ultra-Orthodox leaders and educators as well as of policymakers in central and local government.

Chapter 1

Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in the United States— History and Identity

1. The History of Ultra-Orthodox Jewry in the United States

A. Roots and Crisis (1881–1940)

The rabbinic opposition to the mass migration of two million Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was quite similar to their opposition to Zionist immigration to Palestine. Both were manifestations of the fear of the results of relocation to a new and modern world with standards very different from those of traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe. The rabbinic image of the United States as a “treif” (non-kosher) country clashed with the dream of the “goldene medineh,” with its promise of material comfort and individual and religious freedom (Caplan 2002).

There was considerable justification for the rabbis’ worries about migration across the ocean. Partial or full integration into American society attracted many Jewish immigrants; and even many who did not want to assimilate were compelled to work on the Sabbath, for example, in order to make ends meet. As a result, the abandonment of traditional religious observance gained speed during the years of mass immigration (1881–1924), and a wide gulf opened between the traditional parents and their “American” children. The first attempt to install a formal leadership

for America's Orthodox communities failed. New York's only chief rabbi, Rabbi Jacob Joseph (who served from 1888 to 1902), was unable to consolidate the community, and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis (UOR), established in 1902 to unite the community and represent it vis-à-vis the authorities, had limited sway (Gurock 1996).

The most conspicuous development in American Orthodoxy before the Holocaust was its split into two streams, which came to be called "Modern Orthodox" and "ultra-Orthodox." Modern Orthodoxy began to coalesce in 1898, with the establishment of the Union of Orthodox Congregations of America (OU). In the 1940s, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in New York was detached from the academic departments of Yeshiva University, which became the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy in America (Farber 2006). An ultra-Orthodox alternative emerged in the 1930s, when Rabbi Eliezer Silver, one of the leaders of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, set up Agudath Israel of America, inspired by the parent movement in Europe.

B. Holocaust and Rebirth (1940–1975)

The destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, which triggered a large migration by observant survivors to the United States, had a dramatic impact on the growth of ultra-Orthodox Jewry in the New World. Unlike the previous generation of immigrants, the newcomers' identity was strongly Orthodox; many had no desire to enter the American melting pot. Some 25% of all Jewish immigrants between 1938 and 1956 were Orthodox—tens of thousands of persons. Within two decades the number of Orthodox Jews in the United States—most of them Modern Orthodox—doubled (Heilman 2006).

The Holocaust also spurred the immigration to the United States of yeshiva heads and Hasidic rebbes, and the arrival of their surviving students and communities made it possible for them to resurrect institutions from

the Old Country, including Kletzk (Lakewood), Kaminetz, Telz, Mir, and Lubavitch. After the war, the rebbes of Lubavitch, Satmar, Bobov, Skvir, and other courts crossed the ocean and helped consolidate a devout ultra-Orthodox community in America (Piechnik 1963).

Extremist Orthodoxy blossomed in the United States in the years after the Holocaust, under the leadership of two immigrant rabbis, Rabbi Aharon Kotler and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. They were strongly anti-Zionist and endeavored to curtail secular studies in ultra-Orthodox educational institutions. In 1956, 11 yeshiva principals published a ban on cooperation with other Jewish streams. These steps led to the marginalization of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, which had been the dominant force in American Orthodoxy between the World Wars, and the final consolidation of two totally different branches of Orthodoxy: on one side, the ultra-Orthodox Agudath Israel; and on the other, the OU and the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), which represented Jewish day schools and Modern Orthodox yeshivas, including Yeshiva University.

As happened in Israel as well, one reaction to the Holocaust, in addition to the abandonment of religion, was the emergence of a newly energized devout Jewry with a fierce desire to rebuild the ultra-Orthodox community (Shaul 2010). Some of the survivors who reached the United States saw the Holocaust as divine punishment of the Jewish people for assimilation or for accepting secular Zionism, and their personal survival as a miracle wrought by the Almighty. The catastrophe strengthened their commitment to preserving tradition and their belief that social isolation from the *goyim* was imperative in order to raise a new generation that would carry on the religious heritage with pride. The rapid development of yeshivas and synagogues and the establishment of large families institutionalized this change, and to some extent remedied the catastrophe of the Holocaust (Heilman 2006).

C. Institutionalization and Prosperity (1975–2019); Ultra-Orthodox Society in Numbers

(1) The Size of the Ultra-Orthodox Population

Until the 1960s, a number of sociologists cast doubts about the future of Orthodox Judaism in the United States (Liebman 1965). Most graduates of Orthodox educational institutions were leaving the fold; even in a survey conducted in 2013, half of the respondents who had grown up in Orthodox communities said that they were no longer affiliated with that stream (Wormald 2015). In the long term, however, reality triumphed over the forecasts. As already noted, in the first generation after the Holocaust the ultra-Orthodox community stabilized under strong leadership and established new institutions. Since the 1970s, it has grown and flourished. As in Israel, the rapid numerical increase described below is based on marriage at an early age, large families, and a higher retention rate than in the past.

In the current century, ultra-Orthodoxy moved ahead of Modern Orthodoxy to become the largest sector of American Orthodox Jewry. In 2000, there were an estimated 200,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States, less than half of the entire Orthodox sector (Heilman 2000). But in 2020, 6% of American Jews aged 18 and over said that they were ultra-Orthodox, while only 4% said that they were Modern Orthodox; the number of adult ultra-Orthodox was 350,000, as against 230,000 Modern Orthodox and other Orthodox. The community's rapid growth is also reflected in the younger average age of the ultra-Orthodox population compared with other Jews. According to a survey conducted in 2013, the ultra-Orthodox accounted for 9% of Jews aged 18 to 49, but only 2% to 3% of those aged 50 and over (Wormald 2015).

Enrollment figures for the ultra-Orthodox education system in the United States make it possible to arrive at a rough estimate of the number of ultra-

Orthodox Jews in the United States. In 2018, some 220,000 pupils aged 4–18 attended ultra-Orthodox institutions in the United States.³ In Israel, this age cohort accounts for 37.5% of the ultra-Orthodox community. If so, a cautious calculation yields a total of 587,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States that year. Based on an estimate that the community is growing at a rate of 3.5% a year (the rate at which the ultra-Orthodox school system is growing), then by 2021 there were some 650,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States.

Table 1
Estimated number of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States, 2000, 2020 and 2021

| Source | Estimate | Year | Method |
|---------------|---------------|------|---------------------------|
| Heilman 2006 | 200,000 | 2000 | US Census |
| Pew 2021 | 348,000 (18+) | 2020 | Survey |
| Current study | 652,000 | 2021 | School enrollment figures |

3 These figures are based on the AVI CHAI report for 2018–2019 (Besser 2020), which will be analyzed at length in the next chapter. Drawing on the estimates in that report, we counted half of the students in Chabad schools as ultra-Orthodox. Though it is possible that a few students in the Centrist stream are not ultra-Orthodox, this stream accounts for less than 10% of all ultra-Orthodox pupils, and in any case most of these students do come from ultra-Orthodox families. All the students in the Yeshivish and Hasidic streams come from ultra-Orthodox homes.

(2) Fertility Rates

There are no precise figures for the fertility rate of ultra-Orthodox women in the United States. Our estimate of 6 live births per woman, close to that for ultra-Orthodox women in Israel (6.5 children), draws on a 2011 survey conducted by the UJA–Federation of New York. It found that ultra-Orthodox women aged 35–44 had an average of 5.5 children (Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller 2012). The corresponding figure in Israel, for that same year, was slightly higher, at 6.1 (Hleihel 2017). According to the Federation survey, the fertility rate for Hasidic women aged 35–44 was 5.8, compared with 5.0 for Yeshivish women. This difference reflects the somewhat more moderate tendencies of the latter group, which we discuss below.

(3) Geographic Distribution

Around 89% of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States live in the Northeast, almost all of them in New York and New Jersey. This concentration diverges from the percentage of American Modern Orthodox Jews who live in that region (61%), and is even farther from the corresponding figures for Conservative and Reform Jews—43% and 36%, respectively (Wormald 2015).

The largest communities of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States are found in Brooklyn, especially the Borough Park, Flatbush, and Williamsburg neighborhoods. Brooklyn alone is home to more than a third of all ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States. The second most important cluster today is in Lakewood, New Jersey, to which many ultra-Orthodox Jews from New York, especially the Yeshivish, have been moving. Lakewood is now home to more than 15% of US ultra-Orthodox Jewry. Other important centers are in Monsey, north of New York City, home to both Hasidic and Yeshivish groups; and Palm Tree (formally Kiryas Joel), which is the center of the Satmar Hasidim. Outside of New York and New Jersey there are ultra-Orthodox communities—mainly Yeshivish or Chabad Hasidim—in

several major cities, notably Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Miami (Heilman 2006; Besser 2020).

2. American Ultra-Orthodox Identities and Groups

A. Attitudes to Modernity and to the United States

Historically, most ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States have seen themselves as part of the American scene, living in a country that accepted them and their world with unprecedented openness. This perception was expressed in their educational institutions, which taught secular as well as religious subjects; in their employment, as many ultra-Orthodox Jews acquired a profession or trade and worked alongside non-Jews; and in their residential patterns, as they lived among less and non-observant Jews and sometimes even alongside non-Jews.

Many American ultra-Orthodox Jews feel secure enough to integrate into the host society. Though their official ideology emphasizes their differences from American society and its values, they are able to navigate their lives and find their place in it with regard to school curricula and employment. One of the leading experts on ultra-Orthodox society noted that even when ultra-Orthodox Jews integrate into the modern world, they do so with some variation and preserve their unique identity traits. When it comes to the integration of the community as a whole (as opposed to individuals), an echelon of lay leaders with the right contacts (known as *askanim*) often serve as intermediaries: they deal with the mayor or governor and know how to obtain government funding for the community's institutions. Many activists of Agudath Israel of America, which includes both Hasidim and non-Hasidim, fall into this category (interview with Prof. Samuel Heilman of Queens College).

Alongside this pragmatism, a more extreme ultra-Orthodox view has emerged, promoted by Rabbi Aharon Kotler, the founder of the Lakewood yeshiva, and the Satmar rebbe Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum: they preached full segregation from American culture and even from Jews who are not ultra-Orthodox, including the Modern Orthodox. One of the methods adopted by these two rabbis was geographical isolation from the big city and its seductions, by establishing the yeshiva in Lakewood and the Satmar town of Kiryas Joel. Yoel Finkelman defines this approach as one of life in perpetual conflict—on the one hand, the realization that we are living here in America, and on the other, the constant emphasis that this is not our place. The preference for geographic isolation encourages the development of an enclave, a process which has become stronger with the ultra-Orthodox migration to Lakewood (Finkelman 2017). Among the Satmar, the zealotry went so far as to reject contact with Agudath Israel and all those who were not members of their sect (Keren-Kratz 2013).

The more conservative stream of the ultra-Orthodox community gained strength in the 1970s. This development was reflected in the increasing number of ultra-Orthodox men studying in yeshivas (in Israel as well), some of them for many years. It also found expression in the above-mentioned trend to pursue total geographic separation from other groups, for example by concentrating in Borough Park and Flatbush or moving to ultra-Orthodox communities outside New York City (Mayer 1979). There has also been a growing estrangement from American culture, which is now more liberal than in the past (Heilman 2006). But another explanation for the greater insularity may be that the ultra-Orthodox now feel at home in the United States. As we know from other cultures, the first immigrant generation tends to integrate into the host society as much as possible. By contrast, the second generation, if it has maintained a separate identity, is more likely to stand tall and emphasize its differences.

At the same, the increasing self-confidence of American ultra-Orthodox Jewry is also leading to greater openness in some respects. For example, after many years of an almost total boycott of non-Orthodox Jews, in recent decades there has been greater cooperation between ultra-Orthodox and non-Orthodox organizations, as well as increasing efforts to attract the non-Orthodox to renewed observance. Though it is possible to see this new openness as one-directional, a closer look at the phenomenon reveals that those ultra-Orthodox who are active among other Jews are also more strongly exposed to American ways and contemporary Western culture (Ferziger 2015).

Processes similar to the growing labor-market integration of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel can be identified among their counterparts in the United States. This change can be attributed in part to the success of the process of increased religious stringency in the previous generation in America. The ultra-Orthodox community in the United States—where government welfare programs in general, and support for yeshiva students in particular, are not as generous as in Israel—can provide financial support to only a limited number of young men who continue full-time religious studies in a kollel and do not hold jobs. When the phenomenon of full-time yeshiva study began to get out of hand and became financially impractical, the community had to cut back on its support for these students, forcing many of them to go out to work.

The establishment of Machon L’Parnasa, the Institute for Professional Studies at Touro College in New York, which enrolls thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews, reflects this trend. The institute runs occupational training programs of limited duration in an ultra-Orthodox environment that complies with ultra-Orthodox norms. The courses offered, which include computer programming and business administration, provide students with up-to-date skills for entering the American job market. For the students, their time in the program serves as a transitional period in which they are exposed—in a sheltered environment—to “secular” content

and prepare to go out into various fields of employment. The “shelter” provided is not only against the outside world, but also against elements within the ultra-Orthodox community that pressure them to stay inside. Studying alongside others like themselves provides an important support group before they find a job outside the community (Gonen 2001; Heilman 2006). Nevertheless, one reason for the emergence of ultra-Orthodox colleges and professional training institutes is that some ultra-Orthodox young men whose parents attended secular colleges prefer, for religious and social reasons, to study in ultra-Orthodox institutions.

B. Ultra-Orthodox Streams in the United States

The various groups and streams in the ultra-Orthodox community can be mapped along two axes: their affiliation with a particular social group, and the extent of their modernity. The most important of the former is between the Hasidim and the Ashkenazi non-Hasidim (known as “Lithuanians” in Israel and “Yeshivish” in the United States). There is also a Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox community in the United States, but it is quite small. Our estimate is that the Yeshivish and Hasidic communities are of roughly equal size.⁴ On the socioeconomic plane, the differences between the Yeshivish and the Hasidim are very great, even more so than those between their counterparts in Israel (Brown 2017).

⁴ This estimate is based on the educational data presented below, to the effect that Yeshivish pupils account for 51% of the total, and Hasidim 49%. These figures do not include ultra-Orthodox institutions that are closer to the Yeshivish model but do not identify with that sector. Nor does it include the Chabad Hasidim, whose relative share of the ultra-Orthodox education system the United States is not large.

(1) The Yeshivish

From a societal perspective, the Yeshivish (that is, the non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox) are relatively more open to the American way of life and often work in liberal professions. Nevertheless, in their early twenties the men devote several years to full-time Torah study. Geographically, they are more dispersed than the Hasidim and can be found in various locales across the country, often including regions and neighborhoods in which non-Jews also reside. The Yeshivish in the United States have adopted English as their vernacular, replacing Yiddish. Even in the conservative Yeshivish town of Lakewood, only 9% of families speak Yiddish at home.⁵

Yeshivish schoolgirls are exposed to a large share of secular subjects and take the school exit exams (in states that have them). Their brothers, too, study secular subjects, even in high school, albeit to a lesser extent than the girls. In many cases, young adults continue to college and university, whether in institutions that have special tracks for them (such as Touro College) or in secular universities.

“Open” yeshivas are more receptive to academic studies than are the more conservative ones. For example, it is standard for students at the Ner Israel yeshiva in Baltimore to simultaneously attend college and obtain a bachelor’s degree. A second option relates to courses offered by some yeshivas that earn college credit, thus shortening the time needed for the young men to complete their college degree. For example, for students at the Lakewood yeshiva, academic studies are totally beyond the pale.

⁵ According to the data on Lakewood collected by the [US Bureau of the Census for 2015–2019](#), fewer than 9% of the residents speak an Indo-European language other than English or Spanish at home. Note, however, that Yiddish remains a language of study among the Yeshivish, including the lectures in some institutions. As a result, the American Yeshivish are more fluent in Yiddish than the Lithuanians in Israel are.

However, the course of study at Lakewood is deemed equivalent to an undergraduate program, and students can receive a degree in Talmudic studies that enables them to continue directly to graduate school if they wish (Gonen 2001).

A survey of ultra-Orthodox society as a whole found that 15% of adults (men and women) aged 18 and older hold a bachelor's degree, and another 10% hold a master's degree (Pew 2013). Among the Yeshivish, the percentage with academic degrees may exceed 25%, far higher than in the Hasidic community. This estimate is corroborated by Census Bureau data on higher education for 2015–2019. Even in largely conservative Lakewood, with its conservative Yeshivish majority, 31% of adults had college or university degrees.⁶

Thanks to their better secular education, the Yeshivish have a much higher average income than the Hasidim. According to a survey conducted by the UJA–Federation New York in 2011, only 21% of Yeshivish families had an income that left them below the poverty line—less than half the equivalent figure for Hasidic families. The percentage of Yeshivish families close to the poverty line was also relatively small, at 12%. Thus, only about a third of the Yeshivish families in New York are below or near the poverty line (Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller 2012).

A survey conducted in 2021 found that the average annual income of Yeshivish households was \$164,000, not far below that of the average Modern Orthodox family. The average annual income of Hasidic households was much less: only \$102,000 (Nishma 2021).

6 For the full data on Lakewood, see "Lakewood" on the [Census Bureau website](#). The figures should be taken with some reservations, however, because though a majority of the town's residents are ultra-Orthodox Jews, there are non-Jews as well. In addition, not all of the ultra-Orthodox there are Yeshivish; there is a small Hasidic community.

(2) The Hasidim

The socioeconomic profile of the Hasidic community is very different. It is much more closed to American society and its vernacular is Yiddish. Hasidic men tend to marry and go out to work at a young age, generally not as liberal professionals. In contrast to the situation in Israel, relatively few Hasidic women work outside the home. In addition, the Hasidim cluster together, with almost all of them living in New York and New Jersey. Note, however, that Chabad is an outlier among Hasidic groups with regard to its involvement with American culture, women's employment, and geographic dispersion.

The paradigm of an insular Hasidic community is the town of Kiryas Joel, which, following a referendum in 2017, became the independent township of Palm Tree. Almost all of its 33,000 residents are Satmar Hasidim. Their median age is 14, which is lower than the median age of the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel (16). Some 92% of the residents speak Yiddish at home (and only 4% English). In the Hasidic towns of New Square and Kaser (of the Skverer and Vizhnitz communities, respectively), the percentage of those who speak English at home is also very low—4.5% in New Square and 2.5% in Kaser.⁷

The volume of general studies offered in Hasidic schools is much smaller than in Yeshivish schools. The boys do not study secular subjects after elementary school, though the girls do, and in many cases also sit the school exit exams. It is not common for Hasidic young adults to attend college; those who do always enroll in ultra-Orthodox institutions such as Touro College (Gonen 2001).

