



Israel Religious Action Center



Israel Movement for Reform
and Progressive Judaism

Do the Math

an in-depth study of the impact of the lack of core
curriculum studies in Ultra-Orthodox schools in Israel

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Cover photo: Government Press Office
Children during a lesson in the *Talmud Tora* school in the *Mea Shearim* quarter of Jerusalem

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Core Studies: Background

Core studies are a national and personal interest. Israeli society is comprised of a mosaic of nationalities, religions, ethnic communities, and social classes. The constituent groups are distinguished not only in terms of their identity, but also in terms of social status, worldviews, and lifestyles. In these circumstances, there is an obvious and urgent need to create shared civic space in Israel. Such space is a condition for shaping an Israeli identity that will allow all the groups to be included in the definition of the collective community. This in turn will permit the formulation of a shared common denominator for all the nation's citizens as a foundation for basic solidarity in a multicultural and polarized society. The education system, which offers a core set of common content for all Israeli children, is the most important arena for shaping this shared civic space in Israel. Core studies in all schools will ensure that society as a whole shares a cultural infrastructure – fundamental cultural assets essential for maintaining a common language.

In addition to this common cultural infrastructure, core studies also play a crucial role in the individual's life, since they provide essential knowledge for integration in society and the world of employment, creating an ability to make a livelihood. The education system bears the responsibility of providing the next generation with the knowledge and tools needed to ensure successful integration in social and economic life in the future. The core curriculum seeks to ensure an egalitarian education that provides all citizens with an equal opportunity to enter tomorrow's society and world of work.

Educational institutions in Israel can be divided into three types: official educational institutions, recognized but unofficial institutions, and exempt institutions. Each type has its own distinct characteristics in terms of the extent of state involvement in the content of studies, the character of the institution, and the level of public funding to which it is entitled:

1. **Official educational institutions** include three types: National (including Arab education), National-Religious, and Integrative Education. These institutions are supervised closely by the Ministry of Education, belong to the state, and are fully funded by the state. The funding of official educational institutions is determined in accordance with the Compulsory Education Law.
2. **Recognized but unofficial institutions:** Alongside the official educational institutions, there are also educational institutions that are private owned and have a more limited affinity to the state. The state recognizes these institutions, but they do not belong to it. They are subject to the partial inspection of the Ministry of Education and receive only partial funding. The state's involvement in these institutions is more limited, and the education they provide is not state education. This category includes some Haredi institutions, such as the Ma'ayan Torah Education network and the Independent Education Center.
3. **Exempt institutions:** In addition to the official and recognized but unofficial institutions, there are also educational institutions that have received exemption from the Minister of Education from the provisions of the Core Studies Law. These institutions receive a lower level of funding than the recognized but unofficial institutions. They include Talmud Torah institutions attended by students from 1st through 8th grades. These institutions are officially managed with only minimal inspection by the Ministry of Education, and in practice they function without any inspection. In 2013, there were 302 exempt institutions in the education system, with a total of 34,746 students.¹

Most of the educational institutions (with the exception of "special cultural educational institutions") are required to teach the core studies. Official

¹ According to a document dated 1 July 2013 prepared by the Knesset Research and Information Center.

educational institutions, as well as those of the Independent and Ma'ayan networks, are required to teach 100 percent of the core studies.

Recognized but unofficial institutions are required to teach 75 percent of the core studies, and receive funding at a level of 65-75 percent of that provided for State institutions.

