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The Ultra-Orthodox: Fearing for Their Future

Asaf Malchi, Bezalel Cohen, Dan Kaufmann

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The Hay Elyachar House
20 Radak St., 92186 Jerusalem

<http://www.jiis.org.il>
E-mail: machon@jiis.org.il

Abstract

Many changes have taken place in the Ultra-Orthodox population in recent years as a result of the development of new options for academic and professional training for this sector. A real need for the assessment of these programs and frameworks has developed, which will entail an evaluation of the suitability of these frameworks to the needs of the population for which it is intended and the level of willingness of young Ultra-Orthodox to take advantage of them. The goal of this research is to examine the attitudes of the Ultra-Orthodox towards the pursuit of academic education and to identify the primary obstacles to their integration into different paths of academic study.

In the framework of this project, 550 questionnaires were distributed to Ultra-Orthodox men and women from all the different Ultra-Orthodox communities, with the aim of investigating the level of the participants' willingness to acquire academic and professional training. In addition, a wide range of obstructions and difficulties that stand in the way of young Ultra-Orthodox who are interested in higher education (now offered to them through different frameworks) were characterized and tested. It should be emphasized that the research focused on the population of **Ultra-Orthodox men** characterized as facing special difficulties, among whom there appears to be a real structural failure regarding higher studies. Alongside the quantitative study, a series of personal interviews were conducted with students and Ultra-Orthodox academics and with the directors of institutions and various training centers.

This research was carried out in 2006, in the course of which the field of employment and professional training among the Ultra-Orthodox of Jerusalem was mapped out and studied. The mapping was conducted in the framework of the project Jerusalem – Regional Innovation Strategy (J-RIS) whose goal is to locate new forces for growth in Jerusalem, which included the human and economic potential in the Ultra-Orthodox sector in the city and its environs.

Findings

The findings of the research revealed that more than half of the men studied (approximately 60%) were interested in acquiring an academic education, and more than a quarter (28%) would be ready to study in academic frameworks not tailored specifically to the Ultra-Orthodox.

Despite the willingness among the population to pursue an academic education, the research showed that the Ultra-Orthodox students have special characteristics that present obstacles that make it difficult for them to acquire an academic education. First, the Ultra-Orthodox student is usually relatively older than the secular student, is generally married, and bears the burden of supporting a family; therefore his ability to afford studies and support himself while he studies is very low. Second, most of the Ultra-Orthodox students suffer from gaps in their knowledge (English, mathematics, and academic study) and education that necessitate directed work designed to fill in what they lack. Usually the social surroundings are not encouraging of the pursuit of higher learning, and there is still fear of the responses to their taking such a step.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, assistance should be offered in the following ways to young Ultra-Orthodox interested in an academic education:

- ❖ Overcoming gaps in knowledge – The running of institutions directed at the Ultra-Orthodox population, aimed at filling in gaps in knowledge and tailored to developing skills needed in academic study. These institutions should enable young Ultra-Orthodox students to fulfill the entry requirements of any academic institution. In order to improve the students' chances of success, a network of assistance and tutoring should be created. The running of these preparatory institutions should be fully coordinated with academic institutions and run under the auspices of leading Israeli ones.
- ❖ Support and economic aid – Because of the many economic difficulties that Ultra-Orthodox students must confront, a support system of economic aid based on private donations and public financing is required to enable Ultra-Orthodox students to pursue higher education. Public support may be made conditional on an agreed-upon form of civilian service.
- ❖ Information and counseling -- A wide network of information and counseling should be created to guide the students in the different paths of study and help them learn about their professional repercussions -- in order to minimize the uncertainty and the fears of those interesting in further study. In addition, a forum of Ultra-Orthodox students should be organized as another source of information and personal support.
- ❖ Religious and social support – the founding of special centers of religious study for students and employed people of the Ultra-Orthodox sector may make a significant contribution in the preservation of the Ultra-Orthodox lifestyle and help mitigate the concerns associated with professional and academic study or integration into the work force. This model is already working successfully in different Ultra-Orthodox communities in the U.S. and in Europe, and provides religious and social support for young Ultra-Orthodox people in maintaining their way of life.