7 For the data in this chapter about Palm Tree for 2015–2019, see "Palm Tree" on the [Census Bureau website](#).

The low incidence of academic studies among Hasidim is reflected in the data on the education of residents of Hasidic localities. In Palm Tree and New Square, only 5.5% and 4%, respectively, hold college degrees. Even in Monsey, a mainly Hasidic town with a large Yeshivish minority, only 13.5% of the adults went to college.⁸

In Palm Tree, 75% of the men aged 20 to 64 are employed, but only 38% of the women. These numbers almost invert the ultra-Orthodox employment patterns in Israel, where only 52% of Hasidic men hold jobs, but 77% of the women. The poverty rate in Palm Tree, at 44%, is slightly higher than that for ultra-Orthodox families in Israel (42%) (Malach and Cahaner 2020).

Despite the ultra-conservatism of the Satmar community, its poverty statistics are similar to those of other Hasidic communities in New York. A 2011 survey found that the poverty rate among Hasidim in New York City was 47% (Cohen, Ukeles, and Miller 2012). With 19% of families only slightly above the poverty line, two-thirds of Hasidic households are below or near the poverty line.

3. Similarities and Contrasts between American and Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Identity⁹

The ultra-Orthodox societies of Israel and the United States are in many ways very similar. Both emerged from the forced migration caused by the crisis of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Some of the description here applies particularly to the Yeshivish community.

century and subsequently by the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust. Both are divided into two main sectors, Lithuanian/Yeshivish and Hasidic, whose lives center around the yeshiva for the former and around the community and the rebbe for the latter. And both undertook reconstruction after the Holocaust and have experienced growth since the 1970s. The two communities have very strong ties, which are reinforced by two-way migration between them.

But for all the similarities, there are also large differences between the American and Israeli ultra-Orthodox communities. Sociologists have coined two primary definitions of ultra-Orthodox society: “the society of scholars” (Friedman 1991), and “enclave culture” (Sivan 1995). The first applies especially to the ultra-Orthodox in Israel, where most men continue to study Torah full-time and do not work for a living—in contrast to ultra-Orthodox men everywhere else in the world, most of whom do hold jobs. The second definition is relevant for ultra-Orthodox society everywhere, including Israel, the United States, Great Britain, and Belgium. Still, the nature of ultra-Orthodox enclaves varies from place to place, and the enclave in Israel is quite different from that in the United States.

The differences between the communities can be seen in their degree of modernity, their attachment to the country they live in, and their political stance, all of which, of course, influence their lifestyle. These differences are especially prominent among the Lithuanians/Yeshivish, who are the main focus of the sections of the present study on the teaching of secular subjects. The Yeshivish in the United States are better off economically, while the Lithuanians in Israel are more focused on Torah study. These differences have implications for the complex relations between the Israeli and American communities and between each community and the country in which it is located. We will now take a closer look at these differences and contexts.

A. “Soft Haredi Identity” versus “Rigid Enclave”

All currents of ultra-Orthodox society in the United States have taken on more aspects of the modern world than their Israeli cousins. This is reflected not only in a higher standard of living, but also in aspects of culture and leisure pursuits. In America, there is a middle class of ultra-Orthodox families who have large homes, own cars, and are employed in jobs typical of other middle-class Americans. In Israel, by contrast, an ultra-Orthodox middle class has only just begun to emerge and remains very small (Zicherman and Cahaner 2012; Regev and Gordon 2020). The American ultra-Orthodox are much more likely to be exposed to popular culture, such as music and cinema, and to adopt patterns of leisure that include shopping in malls and eating (kosher) American fast food. Recognition of the importance of staying in shape and interest in sports, including rooting for professional football and basketball teams, are much more legitimate among the ultra-Orthodox in the United States, especially among the Yeshivish (Finkelman 2013).

When it comes to higher education, too, there are significant differences between the communities in the United States and Israel. Around a quarter of the ultra-Orthodox in the United States hold an academic degree (15% a bachelor’s and another 10% a master’s degree),¹⁰ while in Israel, only 16% do (Wormald 2015; Cahaner 2020). There are also significant differences between the two societies with regard to how they perceive poverty: those in the United States see it as a social failure, whereas in Israel it is deemed a matter of choice and even considered to have religious value (Kasir and Tzahor-Shay 2017; Malovicki-Yaffe et al. 2018).

¹⁰ Note, however, that there are some yeshivas in the United States (including Lakewood) where the religious studies, conducted in the traditional fashion, can lead to a college degree in Talmud for those who are interested.

There are a number of reasons for these differences between the American and Israeli ultra-Orthodox communities.

1. **History.** In the United States, ultra-Orthodox society coalesced at a relatively late date, after the Second World War. In Israel, it could build on the extremist roots of the Old Yishuv, which go back to the late nineteenth century.

2. **Theology.** The challenges faced by the ultra-Orthodox in the United States are mainly those posed by the modern world, whereas those in Israel face two fronts—bit only modernity, but also the success of the secular Zionist state. The theological dimension of the second challenge mandates estrangement from the state, but in a different way from the historical model of Jewish life in the Diaspora.

3. **Ideology.** The ultra-Orthodox who moved to the United States, mainly after the Second World War, were refugees motivated solely by economic concerns. By contrast, immigration to Israel rested also on the concept of the Holy Land.

4. **Society.** The boundaries between the ultra-Orthodox and the society around them are clearer in the United States. In the Diaspora, the distinction between Jews and non-Jews is clear, so working alongside gentiles or living next door to them does not blur it. The ultra-Orthodox in Israel, by contrast, live and work alongside other Jews, some of whom are observant. Hence the fear of “seepage” is much greater and much higher ramparts are deemed necessary.

5. **Economics.** The living conditions and economic opportunities that derive from the country’s size and diversity make it possible for the ultra-Orthodox in the United States to do well financially if they hold a job. What is more, the American welfare state is much thinner than that in Israel, especially with regard to private education, institutions of advanced Torah study (yeshivas and kollels), and child allowances. This forces the ultra-

Orthodox in the United States to go out to work at a relatively young age (Caplan 2006).

6. **Legislation.** Ultra-Orthodox men in the United States do not face the choice between compulsory military service or full-time yeshiva study to avoid it. As a result, most of them find a job or acquire occupational training in their late teens or early twenties. In Israel, by contrast, the deferment of military service for young ultra-Orthodox men, which goes back to the War of Independence, has become the norm for the sector. But staying out of the military is contingent on not holding a job until a later age. This situation led directly to the emergence of ultra-Orthodox “society of scholars” in Israel.

B. Political Marginality versus Holding the Balance of Political Power

The demographic and political weight of the ultra-Orthodox in the United States is negligible, which limits their ability to rely on government subsidies or to influence the character of the country. This marginality reduces the tension with the society around them, because, in the absence of influence there can be no ambition to change the country’s character and nature. As we will see below, the ultra-Orthodox do have significant political clout in New York; their attempts to wield it there on issues related to education have produced political friction. In addition, the separation of religion and state in America creates, at least on the overt level, a sort of colorblindness with regard to the ultra-Orthodox and facilitates their acceptance as part of the country’s diverse social and occupational mosaic.

In Israel, by contrast, the ultra-Orthodox have significant demographic weight and great political power, which inspire them to try to shape the country’s character. These attempts trigger a blowback from the secular

public. The severe friction this produces does not exist in the United States, certainly not in the political arena (Cohen and Zisser 2003).

In addition, the partisan political organization of ultra-Orthodox society in Israel means that ultra-Orthodox households are much more dependent on their political representatives in order to flourish socially and economically than are their American counterparts. For example, thanks to the political constellation in Israel, ultra-Orthodox parents' payments to fund their children's schools are tiny in comparison to the support provided by the state. As a result, they have no substantial voice on education, and must toe the line and submit to the demands of the rabbinical education system.

By contrast, the American model is that which existed in Jewish communities in the Diaspora, in which the "householders" have a great say in community decisions. Ultra-Orthodox parents in the United States have much more influence on their children's education than those in Israel, if only because the schools are dependent on their tuition payments. The absence of state support for rabbis, rabbinical court judges, and other religious functionaries in the United States endows parent-householders with more power vis-à-vis the rabbis and institutions.

C. The Yeshivish in the United States and the Lithuanians in Israel

The differences between the "Lithuanians" in Israel and the "Yeshivish" in the United States far transcend the name, and include differences in language and culture, as well as a vast disparity in their involvement with society at large. In addition to the rejection of modernity, the Mitnagdim in Europe (the antecedents of both the Israeli "Lithuanians" and American Yeshivish), confronted by the Haskalah, took on a number of modern attributes, while the more conservative Hasidim did not. For example, at the start of the twentieth century they adopted modern dress, including

a fedora, a short jacket, and a tie, whereas the Hasidim held on to a more traditional appearance. The differences in how the groups relate to the modern world also have more profound implications, such as the status of the individual and the encouragement of rational thought (Brown 2017).

Another difference emerged after the migrations to Israel and the United States. The Lithuanians/Yeshivish accepted the host society's vernacular as their own spoken language; the Hasidim stuck to Yiddish as "mama-lashon," even if they are fluent in the local vernacular to various degrees. In the United States, the Yeshivish moved en masse to English as their mother tongue, though most of them still know Yiddish. Among their counterparts in Israel, by contrast, Hebrew has become the mother tongue and Yiddish a foreign language. The Israelis do not study English, whereas all the ultra-Orthodox streams in the United States lack a good command of Hebrew, not even adequate for studying religious texts in the original. Thus, the Israelis and Americans literally do not have a common language.

In recent decades many foundational Jewish works—the prayer book, the Talmud, commentaries, and homilies—have been translated from the original languages (Hebrew and Aramaic) into English. The new need for translation has created a novel reality: young ultra-Orthodox Jews in the United States no longer have to struggle to study these texts in the original language, as their grandparents did. A convenient translation, such as the Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud, can be found in every library and every place where Torah is studied in America.

Most Yeshivish schools do not devote time to the study of Hebrew, but even at those that do teach it, the students do not become fluent in speaking, reading, or writing. Consequently, when their graduates come to Israel for a year or more of study, they attend yeshivas specifically for

English-speakers, including a branch of Mir in Jerusalem and a number of institutions in the Beit Shemesh region.¹¹

Thus, the Mitnagdim's reaction to the modern world, more moderate than that of the Hasidim, produced wide gulfs between the Lithuanians in Israel and the Yeshivish in the United States. The conditions in the United States allow the Yeshivish to be more engaged with the American way of life. In Israel, by contrast, the Lithuanians have developed the more conservative model of a "society of scholars" as a reaction to the Zionist "people's army" (Friedman 2006). So even though the Israeli and American branches have many things in common, such as how they dress, a tendency to rational and scholarly thought, and relative individualism, there are very great differences in how they feel about the country they live in, how they relate to the modern world and secular culture, and their spoken language.

D. Interactions between the Ultra-Orthodox Communities in the United States and Israel

The Hasidic communities of Israel and the United States have more in common with each other than do the Lithuanians and Yeshivish. The fact that, due to their innate conservatism, they continue to speak Yiddish in both countries facilitates basic communication across the ocean. In addition, their loyalty to their rebbe (whether he lives in Israel or the United States) and the fact that the community is at the center of their lives creates a bond between Hasidim despite the distance. There are also close ties between the Lithuanians and Yeshivish, but the two communities do not have equal prestige. Both see the Israeli branch as the avatar of the

¹¹ Of course their studies in Israel, even in Anglophone yeshivas, improve the young men's command of spoken Hebrew—and, no less important, their ability to read and understand the Hebrew of the classic texts.

tribe of Levi, devoting itself to the study of Torah, whereas the Americans are more involved in practical affairs. At one time, leading rabbis in the United States were recognized as authorities by the Lithuanians in Israel (for example, the halakhic rulings by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein), and enjoyed significant spiritual and political influence (for example, Rabbi Aharon Kotler on Agudath Israel). This was mainly because those rabbis, like their colleagues in Israel, had been educated in yeshivas back in Lithuania. Today, by contrast, the leading rabbis in the United States have little or no weight and influence in Israel.

In his study of how the Yeshivish relate to Israel, Krakowski found that they attach great importance to the sanctity of the Land of Israel and deem it very important to go there to study Torah. The interview subjects emphasized that the level of learning is higher in Israel than in the United States, but nevertheless said that the Israeli system does not suit them. One explanation is that the ultra-Orthodox in Israel are too extreme, see things in black and white, and exhibit no moderation or nuances. For example, American ultra-Orthodox subjects said that the ban on boys and young men playing ball games or engaging in sports is evidence of what they see as the Israelis' "lack of normality."¹² The Americans interviewed for this study were generally very appreciative of the ultra-Orthodox Torah world in Israel, but considered it appropriate for only a few.

On the other hand, the Lithuanians in Israel are scornful of their counterparts in the United States; their proof of the Americans' inferiority was that they flocked to study in Israel, but Israelis never go to Lakewood (Landes 2013).

12 Moshe Krakowski, "Think all Orthodox Jews are Zionists? Think Again," *Forward*, October 11, 2018. The quoted phrase comes from our interview with him.

The Lithuanians in Israel are heavily dependent on the philanthropy and support of their cousins in the United States. This is manifested in direct contributions to yeshivas and kollels, along with the indirect support provided by their covering the expenses of the thousands of their young men who study in Israel. This system of relations is somewhat similar to that between Israel and American Jewry in general, in which Israel sees itself as the focal point of the Zionist vision, with the rich Jews of America in the role of Uncle Sam whose role is to support them, mainly financially.

But the man who pays the bills calls the shots (at least some of them). For example, without quite meaning to, the Yeshivish of the New World—chiefly via immigrants from the United States—are Americanizing the consumption and leisure-time habits of their Israeli counterparts (Caplan 2006). In the other direction, the “Torah of the Land of Israel” is influencing the ultra-Orthodox in America by injecting the ethos of protracted Torah study and the partial adoption of the model of the “society of scholars.”

Chapter 2

Orthodox Jewish Education in the United States

1. The History of Ultra-Orthodox Boys' Education in the United States

Etz Chaim, established on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1886, was the first yeshiva in the United States. The great wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe had produced the need for an educational institution of the traditional type to teach school-age children. Unlike the yeshivas in Eastern Europe, the curriculum at Etz Chaim included some secular subjects. Over the years the secular course load increased, as a result of parental demand, state laws, and the opening of a rival institution, Tiferes Israel, which taught students at a level better suited to life in America. The irony of history is that Etz Chaim evolved into Yeshiva University, the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy, while Tiferes Israel turned into a conservative ultra-Orthodox yeshiva headed by the leading rabbi of the postwar generation, Moshe Feinstein (Gurock 1988).

Until the First World War, American yeshivas developed very slowly. In 1916 there were still only four private Jewish yeshiva/schools in the entire country, with a total enrollment of approximately a thousand boys. But as the immigrants struck roots in their new country, the decade between the Great War and the start of the Great Depression saw a quantum leap in Jewish education, and in 1928 there were 17 schools and 4,300 students.

By the Second World War there were already 30 schools, with no fewer than 7,000 students (Kramer 1984).

This rapid growth created the need for a national umbrella organization. During the Second World War, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz, the principal of the Torah Vodaath yeshiva in New York, initiated the first organization of Jewish private schools in the United States, Torah Umesorah. The new organization's goals were defined at its founding conference, held at the Waldorf Astoria in New York in 1944. They included providing assistance in the establishment of new schools in New York and elsewhere, teacher training, advice to schools on educational and administrative issues, and subsidies and stipends to strengthen the schools. The organization was headed by Joseph Kaminetsky, who held a doctorate in education from Columbia University. There was also an advisory council of rabbis, but its influence was chiefly on paper. The institutions affiliated with the organization adopted important aspects of modernity, and their curricula included a significant volume of secular subjects in addition to the religious studies (Waxman 2017).

Torah Umesorah was very close to Agudath Israel, despite not being officially identified with it. All of its advisory council members, including Rabbi Aharon Kotler, were also members of the Rabbinic Council of Agudath Israel of America (as remains the case today). Torah Umesorah's policy was to steer clear of the issue of support for Zionism; ultimately, it adopted a neutral approach to the subject. This was in contrast to the stance taken by the day schools affiliated with the education committee of the Modern Orthodox Mizrahi movement, which emphasize the Hebrew language and support for Israel.

The years after the Second World War witnessed the formal organization and extensive growth of Jewish education in the United States. For many parents, the shock and sense of loss produced by the Holocaust, followed by the stimulus of Israel's birth, reinforced their Jewish identity and

motivated them to want to give their children a full Jewish education. In addition, many of the recent immigrants from Europe, who arrived after the United States reopened its gates after the war, wanted their children to have an Orthodox education. This led to the establishment of yeshivas for high-school-age boys, whereas previously the emphasis had been on elementary schools (Kramer 1984).

The postwar wave of immigrants also produced a new type of institution, closer to the European model. Most Torah Umesorah schools devoted much of the day to secular subjects, grouped under the general term “English,” but those set up by the newly arrived Hasidic courts of Satmar, Bobov, and Chabad reduced the volume of secular subjects and limited them to the lower grades. Despite the rebbes’ displeasure, these institutions continued to teach secular subjects, at the minimum level required by state law and demanded by parents (Keren-Kratz 2013). Former students of institutions such as Mir, Telz, and Slutzk in Lithuania, now the fathers of families in America, preferred that their sons would have very limited exposure to secular subjects, so these institutions were not closely involved with Torah Umesorah (Helmreich 2000).

The issue of secular subjects was a problem for the organization and its leaders. Most of the available textbooks were those already employed in public schools, and frequently included Christian motifs and content considered to be heretical or immodest. But the attempts to produce suitable textbooks were unsuccessful, chiefly because of the cost involved and the desire to maintain a high educational standard. The most common solution was to skip over problematic passages or to provide an alternative Torah-sanctioned explanation of scientific or Christian material in the textbooks (Mindel 1970).

In 1970, 41% of the graduates of Torah Umesorah schools in New York State passed the Regents Exam—way ahead of the 17% of public school students (Kramer 1984). An article by a teacher in the network, published

that year, highlighted the consensus about the importance of secular studies and offered three different motives for this: (1) parents' desire to give the school a positive image; (2) the aspiration to prepare the pupils for modern life; and (3) personal development (Elias 1970).

The flourishing of American ultra-Orthodoxy was most conspicuous in the field of education. In 1965, 406 Orthodox elementary and secondary schools all over the country enrolled 73,700 students, ten times the figure when Torah Umesorah was founded 20 years earlier. By 1978, there were 100,150 pupils in 613 schools (Kramer 1984). As we will see in the next section, the number of pupils in Orthodox institutions doubled over the ensuing 25 years; growth has continued since then, though at a slightly slower rate.