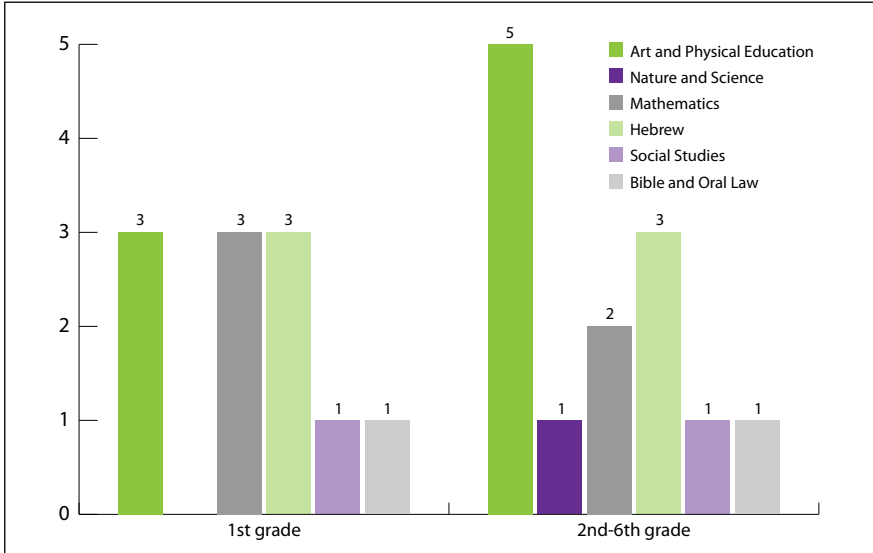
Exempt institutions are required to teach 55 percent of the core studies and are funded at a level of 55 percent of that for State institutions.

In 2008, the Knesset passed the Special Cultural Educational Institutions Law, providing a complete exemption from core studies for institutions recognized in the law, which are to receive budgeting at a level of 60 percent of that for State educational institutions. The Yeshiva Ktana institutions – schools for boys aged 14-18 – were recognized as “special educational institutions,” and accordingly exempted completely from core studies. Haredi boys below the age of 14 are theoretically required to study the core studies, though this does not happen in practice.

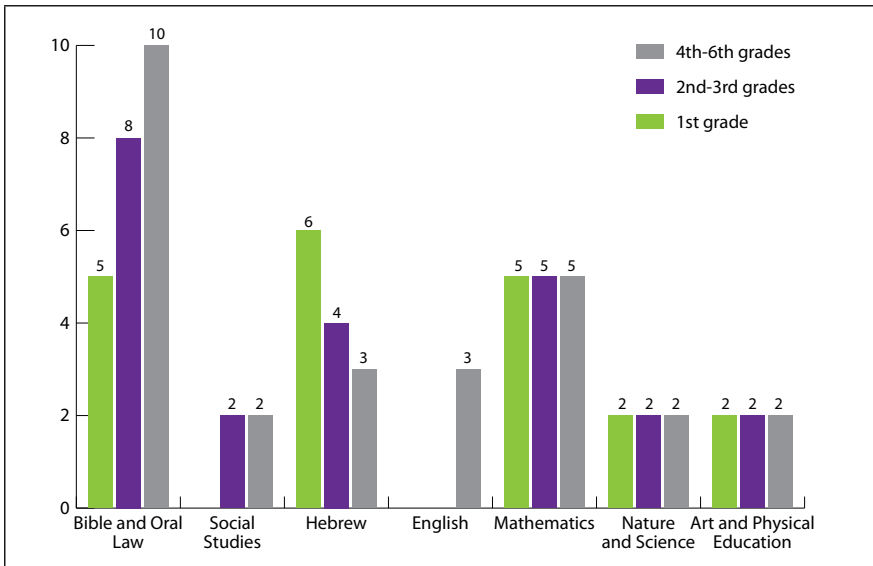
According to the circular of the Director-General of the Ministry of Education detailing the core curriculum for the Haredi sector in elementary schools (1st through 8th grade), the exempt institutions (Talmud Torah institutions) are required to devote approximately five hours a week to secular studies such as mathematics, science, nature, art, and physical education. English is not included among the core studies for these institutions.

(By way of comparison, official elementary institutions are required to teach every week five hours of mathematics, three to six hours of language studies, two hours of nature and science, two hours of physical education, and three hours of English from the 4th grade on).

