"As You Stand Silent" – Has October 7th Changed the Haredi Community?

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A. Background

A cruel war struck Israel on the morning of Simchat Torah 5784 (October 7, 2023). It began with a surprise attack by Hamas terrorists on the Israeli communities in the western Negev. The terrorists broke through the perimeter fence around the Gaza Strip and, under the cover of thousands of missiles fired at Israel, murdered, tortured, and kidnapped hundreds of civilians and soldiers. As happened fifty years earlier on Yom Kippur morning in 1973, the sounds of prayer—"answer us today when we

appeal to you"—were interrupted by sirens that rent the heavens. Thanks to countless acts of heroism, Israel soon regained the upper hand, but the price was unbearably high.

For a while, it seemed as though the fierce polarization that had split Israel during the preceding year of protests against the constitutional crisis would fade and be scattered with the ashes of the fallen. The Ultraorthodox (Haredim) joined in the volunteering effort and embraced the soldiers, evacuees, and families of the dead and the hostages. The general public in Israel appreciated this involvement. Barriers seemed to be lowering and there was a sense that the shared pain was overcoming the walls of isolationism. The cry of the fallen was heard and all listened intensely. But was there any real change in Haredi society? The articles in this collection seek to answer this question.

B. Confrontation

The relations between Haredi society and the rest of the country (and especially Israeli-Jewish society) were confrontational even before the establishment of Israel. At a conference organized by the Israel Democracy Institute in 2024, a Haredi participant in a discussion on the conscription of Haredim portrayed Israeli history as a titanic clash between two projects:[1] the Zionist project of founding a state carried out by secular Jews, and the project of preserving the Jewish people after the Holocaust, which the Haredim took under their wing. The speaker noted that both projects were far more successful than was anticipated, leading to an inevitable clash. This version of history is outrageous, since it denies the Jewish character of Zionism and refuses to recognize the movement, based on two thousand years of longing for Zion, as one of the fertile branches that have grown from the roots of Judaism. Moreover, this approach recognizes only the Haredi interpretation of

1 Eli Hurvitz Conference on Economy and Society 2024, May 21, 2024.

the "Jewish project" and rejects other manifestations of Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the speaker's historical perspective highlights the two identities that share the stage of Israeli-Jewish history. My father and teacher, Prof. Aviezer Ravitzky, once offered a similar summary of the historical process. He argued that when Israel was established, secular politicians and scholars were convinced that Haredi Judaism was doomed to extinction: in the modern Jewish state, the Haredim would surely free themselves from the burden of Exile, stand upright, and merge into the "New Jew," the productive laborer on the land, liberated from any yoke. At the same time, Haredi politicians and scholars believed that secular Jews would soon vanish: the Holy Land, the Holy Tongue, and the Ingathering of the Exiles would surely lead them back to the bosom of traditional Jewish observance.[2] Today, 76 years after the establishment of Israel, both groups are here to stay, but the confrontation between the "Jewish project" and the "Zionist project" remains fierce, tempestuous, and provocative, shaping two colliding identities.

C. Your Brother's Blood

This confrontation seems to have reached a peak with the outbreak of war on October 7, 2023, which sharpened the lines that divide the sectors of Israeli society. The war exposed a struggle that revolves not just around Israel's security, but also around its character, the contract between the state and its citizens, and the internal contract among its various communities. As I write this, more than a year after the war began, there has been no progress on one of the most painful and divisive issues in Israeli society, particularly in wartime: the exemption of Haredim from military conscription. When "your brother's blood is crying out from the ground," tears and sympathy are not enough. The Haredim must decide

2 Aviezer Ravitzky, *Religious and Secular Jews in Israel: A Kulturkampf?* (English Policy Paper No. 1), Israel Democracy Institute, 1997.

whether they wish to take part in the challenge of defending the People and the Land; whether they will join with the soldiers struggling to cope with the burden; whether their voice is that of Cain, exempting himself with "Am I my brother's keeper?" or that of Isaiah proclaiming "Here I am—send me!" and of Miriam watching over her brother "to learn what would befall him."

The tension surrounding the conscription issue revolves around three axes: the axis of necessity, the axis of equality, and the axis of anger and resentment.