2. A Sociodemographic Survey¹³

A. Private Jewish Schools in the United States

The Orthodox dominate the field of Jewish private education in the United States, despite their relatively low proportion of 9% of the adult Jewish population (Pew 2021). Of the 292,172 pupils aged 4 to 18 attending Jewish day schools, 257,089 (88%) are in Orthodox institutions. The overwhelming majority of Jews who identify as Reform or Conservative or who are unaffiliated send their children to public or non-Jewish private schools. Many of these children do receive some Jewish education in Sunday schools (and a few in afternoon Hebrew schools), but that format is not covered by the present study.

¹³ This section is based on the AVI CHAI report, which presents complete data on Jewish education in the United States from 1998 to 2018 (Besser 2020).

Orthodox schools in the United States fall into five main categories: Hasidic, Yeshivish, Centrist, Modern Orthodox, and Chabad. From a sociological perspective, those in the first category resemble Hasidic institutions in Israel. The Yeshivish schools parallel the Lithuanian stream in Israel. The Centrist stream consists of schools that are not affiliated with a specific ultra-Orthodox community, do not stint on secular studies, and have a positive attitude toward Israel. Gender segregation is only partial and varies from institution to institution. Though there is nothing quite like this in Israel, they fall somewhere between the State Religious system and ultra-Orthodox schools. The Modern Orthodox stream parallels the State Religious system in Israel.

The Chabad schools, which are very similar to Chabad schools in Israel, have two models. Those in Crown Heights and other neighborhoods of Brooklyn are meant for the Chabad community itself; they are conservative in character and resemble the schools of other Hasidic groups. The schools in the second group are open to all Jews, many of them traditional or newly observant Jews of various levels. In these schools, secular subjects are taught widely and at a high level.

As for the internal breakdown, slightly more than a third of pupils in Orthodox education attend Yeshivish institutions (38%), with roughly the same number in Hasidic schools (36.5%). Modern Orthodox schools enroll 11.5%, Centrist schools 8%, and Chabad schools 6%.

All of the Orthodox schools—720 in 2018–2019—are private. The Hasidic and Centrist institutions tend to be rather large; at most of them, enrollment exceeds 200 pupils. By contrast, the Yeshivish schools and Chabad institutions tend to be small; nearly half of them have no more than 100 pupils. Most of the Modern Orthodox schools are somewhere in the middle, with 100 to 200 students (Besser 2020), but some schools in major centers have more than 500 students.

The present study deals with the three ultra-Orthodox educational streams in America—the Hasidic, the Yeshivish, and the Centrist. The section that deals with secular subjects focuses on the Yeshivish institutions. We do not address the Modern Orthodox schools, because of their similarity to the State Religious system, nor the Chabad institutions, many of which are not meant to serve the ultra-Orthodox community.

Table 2
Enrollment in Jewish private schools in the United States, 2018, by stream

| Stream | Enrollment | Percent of total |
|-------------------------|------------|------------------|
| Yeshivish | 97,596 | 33.5 |
| Hasidic | 94,379 | 32.5 |
| Centrist | 20,265 | 7 |
| Chabad | 15,408 | 5 |
| Modern Orthodox | 29,441 | 10 |
| Total Orthodox | 257,089 | 88 |
| Community | 19,826 | 7 |
| Conservative and Reform | 10,940 | 3.5 |
| Other | 4,327 | 1.5 |
| Total | 292,172 | 100 |

Source: Besser 2020

B. The Growth Rate of the Orthodox Educational Streams

In 2018, the three ultra-Orthodox school systems we will examine here had a total enrollment of 212,240 pupils, or nearly three-quarters (72.5%) of all students in private Jewish institutions in the United States. The student population of ultra-Orthodox schools as a whole has been increasing rapidly, almost doubling (a 98% increase) between 1998 and 2018. Its annual growth rate is 3.5%, the same as that of ultra-Orthodox education in Israel between 2013 and 2020 (Malach and Cahaner 2020). But not all of the streams are expanding at the same pace. Over the last 20 years, the Hasidic stream has experienced a remarkable growth of 142% (2.5 times). The Yeshivish stream also doubled during the same period (105%). Meanwhile, the Centrist stream shrank slightly (-1%). The especially swift growth of the Hasidic stream stems chiefly from the young marriage age and high fertility rate in the sector. By contrast, the Centrist stream has shrunk because more parents, preferring to be affiliated with a defined stream, are sending their children to Yeshivish schools or have modified the school's character to coincide with that stream (Schick 2014).

As noted, over the last two decades ultra-Orthodox education has expanded much faster than the other Jewish streams. For example, the number of pupils in Modern Orthodox schools increased by only 9% over that period. It is possible that this slower growth is affected by the relatively high tuition fees for those schools and by aliya, but also by families' becoming less observant or moving toward ultra-Orthodoxy. The community schools that are not affiliated with a defined stream but are closer to Conservative and Reform grew faster, by 33.5%, but this stems chiefly from the influx of pupils from the official Conservative and Reform systems, which shrank by 70%. The Chabad system, like the main ultra-Orthodox streams, doubled its enrollment in these years.

Table 3
Orthodox education in the United States, 1998–2018

| Stream | Enrollment, 1998 | Enrollment, 2018 (growth, %) |
|-----------------|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Yeshivish | 47,643 | 97,596 (105) |
| Hasidic | 39,059 | 94,379 (142) |
| Modern Orthodox | 26,961 | 29,441 (9) |
| Centrist | 20,504 | 20,265 (-1) |
| Chabad | 7,438 | 15,408 (107) |
| Total | 141,605 | 257,089 (82) |

Source: Besser 2020

C. The Geographic Distribution of Ultra-Orthodox Schools in the United States

The ultra-Orthodox educational institutions in the United States are concentrated in New York State and, to a lesser extent, New Jersey. In 2018, these two states accounted for some 90% of all ultra-Orthodox pupils in the country, including 66% in the New York metropolitan area alone.

A large majority of the Hasidic institutions are in the states of New York and New Jersey. By contrast, only 58% of the pupils of Centrist schools are in those states, and 42% elsewhere. This is because Orthodox Jews who live outside the major centers in New York and New Jersey are more modern, so their schools are more likely to incline toward the Centrist paradigm.

A prominent trend of recent years has been the relocation of ultra-Orthodox Jews of all streams from New York to New Jersey. This is

reflected in the growth rate of ultra-Orthodox enrollment: Between 1998 and 2018, enrollment increased by only 64% in New York State, but by 177% in New Jersey. The largest jump in ultra-Orthodox enrollment was in Lakewood, New Jersey, where 16% of all ultra-Orthodox pupils went to school in 2018, significantly more than the 5% figure of 1998.

D. The Yeshivish Education System

Because the section on secular studies presented below focuses on the Yeshivish stream, we will go into some detail in our analysis of the data concerning it.

The number of schools in the Yeshivish stream is quite large because some of them are small and may have only one class at each grade level, mainly due to the preference of administrators and parents. Nevertheless, more than half of the pupils attend schools with enrollments of 500 or more.

The terminology of the Yeshivish system in the United States is very different from that of its counterpart in Israel. An elementary institution is a *yeshiva ketana* and a secondary institutions a *mesivta*.¹⁴ For clarity's sake we refer to them by their pupils' age level—elementary and secondary—no matter what the public calls them.

The geographic distribution of Yeshivish institutions is significant. They too are concentrated in New York and New Jersey, which contain 78.5% of pupils. In fact, 63% of all their students live in only two cities, New York and Lakewood. There are more pupils in New York City (32%), but Lakewood, despite its much smaller population, trails only slightly (31%). Other pupils in the Yeshivish schools can be divided between the New York

¹⁴ Among the Hasidim, elementary institutions have various designations, including Talmud Torah and yeshiva; in high school, the term is yeshiva or *mesivta*.

suburbs (11%), other towns in New York State (outside the metropolitan area) and New Jersey (other than Lakewood) (4.5%), and everywhere else in the country (21.5%).

Lakewood's growing prominence in the Yeshivish stream is reflected in the remarkable increase in the percentage of pupils in the stream who study there—from 9.5% in 1998 to 31% in 2018 (for New York City, the figures are 51.5% in 1998 but only 32% today). Yeshivish education outside New York and New Jersey has grown at a rate comparable to that of the entire system and has maintained its relative share of the system (about 20%).

Table 4
Yeshivish educational institutions in the United States, by location, 2018

| Location | Pupils | Percentage of total enrollment |
|--|---------------|--------------------------------|
| New York City | 31,251 | 32 |
| Lakewood | 30,247 | 31 |
| New York suburbs | 10,739 | 11 |
| Other towns in New York and New Jersey | 4,317 | 4.5 |
| Other states | 21,042 | 21.5 |
| Total | 97,596 | 100 |

Source: Besser 2020

E. The Significance of the Geographical Distribution

The curriculum of a Yeshivish school correlates to some extent with its location. Lakewood, as noted, has a large and dominant Yeshivish population. Beth Medrash Govoha (BMG)—the “Lakewood Yeshiva”—is the largest Torah institution in the United States and one of the largest in the world. The schools in Lakewood—*talmudei torah* and *yeshivas*—as well as those elsewhere in New Jersey that are subject to its rabbis’ influence, teach the barest minimum of secular subjects at the elementary level and totally banish them from high school. Because so many ultra-Orthodox Jews have moved to Lakewood, the Lakewood model’s influence on the entire Yeshivish sector has grown in recent years.

The institutions in Borough Park, Flatbush, and other Brooklyn neighborhoods constitute the Yeshivish “mainstream.” The hours of instruction and level of secular studies satisfy the legal requirements, but no more, and the pupils take the Regents exam.

Yeshivish institutions elsewhere in the country, including the rest of New York City, Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and smaller ultra-Orthodox centers, usually teach secular and religious subjects at a level similar to national religious yeshiva high schools in Israel. Their student bodies tend to be more heterogeneous with regard to religiosity; that is, they accept children from families that are less stringent in their observance.

This phenomenon can also be found in more moderate ultra-Orthodox institutions in New York, outside Brooklyn. A flourishing institution identified with this sector, located in Washington Heights, near Yeshiva University, is Yeshiva Samson Raphael Hirsch, which has elementary and secondary divisions and a post-high-school yeshiva. It is named, not surprisingly, for the German rabbi who originated the concept of *Torah im derekh erez* (“Torah with worldly involvement”), that is, moderate ultra-Orthodoxy that combines a maximum commitment to the Torah with excellence in the practical world and advanced secular education. The

Yeshiva Ktana of Passaic (New Jersey) serves the moderate ultra-Orthodox population there; in addition to intensive Torah studies, its pupils take the state school exit exams. Similar institutions are Yeshiva Ohavei Torah in Riverdale and Yeshiva Darchei Torah in Far Rockaway.

Chapter 3

Secular Studies in Yeshivish Schools

The volume of secular studies at Yeshivish boys' schools in the United States far outstrips that both at the Hasidic schools in that country and throughout the entire ultra-Orthodox system in Israel. This is why we believe it important to examine these studies more closely and look at how they are changing. Later, in Chapter 4, we will consider American legislation, funding, and policies with regard to private schools in general and ultra-Orthodox institutions in particular. First, though, we want to offer a brief description of the content taught by ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States. After surveying the main differences between Hasidic and Yeshivish institutions, we will dive into the latter and examine the quantity of secular studies there, the teachers, and the textbooks. We will also consider this stream's philosophy and the main factors that influence secular studies in its institutions.

1. Introduction: The Scale of Secular Studies in the Ultra-Orthodox Sector as a Whole

The conventional division of the ultra-Orthodox community in America into Hasidic and Yeshivish is strongly reflected in the attitude toward secular studies for boys. The Hasidim teach the bare minimum required to reconcile their community norms with the legal mandates. By contrast, the tendency among the Yeshivish is to combine religious studies with a relatively large quantity of secular studies in elementary school and a much smaller quantity in high school. Secular subjects are taught in Yeshivish institutions from a pragmatic perspective—to prepare the students for adult life. In some cases, however, they hold to the principle of integrating Torah with worldly life, in keeping with doctrine of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch.

The divergent approaches of Hasidim and Yeshivish are manifested in the number of hours devoted to secular studies, the subjects taught, the professional qualifications of the teachers involved, and the textbooks used. An equally important expression of the difference is the age to which boys are exposed to secular subjects: in most Hasidic institutions such courses disappear after eighth grade, whereas in Yeshivish high schools boys continue to study secular subjects in the afternoon. As noted above, the Centrist stream lies somewhere between the ultra-Orthodox and national religious education streams in Israel, with more hours of instruction in secular subjects in both elementary and secondary school.

The differences between the Yeshivish and Hasidic streams are prominent in boys' schools. In girls' schools, which this study does not address, the differences are smaller; as a rule, girls in all ultra-Orthodox institutions in the United States, including the Hasidic, are exposed to a healthy amount of secular subjects.

For example, an activist for change who is a graduate of Hasidic education told us that

Women come out with some skills. They speak English. They know math, most of them know some science and history. I grew up with a lot of girls in my house and they would come home and sing the names of the 50 states, names of the presidents, names of the capitals, stuff like that. I would never hear about it in my yeshiva. It did not exist. They learn also very practical things—they learn typing on a keyboard, sewing and housekeeping, financial management. They come out and they are prepared to get an entry-level job, they can be a bookkeeper, they can do administrative work and so forth. Typically, that's where their careers end—because they begin having kids: one two, three. It is only so long that they can stay in that environment, so then they begin dropping out of work,

or doing it part time and then the husband has to go work.
(Naftuli Moster, YAFFED)

2. Secular Studies in Yeshivish Institutions: Details

A. Elementary School

When it comes to teaching secular subjects, Yeshivish schools in the United States fall into three groups.

The schools of the first group have a positive attitude toward secular subjects and teach them seriously, because they are thought to be essential for life in modern society. This is reflected both in the time devoted to them (three or four hours a day) and in the content, which includes English, geography, history, and the sciences. In contrast to ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel, the classes are not relegated to the end of the day, but are interspersed in the schedule with religious subjects. Such schools can be found in Yeshivish population centers all over the country, except in the most conservative communities in Lakewood and Brooklyn. Our interviews and field trips did not suggest any tendency to cut back on these subjects, which continue to be taught as they have been for decades.

The second group consists of the Yeshivish schools in the ultra-Orthodox centers of New York, such as Borough Park and Flatbush. These offer fewer classroom hours in secular subjects and have a less positive attitude toward them. This difference may be expressed in pushing the classes off to the end of the day, in the quality of the teaching, and in the teachers' qualifications.

The third group, which is growing rapidly because of significant migration, comprises the Yeshivish schools in Lakewood. Here the volume of secular subjects in elementary school resembles that in parallel institutions in

Israel. This means only an hour or two at the end of the day, accompanied by the educational message that they should be studied without much joy and only because of the constraints imposed by the outside world.

B. High Schools and the Attitude toward Post-Secondary Education

The same tripartite division is found in secondary schools. All over the United States, yeshivas in the first group teach a fairly large quantity of secular studies, similar to national religious yeshiva high schools in Israel. Many of their graduates go on to college, either in tandem with their yeshiva studies (as at Ner Israel in Baltimore) or afterward, at general institutions or at those intended specifically for the ultra-Orthodox.

In the second (mainstream) group too, boys take the high-school exit exams (in New York, the Regents). They are tested in English (literature and reading comprehension), mathematics (algebra, geometry, trigonometry, etc.), social studies (American geography, government, and history, world geography and history), the sciences (chemistry, earth science, and physics), and a foreign language (French, German, or Hebrew). The level of instruction varies from institution to institution. In most of them students take only the minimum number of exit exams, though a few students at more modern institutions may take more of them in order to satisfy college admission requirement and have more career options later in life.

In these institutions many more hours are devoted to religious studies, while classes in secular subjects are limited. By far the bulk of the school day at mainstream yeshivas (which lasts more than 10 hours) focuses on religious subjects, with only two or three hours of secular classes, usually in the afternoon. The limited classroom exposure to secular subjects and the impossibility of intensive courses that can prepare the pupils for Advanced Placement exams makes these institutions similar to ultra-Orthodox yeshiva high schools in Israel (as opposed to the national

religious system). Here too there has been no change in recent years. Still, though the number of classroom hours in secular subjects in the Yeshivish communities of New York, in Flatbush and Borough Park, has not decreased, it is frequently asserted that these institutions display greater disdain or lack of respect for secular studies than they did in the past.

The institutions in the third category want their boys to have an exclusively religious education, so their attitude is similar to that of the Lithuanian sector in Israel. This approach is prominent in Lakewood, where no secular subjects are taught in high school and, of course, the boys do not take the state exit exams. This pattern is becoming more significant as a result of the migration of ultra-Orthodox families to Lakewood, where nearly a third of all pupils of the Yeshivish community now go to school.

Note that there are other Yeshivish communities whose boys' high schools have banished secular subjects, such as in the mainly Hasidic town of Monsey, but also in Toronto. A senior leader of the Yeshivish community told us how surprised he was to learn of the insular character of the school attended by some of his relatives' children. In practice, he said, they effectively do not attend high school and have abandoned secular studies to learn Torah all day. He ascribed this to the mentality of the ultra-Orthodox in the United States:

When you feel secure, you have more "chutzpah" ... Once the US Haredi community felt secure here and that they are no longer immigrants, we have children who are American in every regard, "we have rights." Once that has happened, some people have allowed themselves to do what they think is the ideal. Is this the ideal or not? This is another issue, a large issue. But they feel that is the ideal and are more comfortable bending the rules, to the extent that there are any government

rules. (Rabbi Avi Shafran, spokesperson for Agudath Israel of America)

So the curtailment of secular subjects is not limited to Lakewood. Nevertheless, though the trend is clear, it should be noted that even in Lakewood some schools teach secular subjects. Some interviewees said that in Lakewood, too, there are now calls to expand secular subjects in the schools, perhaps because of the influx of Yeshivish Jews who are more open.¹⁵ A senior official of Torah Umesorah told us explicitly that changes are possible in Lakewood, even among the Hasidim:

We find that the Yeshivish, and the Hasidim not far behind, are realizing that if students in high school do not get a solid background they are not going to get a job and they are not going to be able to support their families, so the Lakewood model is not working. It is just not working. And also, the parents are more sophisticated in this generation, so when they send their kids to Yeshivish high school they want Lakewood, but they [also] want a good secular education. And it is a very competitive market in high school, and any yeshiva that does not provide it is not going to make it, people will go somewhere else, so there is tremendous pressure. (Rabbi Mordechai Besser, Torah Umesorah)

Studies in a post-secondary yeshiva may be eligible for college credits. Even Lakewood confers bachelor's and master's degrees in Talmudic studies, which can serve as a springboard to graduate studies if students want to go on to university.