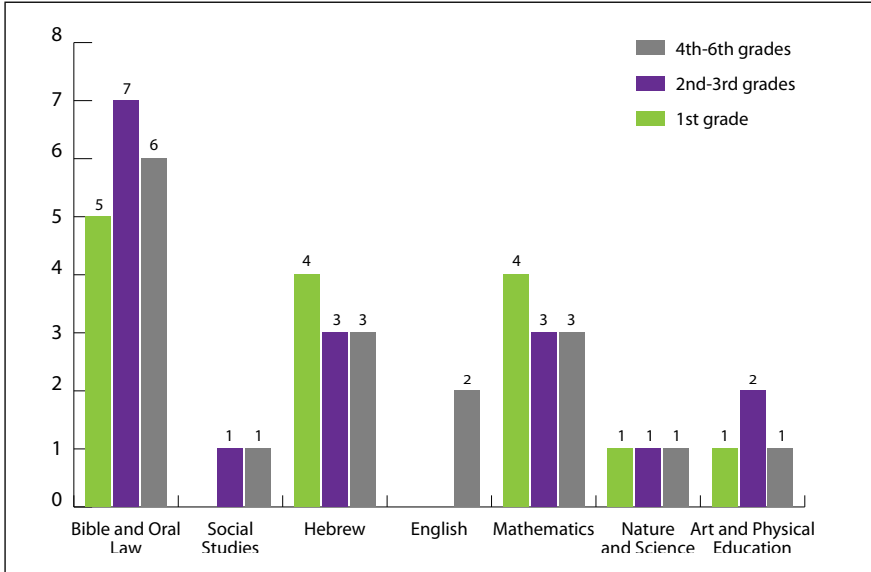
Weekly Study Hours



Weekly Study Hours



Weekly Study Hours



Secular studies are usually taught in Talmud Torah institutions for one to two hours in the afternoon or toward the end of the school day, and are considered a form of intermission from intensive religious studies. From the 6th or 7th grade, these subjects disappear completely from the students' timetable and are replaced by additional hours of religious studies.

The students in the exempt institutions are not required to participate in the standardized "Meitzav" (School Effective and Growth Indices) tests. Accordingly, there is no way to know what level they reach in the core subjects. The Independent institutions also do not participate in the Meitzav tests. This situation is compounded by the extremely small number of inspectors employed to inspect Haredi educational institutions.

The total state budget for recognized but unofficial and exempt educational institutions is approximately one billion shekels a year. Funds are transferred to these institutions without the Ministry of Education examining whether they meet the legal requirements that are ostensibly a condition for the funding.

It should be noted that the situation regarding girls in the Haredi sector is different, and they enjoy a substantial advantage over the boys. In the recognized but unofficial institutions, girls are taught according to structured curricula for the core subjects, developed by each institution or by the educational networks. The teachers who teach core studies, like all the teachers in the recognized but unofficial schools, hold teaching certificates and participate in occasional in-service training devoted specifically to these subjects. In addition, figures from the Ma'ayan Torah Education network show that the core curriculum is implemented in full in all the educational institutions for girls. A study examining the implementation of core studies in the recognized but unofficial institutions of the Independent Education Center and the Ma'ayan Torah Education network found that the level of core studies for girls is actually higher than that required by the Ministry of Education. In the exempt institutions, which are attended by a small proportion of girls, it is reasonable to assume that most of the teachers hold a teaching certificate, but the scope of training they receive in the core subjects is unclear, and the core curricula in each subject are less clearly defined.

Over the past decade, the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC) has been engaged in a legal and public campaign on the subject of core studies. In 2007 IRAC submitted a petition concerning the conditioning of funding for Haredi educational institutions on core studies, and concerning the obligation of the Ministry of Education to maintain an efficient inspection system prior to funding any educational institutions. The Supreme Court was about to accept the petition, but a few days before it gave its ruling, the Knesset passed the Special Cultural Educational Institutions Law. Accordingly, the Court did not include operative orders in its ruling.

Approximately three years later, in 2010, IRAC submitted a further petition after the Ministry of Education failed to keep its promise to the Court to expand the inspection system for Haredi educational institutions. In its

response to the petition, the Ministry of Education acknowledged its failings concerning the inspection of core studies and admitted that the existing network of inspectors was inadequate. The Ministry declared that it had decided to increase substantially the number of staff positions for inspectors for the recognized but unofficial and exempt institutions (elementary and post-elementary) in order to ensure effective inspection. The Ministry of Education promised that by 2013 (i.e. within three years) several dozen new positions would be added for inspectors. In their ruling, the justices noted that “the number of inspectors as of the date of submission of the petition was indeed far from satisfactory.”

The petition also demanded that the Ministry of Education hold Meitzav tests in the Haredi institutions as an additional tool for evaluating these schools’ compliance with the content-related obligations imposed by law. The Court issued an order requiring the state to explain why it should not apply the requirement to hold Meitzav tests to these institutions, as it does regarding the recognized but unofficial institutions. However, the education minister at the time decided to abolish the Meitzav tests, and accordingly the petition was not accepted.

