

# From the Yeshiva World to the Practical World

## Social Challenges and Employment Potential among Haredi Yeshiva Students

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Asaf Malchi



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## **Abstract**

The records of the Ministry of Education's Senior Division for Torah Institutions show that in the 2021–2022 school year, almost fifty thousand (47,749) students attended Haredi higher yeshivot (*"yeshivot gedolot"*), distributed among 433 diverse institutions. These institutions serve male students aged 17–23 and offer intensive programs of Torah study. Despite attempts to adapt the yeshiva world to meet the needs and characteristics of all types of students, many students struggle to feel fully and completely at home there. The reason for this is that the yeshivot offer a uniform and demanding program of study that not all students are able to cope with. The students' level of studies in the yeshiva also serves as an indicator of their seriousness and quality ahead of marital matchmaking. Thus, outstanding yeshiva students enjoy the satisfaction of their Torah studies along with material benefits in the form of desirable jobs in religious settings, a good marital match, or generous assistance from their bride's parents toward the purchase of an apartment. Conversely, students who cannot or do not wish to devote all their time, energy, and future to the Torah world struggle greatly with their studies, but

are forced to remain in the yeshivot. This is because they have no access to any alternative track for self-realization that is regarded as legitimate by their community, due to the norms that require all boys and young men to engage in full-time and substantial Torah study.

The current study examines the level of satisfaction and the social and personal challenges among young Haredim studying in higher yeshivot. It also examines their attitudes toward possible alternatives to yeshiva studies, such as vocational studies and entering the workforce. The study is based on two types of information: (a) a quantitative survey of 530 yeshiva students aged 17–23 from diverse religious streams and communities; and (b) a qualitative component comprising in-depth interviews with 15 Haredi educators and rabbis, as well as two focus groups comprising a total of 16 yeshiva students from Lithuanian and Sephardi backgrounds.

The study distinguishes between two groups within the population of yeshiva students: (1) a group comprising the majority of students in the ordinary yeshivot of the mainstream Haredi community, in which there is strict attention to study programs and meticulous observance of dress codes and the Haredi religious way of life; and (2) a group comprising some 8,320 students (around 18% of all yeshiva students) who attend around 130 yeshivot that serve young men who find it difficult to engage in religious studies for the whole day. The academic pressure at these yeshivot is lower, and they also offer ancillary classes and social activities that are not considered acceptable in the yeshiva world as a whole. In this study, I refer to these institutions as “soft yeshivot.”<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the respondents in the quantitative survey were also divided between these two populations or groups.

1 This term was chosen during the preparation of the study. At first, I referred to these yeshivas as “alternative” frameworks to the mainstream, normative yeshivot. However, this terminology

## Key Findings

✓ Satisfaction with yeshiva studies. Only around one-third (36%) of students in the “soft” yeshivot are very satisfied with the yeshiva they attend, compared to 58% of students in mainstream yeshivot. Overall, around a half of all students in higher yeshivot are very satisfied with their institution of study.

✓ Difficulties and challenges. Over half (55%) of the students in the “soft” yeshivot reported difficulties in their religious studies, compared to just one-fifth (21%) of their peers in the mainstream yeshivot. Overall, around a quarter (27%) of all students in higher yeshivot reported difficulties in their studies. The challenges faced by students in the mainstream yeshivot, and still more so by their peers in the “soft” yeshivot, are related to the study workload, disciplinary problems, spiritual challenges, the monotonous character of the study material, the attitude toward them of their rabbi-educator (“*ram*”), and so forth. Additionally, the qualitative research showed that some yeshiva students find it difficult to devote themselves solely to Talmud study and would like to make progress in other, non-religious fields of study.

✓ Paid employment during yeshiva studies. Around one-fifth (21%) of the students in the mainstream yeshivot reported that they are employed in various kinds of jobs alongside their yeshiva studies.

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embodies a normative and value-based judgment regarding which frameworks are desirable and “proper” for young Haredi men. Accordingly, I elected to refer to these special yeshivas as “soft.” This term is consistent with the concept of “soft Haredi Judaism” (Leon, 2009), a term that is mainly used to describe Sephardi-Mizrahi Haredi Judaism, which holds more flexible and integrative values and behavioral norms than does the hardcore and hardline Haredi mainstream.