¹⁵ One of the initiatives to teach secular objects in a way that links them with the practical life of an Orthodox graduate in the modern world is that of the ultra-Orthodox organization Life Prep Education System, which operates in Lakewood as well (see below, n. 18).

Along with the trend among the Yeshivish toward greater insularity, there are also those (admittedly fewer) who are more open than their parents. They may support their children's going to university or see themselves as part of American society. But they, too, want to preserve the community framework and the outward appearance of Yeshivish society.

In recent years, many young men who grew up in ultra-Orthodox families and who dress the part have enrolled at traditional centers of Modern Orthodoxy, especially Yeshiva University in Washington Heights. When we visited its campus, we were struck by the number of students in ultra-Orthodox garb, some of them students at the affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, but others enrolled in the university's other departments. This bears note because the university is the flagship of Modern Orthodox society and its motto remains *Torah u-Madda*, "Torah and Science," inspired by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the paramount leader of Modern Orthodoxy.

It is often asserted that in a complex process encompassing religious outlook, politics, and sociology, Yeshiva University has moved to the right over the years. Hence many more ultra-Orthodox Jews study there now—whether they grew up in ultra-Orthodox communities and now feel comfortable at a Modern Orthodox institution, or whether they come from a Modern Orthodox background but have shifted toward ultra-Orthodoxy or adopted some of its premises. Both groups favor an approach that integrates Torah learning with a general secular education and a scientific approach, in a model of moderate ultra-Orthodoxy.

According to Moshe Krakowski, today's Yeshivish ultra-Orthodox community is experiencing tensions and complexities that in the past existed only in the modern stream. There are now various options available, even if they are not called Modern Orthodoxy. While the ultra-Orthodox may not have developed an outlook that attaches value to secular studies (as the Modern Orthodox do), in practice people are behaving in novel

ways. This is evident all across the spectrum, and especially when it comes to attending college, which more and more ultra-Orthodox are now choosing to do.

This phenomenon is associated with the movement toward greater stringency among the Modern Orthodox:

Children who grow up Modern Orthodox want more religious commitment and “authenticity” than their parents. They go off to yeshiva for a year, in the United States or Israel, and then, to their parents’ astonishment, they come back wearing a black hat. These young men grew up in a world of secular education and then moved toward ultra-Orthodoxy. They want to be both American and ultra-Orthodox, as long as they have money and power. The result is that the boundary between Yeshivish ultra-Orthodoxy and parts of the Modern Orthodox world are less distinct than in the past, which means that Yeshivish men can feel at home in a place like Yeshiva University. (Prof. Samuel Heilman, Queens College)

C. American Identity: School Assignments, Pictures on the Walls, Singing the National Anthem, and Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance

The pupils of Yeshivish schools in the United States, especially those in the first and second categories described above, feel American in every way. Studying in English, exposure to non-Jewish teachers, and the curriculum, which includes American history and civics with an emphasis on the Constitution and democratic institutions (see below), forge a link between the pupils and the American scene, alongside, of course, their ultra-Orthodox identity.

Our visit to a Yeshivish elementary school in the first category showed us how these two identities can coexist: on one wall were pictures of daily life in colonial Jamestown and letters that the students wrote to George Washington; on the other wall was a large poster with a verse from Isaiah, “Your eyes will see your teachers,” under pictures of leading ultra-Orthodox rabbis in the United States and Israel. There is much less identification with contemporary America in schools of the second and third categories, but pictures associated with American history and of famous Americans can be found on classroom walls there too, and even in Hasidic schools.

This serves to demonstrate the similarities and differences between Yeshivish schools in the United States and their Lithuanian counterparts in Israel. In the former, the exemplary figures are ultra-Orthodox leaders, including those who live in Israel. In addition to American rabbis, an ultra-Orthodox pupil in the United States will be regaled with the greatness of the Hazon Ish, Rabbi Shach, and Rabbi Shteinman. When he grows up, if he goes to study at a yeshiva in Israel it will almost certainly be an ultra-Orthodox institution, where he will feel at home. By contrast, the curricula and pedagogical methods of Yeshivish schools in the United States, along with the honor shown for national heroes, are paralleled in Israel only in State Religious institutions.

The American identity is also part of Yeshivish high schools in the United States. This includes the culture of sports and physical fitness, which includes playing basketball, baseball, and American football. Students at ultra-Orthodox high schools in the United States are permitted to play ball in the schoolyard during recess—something that would never be dreamt of in Israel. And the connection to American identity goes even deeper. An online video of the graduation ceremony of the Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia, one of the most important Torah education institutions the United States, shows the pupils reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and then singing the “Star-Spangled Banner.” While the young men are praising

“the land of the free,” one of its deans, Rabbi Shimon Yehudah Svei, and the other dignitaries stand as well, though they cannot be heard singing. The high school graduation ceremony constitutes a sort of rite of passage into adult American society—whence the students’ excitement.¹⁶

3. Teachers and Textbooks

A. The Faculty Profile

An Israeli visitor to ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States encounters something that is quite unimaginable in Israel— non-observant and even non-Jewish teachers of secular subjects. When we visited an ultra-Orthodox elementary school in Passaic, New Jersey, we observed a science class taught by a Puerto Rican teacher who the principal says is the students’ favorite member of the entire faculty. We do not know very much about that day’s topic, so we cannot express an opinion on the teacher’s professional abilities, but we were strongly impressed by her positive dynamic and warm relationship with the students. In fact, this situation is not unusual at that school and is even rather common in ultra-Orthodox schools, certainly those of the Yeshivish persuasion. In addition to teachers who are not ultra-Orthodox, there are non-Jewish support staff of various ethnicities and religious denominations.

The faculty profile reveals that the ultra-Orthodox enclave culture in the United States is very different from what we know in Israel, especially when it comes to education. The pragmatism of American ultra-Orthodox Jews leads them to take the teaching of secular subjects for granted and makes the teachers’ identity irrelevant. This can even be found in Hasidic schools.

¹⁶ See Yeshiva World News, “Yeshiva of Philadelphia Singing National Anthem at Graduation *YouTube*.”

It is hard to find qualified teachers because there is not a lot of money to pay, so sometimes you find Jewish guys who are not Yeshivish who want a second job in the afternoon after public school, or non-Jews who teach in Catholic or public schools and then come to the yeshiva in the afternoon because our secular studies start at 3:30. In high school they will be male, and in elementary school it depends—some will also allow women. (Moshe Krakowski, Yeshiva University)

Here too, however, there have been changes in recent years, as some of the ultra-Orthodox have begun criticizing the employment of non-Jewish or non-observant teachers. The critics' main point is that such people cannot serve as role models for students because of their different background and worldview. The criticism is motivated by two almost opposed motives: some want all the teachers to be ultra-Orthodox so that pupils will take secular subjects more seriously; others do not care about this but want the faculty to be "holy."

Yeshivish schools are hard-pressed to employ exclusively ultra-Orthodox faculties. They want to provide a high level of secular studies and cannot find enough ultra-Orthodox teachers for this purpose. One reason is that the institutions can afford to pay only low salaries and inadequate social benefits, which frequently do not include health insurance, a pension, and paid vacations. The teachers who are not ultra-Orthodox have a university degree. In the morning they teach in public schools, and then moonlight at the ultra-Orthodox school to supplement their income. By contrast, because few ultra-Orthodox men have a degree in education, which limits them to ultra-Orthodox schools and their poor salaries, few of them even enter the field:

The biggest problem in ultra-Orthodox education is recruiting teachers who are qualified to teach secular subjects. When the economic situation in America is good, public schools

hire many teachers, so who wants to come here for half a day with a poor salary and no benefits? So we are moving on to the stage where Torah Umesorah will train religious people as teachers. We still have non-Jewish teachers, some of them excellent, but the market is becoming difficult. (Rabbi Baruch Hilsenrath, general studies principal, M'kor Baruch Elementary School, Yeshiva Ktana of Passaic)

Torah Umesorah, the umbrella organization of Orthodox (and especially ultra-Orthodox) schools in the United States, offers in-service courses and runs a pedagogical center for ultra-Orthodox teachers in Flatbush. When we visited the center we found a library with diverse pedagogic and professional materials, but the ultra-Orthodox teachers seem to make scant use of them. For both economic and professional reasons, the day is still far off when all teachers of secular subjects in Yeshivish schools will be ultra-Orthodox.

Torah Umesorah's approach clearly reflects the special methods that Yeshivish Orthodoxy (which dominates the organization) employs to build its enclave. The organization's annual convention aims to forge a sense of identification and belonging among teachers in the ultra-Orthodox sector. One participant told us that he doesn't always learn anything new there, but, because he lives and the works in a city where there are not many ultra-Orthodox Jews, the opportunity to meet rabbis and educators is essential for him to feel that he is part of a larger group.¹⁷

Still, the convention is evidence of the enclave's fluid walls. The keynote speaker, who ran an active pedagogical workshop that lasted for several hours, was a well-known non-Jewish professor of education. The desire to

¹⁷ The 62nd annual Torah Umesorah National Leadership Convention, which we attended, was held on May 2–6, 2018, at the Kalahari Resort in Pocono Manors, Pennsylvania.

keep abreast of and acquire new teaching methods, and the willingness to learn from a non-Jewish speaker, are important expressions of how American ultra-Orthodoxy relates to general society. One could never imagine an event in a similar format at a convention of ultra-Orthodox educators in Israel.

The push for an ultra-Orthodox faculty is stronger in Hasidic schools, which are more isolated from their surroundings. It is more important for them that a teacher be “one of us.” We encountered an example of this during a visit to a Hasidic school in Borough Park, where a teacher of secular subjects at a Talmud Torah, a man in his early twenties, told us about his methods for teaching history and social studies. In the class we observed he told his sixth-graders what the United Nations does around the world. It was evident that he was devising the curriculum from scratch, rather than working from a mandatory program or organized knowledge.

Who do they have today as a teacher? Me. Who am I? I do not know English; I am not a professional teacher. I teach general studies: history, English reading, writing, anything else. For an example, how does the government work. I did not learn this. I know people here from Bnei Brak, they come here and they get a job, they do not know English. They are basically babysitters ... How did I get the job? They asked me, ‘Would you take a *kita dalet* [fourth-grade] class?’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t know’ but they said, ‘Whatever you can.’ (Rabbi Moshe Klein, a teacher in a Hasidic school in Borough Park)

When we asked him whether the situation today is better than that in his childhood, not so long ago, or worse, he answered:

It’s both. When I was a child in a Talmud Torah in Brooklyn, we studied English only from fourth through seventh grades. In many places that is still the situation today. The main change is the teachers. We had non-Jewish professional teachers. They

didn't know a word of Yiddish. We threw tomatoes in class and laughed at them, but we learned something. Today the teachers are Hasidim. They aren't professionals. But Hasidic teachers like me get more respect in the classroom. The educational part, the content, depends totally on the teacher.

As noted, this refers to Hasidic elementary schools.

Teachers who lack formal training can teach in ultra-Orthodox schools because of the lenient regulation of private schools in the United States. Whereas the minimum qualification for public school faculties is a teacher's certificate from an accredited institution, New York State permits private schools to employ teachers who are merely "competent." Teachers told us that the assumption is that the language of the law requires them to have mastery of the material taught and a proven ability to control a class, but this definition is rather vague, left to the school to interpret, and not verified by the authorities. As a result, many teachers in Hasidic schools have no formal training in pedagogy or the subjects they teach. Some of our interview subjects said that there are English teachers in Hasidic elementary schools who barely know the language:

Twenty years ago, or perhaps more, Hasidic yeshivas hired mainly teachers from public schools. Think of it: the public schools finish at 3pm, and that's when you start teaching in the school across the street, which is Hasidic. You're a non-Jew, you look like a non-Jew, and you get an offer: Come to us for another hour and a half at the end of the day and you'll earn a few more dollars, you'll earn another vacation. For 90 minutes every day these people were abused and severely humiliated because the children had no respect for them. The discipline was terrible. Interestingly enough, the Hasidim tried to improve the discipline and behavior, so they said: We know what the problem is—Hasidic children don't respect anyone

who looks like you; so there's a solution—we'll bring in people who look like us, like the boys' fathers. So in a certain sense they improved the secular studies, but in another sense they made matters worse, because the English teacher doesn't know English, and the math teacher doesn't know math, and they have to go ask their wives. (Rabbi Moshe Klein, a teacher at a Hasidic school in Borough Park)

Our impression is that this account may be slightly exaggerated, but in many cases it is not that far from the truth.

B. Textbooks

Textbooks are an important element of every education system. They shape the children's collective knowledge and are considered to be an objective source of information, even though they of course reflect ideological biases. This is why the selection of textbooks is apt to produce disagreements, and especially when the subject is civics or history. In ultra-Orthodox schools, the fear of inappropriate content is rampant not only with regard to the humanities, but for all subjects, including the sciences.

As long as there were no alternatives, most American ultra-Orthodox institutions used the same books as the public schools to teach reading and writing, literature, science, history, and other subjects. This is still the situation today, especially at the elementary level. The material studied in the early grades is seen as less problematic than the high school curriculum. Learning how to read and write is not as “dangerous” as contemporary English literature, and nature and geography are not as challenging as the hard sciences, which include evolution and geology.

One incentive for using general books is that many states, including New York, have an approved list of subsidized textbooks. Inclusion on the list and the subsidy for printing them requires a close review of their content

and quality, as judged by professionals. The textbook subsidy is one way that private schools can benefit from public funding.

Given the small number of ultra-Orthodox schools in the past, it was not feasible to commission textbooks specifically for them, so they had to rely on those used by everyone else. But changing values in the United States—especially since the emergence of the counterculture of the 1960s, which resulted in more audacious literature, the idea of gender equality, and clothing deemed immodest (reflected in the illustrations in the books)—as well as the greater conservatism of the American ultra-Orthodox community than in the past and the push for a more uniform education system, meant that the schools have had to make “creative use” of the available textbooks.

The principals and teachers at some ultra-Orthodox schools, especially at the secondary level, have come up with a number of ways to deal with the challenges posed by these textbooks, running from the simple to the more complex: screening, omitting, supplementing, censoring, revising, and even writing original books.

(1) Screening

The list of subsidized textbooks is long and varied; every school can choose titles it finds “harmless.” This is an easy way to satisfy the curricular requirements while avoiding material deemed problematic. For example, Darchei Torah is a large network of schools in New York, with 2,300 pupils from age three to the end of high school. The 250 boys in its secondary school, grades 9 through 12, study English literature via a series of thick volumes that are frequently employed by Christian schools, *Implications of Literature*. These anthologies present short novels, poems, and famous speeches, as well as texts from the Puritan and Victorian ages through the twentieth century, including Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, and Martin Luther King. The series is not overtly Christian, but on its website the

publisher, TextWord Press, states that it provides high-school students with a “classic, traditional, values-oriented language-arts curriculum,” including scrupulous adherence to family values. The Darchei Torah teachers examined the entire series and found the contents to be “kosher” for Yeshivish eyes, too.

(2) Omitting

When ultra-Orthodox schools employ books that include “problematic” material, the teachers may skip over the awkward paragraphs or chapters—such as those on evolution. In some institutions, students learn nothing about this topic and are expected to fail questions related to it on school exit exams.

(3) Supplementing

At the Darchei Torah secondary division we saw a standard textbook to which a chapter had been added on the conflict between the theory of evolution and the Torah. It employs familiar ultra-Orthodox arguments to undermine the scientific validity of evolution and the “origin of the species,” along with the statement that there is no contradiction between the Torah and science. This approach was presented to us as an example of openness and inclusion, in contrast to schools that simply ignore the subject. By adding the “correct view,” despite the financial outlay involved, the institution teaches its students how to deal with the ostensible contradictions and tension between science and the Torah. This makes it possible for them to use leading textbooks that give the students an adequate preparation for the standardized tests in biology.

Rabbi Yaakov Bender, the *rosh yeshiva* (dean) of the Darchei Torah high school, explained that “Some schools won’t teach the government books because there is Darwin in there, that is the problem. But we wanted to get through the biology Regents. So, we have redone the entire book.

We added pages to the books, on which we offer what we hold to be the correct view, that we don't believe in monkeys. It cost us a lot of money.”

Rabbi Gold, who is responsible for secular studies at that institution, went further:

A student has to know that there is such a thing as the theory of evolution. One day the fellow will go out to the job market and encounter someone who tells him something about evolution. He has to know what that is—and it helps that we also have a lot of religious studies to prepare him. There are yeshivas that tell their boys not to answer [questions on the Regents exam] about evolution. They tell them—“On this question you'll fail on purpose, your score will be zero.” We say, “No, it's all right, answer.” Some boys ask me, “How can we allow this?” [I reply] “I want you to know our position on evolution, so you have to learn about it.” In our textbook we have added an introduction; we reproduced the book with a supplement by a rabbi. He wrote exactly what we believe. We also study reproduction, male, female. I teach all the concepts necessary for the test, but without going into detail. Just what they have to know. But they are studying for the test, not going into depth, only just what they have to know, so maybe they get a grade of 95 instead of 99. But they study it.

(4) Censorship

In some cases, it is decided to employ a textbook used in public schools, but only after the ultra-Orthodox educators have censored parts of it. It is not uncommon, especially in Hasidic talmudei torah, to find that pages have been removed or blacked out before the students receive their copies. The offending pages contain texts or graphic material that are liable to raise questions or contradict what the institution deems proper.

(5) Revising and adapting existing books

One ultra-Orthodox project of recent years is production of a new series of science textbooks based on one that is widely used by public schools in the United States. The publisher also commissions ultra-Orthodox writers to provide readers for the early grades, with no violence and no “families with two mothers,” as he put it. According to him, there is no alternative to publishing books that are suited to the target population: “If you give the child a book that is censored or ‘whited out,’ he wants to know what you are trying to hide. That no longer suits us. We want to provide them from the start with books that are suitable for them.” He said that he employs a number of women who pore over the thousands of textbooks available on the market in order to find those that are most suitable for “being made kosher.”

(6) Writing original textbooks specifically for ultra-Orthodox Students

Some rabbis and educators, as well as businesspeople, have reservations about the compromises required by the decision to use “the goyim’s” textbooks and want to drop them in favor of a more costly enterprise—the composition of original textbooks meant specifically for ultra-Orthodox students. This position is compatible with the burgeoning of the ultra-Orthodox book market in general and of textbooks in particular. Over the last 10 to 15 years, hundreds of English-language volumes have been published in the United States and Britain that are suitable for ultra-Orthodox pupils from preschool through the secondary level, both boys and girls, in the sciences, English literature, and history. This growing sector has a community and educational aspect as well as a commercial side.