There are many partners in this project who helped bring it along and realize it. Our special thanks to the Jerusalem Development Authority and Ezri Levi whose contribution was expressed both in the formulation of the project and in its financing. The Joint Distribution Committee – Israel was a partner in funding the project and we especially thank the staff of the program "Momentum to Work" (TABAT, in Hebrew) – Reuven Gorbet, Bezalel Cohen, Herschel Klein, and Eti Miller. We would like to thank the directors of the institutes for training for the Ultra-Orthodox, who helped us work with and collect the data in this research: the Ultra-Orthodox College in Jerusalem headed by Ms. Adina Bar-Shalom, the School for Technology (Machon Lev), the Ultra-Orthodox campus Kiryat Ono, the Ultra-Orthodox Center for Professional Training and the "Lomda" Institute. We extend a special thanks to the Ultra-Orthodox students whom we interviewed in the framework of this study.

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Recommendations for Further Research

1. Academic Study and Military Service

Although the connection between academic study and military service was not studied in depth in this research, we expect that official civilian service may solve the problem of military service among young Ultra-Orthodox people who are interested in academic studies. A limited and random study of 20 Ultra-Orthodox students revealed that many of them declined to pursue full academic studies in the morning hours because they feared that they would lose their status of exemption on religious grounds, meaning the loss of their stipends stemming from religious study and their being drafted in to the army. We believe that an arrangement that would allow for civilian service during the course of their academic studies, in the stead of military service, would encourage many young Ultra-Orthodox to pursue full academic studies and integration into positions of employment afterwards.

It might also be considered that financial assistance to Ultra-Orthodox students could be offered in a special framework of religious studies that would allow Ultra-Orthodox students to pursue religious and academic studies in parallel. It is important to remember that the success of such a program would aid, in the end, the Israeli economy.

2. Ultra-Orthodox Drop-Outs from Academic Studies

Over the course of this research it became clear that there is a significant drop-out rate of Ultra-Orthodox students from academic studies, especially among men. There are many reasons and factors contributing to this, beginning with economic and family considerations, including lack of knowledge and exaggerated expectations, and the problem of having to make up for so much not learned -- in a short space of time. The intensity of the studies, classes in the evening, economic and other pressures emanating from a lack of support in the student's surroundings, frequently result in the students' dropping out of their studies. The rate at which the Ultra-Orthodox students leave the academic path may produce a negative impression that will not be conducive to other such students interested in pursuing academic studies. This subject is worthy of further study that will

investigate the reasons for the dropping-out, will characterize the profile of those that do, and will propose ways for reducing the phenomenon.

3. Academic Studies for Ultra-Orthodox Women

Over the course of this research, data on 120 women Ultra-Orthodox students was collected and examined. Checking and analyzing the findings showed significant differences between the characteristics of the men and women students and the attitudes of the women towards higher education. In addition, it became clear that there were differences between the obstacles and the difficulties that the men and women encountered. The basic assumption in this matter asserts that the abilities of the Ultra-Orthodox women to pursue academic studies and to become integrated in the work force are greater than those of the Ultra-Orthodox men, both because of the general education that the women acquire in the framework of their studies and because of the social and rabbinical acceptance of their working and of the necessity of their contribution in supporting the household. The methodological and practical need to focus on the development of policy for integrating Ultra-Orthodox men in professional training does not diminish the need for research directed at investigating the various characteristics of academic study for Ultra-Orthodox women.

4. Engineering and Technological Studies for the Ultra-Orthodox Population

Among the tracks for advanced training that are possible and desirable for Ultra-Orthodox men and women, the engineering and technological tracks should be noted. Such training, under the supervision of the government's Institute for Technological Training (of the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Labor), entails full-time study for two years, and in some cases specialized study for an additional year, at the end of which the student is granted a diploma as a certified engineer or recognized technician. We believe that this sort of study could serve to a great extent as a "middle" track between professional study and higher learning. We think this track could be an attractive option, especially given the relatively short training period, for a variety of employment possibilities for engineering students and for those considering, in parallel, continuing academic study. The integration

of Ultra-Orthodox men and women in engineering and technological training programs demands a careful and thorough evaluation of the bodies that deal with the training and supervision of this track (through the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Labor). In this way it will be possible to assess the possible adaptation of these tracks for the Ultra-Orthodox public of all sorts, and the possibilities for integrating Ultra-Orthodox graduates of this track in the branches of engineering and technology in the Israeli economy.