D. "The Flood"—The Axis of Necessity

The first axis—the **axis of necessity**—is pragmatic. After October 7, it became apparent that the IDF's pool of active and reserve personnel is too small to meet its needs. The ranks of combat troops have been eroded by fatalities and injuries; the citizens called up from the reserves have borne an almost intolerable span of duty. Israel is left with no alternative. The depleted reserves must be replenished from the tens of thousands of young Haredi men currently studying in yeshivas, as well as the idle graduates of the Haredi education system. Moreover, the demographic trend is such that within 25 years the ballooning Haredi sector will constitute around one-fourth of Israel's population and almost half of all Jews of school age. Given these forecasts, there is no realistic possibility that the Israeli economy will continue to prosper and support a strong and sophisticated military and extensive education, health, and welfare systems, while simultaneously supporting those who neither work nor serve and are funded by increasingly heavy taxes on other sectors of the population. A brief window of opportunity has opened for modifying the arrangements in order to ensure that Israel survives. In this discourse, there are no good or bad people, no right or wrong, no ideology or values. There is only the stark reality, and those who acknowledge it versus those who bury their heads in the sand and rely on miracles.

The story goes that when the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, the dean of the Har Etzion Hesder Yeshiva in Alon Shvut, was asked to justify his participation in a rabbinical conference in the United States, alongside Reform and Conservative rabbis, he responded with a parable: In the Bible, all the animals gather together twice—in Noah's ark and at the End of Days, when the "wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat." He was not at the End of Days, the rabbi said; but there was a flood outside, and he did not have the privilege of refusing to board the ark with the others. Applied to our times, if on October 7 the heavens unleashed a flood, the insular yeshiva can no longer function as Noah's ark. The ark buffeted by the waves is the State of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces, where all the animals must serve together. No animal has the right to stand aloof when there is a deluge outside. During the High Court hearing on the conscription of yeshiva students, in June 2024, Justice Solberg, too, employed the metaphor of the flood. The representative of the Association of Yeshiva Students implored the justices not to adopt an "after the deluge" approach in their ruling, but to consider "the social implications of legal decisions on sensitive issues outside the courtroom" and the fear of a religious war. Justice Solberg could not hold back. Referring to the heavy burden on reserve soldiers and their families, he exclaimed, "Not 'after the flood'—the flood is now! The flood is now!"

E. "The Lemon Tree"—The Axis of Equality

The second axis, the **axis of equality**, is ideological and social. The tension here does not focus on the true security, economic, and demographic situations, but on what is fair and equal versus what infringes equality. Many Israelis are no longer willing to accept the disparities in obligations and rights between the various "tribes" that compose their society. Conversely, the Haredi claim is not that they are exempt from serving, but rather that the burden of Torah study is equal to or even heavier than the burden of military duty. The issue

is no longer how to meet the IDF's personnel needs; it also involves morality, ethics, and mutual responsibility, as well as questions related to multiculturalism and social and civic cohesion in a shared society. On the ideological axis, practical solutions alone will not be enough. There is also a need for profound change in the social contract and a renewed discussion of the concepts of minority and majority, the right to autonomy, and the right to freedom of religion, versus civic duties and the principle of equality. Maj. Gen. Moti Almoz, former head of the IDF Manpower Directorate, compared the issue of Haredi conscription to his grandfather's lemon tree in the farming community of Migdal on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Despite years of watering and care, the tree never yielded any fruit. In his fury the grandfather stopped watering the tree. When his grandson tried to water it on the sly, the old man stopped him and said, "I watered it for years, but the tree remained stubborn. I'm not going to water it anymore. Let it produce lemons first—then I'll give it water."

F. "The Fault Lines"—The Axis of Anger and Resentment

The third axis is the **axis of anger and resentment**. The driving force behind this axis is neither practicality nor ideology, but pure emotion. Non-Haredi society struggles to understand how the events of October 7 did not lead to a greater change in Haredi society—how it quickly returned to its old routine and why the insularity concept did not collapse. The anger and resentment seem to be particularly acute among the traditional and Religious Zionist sectors, in reaction to the Haredim's use of Torah study as justification for their exemption from a defensive war. For these circles, enlistment in what Jewish law defines as a "war of obligation" intended to "save Israel from the hand of the oppressor" is a binding religious imperative. The anger and resentment are intensified by the disdain that some Haredi politicians show for the