An example of this initiative is the Limudai Yisroel Institute, which has published several “kosher” textbooks on history and earth science. The

first few pages of each of its titles are filled with rabbinic approbations. In his approbation to one such, for example, Rabbi Aaron Feldman, the dean of Ner Israel in Baltimore, wrote that in ultra-Orthodox books, as opposed to secular books, “there are no influences contrary to the Torah” and consequently they “make it possible for pupils to study secular subjects according to the pure injunctions of the Torah.” He noted that ultra-Orthodox Jewry is flourishing in the United States, but suffers dearly from the contact with textbooks that contain messages and values “that contradict the Torah and its values.” Nevertheless, the project’s science textbooks emphasize that 80% of their content is that required by the Earth Sciences division of the New York State Department of Education. The material in the sample chapter on the project’s website could be found in any general textbook on the subject.

Another publisher we encountered is the Jewish Center for Science. Its brochure trumpets the slogan, “Seeing Hashem Wherever We Look.” In addition to this tagline, the content itself is strictly kosher as it demonstrates the extent to which nature is an expression of the Creator’s greatness. Its series, *Niflaos Haboreh Explorer*, includes a biology textbook for junior high school, *Fundamentals of Life Science*. In the company’s publicity materials, the CEO is presented first of all with his rabbinic title, and only then with his academic degree in the sciences.

All of these are commercial ventures that fit in with rabbinic line and with the community effort to “professionalize” education. This is also the principal task of the umbrella organization Torah Umesorah: it supplies educators with lesson plans, educational methods, and textbooks, devised with the help of expert committees that aim to enhance ultra-Orthodox teachers’ professionalism. It makes them aware of textbooks produced specifically for the ultra-Orthodox—mostly by private firms—and of others that have been modified to be suitable. Its magazine, *Hamechanech*, publishes recommendations and advertisements to

promote language-arts and science textbooks devised specifically for ultra-Orthodox schools.

Sometimes the aspiration to produce content specifically for the ultra-Orthodox finds common purpose with private enterprise and government incentives. We saw an example of this at the annual Torah Umesorah convention in Pennsylvania. The event included an educational fair where companies and organizations set up stands to introduce their wares to the participants—curricula and textbooks, computer software, pedagogical aids, and other products. At one stand, a company was offering enrichment courses, taught by ultra-Orthodox teachers and with content suitable for the community, as part of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) program. STEM, which seeks to foster excellence and competition among students in scientific subjects, on top of the formal school curriculum, has spread though the entire American education system. It enjoys presidential sponsorship (the White House budgeted \$200 million for it in 2019) in addition to other government funds and donations by hi-tech firms, to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars a year. This is a prestigious voluntary program with classes that extend the regular curriculum, sometimes after regular school hours; we are curious whether it will be able to penetrate the ultra-Orthodox system, especially the boys' schools. On the face of it, the combination of government incentives and private enterprise might make this possible. The company that was offering its services is hoping to make a profit from teaching STEM in ultra-Orthodox schools, while the pupils will be able to take enrichment courses in prestigious subjects.¹⁸

18 Another project is that of the ultra-Orthodox Life Prep Education System, which endeavors to make secular subjects more interesting and relevant to the students' practical life, and is expanding its presence in Yeshivish institutions. See Yochonon Donn, "Teaching Moments," *Mishpacha*, February 5, 2020.

4. The Attitude toward Secular Subjects

A. The Justification for Secular Studies

In this section we again focus on Yeshivish institutions. Except for Lakewood, they have always taught secular subjects and take this for granted. There is hardly any thought about the religious justification for them. It is clear that our informants, most of whom are educators, have never felt a need for a theological or principled discussion of the topic.

American Orthodoxy has never produced a doctrine that attaches holiness to secular studies or is broadly accepting of scientific knowledge. Only a few schools, including Ohavei Torah and Darchei Torah, gave us the impression that they encourage excellence in secular studies. In most institutions, there is no well-considered dialectic approach like the “Torah and Science” view of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, the well-known Modern Orthodox leader. Ostensibly, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch’s *Torah im Derech Eretz* philosophy, which originated in nineteenth-century Germany, is well suited to the Yeshivish community in the United States, because of its dual commitment to meticulous observance of the precepts and to modern life; but it has not been adopted by the American Yeshivish mainstream.¹⁹

¹⁹ In the United States, there were Orthodox communities of German immigrants, most of whose children and grandchildren found their places in other sectors, either modern Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox. The institution that formerly served the German immigrants in Washington Heights, the Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch Yeshiva, now serves a modern Yeshivish population, not necessarily with German roots. It teaches both religious and secular subjects through high school.

What, then, is the ultra-Orthodox motivation for secular studies, and how do educators and parents explain them? In general one can say that in the mainstream Yeshivish world (chiefly in Brooklyn), where secular studies are relatively limited, the reasons offered are more pragmatic, whereas in the more open circles (elsewhere in the United States and in parts of New York and New Jersey), secular studies are allowed to have real and important value. We will look at these attitudes here.

(1) Pragmatism

Preparation for the Working World

The basic assumption of educators at Yeshivish institutions is similar to that of the traditional communities back in Eastern Europe in years gone by: Only a small percentage of the students will have religious vocations as adults, and thus most will need to have paying jobs in order to support themselves. For this reason, the education system must do its best to provide graduates with the ability to make a living in the future. What is more, Yeshivish society has an elitist view of employment, meaning a preference for white-collar professions over blue-collar trades. The former naturally require good command of English (reading, writing, and speaking) and mathematics, as well as basic socialization to the American scene (history and civics).

This elitist attitude is one of the factors that distinguish Yeshivish institutions from their Hasidic counterparts with regard to secular subjects in high school. Even though most graduates of Hasidic schools will hold jobs when they grow up, many will go into occupations that do not require a serious general education, and hence it is seen as less essential in high school. Graduates of Yeshivish institutions, by contrast, who hope to become lawyers, accountants, managers, and so on, need to

equip themselves with the minimum toolset for such employment in the future (Gonen 2001).²⁰

The Yeshivish community's pragmatic attitude toward secular studies stands out even more sharply when compared to the common attitude of their counterparts in Israel. As part of the emergence of the "society of scholars" in Israel, and on the assumption that most of their graduates will continue to study Torah for their entire life, the schools' general outlook is that they need to develop their graduates' Torah-learning side only, and no more. In addition, the Lithuanian yeshivas in Israel have cultivated a theology that the yeshiva is a sort of Noah's ark that protects its students from the deluge outside; this leads to the rejection, as matter of principle, of the secular world, the labor market, and general education (Brown 2017).

Except for the enclave of Lakewood, this concept is foreign to the Yeshivish institutions in the United States. We heard a lyrical expression of the difference in outlook from the dean of secular studies at one Yeshivish high school: "Our yeshiva has to be like a womb that protects the fetus until birth. This is the place where he completes his development, the place where he grows, so we have to decide for them what is good and what isn't good for the fetus" (Rabbi Gold, Darchei Torah). What this metaphor means is that the yeshiva is not a closed-off space and that what happens inside it is necessarily in conflict with what goes on in the world outside; rather, it is a protective environment that prepares its graduates for their future encounter with employment and the real world. This idea, that the yeshiva is a sort of preparatory school, is poles apart from the Israeli Lithuanian idea that the yeshiva is a Noah's ark that should be sealed off from the world.

²⁰ A similar attitude about the need for secular studies is presented in the qualitative study Krakowski conducted in a Yeshivish school (Krakowski 2012).

Such pragmatism could be an engine for change in New York and even in Lakewood. As we were told explicitly by an educator in New York, the trend in the coming years will be toward more secular studies, both in New York and in Lakewood. He said that some in Lakewood are worried that the boys complete the secondary-level yeshiva without any skills. “They want to go into the business world and have no skills.”

Effective use of Time

Another argument, which sidesteps the substantive question, is that if we are already teaching secular subjects (in order to comply with state law and with parents’ wishes), “we should do it properly.” This idea comes from Rabbi Samuel Kamenetsky, a member of the Agudath Israel rabbinical council and a pupil of Rabbi Aaron Kotler, the founder of the Lakewood yeshiva. Rabbi Kamenetsky’s Talmudical Yeshiva of Philadelphia teaches secular studies with no reservations. This position avoids the issue of whether secular studies are appropriate, useful, or superfluous, and sees them as inevitable in the circumstances. It calls on teachers and students to respect the decisions of rabbis of the previous and current generations that they devote time every day to mathematics, English, and the sciences. It also calls for eschewing a casual or unprofessional approach to secular subjects, of the sort common in Hasidic schools. Once it has been decided that a particular time slot will be devoted to English or science, it must be used to fullest advantage. This does not necessarily mean great enthusiasm about secular studies, but, as stated, does require a serious attitude—both compliance with the rabbis’ injunctions and making the best possible use of the time invested in secular studies: a sort of a ban on *bitul Torah* (wasting time that could be devoted to Torah studies) that refers not to the Torah but to secular subjects.

This attitude underpins secular studies at other Yeshivish institutions as well. Rabbi Bender of Darchei Torah described the Philadelphia model as “if you do it, do it right.”

What is more, achieving the goal of studying a subject has educational value:

Learning is good for the students' total being. It's good to know that there's a task and there's a goal, and it's useful for your wholeness that you have to achieve the goal, reach the end of the matter, not only in Gemara, but in your life. You will be a family man, so there are roles you have to play gladly. The students understand that they have to study as hard as they can, even if it's not what you want to be doing for their whole life. (Rabbi Gold, Darchei Torah)

The students have to study, and if they don't study—send them to the *beit midrash*. Don't play the game that they forced you to teach secular subjects. Let them play on the computer. If you want the boy to learn—let him learn. (Rabbi Peretz Scheinerman, head of the yeshiva in Providence, Rhode Island)

(2) Religious Justifications for Secular Studies

We encountered three types of religious justifications for secular studies among the Yeshivish in the United States. The first has to do with the essence of human beings and education; the second with a broader concept of God's presence in the world; and the third with the ability of halakha to cope with the innovations of the modern world. As noted, these justifications are voiced by the more open and modern stream.

Developing the Students as Human Beings

The practical attitude that educators sometimes articulate is in fact broader: secular studies are not merely the groundwork for making a living but a preparation that has religious value for this world and for life itself. Thanks to their knowledge of secular subjects, students can express themselves more fluently, are familiar with the culture around them, and

function better in the modern world. One yeshiva dean said that his goal is to produce “human beings” and “to prepare them for life.” The study of Torah, he said, is one path for this, but familiarity with other branches of knowledge conveyed by the secular subjects taught in school, and preparing the boys for family life and relations with those who are not ultra-Orthodox Jews, are also important channels to this end.

We heard this idea when we spoke with the school’s board of directors. Its members told us proudly about how many of their outstanding graduates had gone on to Harvard and other elite universities. They emphasized that the sons of some of these graduates were now attending their school. In other words, exposure to academic studies and excellence at university do not contradict their Torah-centered outlook.

This can be seen as an echo of the ethical outlook of the Slabodka yeshiva about human beings’ distinction as “the pinnacle of creation” (Tikochinsky 2016). This concept, developed by Rabbi Nosson Zvi Finkel, the “*Alter* of Slabodka,” has three components, which he anchored in tradition, but which are equally compatible with modernity: (1) the universal: the significance of all human beings’ as individuals; (2) freedom as a key human value; and (3) the physical: a positive attitude toward the body and physical delights. This led to the need to adopt modern customs and behavior (order, restraint, hygiene) and modern dress (suit, hat, and tie) in the form common in Europe in the late nineteenth century (Brown 2006). The desire for moderation also produced a forgiving attitude toward the Haskalah and an emphasis on learning to know this world and be involved in it (Englander 2006).

The gulf between the American Yeshivish approach and that of the Israeli Lithuanian community found stark expression in the reactions to the book *Making of a Godol*, published in 2002 by Rabbi Nathan Kamenetsky, the brother of the aforementioned Rabbi Samuel Kamenetsky of Philadelphia and the son of one of the leading rabbis of American ultra-Orthodoxy,

Rabbi Jacob Kamenetsky. The book recounts the early years of several leaders of the community. Among other things, the author refers to the relationship between Rabbi Aharon Kotler and his future wife, and his own father's command of Russian literature. But what the author saw as praise and evidence of the broad horizons and human side of those who developed into great rabbis was denounced by the ultra-Orthodox in Israel (and in Lakewood) as impudent disrespect for the rabbis. A long list of rabbis, headed by the Israeli Lithuanian leader Rabbi Elyashiv, banned the book and its author and had copies of it burned.

Some of the educators we interviewed were distressed by the decline of the religious humanist appreciation of secular studies in recent years, in favor of the pragmatic outlook that stresses the need to acquire practical knowledge in order to find a job. They said, however, that this process is not unique to ultra-Orthodox education, but is a general phenomenon of the decline of the humanities and the "impoverishment of the intellect in America."

The Wonders of Creation

An argument we heard frequently in support of the inclusion of secular subjects in boys' education, especially the sciences, is that pupils should become familiar with the wonders of creation. Ultra-Orthodox education enlists science to promote religious sentiment. Science does not have independent value; instead, ultra-Orthodox students are introduced to substantial elements of environmental science, astronomy, zoology, and physics so that they will be astounded by the natural world and its laws and appreciate the majesty of God. As we have seen, this rhetoric is prominent in a series of science textbooks intended for ultra-Orthodox schools, *Niflaos Haboreh Explorer*. The publisher (the Jewish Center for Science) uses the slogan "Seeing Hashem Wherever We Look" in its advertising copy.

Applied Torah

Another approach sees knowledge of science and technology as beneficial and as an essential supplement for observant Jews, and even more so for those who issue halakhic rulings:

There is a very fine point, for example, when a rabbi is asked whether a certain action is permitted on the Sabbath, or if heating food in a microwave constitutes cooking [in halakhic terms]. The rabbi has to understand how things work. Mechanics, electronics, how a smartphone works; so there are people, thank God, who are very religious and know this. If a rabbi doesn't understand the issue he asks me, as someone who does—tell me what it's like. That helps us apply halakhah. It doesn't change the Torah.

It doesn't limit the Torah, it's not as if the Torah is missing anything. Science complements the Torah, and in order to apply it on the basis of what we know—we study it. It's perfect, it's from God. And our task, our challenge, is to understand what God wants of us according to what we learn from science (Rabbi Gold, Darchei Torah)

B. How Teachers, Parents, Students, and Donors View Secular Studies

Thus far we have considered ideological approaches to general education. However, we should also consider another cross-section of the Yeshivish world in the United States—the different ideas, sometimes clashing, held by the main actors in the education system: educators, parents, the students themselves, and those who pay for it all. In Israel, the directors of ultra-Orthodox educational institutions hold the reins of ideological and political power with regard to children's education. In the United States, by contrast, they have to share control with others.

(1) Educators

The administrators and teachers of the mainstream Yeshivish institutions are afraid of general knowledge that has no boundaries and supervision, but see secular studies as an important component of the education they provide their students. They want their students to leave school with the basic foundations for dealing with the outside world, with the emphasis on the employment market and finding a job.

Their take on secular studies is thus generally pragmatic, with the focus on providing the skills that students will need in order to make a decent living in the future. The educators understand that secular subjects are important and do not see them as in conflict with other values. Our interviews made us aware of the importance they attach to earning a living and economic life in general; this can be attributed to the capitalist ethos in the United States, which trickles down into the ultra-Orthodox communities as well. In addition, the schools must satisfy the parents, who, in keeping with the American norm, are seen as the school's clients (see below).

Alongside this pragmatism, the elite schools tend to see secular studies not only as a tool for economic success in the future, but also as a way to expand students' horizons and augment their knowledge, curiosity, and humanity.

(2) Parents

Many Yeshivish parents who send their children to private institutions, and generally pay steep tuition fees, have great expectations of the elementary and secondary schools. Yeshivish education, though relatively accessible, is part of the American culture of private education. Private schooling is a very expensive "product" or "service," far more costly than education in Israel. This means that parents have a commitment to the institution

of their choice and feel entitled to be involved in its inner workings. In some sense, they are “customers” and want to make sure that they are getting their money’s worth. Another characteristic of American ultra-Orthodoxy is that the “fuel” powering the Jewish lifecycle is much more materialistic than in Israel. Ultra-Orthodox families in the United States need economic security not only in order to live respectably, but also to ensure their Jewish identity and provide the special needs of an Orthodox home. Jewish education, religious items and services (notably kosher food), congregational dues, contributions to support the institutions—the American ultra-Orthodox identity depends on ample private funding; and the schools, too, must comply with his model. Because education is very expensive, it must open a path for the students to make a good income as adults. Hence the parents are deeply concerned with money, both because of the nature of life in the United States and also because money, which depends on a high-income job in the future or on family wealth, is an essential condition for the preservation of Jewish identity.

In most Yeshivish communities the parents are interested in secular studies, see them as important, and expect the school to teach them. One of our interviewees, an educator, estimated that if his institution discontinued secular classes, 90% of the parents would pull their children out. In the Hasidic sector, too, and in the more conservative Yeshivish communities, parents still want their sons to acquire basic skills in English and mathematics, at least in the lower grades.

This attitude dwindles as one moves closer to the influence of Lakewood. Paradoxical as it may seem, the social concepts and ideology that lead Yeshivish parents to remove their children from the materialist game and send them to institutions with only religious studies also derive from American Jews’ economic success. Much of the private wealth they amass is donated to community institutions. This model, which has always existed among Hasidic philanthropists, is gradually penetrating the Yeshivish community as well; today there is a class of businessmen who

cover the tuition of many children and make private Jewish education accessible to the masses (on the issue of tuition, see at length in Chapter 4).

(3) Students

The complex view of secular studies held by rabbis and parents carries over to some of the students (especially when they reach high school), who dismiss secular subjects as of secondary importance. Because Torah study is affirmed to be the chief value, Torah-oriented students prefer to invest their energy in religious subjects; some believe that excellence in secular studies will not gain them many points or esteem.

Frequently the boys don't respect the teachers, don't respect secular subjects. This may be a success—they love the rabbis, they love learning Gemara. But the really good children are strongly attached to religious studies and are constantly resisting secular studies. (Rabbi Yosef Rosenzweig, principal of the M'kor Baruch Elementary School—Yeshiva Ktana of Passaic)

When we inquired about the source of this resistance, Rabbi Rosenzweig told us that it was a combination of contempt and the assumption that these subjects are ideologically problematic. He told us about one outstanding student who had transferred to the yeshiva from a more modern school and had begun to disparage his secular courses:

When I asked him why, he said, "At this school English isn't important and Torah is important." I asked him, "Who told you that?" He thought and then said, "Every morning the rabbi comes to school with a Gemara, everything revolves around Gemara, Gemara is at the center." That's slightly exaggerated and I don't like it, but there isn't much I can do. Right now

we are making an effort to train rabbis who teach [religious subjects] in the morning to come back in the afternoon to teach secular subjects. They know the children and have a connection with them.