Most of these students are employed in casual, part-time, and non-professional positions. Among the students in the “soft” yeshivot, a large majority (75%) work alongside their yeshiva studies. Almost half of this group (43%) reported that they are employed in casual and part-time positions, while one-third reported that they work on a regular basis. In total, a quarter (24%) of all yeshiva students who responded to the survey work occasionally, while a further tenth (9%) work often or regularly. However, it is important to emphasize that these jobs are usually non-professional ones that do not require any employment experience or formal qualifications. Moreover, they do not (in general) equip these young men with meaningful employment skills and experience that might help them later on in life. The choice of this type of work is connected to the fact that the rabbis and yeshiva heads oppose any extraneous activities liable to distract the students from their religious studies.

✓ Motivation for work and secular studies. A majority (72%) of the students in the “soft” yeshivot and 52% of those in the mainstream yeshivot anticipate that most of their peers will not continue to pursue studies in a religious framework for many years after marrying. Haredi educators and students in the yeshivot interviewed in the study expect that most of the students will be unable to continue their studies at a kollel (a yeshiva for married men) for more than a few years, and that they will join the workforce in some form or another within a few years of marrying. This expectation is consistent with another finding of the study, showing that the majority of yeshiva students (84%) are interested in information about the job market, study and training tracks, and in-demand jobs.

✓ Desired vocations. In light of their constant engagement in religious studies and their avoidance of any other area of activity, most yeshiva students do not have an employment orientation and lack knowledge and understanding of the abilities, capacities, and skills needed in order

to succeed and advance in the employment market. As noted, even students who are already working alongside their yeshiva studies are usually employed in low-quality jobs that do not provide them with the skills required in the employment market. Accordingly, and given the communal and normative prestige attached to jobs within the Haredi community, such as religious functions and educational positions, there is a high level of demand among yeshiva students for these vocations. Over half the students reported that they are interested in working in these fields in the future. There is also a high level of demand among students in the mainstream yeshivot for positions in the fields of management and computing, presumably because they recognize that these jobs offer good salaries and working conditions. However, since these positions usually require extensive employment experience and formal certification from academic institutions, which students in the mainstream yeshivot do not possess, it is unclear how many of them will be able to realize this ambition.

✓ The age of exemption from military service and the job market. The issue of the age of exemption from military service for yeshiva students (in accordance with the arrangement based on the definition that “their Torah study is their vocation”) is closely connected to the job market, and has far-reaching political, legal, social, and economic ramifications. The higher the age of exemption from military service, the lower the likelihood that yeshiva students will be able to integrate into the workforce, due to family obligations (marriage and parenthood) and to the increasing difficulty of acquiring essential general and vocational knowledge at a later age. Thus, lowering the age of exemption from military service may encourage young Haredi men to enter the workforce at an early age and to address their lack of core studies and basic soft skills. The study shows that around two-thirds (67%) of students in the mainstream yeshivot believe that lowering the age of exemption from military service would lead them to enter the job market at an earlier age, and 87% of students in the “soft” yeshivot



share this assessment. Thus, it seems that the current high exemption age is a substantial barrier to early integration into the job market, and one that requires an appropriate systemic and legislative response.

The study findings indicate some early signs of change in the way in which young Haredi men perceive and plan for their future. Although most yeshiva students are satisfied with their studies in these institutions, the study found that around one-fifth of them will in the future need to receive employment support and guidance, complete their basic studies, and acquire other tools that can help them enter high-quality employment consistent with their capabilities. The transition from the yeshiva world to the practical world is not a simple or natural one for yeshiva students. Haredi education advocates a commitment to lifelong religious studies. As a result, even when yeshiva students consider entering or are forced to enter the world of employment, they do so gradually and cautiously, so as not to lose the social status attached to yeshiva study. Their real and direct encounter with the practical world comes mainly after they marry. Before marriage, young Haredi men are used to their family, their yeshiva, and their community meeting most of their needs. As they marry and establish a family, however, they are brusquely faced with the reality of practical and mundane necessities, forcing them to consider how they can make a living. In the past, they might have expected to find a religious position that would offer both material and symbolic rewards. Today, given the rapid growth of the Haredi community, such jobs are in short supply. Accordingly, yeshiva students are forced to find work outside their community, in positions that do not have a religious character.