lifestyle and Torah study of the Religious Zionist sector and their denial that it is possible to master both "the book and the sword." Recently, several prominent Religious Zionist figures have sharply criticized their community's historical and political alliance with the Haredim, based on the values they share. In November 2024, the religious journalist Kalman Liebskind, who lost a nephew in the war, published an article in *Maariv* entitled "A Bill of Divorce from the Haredi Sects": "If in the past we were divided between right and left, or between religious and secular, today other fault lines divide Israeli society. There is a sector that gives versus a sector that takes; a sector that sleeps soundly versus a sector that lies awake at night."[3] In October 2024, Rabbi Tamir Granot, who lost his son in the war, addressed Haredi yeshiva students in a widely circulated video: "I am suspicious of your Torah. [...] Torah without action, without works of loving-kindness, without saving lives, without sharing in the public's distress, is not Torah. [...] There can be no reward for such Torah." Granot added: "This is a real alert. [...] You can still save the tens of thousands of Israelis who are sighing with pain. You can still save the honor of the Torah."[4] Haredim feel betrayed by the response of the Religious Zionist sector, which has turned its back on the religious-Haredi alliance; Religious Zionists feel betrayed by the Haredi public's failure to join them in their distress.

The three axes of the public struggle for equality in military service—the discourse of needs, the discourse of values, and the discourse of emotions—leave Israeli society divided and concerned for its future, both literally and in terms of its ability to strike the delicate balance between shared and separate spaces, maintaining distinct identities while allowing for concession and compromise. The articles in this collection offer a deep examination of developments in Haredi society since the

3 Kalman Liebskind, "Haredi Society in Israel will be Remembered for all Time for Shirking its Responsibility for our Shared Fate Here," *Maariv*, November 1, 2024.

4 Rabbi Dr. Tamir Granot, Appeal to Haredi Yeshiva Students, *YouTube*, October 29, 2024.

morning of Simchat Torah 2023. Such an examination is essential for assessing the prospect of "brothers dwelling together" in the future.

G. Summary of the Articles

Has Haredi society changed due to the war, and if so—in what ways? We attempt to answer this question from seven angles: field research; public opinion polls; a review of Haredi rabbinical thought; observation of the leaders of modern Haredi society; a study of coverage in the Haredi media; the works of Haredi women poets; and the Haredi response in previous wars. These diverse perspectives paint a rich and complex picture of the behavior and worldviews of Haredi society and the ways these have been expressed during the war.

Asaf Malchi and Roei Lachmanovich examine the behavior of Haredi society in the war through interviews with Haredi men and women from various communities, many of whom volunteered in civilian programs during the war. The authors discuss the muted presence of the war experience among the Haredim, their impressive level of civilian volunteering in the early months of the war, and the limited phenomenon of the conscription of older Haredi men for a shortened term of service. They profile the tensions between Haredi and non-Haredi society, but also address the gaps that have emerged within Haredi society itself between the majority, whose stand on military conscription has not changed significantly, and the modern fringe, who are critical of the veteran leadership and feel discomfort and guilt about not sharing the burden. The authors conclude that no changes will occur in the Haredi mainstream as long as Torah study is the litmus test of Haredi male identity.

This conclusion is supported by the public opinion survey conducted by **Shlomit Ravitsky Tur-Paz** and the Viterbi Family Center for Public Opinion and Policy Research at the Israel Democracy Institute among the Haredi public and the general Jewish public on the issues of conscription,

volunteering, and leadership. The responses indicate the level of civilian volunteerism in each group, conscription rates, and attitudes regarding Haredi conscription during the first year of the war. While the Haredim generally remained steadfast in their opposition to conscription, the non-Haredi public, and particularly religious and right-wing secular Jews, underwent a significant change; a year after the start of the war, only a minority were willing to accept the status quo. Another finding is that the overwhelming majority of Haredim believe that Torah study contributes at least as much to the war effort as military service, if not more.