Though this attitude does not reflect the official scale of priorities, it creates friction between the boys on the one side, and educators and parents who are strongly interested in secular studies, on the other. What is more, because secular courses are taught at the end of the day, there are more problems with indiscipline, lack of interest, and waning of concentration on the part of the students. A scornful attitude toward secular subjects is more conspicuous among students of institutions that invest less in those classes, for example, by using outdated curricula or employing teachers who are not professionals.

Nevertheless, for many students secular studies, especially in high school, satisfy their curiosity about various fields of interest that are not covered by the religious subjects to which most of their time is devoted. Some students are attracted to the sciences, history, or English literature, which they find challenging and interesting. This is prominent mainly in institutions that invest serious resources to encourage students to excel in these subjects, for example by offering electives in addition to the required subjects. Some of these students elect to sit for the SAT and achievement exams.

(4) Donors and Foundations

The high tuition charged by ultra-Orthodox schools is producing an interesting change in the Yeshivish community: increasing dependence on wealthy donors. This means the penetration of the economic model that in the past was typical mainly of Hasidic communities.

In most Hasidic communities, there is an economic safety net that protects everyone. The poor and needy generally enjoy fully subsidized community services, especially education, paid for by wealthy men who are affiliated with the same Hasidic court. This community responsibility is now being transferred, in miniature, to the American Yeshivish sector, especially in the face of the skyrocketing tuition fees at its schools. An important element of this philanthropic model is the annual fundraising dinner, which has become increasingly common at Yeshivish institutions as well, and is intended to support the institutions and help students from poor families. These changes are also a result of the community's prosperity—that is, the emergence of a stratum of far more wealthy families than in the past.

Businessman Shlomo Rechnitz is a leading philanthropist of the American Yeshivish world and supports institutions in Lakewood as well as in Israel. He feels that his checkbook also allows him to express an opinion about matters of educational policy. At an event for the Lakewood yeshiva in 2016, with local rabbis on the dais, Rechnitz said that Lakewood is a “sick” society and attacked the elitism of the ultra-Orthodox educational institutions that exclude children whom they do not see as socially or educationally suitable—an attitude that, he said, borders on bloodshed. Though Rechnitz focused on elitism and exclusion, and not on the scope of secular studies, this incident provides evidence of philanthropists' ability to influence the ultra-Orthodox education system.

Foundations that are not ultra-Orthodox can also have an impact. For example, in recent years the New York Federation has started to collaborate with members of the community to increase the volume of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox schools. More than 15 years ago, this led another foundation, AVI CHAI, to launch a program to train new teachers

for Jewish private schools, including ultra-Orthodox institutions.²¹ The program has continued after AVI CHAI shut down.²² These developments suggest that in the future philanthropists and foundations, both inside and outside the ultra-Orthodox community, will exert significant influence on the teaching of secular subjects in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools.

5. Summary: Has There Truly been an Erosion of Secular Studies in Ultra-Orthodox Schools in the United States?

Before we began our journey to learn about secular studies in Jewish schools in the United States, we were aware of two perspectives that we wished to examine. On the one hand, we heard that the ultra-Orthodox in the United States are very different from their cousins in Israel and that ultra-Orthodox education in America includes more secular subjects and at a relatively higher level. On the other hand, some alleged that the American ultra-Orthodox are becoming more like the Israelis, with the emergence of an American “society of scholars” and a reduction in the hours of secular studies in their schools.

Having concluded our journey, we can state that the ultra-Orthodox sector in the United States is indeed different from its counterpart in Israel. It is important to emphasize, however, that the main difference is between the Lithuanians in Israel and the Yeshivish in the United States. Though the former have adopted some modern ideas, chiefly related to rational thinking and Western dress, the modern aspects of American Yeshivish

21 See the [list of institutions](#) supported by AVI CHAI as part of the Jewish New Teachers Project.

22 See further on the website of the [Jewish New Teacher Project](#).

Jews run much deeper. These are also expressed in their attitude toward secular studies, the option of obtaining higher education, working in liberal professions, and joining the upper middle class, and the extent of their involvement and affiliation with American society in general. It is much more difficult to find similar traits among the Lithuanians in Israel.

It is true that Hasidic men in the United States go out to work at an earlier age than Hasidim in Israel, and that American Hasidic schools offer slightly more in the way of secular studies than those in Israel. But the differences between the Hasidim in the two countries are less pronounced than those between the Lithuanians and the Yeshivish.

On our tour, we found that the Yeshivish education system in New York State has retreated with regard to its principles concerning secular studies, but not its practice. Though they may devote only a few hours to these courses, the schools still teach all of the subjects required by the state, and all graduates of Yeshivish high schools take the school exit exams.

In other Yeshivish communities in the United States, including New York (outside Brooklyn) and New Jersey (outside Lakewood), the high level of secular studies and the serious attitude toward them remain largely unchanged. The course offerings are quite broad and include electives for students interested in them, as well as Advanced Placement tests in these subjects.

As we have written, in the last decade there has been a major migration of the Yeshivish to Lakewood. The newcomers have adopted its narrower approach to secular studies, closer to the practice of the Lithuanians in Israel. Hence the Lakewood model, which for many years was marginal, has become increasingly central in the Yeshivish community, even if it does not pose a threat to the mainstream. Nevertheless, some of those we interviewed believe that the trend in the coming years will be a return to secular studies, even among those close to Lakewood—chiefly for pragmatic reasons.

Thus, we can say that in an enclave culture like that of American ultra-Orthodoxy, there is a pendular movement between insularity and openness. The aspiration to remain separate and strictly observant is in constant tension with the desire to make a living and even to enjoy a modern lifestyle; whenever one of the goals is achieved, there is increased pressure to restore the balance and emphasize the other goal.

In addition to dealing with internal tensions, the American ultra-Orthodox must also fend off outside pressures. Their rising political power, produced by their rapid demographic growth, has made the civil authorities increasingly aware of the inadequate preparation of young ultra-Orthodox Jews, especially the Hasidim, for the working world. To date, the American ultra-Orthodox education system, especially in New York and New Jersey, has operated with a large measure of autonomy, under the radar of official scrutiny and public opinion. But various processes are affecting this state of affairs and challenging the community's religious leadership. The new situation puts the ultra-Orthodox community on the defensive, but also indirectly influences its norms, including those of its the education system. This is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Laws, Regulations, and Government Funding of Ultra-Orthodox Education

1. Laws and Regulations

A. Introduction

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which produced unprecedented news headlines about the American ultra-Orthodox sector, the community's educational model had come under the media spotlight. The topic was brought to the fore by young graduates of the ultra-Orthodox school system, who began to challenge the status quo and whose activism—which included appealing to the state education authorities and publishing articles in the press—made the public at large aware of the situation in those schools. Their efforts exposed various aspects of the de facto autonomy of ultra-Orthodox education and stirred up fierce opposition within the community. This is a dynamic internal conflict, with political, legal, and public ramifications, about which the last word has yet to be spoken.

Another development that disturbed the peace of the ultra-Orthodox community came in 2019, when the community was in the headlines because of a measles epidemic that swept through it—the worst in North America in decades. Public attention focused on ultra-Orthodox

schools and forced the authorities to intervene swiftly and vigorously (Paumgarten 2019).

But these were mere ripples compared to the wave of negative attention that American ultra-Orthodox Jews, including their schools, received from the public and the authorities when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted a year later. This marked the dawn of a new age, heralding trouble for the ultra-Orthodox community both inwardly and outwardly. During the first wave of the pandemic, when mortality rates in the ultra-Orthodox concentrations in New Jersey and New York were very high and hundreds died, the community's conduct was assailed by the media and even by public officials (Abensour and Friedman 2020). As in Israel, the more conservative and insular communities were less likely to comply with the authorities' directives. So even though most yeshivas and synagogues shut down when the governor ordered the closure of schools and places of worship, the institutions of the more extreme groups continued to operate; from time to time there were also large weddings and funerals that led to harsh public criticism and even police enforcement actions.²³

The discussion below, which focuses on the government regulations that apply to the ultra-Orthodox education system in the United States, reflects the mounting attention paid by civil authorities and the general media to issues associated with the interface between the ultra-

²³ For example, the report that a Hasidic Talmud Torah was open in violation of the governor's lockdown order in New York was the lead headline of the *Daily News* on May 18, 2020. Its front page was a picture of Hasidic children in their classroom, with the punning caption, "Pain in the Class." See also the article itself: Kerry Burke, Rocco Parascandola and John Annese, "[NYPD cops find 60 children taking classes in Brooklyn Yeshiva despite coronavirus lockdown, de Blasio warns 'how dangerous this is,'](#)" *New York Daily News*, May 18, 2020. There were also reports about a large Hasidic funeral in violation of the regulations: Liam Stack, "[500 Mourners Jam a Hasidic Funeral, Creating a Flash Point for de Blasio,](#)" *New York Times*, April 29, 2020.

Orthodox community and society at large. Whereas the previous chapter concentrated on the Yeshivish sector, here the focus is on the Hasidim, who are bearing the brunt of the authorities' displeasure.

B. Curricula

The political and legal framework in which ultra-Orthodox education operates in the United States is substantially different from that in Israel. The Israeli education system is centralized and controlled by the Ministry of Education, whereas in the United States education is decentralized and overseen by each state and sometimes county or city. By the same token, while Israel has a nationwide curriculum, there is no mandatory common core in the United States and the matter is left to the state and district levels. Another important difference between the two countries relates to funding, as we will see below.

In the United States, both legislation and court rulings draw a line between public and private schools. Private schools have certain rights and obligations, some of them anchored in federal law, but in general, enforcement of compulsory schooling laws and curricular mandates is the responsibility of states and districts. They decide what laws apply and what should be the extent of public funding for schools of different types.

Given the decentralization of the education system, our discussion of a required curriculum for private schools will focus on New York and New Jersey, which are home to the overwhelming majority of ultra-Orthodox students in the United States. After a look at the differences in the two states' laws and regulations, we will investigate whether they do in fact create a real difference between how the schools operate there.

(1) New York versus New Jersey

In the United States, the laws that define the obligations of private schools fall into three main categories: curricula, minimum qualifications for teachers, and testing (US Department of Education 2009). We will compare the requirements of New York and New Jersey.

Curricula

New York law requires all private schools to teach the core subjects at a level that is “at least substantially equivalent” to that in public schools.²⁴ In order to clarify the meaning of “substantially equivalent,” the sections of the law that deal with private schools enumerate the subjects required in public schools. In grades one through eight they must teach mathematics, reading, spelling, composition, English, geography, American and New York State history, civics, health, and physical education. At the high-school level, the required subjects are similar (except for mathematics and geography), with the addition of an emphasis on the American Constitution and other matters. The law defines other required topics, including patriotism and human rights, and stipulates that private schools that fail to comply with these provisions will be considered to be in violation of the “substantially equivalent” provision.

In recent years, the New York State Department of Education has also defined the level of education that private schools must provide in the core subjects mentioned above, including English (reading, speaking, and composition), mathematics, history, geography, and science.

24 New York Consolidated Laws, EDN – Education, Title 4 – Teachers and Pupils, Article 65 – Compulsory Education and School Census, Part 1: Compulsory Education, Section 3204: Instruction required.

In New Jersey, too, the law requires that private schools teach material at a level equal to public schools.²⁵ Unlike New York State, however, the New Jersey statute does not list the core subjects that private schools must teach.

Faculty

In New York State, the law defines only minimum requirements for private school faculties. Teachers must be “competent,” but, unlike those in public schools, do not have to be certified. The statutory language requires teachers to have a command of the material they teach and to demonstrate an ability to control the class; but the precise meaning of “competent” is vague and thus hard to enforce.

In New Jersey, the law sets no qualifications for teachers in private schools.

Tests

Students at private schools in New York State, unlike those in New Jersey, must take the Regents exams. In addition, students in certain grades at both public and private schools must take national tests (the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP) in several core subjects.

This comparison, as summarized in Table 5 below, highlights the major differences between the laws of the two states.

25 The [specific wording](#) is "equivalent to that provided in the public schools for children of similar grades" (US Department of Education, 2009, p. 189). The only requirement stated explicitly in the law is teaching the United States Constitution, starting in seventh grade.

Table 5
**Statutory requirements for private schools in New York
 and New Jersey**

| Category | New York | New Jersey |
|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Curricula | The extent and level must be equivalent to those of public schools, with a list of the required subjects | Equivalent to that of public schools |
| Faculty qualifications | Competence | None |
| Tests | The Regents exam for high school graduates and achievement tests for elementary school pupils | None |

In the previous chapter we noted the increasing prominence in ultra-Orthodox education of New Jersey in general and of Lakewood in particular, due to the relocation there of ultra-Orthodox Jews from New York City. They are moving to Lakewood because of the cost of living, housing density, and environmental concerns in the big city. But there are also ramifications for their children's education, because Yeshivish schools in Lakewood generally teach fewer core subjects than those in New York. These differences have roots in religious outlook but also, as noted, in the fact that in New Jersey the government sets almost no requirements for private schools with regard to curriculum, faculty qualifications, and achievement and school-exit tests.

C. Supervision of Institutions

Thanks to a ruling by the US Supreme Court almost a century ago (1925), parents are entitled to send their children to private schools that are subject to less formal supervision than are public schools. In practice, for many years the laws on private schools were not enforced in ultra-Orthodox institutions in New York and New Jersey. In 2007, a senior inspector of private institutions in New York reported that during the more than 20 years he had held his post, no school had ever been closed or fined for failing to comply with legal requirements related to curricula (Zehavi 2009).

Nevertheless, the inspectors do try to encourage quality instruction so that students are prepared to enter the job market in the future. The standard way to achieve this is via negotiation with the schools, rather than coercion, and including financial incentives. For example, the students at an ultra-Orthodox school in New York that received, for the first time, federal funds to teach English passed the national achievement tests, which they had never done before (Zehavi 2009).

There are three main reasons for the states' long failure to conduct real oversight of ultra-Orthodox education:

1. The political power of the ultra-Orthodox sector, especially in New York and New Jersey (Perry-Hazan 2015).
2. The lack of public interest in what takes place within the ultra-Orthodox community, whose schools are deemed a marginal element of the American education system. It should be remembered that most ultra-Orthodox schools (including Hasidic girls' schools) do comply with the statutory requirements, so that the operation of (mainly) Hasidic boys' schools passed relatively unnoticed.

3. The lack of pressure within the ultra-Orthodox community to modify the status quo.

(1) Changes in Education Authority Policies

The above points notwithstanding, recent years have seen a major awakening of public attention to ultra-Orthodox education and the launch of a campaign by the authorities to make its institutions teach secular subjects. A key player in the new government supervision of ultra-Orthodox schools is Young Advocates for Fair Education (YAFFED), an organization established in 2011 by graduates of the ultra-Orthodox system, some of them no longer ultra-Orthodox. They asserted that as a result of the authorities' failure to regulate and supervise ultra-Orthodox private education, they had been denied their basic right to a general education. In its early years, the organization made contact with the state education department in New York. At first the latter maintained that ultra-Orthodox schools did not fall into its bailiwick, but in 2015 a detailed complaint from dozens of yeshiva graduates, submitted by YAFFED, triggered an investigation that opened the way to formal supervision of ultra-Orthodox education.

A comprehensive report compiled by YAFFED in 2017 found that in Hasidic schools for boys, usually through seventh or eighth grade, pupils spent an average of 90 minutes every afternoon on secular subjects (Partlan 2017); but after that there were no secular studies whatsoever in most Hasidic yeshivas. The organization's founder, Naftuli Moster, told us that even though Chabad is the Hasidic sect most open to and involved with society, its schools, too, set strict limits on secular studies, in keeping with a directive by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe.

The education authorities' investigation got underway in 2017; inspectors began visiting 28 ultra-Orthodox schools which were said not to be teaching the required hours of core subjects. When its conclusions were

finally submitted, in late 2019, it found that 11 of the institutions that had been inspected did meet the legal requirements, while five of them certainly did not. As for the others, they had begun a process to increase the scope and quality of instruction in the core subjects, but were still not complying with the law.²⁶

The ultra-Orthodox leadership of Agudath Israel did not sit idly by while this was going on. In April 2018, cooperation between the ultra-Orthodox New York State Senator Simcha Felder (elected as a Democrat) and the Republican majority in the Senate led to a relaxation of the long-standing requirement that ultra-Orthodox institutions teach material of a similar scope to the public school curriculum. The bill as passed by the state legislature provided that the curriculum of bilingual schools with long school days (in practice this means ultra-Orthodox schools) should be evaluated using a holistic approach that focuses on whether the curriculum develops the students' skills of critical thinking and prepares them for practical life and the working world. But even with this new leniency pushed by Felder, the law still requires the teaching of English, history, mathematics, civics, and other subjects. For example, students must be able to understand literary and expository texts in English and to write a composition that presents a worldview and advances arguments to defend it; in history they must be able to analyze a primary source and be familiar with important events of the past; and so on in the other subjects.²⁷ Felder and the ultra-Orthodox hoped that this clause would

26 See the [letter](#) from the New York City Department of Education. Note that most of these institutions are elementary schools. There were no secular studies whatsoever in two of the three secondary institutions inspected.

27 See the text of the law: 2019 New York Laws EDN – Education, Title 4 Teachers and Pupils, Article 65 – Compulsory Education and School Census, Part 1 – Compulsory Education, 3204 – Instruction Required.

remain on paper and not actually force the schools to adopt a detailed curriculum.

But the ultra-Orthodox victory proved short-lived. Because of the amendment, the state education authorities now had to clarify private schools' scholastic obligations in secular subjects. In a detailed document published in November 2018, the state commissioner of education set a minimum requirement for secular subjects of several classroom hours a day—many more than are generally provided by Hasidic schools.²⁸

In order to deal with this decision, the ultra-Orthodox noted that there had not been a public hearing about the new mandate and accordingly asked for and received a postponement of the law's implementation. During the hearing process, which was completed in September 2019, some 140,000 persons, most of them ultra-Orthodox, sent letters to the New York State Department of Education asking that the new requirements be withdrawn.²⁹ The final outcome has not yet been announced. According to media reports, Mayor Bill de Blasio prevented its publication because of his close relations with the ultra-Orthodox leadership.³⁰ In any case, the ultra-Orthodox leaders launched a campaign against the new rule, waged in the political, judicial, and public arenas. The issue has already produced a conflict between the Hasidic communities and the state authorities (Wecker 2019).