The study further shows that many young Haredi men understand even as yeshiva students that in order to make a decent living in the future, they must prepare themselves as soon as possible. This process can be facilitated through the implementation of the recommendations presented below.

## Recommendations

The study proposes several courses of action and tools that can help this population cope with the challenges of making a livelihood without losing their affiliation and identification with the Haredi community. The recommendations fall into two broad categories: (1) recommendations to members of Knesset on issues requiring regulation and primary legislation in order to remove employment barriers—for example, so as to prevent young Haredi men from working in unreported jobs, as found in the study; and (2) recommendations to the government that require the formulation of various programs and tools in order to achieve a major advance in the existing means made available to young Haredi men and in order to optimize their preparation for the job market and for various training frameworks. Some of the recommendations are intended to be implemented within the yeshivot themselves, and accordingly will require securing the cooperation of yeshiva heads and Haredi educators.

### **1. Regulation and Legislation: Lowering the Age of Exemption from Military Service and Conscription to the IDF**

As the findings of the study show, lowering the age of exemption from military service could provide a broad legal response to the needs of many young Haredi men of higher yeshiva age, particularly those who do not see their future in the yeshiva world. This measure will allow them to make an earlier exit from the yeshiva in order to begin secular studies, complete their basic education, pursue vocational studies, and enter high-quality and respectable employment without breaking the law. At the same time, without methodological preparation for the job market and without additional incentives, this measure may not lead to the successful integration of young Haredi men from higher yeshivot into the workforce. Accordingly, we recommend the following assistance programs.

### 1.1. Integration of Yeshiva Graduates in Military Service and a Differential Budgeting Model for Yeshivot

Arrangements should be developed to provide economic incentives for yeshivot that provide preparation for military service or whose graduates perform military service (such as Haredi “*hesder*” yeshivot). This should be accompanied by a substantial reduction in funding for yeshivot that do not encourage students to enlist in the IDF. These arrangements will help young Haredi men from “soft” or mainstream yeshivot who are dissatisfied with or struggle with their religious studies to realize in the military capabilities and skills that are not given expression in the yeshiva world. They will also help address the personnel needs of the IDF, which now has a greater need than in the past for combat soldiers in field units. Although this survey did not examine the question of motivation for serving in the IDF, the findings of previous surveys show that many Haredi men who serve in combat functions in the military come from the margins of the yeshiva world. Accordingly, it is realistic to regard some of the students in the “soft” yeshivot as a population with potential for military service.

### 1.2. Government Employment Guidance Program for Students Exempt from Military Service

The lowering of the age of exemption through (primary) legislation will require the formulation of a support package and dedicated program for Haredi men exempted from military service who are interested in acquiring knowledge and tools for entering employment. This package will include information about the job market and employment possibilities; preparation of resumes and training for job interviews; information about study and training tracks; introductory days to specific fields and vocations; preparation for further education (such as technical engineering) and academic studies; workshops on home economics and financial conduct; and so on. In the initial stage, these

tools and fields of knowledge will be provided at the employment guidance centers for Haredi men operated by the Employment Division of the Ministry of Labor, after initial screening of applicants. The service will be provided in accordance with the framework adopted in primary legislation, together with government regulation providing for the transfer of information from the IDF and the Ministry of Education to the Employment Division (while protecting personal privacy) regarding students in higher yeshivot who have reached the age of exemption from military service. The Employment Division will then proactively reach out to these target populations.

### 1.3. Flexibility in Secular Studies and Distribution of Individual Vouchers

In order to encourage the integration of students from higher yeshivot (aged 18–22) into employment, the proposed Amendment 26 to the Military Service Law for the Integration of Yeshiva Students into Military Service (January 2022) stated that that these young men would be able to undergo dedicated vocational training for a total of 15 weekly hours, to be deducted from the hours they are obligated to dedicate to religious studies. This training could include completing 12 years of study or gaining a matriculation certificate; a pre-academic preparatory course; vocational training; employment guidance; and even undergraduate studies. It should be emphasized that according to this proposed amendment, the implementation of this alternative would be conditional on the approval of the student's yeshiva head. We suggest a similar arrangement, but one that will facilitate independent and flexible behavior on the part of higher yeshiva students in order to prepare themselves properly for the job market.