Two articles examine the positions of the Haredi rabbinical leadership, moving from the general to the specific. **Eliyahu Berkovits's** article examines the range of Haredi rabbinical positions on the issue of Haredi conscription in wartime. The Haredi mainstream, he writes, regards Torah study as the most important activity for defense of the Jewish people; some of its spokespersons hold that "one person who studies Torah is worth a thousand who do not." He contrasts this group with two minority positions: the isolationists, who reject any involvement with the state and its institutions, and the integrationists, who call for contributing, sharing the burden, and "shouldering the national load." Berkovits shows that despite these differences, all Haredi rabbis agree that there must be a full exemption for Torah students who are diligent in their studies and that all fear the secularizing effect of military service. There is, however, disagreement between the different streams regarding a shortened term of conscript service for older working Haredi men and the possibility of conscription in the future, after the Haredim and IDF have made certain changes and preparations.

Tehila Gado's article describes processes within the modern Haredi rabbinical leadership, with the focus on Rabbi Dovid Leibel. Gado sees the war as a crucial stage in the coalescence of this alternative leadership and its ability to respond to the changing reality. Even before the war, Rabbi Leibel led initiatives to encourage Haredi men to enter the labor market, headed a network of kollelim where working men could

continue their religious studies, and promoted the State Haredi school system. After the outbreak of the war, he took a clear stance regarding Haredi society's obligation to participate in the national war effort, established an operations center for volunteering, and began efforts to establish a Haredi brigade in the IDF. Rabbi Leibel even challenged the long-standing Haredi axiom that the Torah protects the Jews from their enemies and called for a combination of study and military service by all who live together in the "shared home." Gado sees this new model of Haredi rabbinical leadership as a return to the "Torah with Derekh Eretz" doctrine of stringent observance combined with engagement with the world, promulgated by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in Germany in the nineteenth century.

Rivka Neriya Ben-Shachar, too, examines the tension between Haredi and Israeli identity during the war. She surveyed the reflection of this tension in the Haredi media and found a significant difference between the traditional Haredi press and Haredi news websites. The newspapers tended toward seclusion and conservatism, while the websites evinced a stronger tendency to integration with Israeli society. In the newspapers, volunteering was featured mainly in the women's supplements, whereas the websites published calls for volunteering by both men and women. In addition, while the websites displayed Israeli symbols and covered the war in breadth, the newspapers focused on internal Haredi issues and highlighted their opposition to conscription of Haredim, despite their sympathy for the national pain.

Tzahi Cohen explores the Haredi response to the war from a unique perspective—the poetry in which Haredi women have chosen to express their pain. Despite the women's sociocultural distance from secular society, their poems reveal a profound identification with the pain of the war. The maternal voice they adopt facilitates identification with the pain of the mothers of the fallen, wounded, and hostages, as well as serving soldiers. The writers incorporate traditional Jewish texts, mainly the Bible and the liturgy, but give them personal and sometimes even subversive interpretations. The poems are also notable for their silence

regarding key issues such as the conscription of Haredim and Torah study.

In the last article in this collection, **Yair Halevi** looks back at the Haredi response during previous wars. He identifies a recurring pattern in which wars spark localized and temporary solidarity and identification among the Haredim but do not lead to fundamental and long-term changes in conscription patterns. The only exception was the War of Independence, when most Haredi men were not full-time yeshiva students and a majority enlisted to defend the country. Halevi concludes that one-time traumatic events, however severe, cannot generate deep currents of change. Accordingly, we should expect only the continued slow integration of Haredi men from the modern circles into Israeli society, but no change in the mainstream.

H. Living with the Crisis—Conclusion

The articles in the collection paint a broad picture: those who placed their hopes in a Haredi awakening following the war and assumed that the traumatic events of October 7 would immediately create a new reality in which Haredi men recognize the error of their insularity and report en masse to the recruitment center are bound to be disappointed. Life goes on as usual. On the other hand, those who believed that the pain of those who do serve and the murder of men and women on October 7 would not concern the Haredim, secluded in their own world, were also surprised by the intensity of their sympathy and the wave of volunteering.

To date there is no sign of a social revolution or tectonic change in Haredi society as a result of the war; only slight ripples can be detected on the surface of its more modern fringe. However, the tragedies of the war have opened paths that link the different groups in Israeli society. Israel is too small for these separate groups to split into the tribes of Judah and Israel. Israelis have no choice but to continue to struggle for a new social contract and for a fair and respectful civic partnership. They must learn

to live with the crisis, in the hope that it will lead to an opportunity for healing and repair.

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