28 See ["NYSED Releases Updated Guidance and Resources on Substantial Equivalency of Instruction,"](#) New York State Education Department website, November 20, 2018.

29 Selim Algar, ["State hit with 140K public comments on bid to boost private school oversight,"](#) *New York Post*, September 11, 2019.

30 Susan Edelman, ["Emails reveal Mayor de Blasio 'abused his power' to help stall yeshiva probe,"](#) *New York Post*, May 9, 2020.

In March 2022, the New York State Education Department finally released the updated regulations for private schools.³¹ They recognize the cultural and religious diversity of the population and offer private schools various ways to satisfy the requirement that they teach the core subjects at a level equivalent to that in public schools. They may choose between sending their pupils for external exams or submitting to outside inspectors, but in any case must meet the requirement with real content. The anguished reaction by the Satmar rebbe and the more moderate but still worried response by Agudath Israel show that they see the new regulations as another step towards state supervision of Hasidic education.³² The regulations have not yet received final approval, and the ultra-Orthodox have not yet said their final word on the subject.

(2) Impact of Increased Public Awareness on Ultra-Orthodox Education

The issue of oversight of Hasidic schools points to a process that is relevant to the entire ultra-Orthodox education system. It was the community's rapid growth and the pressure from below by graduates of its schools that forced the politicians and bureaucrats to stop ignoring the matter. For the first time, senior politicians were questioned about ultra-Orthodox education; even the mayor of New York City, who initially displayed total ignorance of the subject, was eventually compelled to publish statements

31 [Department Proposes Regulations for the Substantial Equivalency of Instruction in Nonpublic Schools](#), The New York State Education Department, March 10, 2022.

32 Julia Gergely, "[NY State Releases New Guidelines for Private Schools – And Yeshivas Push Back](#)," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, March 11, 2022.

about ultra-Orthodox institutions' obligation to teach secular subjects.³³ The recurrent reports in major news outlets, including the *New York Times*, kept the issue on the public agenda; the heads of the ultra-Orthodox sector could no longer operate under the radar.

Changes in the stringency of government oversight may have an impact on ultra-Orthodox education as a whole. One reason is the trend to cut back on secular studies in the Yeshivish sector, which we addressed in the previous chapter. It is true that this phenomenon is found chiefly in New Jersey; but as Lotem Perry-Hazan has shown, increased regulation of ultra-Orthodox education is widespread and is taking place in Great Britain, Belgium, New York, and Israel. It is not impossible that in the coming years it will reach New Jersey as well, and especially Lakewood (Perry-Hazan 2015, 2018).

Another facet is the ultra-Orthodox reaction to the government pressure. In recent years, as a reaction to YAFFED, ultra-Orthodox activists founded PEARLS (Parents for Educational and Religious Liberty in Schools), which produces secular curricula and provides them to ultra-Orthodox schools. To date, the group has devised curricula in mathematics, English, and science for most of the elementary grades. According to the New York state commissioner of education, many Hasidic schools have adopted PEARLS curricula in recent years. The commissioner also noted that the organization's cooperation was important for introducing these changes to the ultra-Orthodox system. While there is no doubt that PEARLS wants to enhance the public image of ultra-Orthodox education in the wake of the recent tremors,³⁴ it also seems to be having an effect within the ultra-

33 JTA, "[De Blasio Denies He's Soft On Yeshiva Standards](#)," *Forward*, August 19, 2018.

34 PEARLS was one of the organizations that, along with Agudath Israel and Torah Umesorah, initiated the letter to protest the authorities' interference in the curricula of ultra-Orthodox schools.

Orthodox system. The implication is that while pressure by the authorities may increase the teaching of secular subjects in Hasidic schools, ultimate success depends on long-term action and cooperation with elements within the ultra-Orthodox community.

D. “Flour and Torah”:³⁵ The Conditions for Receiving Government Funds

With regard to school financing in the United States, there are three different categories: (1) public schools, which are entirely government-funded and do not charge tuition; (2) charter schools, run by private firms or nonprofit associations under government supervision, and which also receive government funds; (3) private schools, which depend mainly on parents’ tuition payments and on donations.

In recent years, especially during the Trump administration, American parents have increasingly exercised their freedom of choice with regard to their children’s education by means of vouchers. Under this arrangement, parents decide what institution—private, public, or charter—will receive the funds the government allocates for each child. The system is employed mainly in states without large ultra-Orthodox communities, which means that, for now at least, it remains only an idea that allows the ultra-Orthodox to hope for increased government support of their private schools in the future.

Tuition at private Jewish schools in the United States constitutes a very heavy economic burden for families whose children attend them, and has become even more onerous in recent years. Nevertheless, the unique

³⁵ "Without flour, there is no Torah; without Torah, there is no flour" (*Tractate AVOT* 3:21): i.e., without economic activity Torah study is impossible; but without Torah study amassing wealth is pointless.

situation in the United States (separation of church and state and the nature of public education) means that ultra-Orthodox parents are forced to send their children to expensive private schools.

The median tuition at private ultra-Orthodox schools is \$20,000 a year per student, even though, in comparison to the much more expensive Modern Orthodox (\$31,000) education, these institutions tend to pare construction costs and faculty salaries. Because this sum exceeds what large families can pay, 52% of them require scholarships or formal community support in order to give their children a Jewish education (Nishma 2021).

Thus, ultra-Orthodox schools are forced to operate as private institutions even as their outlays on every item—faculty and staff salaries, the building and its maintenance, equipment, kosher food, and more—are ballooning. One official of an Agudath Israel institution told us that the starting point is that “we are in an economic crisis,” so his job is to find funding sources: “Part of what we do is funded by the government, and the government’s interest is to let religious schools know what they can and cannot do. We are good at getting money, but we are very careful to get it only when it is coming to us.”

Indeed, thanks to court rulings in several states that the funding of private schools does not necessarily violate the principle of the separation of church and state, private Jewish education now enjoys government assistance. In New York City alone the subsidy for private Jewish schools (the vast majority of them ultra-Orthodox) exceeds \$100 million a year (Wecker 2019). Below we review the categories of government support for ultra-Orthodox schools.

Transportation. In most states, pupils in the lower grades have a statutory right to subsidized transportation. Ultra-Orthodox schools make very good use of the famous yellow school buses. However, local and state boards of education have some discretion about funding this service. In

Lakewood, for example, the authorities initially refused to provide the ultra-Orthodox with separate buses for boys and girls, because in some places it would double the expense. In the end, however, they did approve the duplication.

Security. In recent years, thanks to lobbying by Agudath Israel, federal funding for school security has been extended to ultra-Orthodox educational institutions. This comes to millions of dollars in taxpayers' money spent each year on personnel, security cameras, and other means.

Special education and pupils from disadvantaged families. Under a 1965 federal law, special education pupils are entitled to government funding, which includes payment of teacher salaries and small classes.³⁶ The law budgets extra hours of instruction for schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods, a category that includes Borough Park and Crown Heights. In the past, many ultra-Orthodox schools passed up this opportunity, because the teachers were not Jewish. Today, however, the program seems to place greater emphasis on cultural suitability and the teachers sent to ultra-Orthodox schools are themselves ultra-Orthodox, some of them recruited and employed through an agency that holds a government franchise.

We saw another angle, this one negative, of the integration of special education and ultra-Orthodox education at a Talmud Torah that serves all Hasidic sects in Brooklyn, with hundreds of pupils from preschool through sixth grade. By chance, we arrived on the day when the New York State Testing Program exams were being administered. The principal acknowledged that his school, where pupils study secular subjects for only 90 minutes a day in the afternoon, does not do well on these tests, which include mathematics, science, and English (English as a second

³⁶ Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged.

language; the main language of instruction at the school is Yiddish). He added, without thinking about the implications of his remark, that given the budget rules in New York, the pupil's poor test scores actually benefited the school, because a pupil who continues to do poorly on these tests is considered to have a learning disability, even if this is not really the case, and the school receives a government-funded teaching assistant for him. This teacher sits in the classroom and is generally available to assist the other pupils as well. In a school that is resource-poor and has trouble paying its utility bills, the principal said, such funding is a real help.

Thanks to the section of the law that allows “culturally responsive” special education institutions, New York and New Jersey provide full funding to several special education schools where the language of instruction is Yiddish. The language automatically screens out students who are not ultra-Orthodox. However, because religious activities are not allowed in government-funded schools, the school day there cannot begin with the morning prayer service—a limitation that the parents find problematic.

Health and nutrition. Ultra-Orthodox schools receive government funding for a school nurse and for activities related to teaching first aid and the war on drugs. In addition, subject to relevant criteria, pupils' meals are subsidized in most states and cities with a large ultra-Orthodox population.

Computers. Every private school can ask the government to pay for computers.

In sum, though the situation varies from school to school and state to state, the principle is clear: huge sums of government money flow to the private ultra-Orthodox education system. Of course, money talks and exerts influence. One Agudath Israel official told us that the government's interest is clear—letting religious schools know what they can and cannot do. The interest of the ultra-Orthodox is also clear: they want to stand

on solid economic ground in a period of uncertainty and cutbacks. As the same person told us:

We are good at getting money, but we are very careful to get it only when it is coming to us. [...] The Jews are just working on it.

Unlike others, they know the rules, they use them. The others do not know how, they should come to the Haredim and ask them how you do it, instead of throwing rocks at them. We would be happy to help. They just want to survive basically. People do not know how they will fund their school.

2. Summary: From Full Autonomy to Increasing Supervision

Our visit to New York clearly showed us the ramifications of the American system that does not engage in oversight of private schools and does not intervene in their curricula. The ultra-Orthodox desire for educational autonomy would seem to be achieved all over the United States, perhaps even more so than in Israel (where ultra-Orthodox autonomy can be traced back to the “status quo document”). Along with the advantages of this autonomy, our impression, mainly from Hasidic institutions, is that this “freedom” often comes at the students’ expense, and the quality and level of instruction in the few hours devoted to secular subjects are insufficient.

Nevertheless, it seems that policymakers, certainly in New York State, are finally beginning to change their approach in favor of a more active policy that includes stronger oversight. This policy is reflected both in the statutory language, which now imposes more specific requirements on

private schools (including ultra-Orthodox institutions) than in the past, and in the multiplying investigations of suspected violations of the law. These changes are putting pressure on the ultra-Orthodox community, especially the Hasidim, to modify their curricula (albeit to the smallest extent possible).

In this chapter, we have seen that regardless of their level of autonomy and state supervision, ultra-Orthodox educational institutions can benefit from a combination of government incentives and financial considerations. Most of the ultra-Orthodox are not opposed to teaching a larger quantity of science. With a combination of government incentives and economic motives, it is possible that the ultra-Orthodox students will come out ahead.

Chapter 5

Lessons and Conclusions Applicable to Israel

1. Ultra-Orthodox Integration in the United States and Israel

This study has shown that the enclave culture has many faces. The Hasidic enclave in the United States is rigidly segregated from the world around it, geographically, socially, and culturally. The education system for Hasidic boys reflects this insularity in its extremely limited quantity of secular studies, reduction to the bare minimum of students' encounters with teachers who are not themselves Hasidic, and scant exposure to American culture.

The American Yeshivish version of the enclave culture has a different character—what might be called an “integrative enclave.” It is marked by strong community life, the centrality of Torah study, and discrete residential concentrations. But its boundaries are much softer than those of the Hasidic enclave. This hybrid enclave adopts modern and American lifestyle and values, running from the desire for material comfort, through culinary culture and sports, and all the way to exposure to high culture and a deep identification with American democracy and the importance of safeguarding individual rights.

The Yeshivish education system in the United States, for both boys and girls, is based on this soft and fluid concept of the enclave. The material

studied in its schools includes a basic level of the sciences and humanities taught in secular schools in the United States, based on the idea that these subjects are agents of socialization to American identity and the democratic world, as well as essential tools for finding a job in the future. The fact that a significant percentage of the faculties in Yeshivish schools are not ultra-Orthodox, and sometimes not even Jewish, attests to the positive attitude toward the surrounding culture and absence of a sense of threat from it, based on the midrashic dictum, “if they tell you there is knowledge among non-Jews, believe it.”

This positive attitude toward secular studies in the Yeshivish enclave does not have a strong ideological component. The educators with whom we spoke about the motives for secular studies offered few religious explanations and focused on the practical arguments. Between the lines, though, we could hear an expression of the Yeshivish elitism that holds that a young man of the community must not be inferior to his American peer in his intellectual skills, or be limited in his ability to converse with the society around him.

The points of contact with that environment require the soft enclave to draw borders of a very different character than those of the rigid enclave. One of its important features is acceptance of the outside world as legitimate, within limits, rather than dismissal and total rejection. This attitude is evident, for example, in the diverse strategies employed to cope with problematic material in the curriculum, as well as in the complex approach to pedagogy and in-service courses for teachers. The message is that there is no need for isolation in every dimension of life, but mainly in matters of religious and social norms. So when a graduate of Yeshivish education enters the working world, where he is apt to have non-Jewish colleagues, their human and professional common denominator is likely to be large and to produce close ties. At the same time, the religious and social boundaries will remain clear, so the encounter will not lead to assimilation.

Could the ultra-Orthodox in Israel adopt the American Yeshivish model? The answer is far from simple. The Israelis frequently condescend toward their American cousins, thinking them less committed to Torah study. Similarly, the conditions that forced the Yeshivish in America to adopt the soft enclave model are very different from those in Israel, which permit and sometimes force the ultra-Orthodox to live in a rigid enclave. The threat of assimilation among Jews who are not ultra-Orthodox is much greater in Israel (though the ultra-Orthodox who live in a non-Jewish environment in the United States might disagree). What is more, the state support for their institutions makes it possible for the Israeli ultra-Orthodox to raise their ramparts even higher. In the United States, by contrast, the high cost of private education and religious observance, along with the need to make a living, do not permit the ultra-Orthodox to segregate themselves fully.

All this notwithstanding, strong arguments can be advanced that the ultra-Orthodox in Israel could adopt elements of the American Yeshivish model. As we showed in the previous chapter, the American Yeshivish model has its roots in the philosophy of the Slabodka yeshiva in Lithuania. In Israel, too, Lithuanian ultra-Orthodoxy was once more open, until its horizons narrowed under the leadership of Rabbi Shach. Menachem Friedman showed that the Israeli “society of scholars” emerged as a reaction to certain conditions that were created in the country (Friedman 2006). Many other studies have shown that it is on the verge of significant change (Brown 2011; Zicherman and Cahaner 2012; Caplan and Stadler 2012; Malach and Cahaner 2017; Cahaner 2020; Malach and Cahaner 2020).

An academic who studies American ultra-Orthodox education suggested how the American model could influence the ultra-Orthodox in Israel:

In Haredi schools in America that have secular studies they teach these things as part of the wonders of the world, of

the universe. In Eretz Israel it has always been a different educational approach. So, first of all, who are we [in America] to tell anyone to do that or not to do that? But also they see how we work—they travel back and forth here, they see it, and I believe that over time there might be a softening of the opposition to certain things. I do not expect them to teach science and literature at Haredi yeshivot soon, maybe not at all. But they know that they have it here. They see we are still Haredim and we still care for halakha and we still *daven* [pray] three times a day, and we study Torah and it has not destroyed us in any way. I will argue it strengthens us. But they see that it is possible and of course it can help that it has some effect. Though once you put it in a package and stamp it, that package is a *hefetz hashud* [suspicious object] for them. (Moshe Krakowski, Yeshiva University)

One might say that the relation of ultra-Orthodoxy, especially in its Lithuanian/Yeshivish version, toward the outside world shifts in a pendular motion: Sometimes it lowers the walls and enlarges the common denominator with the society around it and the latter's influence on it; and sometimes, especially in times of crisis, it builds the ramparts higher and increases its isolation from the world. It is not surprising that in Israel, too, the expansive tendency of recent years of taking a modern line and integrating into society is more common among the Lithuanians and less so among the Hasidim (Cahaner 2020). Such dynamism is deeply rooted in the Lithuanian way of life.

This survey of the American Yeshivish education system is also intended to offer Israeli decision-makers and the public at large an alternative model that many seem to have lost sight of. The tension between the state and ultra-Orthodox society often provokes the question of whether the state wants or is even permitted to aspire to change the ultra-Orthodox way of life (Perry-Hazan 2013). We believe that this picture of the American case

can provide inspiration and enrich the discussion of these questions and shed light on the definition of authentic ultra-Orthodox identity and the image of ultra-Orthodox education. The American case shows that the insular ultra-Orthodox model is not the only one possible and that it can be modified without the surrender of any component of ultra-Orthodox identity. This context makes the state's attempts to effect changes in ultra-Orthodox society fairer and more reasonable.

2. Internal Motivation as a Lever for Attaining a Higher Educational Standard

In the Yeshivish community in America, a healthy share of secular studies enjoys broad public legitimacy. This stems first of all from parents' desire to provide their children with the life skills required in modern society, which compels the schools to teach secular subjects at a high level. As one of our interview subjects acknowledged, if his school decided to eliminate all secular studies, 90% of the parents would send their children elsewhere.

Parents' role in the decision-making mechanism is associated with the character of parental involvement in the education system in the United States as a whole, including the fact that private schools are run by boards on which parents have significant representation. But from this one can also infer about the influence that parental organizing and pressure might have on schools in Israel.

This internal motivation, as well as the American authorities' desire to beef up secular studies in ultra-Orthodox institutions, has produced a number of initiatives within the community. Writing new textbooks and training teachers who are members of the community are responses to

a deep need and are viewed favorably by the formal leadership of ultra-Orthodox education—Torah Umesorah. The parties engaged in this, all of them ultra-Orthodox, know that they are also likely to obtain financial support from the government, so the project may also prove economically worthwhile. As we have seen, philanthropy, too, influences the social and educational decisions of ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States. This power derives, of course, from donors' financial largesse, but also from their desire to promote voluntary measures and to cooperate with forces within the community.

Israeli Orthodoxy is not monolithic. In recent years there has been increasing recognition by academics that the sector should be analyzed not only along the axis of group affiliation (Hasidim, Lithuanians, Mizrahim), but also along the conservative-modern axis (Malach and Cahaner 2017; Cahaner 2020). The more modern ultra-Orthodox include many who immigrated to Israel from Western countries where they were exposed to a less insular form of ultra-Orthodoxy. Their inclination toward modernity has produced several educational ventures, of which the most important is the new phenomenon of "State Haredi" schools.