Accordingly, we propose that the number of hours dedicated to this purpose be increased to 20 out of the total required number of hours of religious studies in yeshivot. Students who so wish will receive

personal study vouchers at varying scales of education and levels of tuition fee, according to their selected field or study track. These vouchers will be accepted by colleges and training institutes recognized by the Council for Higher Education (CHE), the Government Institute for Technological Training (GITT), and the Ministry of Labor's Vocational Training Division. These recognized institutions will be required to submit periodic reports on secular studies undertaken by yeshiva students, under the inspection of the CHE and the GITT; reporting by the yeshiva head will relate only to the number of religious study hours completed in the yeshiva. This will effectively remove the requirement for the yeshiva head to give their approval for yeshiva students who so wish to participate in secular studies. This model will provide a legal and official basis for a gradual and intermediate arrangement that is desirable for many yeshiva students; as we have seen, between one-quarter and one-fifth of these students already work unofficially in casual and part-time jobs alongside their yeshiva studies.

#### 1.4. Introduction of Secular Studies into Existing Yeshivot

The study shows that some yeshiva heads and religious supervisors are interested in allowing their students to study toward a matriculation certificate in the evening. Some yeshivot are interesting in teaching basic English and mathematics, while others would like to send their students to complete such studies on an individual basis outside the yeshiva, in order to preserve the yeshiva ethos of exclusive devotion to religious study. Accordingly, consideration should be given to removing regulatory obstacles and formal definitions in order to permit yeshiva heads who so wish to provide secular studies, even if their institutions are not defined as yeshiva high schools or post-high-school yeshivot. This step will be in addition to the arrangements we recommended in the previous sections, and it mainly concerns the "soft" yeshivot.

## **2. Government Programs: Setting Pedagogic Targets for the Yeshivot**

Much of the dissatisfaction and lack of motivation expressed by many yeshiva students is related to the fact that most yeshivot do not set detailed academic targets and do not provide official feedback and evaluation. Moreover, some students are dissatisfied with their studies or do not find them challenging, while others face academic and other difficulties. Accordingly, we propose that the yeshiva heads, together with professional pedagogic experts from within the Haredi community and elsewhere, set clear academic targets and introduce a moderate level of testing, measurement, and evaluation. It is also recommended that the system of academic and educational support for students be expanded. These changes will allow students with average capabilities and skills to find greater interest in their studies and acquire advanced learning skills. This recommendation is intended for implementation within the yeshiva world, and thus requires cooperation on the part of Haredi rabbis and yeshiva heads.

### 2.1. Improving and Reinforcing the Personnel and the Educational and Care Systems in the Yeshivot

In order to encourage increased professionalism in terms of pedagogy and student care in the yeshivot, consideration should be given to additional government funding and budgeting, inspected and audited by the Ministry of Welfare and its subsidiary units, for the placement of Haredi care staff in yeshivot in which over one-third of the students face academic or other personal difficulties. Emotional and therapeutic tracks of this kind could mitigate the negative image attached to the “soft” yeshivot. Training care workers to provide tailored and focused services to yeshiva students, and bringing in additional team members such as educational counselors, grade coordinators, and other educational figures, will help provide a response to the needs of all students.

## 2.2. Subsidies and the Broader Implementation of Online Learning Platforms

Online learning channels adapted to the Haredi public are now available; these are the product of private initiatives and, in most cases, are provided free of charge. These study tracks should be reinforced with the help of government funding and should be made accessible to the majority of yeshiva students interested in acquiring basic knowledge and entering various study tracks. Developing and disseminating additional courses and study tracks and subsidizing teaching assistants and tutors with training and experience in online teaching will help improve and strengthen the online study tracks and realize their potential among the target population: yeshiva students who need to complete basic knowledge that is not studied in the yeshiva framework.

## 2.3. External Studies and Flexible Study Hours

Following on from the previous recommendation, and as a parallel track, most institutions that offer programs for completing basic studies and for vocational training operate these activities in the morning or afternoon hours, when yeshiva students are busy with their religious studies. Establishing or adapting frameworks that will offer studies in the evening, when it is easier for yeshiva students to leave the yeshiva and engage in external studies, could greatly increase the number of those embarking on such studies. In addition, digital study platforms, or physical institutions that are not situated in close proximity to Haredi residential areas, may be less threatening to the students and encourage them to engage in these studies alongside their yeshiva classes.

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