Here we could also note that some ultra-Orthodox community centers have opened after-school groups in which boys and girls can study English and science. We believe there is room to expand this activity and move it into the schools.³⁷ The great importance now assigned to these subjects

³⁷ Recently, Moshe Gafni of the ultra-Orthodox Degel Hatorah party, the former chair of the Knesset Finance committee, recognized this need and stated that if parents asked for it, the Independent school system would add English to the curriculum of its boys' schools. Its decision to do so has the backing of the Council of Torah Sages and is also based on the desire to compete with the institutions of the State Haredi system. But it is also evidence of a change in public opinion that is sweeping the community, the ultra-Orthodox leadership's awareness of these changes, and their response to it. See also Shahar

by ultra-Orthodox parents and teachers in Israel, in part because more of the ultra-Orthodox are entering the labor market, could increase the schools' incentive to respond favorably to these initiatives. There is no doubt that the level of courses in the schools would be higher than that of the afternoon programs.

Philanthropy has played a crucial role in supporting the introduction of after-school classes in the ultra-Orthodox sector; it could take another step and foster community ventures to bolster the teaching of English, arithmetic, and science in the schools themselves. We believe that a philanthropic push to introduce secular studies in institutions where they do not exist, or to raise the level of instruction where they do, would enjoy more cooperation among the ultra-Orthodox than a government-supported effort. The success of a pilot program would eventually lead to an expansion of the activity and support from the Education Ministry.

3. Government Involvement in the Education System

This study has shown that it is impossible to discuss the regulation of ultra-Orthodox education in the United States without taking account of how the authorities relate to it. We focused on educational policy in the major ultra-Orthodox centers of New York and New Jersey and the differences between them. In New York, the compulsory education law makes more demands, including on private institutions, and the state sets a threshold level of school exit exams. In New Jersey, by contrast, almost

Ilan, "Gafni's Revolutionary Statement: We Will Open Ultra-Orthodox Boys' Schools with Secular Studies," *Calcalist*, February 13, 2020 [Hebrew].

no demands are made of ultra-Orthodox private institutions and the state does not require private schools students to take exit exams.

Do these differences in the state's demands produce a difference in the nature of education? The answer is not clear-cut. As we have seen, in New York, too, most Hasidic schools do not comply with state requirements, but nevertheless are not penalized in any way; whereas in New Jersey some Yeshivish institutions teach secular subjects in a format similar to that which prevails in New York, even though the authorities do not force them to do so.

In the course of our research, however, we saw that legislation can press ultra-Orthodox schools to revise their curricula. At the time of writing, the issue of oversight of ultra-Orthodox education in New York State has not yet been decided and we cannot know whether the outcome will lead to a stronger defensive posture by the ultra-Orthodox, carried to the point of a confrontation with the authorities. Still, we can already witness the efforts by some among the ultra-Orthodox, ranging from the establishment to various Hasidic courts, to make changes, albeit limited, in what their schools teach.

As we have seen, in New York State the change in policy began with public awareness, fed by the activity of civil society organizations and media reports. The ability to effect policy change was dependent, however, on a comprehensive investigation by the relevant government agency (the New York State Department of Education) in order to identify the deficiencies that needed to be corrected.

It is not only in New York that policymakers are turning their attention to the situation inside the ultra-Orthodox education system. The exposure of its internal workings has stimulated policymakers in several countries, including Great Britain and Belgium, to make more rigid demands of ultra-Orthodox schools (Perry-Hazan 2018). Israeli policymakers could learn

from New York and other countries not only how to monitor the problem, but also how to address it and propose solutions.

In general, in its attempts to deal with the challenges of ultra-Orthodox education, New York State tends to employ both the carrot and the stick, the two common tools of public policy. Alongside the statutory pressure and legal threats, there is also an attempt to promote educational programs, such as STEM, and to subsidize textbooks and tutoring for underachievers. These programs, which are in part budgeted by the state, operate in close cooperation with the schools and other elements of the ultra-Orthodox community itself.³⁸

As stated, the great differences among the several states in America with regard to educational policy make comparison with Israel complicated. Nevertheless we can say, chiefly from what we learned in New York, that when some sector of the population (in this case the Hasidim) resists change to the status quo, both the carrot and the stick have merit. By themselves, leniencies and incentives can influence some institutions, but they will not effect an essential change in the sector's attitude toward secular studies. Pressure and sanctions, taken alone, provoke fierce opposition and a desire to manipulate the system in every possible way. When the authorities exert pressure by means of legislation that is translated into clear regulations, and also know how to deal with the schools and propose processes to facilitate the changes, the trust produced between the two sides can lead to modification of the curriculum.

38 Intelligent use of both the carrot and the stick could also be seen in how New York State reacted to the outbreak of measles in the ultra-Orthodox community. The forceful response included closing summer camps and forbidding schools to operate if their students had not been vaccinated; but the authorities also developed extensive ties and launched a dialogue with politicians, rabbis, and professionals (including the Refuah and Hatzoloh organizations) within the community, in order to forge trust and cooperation (Paumgarten 2019).

In Israel, too, public awareness of the problems associated with the nature and limited scope of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools is growing; today it finds expression in academic studies and media investigations.³⁹ On the other hand, it was not until 2020 that the first more-or-less comprehensive report about ultra-Orthodox education by an official organ of the state, the State Comptroller, was published (State Comptroller 2020). As we have seen in the case of New York State's approach to the issue, full and close monitoring by the government agency responsible for correcting deficiencies is an essential condition for change. In Israel the relevant body is the Ministry of Education. It must conduct a comprehensive survey of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools and analyze issues such as teacher training, textbooks, examinations, subjects taught, and hours of instruction, as well as the nature and extent of the oversight provide by its Haredi District.

As in New York State, the next stage after monitoring is definition of the requirements demanded of schools. Unlike the general discourse, which focuses on the extent of core curriculum taught in ultra-Orthodox education, the Education Ministry must clearly define the requirements of ultra-Orthodox boys' schools in all aspects and elements of the secular curriculum, and must monitor implementation. It must also define the price that an institution or network will pay for failure to comply with the requirements.

39 A recent study of this is Barth, Spiegel, and Malach (2020). Also worthy of note are Horowitz (2012) and Schiffer (1998). See also media reports on this topic, for example Lior Datal, "[A Danger for Israel: A Huge Jump in the Number of the Ultra-Orthodox Exempt from the Core Curriculum](#)," *TheMarker*, May 12, 2019 [Hebrew]; Shahaar Ilan, "[Only in Israel: Funding of Private Ultra-Orthodox Education without the Core Curriculum](#)," *Calcalist*, August 27, 2019 [Hebrew]; Kobi Nachshoni, "[Core Curriculum for the Ultra-Orthodox: 95% of Math Teachers Never Studied Mathematics](#)," *Ynet*, May 4, 2020 [Hebrew].

As we saw in the case of New York State, in addition to setting standards and defining sanctions, the Education Ministry needs to develop ways to cooperate with the schools in implementing the plan. This cooperation could include the gradual introduction of curricula, fiscal incentives for advancing them in the schools, training for teachers and administrators, and subsidizing the creation of the textbooks required for the new departure. The capacity to make such changes seems to be more limited in Israel than in the United States, chiefly for political reasons. Nevertheless, the demographic weight of the ultra-Orthodox sector in Israel makes these changes much more essential.

Chapter 6

Summary and a Look to the Future: Internal Motivation vs. Government Oversight in the United States and Israel

The extent and nature of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox schools in the United States are the product of two forces: an internal motivation to provide students with knowledge; and the external demands of government regulations. These two forces are complementary but can also come into sharp conflict.

Internal motivation can be found in many but not all of the Yeshivish schools. The mainstream institutions attach importance to secular subjects and teach them, whether so that their graduates will be able to earn a decent living, in recognition of the need to expand their students' horizons, or in response to the parents' demands. Accordingly, there is only a slight need for external regulation of these schools.

In Hasidic schools, by contrast, there is hardly any internal motivation. For many years the authorities were indifferent to the situation there. So despite the laws and regulations that apply to private schools, especially in New York, there was no will to enforce them. The principles of religious and pedagogical freedom made it possible for hundreds of schools of various sects to develop along the lines set by their rabbis and community institutions.

In recent years, however, changes have taken place in both sectors. As a result of the wave of migration by the Yeshivish from New York to Lakewood, an increasing percentage of ultra-Orthodox students now have only a minimal exposure to secular studies even in elementary school, and the number of those attending high-school yeshivas where there are no secular studies whatsoever — the model common among the Hasidim in the United States and all of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel — has grown.

Despite this erosion of the internal motivation for secular studies among the Yeshivish, it still exists. Because the “soft enclave” concept is so deeply rooted among them, their aspiration to earn a respectable living in diverse occupations is unquenchable, and this requires serious instruction in secular subjects. The authorities’ role in preserving this inclination is expressed in funding to train teachers from within the community and to develop curricula that prepare the students for the dynamic labor market.

There have also been changes in how the authorities relate to the Hasidic schools. In recent years, the New York State Department of Education has stopped ignoring the situation in those institutions, and the result, as described in this study, has been a government demand that they teach more secular studies and at a higher level.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew public attention to the internal workings of ultra-Orthodox society in New York. Neighborhoods in Brooklyn and some of the ultra-Orthodox suburbs north of the city stood out for their high rate of contagion. The media focused on the ultra-Orthodox who refused to take coronavirus tests, and mass events among Hasidim were covered extensively. Both the mayor and the governor voiced public criticism of the violations of their directives in ultra-Orthodox areas and threatened to impose sanctions on schools. The topic of the ultra-Orthodox and the pandemic also found its way into the opinion columns of newspapers with a national circulation.

The barrage of criticism was sometimes exaggerated, but it was obvious that the pandemic had opened a previously concealed door onto a reality of which few Americans had been aware—a door behind which the ultra-Orthodox community had enjoyed extensive autonomy for generations. The reports on how this community was handling (or not handling) the pandemic provided a first look at its size and power and, more than that, at the authorities’ fecklessness in dealing with it in times of crisis.

It is too soon to estimate the ultimate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the determination of politicians and administrators in New York State to increase secular studies in Hasidic schools. In the short term, the pandemic forced the postponement of several intended steps by the State Department of Education to require schools to modify their curricula. But it also made decision-makers and the public at large more aware of the extent of the autonomy enjoyed by the ultra-Orthodox and its influence on the state as a whole; this greater awareness may strengthen the resolve to effect changes in the Hasidic education system and monitor their implementation.

In Israel, too, the ultra-Orthodox education system maneuvers between the community's internal motivation and state regulation. Because the girls' schools have a strong internal motivation to teach secular subjects, the level of instruction is reasonable even without government oversight. By contrast, boys are taught these subjects at a very low level; since the 1970s, the hours devoted to them have contracted even further, as institutions have proliferated that teach even less of the core curriculum.

Over the last 20 years, however, an increasing motivation for secular studies has become evident, as reflected in certain changes in ultra-Orthodox boys' education in Israel. These include the secular courses taught in the Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox Bnei Yosef network, the opening of the State Haredi stream, and the rapid increase in the number of students attending ultra-Orthodox yeshiva high schools. Though these changes are not insignificant, they are concentrated among the ultra-Orthodox with some openness to modernity and among the Mizrahim, who in any case tend toward "light ultra-Orthodoxy" (Leon 2009; Cahaner 2020).

Even before the changes we described in New York State, Israeli decision-makers had showed greater awareness of the need for changes in the oversight of ultra-Orthodox education and the teaching of the core curriculum in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools. As a result, the Ministry of

Education established its Haredi District and trained dozens of inspectors to work in it. At this stage, however, it seems that the state and the Education Ministry are not making adequate use of this mechanism in order to increase the hours and level of instruction in basic subjects.

Our tour of ultra-Orthodox boys' education in the United States produced three main lessons that are relevant to ultra-Orthodox boys' education in Israel:

1. There is a type of ultra-Orthodoxy that combines secular studies with religious studies.
2. The community's internal motivation can enhance the volume and quality of secular studies.
3. The authorities can influence the introduction and enforcement of educational standards.

There are extensive links between the American Yeshivish and the Lithuanians in Israel. The Americans donate funds to yeshivas and kollels in Israel, some of them come to study in Israel, and no few even make aliya and settle in Israel; but they have little influence on ultra-Orthodox society and education in Israel. Nevertheless, today, when there are many initiatives in the United States to develop a form of ultra-Orthodox education that combines religious studies and secular subjects, we believe it is possible to learn quite a bit from the American Yeshivish model and how it copes with the challenges inherent to this kind of education.

We also found that the scale of secular studies in ultra-Orthodox institutions in the United States derives chiefly from the community's inner motivation and from parents' appreciation of their importance for their children's future. Almost all ultra-Orthodox men in America are gainfully employed; their exposure to an adequate quantity and quality of secular subjects when they were young influences the nature of their jobs. Because the Hasidim continue to speak Yiddish and marginalize secular

studies, very few of them work in the liberal professions. The Yeshivish, by contrast, who speak English as their mother tongue and spend more time on secular subjects, are much more likely to be liberal professionals in adulthood. Recent years have seen an increased push among the ultra-Orthodox in Israel to study secular subjects, especially English; this could lead to greater attention to these subjects in ultra-Orthodox institutions affiliated with the mainstream community.

We also learned about the authorities' power to regulate and supervise ultra-Orthodox education. Though in New York State this battle continues, it has already had an effect on the schools. Important players in American ultra-Orthodox education now understand that if the state decides to require a larger volume of secular subjects, they will have to respond in some way—whether by complying with the decision, finding a compromise with the authorities, or escalating the clash with the government.

In Israel, as in the United States, the gulf between the statutory requirements for the teaching of secular subjects and their implementation in ultra-Orthodox boys' schools obliges the state to intervene. In Israel, the state can push for changes in the ultra-Orthodox education system because the system is largely dependent on government funding. The policy needs to be expressed in positive measures, such as approving up-to-date textbooks, training better teachers and administrators, and providing incentives to schools that teach secular studies. But an effective outcome also depends on a clear definition of the institutions' obligations, on effective oversight, and on funding that is made contingent on their satisfying these requirements. The combination of these measures could lead to more and better hours of instruction in secular subjects in ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel.

For this to happen, it is crucial that Israelis become aware of the American Yeshivish model. Such knowledge can be of use to the ultra-Orthodox

themselves, especially in light of the ongoing public debate about secular studies. It is true that many of them know that things are done differently in the United States, but our impression is that this familiarity with the major differences between the education system and lifestyle of the Yeshivish in the United States and the Lithuanians in Israel is shallow, among both secular Israelis and the ultra-Orthodox.

This study has provided a deep and detailed description of the Yeshivish enclave model in America in general and of its education system in particular. Acquaintance with this model could bolster the growing realization among the ultra-Orthodox in Israel that there is more than one way to be ultra-Orthodox and that there is a type of ultra-Orthodoxy that is not bounded exclusively by religion and the study hall. This brand of ultra-Orthodoxy aspires to live in harmony with practical life and the society around it, and is not weaker on this account. Knowledge of this model could also provide Israeli ultra-Orthodoxy with tools for dealing with issues of education, teaching, and educational ideology, including, for example, ways to handle content that poses educational and religious challenges.

The path followed by Yeshivish boys' education in the United States could serve as a model for change in ultra-Orthodox boys' education in Israel. Will such a change take place? Only time will tell.

Interview Subjects

The most important informants for this study are listed below in alphabetical order. Interviews were conducted both in English and in Hebrew.

| Name | Position and Institution/ Organization |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Rabbi Yaakov Bender (and colleagues) | Rosh yeshiva, Darchei Torah High School, New York (and other faculty members and preschool administrators) |
| Rabbi Mordechai Besser | Senior school consultant, Torah Umesorah |
| Rabbi Shmuel Bloom | Former executive vice president, Agudath Israel of America |
| Rabbi Hizky Buchbinder | Principal, First Mesiftha of Canada, Montreal |
| Rabbi Menachem Gold | Darchei Torah High School, New York |
| Jack Gorman (and colleagues) | UJA-Federation of New York |
| Prof. Samuel Heilman | Researcher of ultra-Orthodox society, Queens College, City College of New York |
| Rabbi Baruch Hilsenrath | General studies principal, M'kor Baruch Elementary School (Yeshiva Ktana of Passaic) |
| Rabbi Moshe Klein | Rabbi and educator in the Hasidic community, Borough Park |
| Jacob Kornbluh | Journalist, Forward |



| Name | Position and Institution/ Organization |
|--------------------------|--|
| Dr. Moshe Krakowski | Researcher of ultra-Orthodox education, Yeshiva University |
| Yakov Lubin | Author of a science textbook for ultra-Orthodox junior high schools |
| Naftuli Moster | Founder and director of YAFFED |
| Jonathan Rosenblum | Author and journalist |
| Rabbi Yosef Rosenzweig | Principal, M'kor Baruch Elementary School (Yeshiva Ktana of Passaic) |
| Rabbi Peretz Scheinerman | Head of the yeshiva in Providence, Rhode Island |
| Motti Seligson | Director of media relations, Chabad Lubavitch, New York |
| Rabbi Avi Shafran | Spokesperson, Agudath Israel of America |
| Hirsch Meir Traube | Businessman, author of textbooks and curricula, Gerrer hasid |
| Nechumi Yaffe | Researcher of ultra-Orthodox society, Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University |
| A. A. | Staff member, Catapult Learning (producer of curricula and textbooks) |
| B. K. | Director of training for ultra-Orthodox teachers of secular subjects |
| G. R. | Educator, ultra-Orthodox yeshiva in Lakewood, NJ |

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The ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) community in the United States—more than 650,000-strong, is the second-largest in the world, after Israel. However, little is known about this group. One of the prominent characteristics of American *Haredim* is their positive attitude towards higher education and gainful employment—very different from that among their Israeli counterparts. The present study focuses on the education of ultra-Orthodox boys in the United States, which consists of several private systems that have doubled their enrollment over the past 20 years.

What do these ultra-Orthodox boys study? What is the scope of secular studies in their schools? It is growing or shrinking? Who are their teachers? What is the government's role in their funding and in their supervision?

This is the first comprehensive study of the ultra-Orthodox education system in the United States. It describes the characteristics of the American *Haredi* community, the development of its educational institutions, and the changes that have taken place over the years. It examines issues such as the need for, and justifications given, for including secular subjects in the core curriculum, textbook contents, and the profile of the faculty.

The study challenges decision-makers and the *Haredi* public in Israel by presenting an integrative model of ultra-Orthodox education for boys, far different from that in Israel's *Haredi* education system. It also presents recommendations regarding community involvement and the state's ability to effect changes within the system—issues that have become more and more important in recent years.

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45 NIS

June 2022



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ISBN

978-965-519-394-7 www.en.idi.org.il