In light of the Ministry of Education’s undertakings, IRAC submitted repeated requests over a period of more than 18 months in an attempt to monitor their implementation. Finally, after the Court issued a warning, the Ministry of Education provided the requested statistics, revealing the following sad state of affairs:

Lack of effective inspection: Toward the end of 2015, the number of inspectors in Haredi elementary education was just 27. Their job description reveals that the Ministry of Education lacks tools for meaningful inspection and enforcement of the core curriculum. In any case, these means are insufficient to inspect the effective and profound implementation of the core curriculum in the Haredi educational institutions. There are no forms for orderly and detailed reporting by the inspectors on the activities in these

institutions, and the inspection is based on an affidavit submitted by the principals. The inspectors have no tools for examining the implementation of the core curriculum.

Failure to offset budgets due to the non-implementation of the core curriculum: The Ministry of Education has not taken any action to offset the budgets of the institutions it inspects. The reason is not that all these institutions meet their obligation to teach the core studies, but that the Ministry lacks any effective way of determining the proportion of core studies taught in each institution. Accordingly, it cannot determine the proportion of the budget that should be offset and has not developed any mechanism for efficient sanctions.

Lack of teachers trained to teach the core subjects: In the 2014-2015 school year, not a single teacher was trained to teach English, while the number of male teachers trained in the seminaries (non-academic frameworks) to teach core studies was just nine. In 2016, the proportion of teachers with academic training in Haredi elementary schools was just 10 percent – compared to 90 percent in State and State-Religious schools. In order to reduced this gap, at least 40,000 teachers must be trained immediately. However, training is a protracted process that naturally cannot be implemented in a very short period of time. In the 2015-2016 academic year, just 14 training programs were provided for Haredi teachers (women and men). Given the growing weight of Haredi students as a proportion of all students in elementary education, it will take around fifty years to eliminate the above-mentioned gap.

Failure to hold Meitzav tests: The Ministry of Education reintroduced Meitzav tests in official educational institutions, but does not hold them in any format in the Haredi educational institutions.

This report aims to present the thoughts, experiences, and feelings of members of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society involved in education and in the task of integrating Haredim in the Israeli academic sector and the employment market. The participants told us about the challenges and difficulties they face and presented their expectations regarding the state and Israeli society in general, and Haredi society in particular. All the interviewees come from the Haredi world itself, in all its diversity and shades. Some of them are still part of this world, others have left entirely, and others still remain within Haredi society but have left the particular communities in which they were born and raised.

Most of the interviewees asked to be referred to by pseudonyms in this report, due to their concern that cooperating with the report – could damage their social standing and their employment.

1. No Core Studies: Significance and Ramifications

The standard format of studies in Haredi institutions includes three main stages. From an early age (approximately five years), boys are sent to the “Cheder,” which they attend from 8:00 AM through 4:00 PM. They study religious subjects such as the Torah (Pentateuch) and the Mishna, and around the age of six study of the Gemara (Talmud) is added. In some of these institutions, depending on the particular community of Hasidic dynasty to which the family belongs, the boys will remain in the Cheder for an hour or two at the end of the day and study non-religious subjects, such as basic mathematics, Hebrew, geography, and so forth. Other institutions do not even provide this minimum general instruction. Shortly after their Bar Mitzvah, as they approach the age of 14, the boys continue to the “Yeshiva Ktana” (small or junior yeshiva), where they devote their time entirely to religious studies, and in particular study of the Gemara. During their years in the Yeshiva Ktana, the boys do not study any non-religious subjects. At the age of 17, the students move on to the Yeshiva Gedola (large or senior yeshiva), which once again focuses exclusively on intensive

religious studies. From there, the young men will marry at a young age and continue their studies in the framework of the Kollel. Accordingly, the last time that the Haredi student encounters any non-religious studies is at the age of 14, assuming that they attended an institution that provides limited instruction in the core subjects.

We set out to explore what awaits the average Haredi student when they become an adult – a father of students who bears responsibility for their families' livelihood despite the fact that they have not acquired any grounding in mathematics, English, or other subjects permitting entry into the academic world and the acquisition of a profession. Moshe (not his real name) grew up in Meah Shearim and was educated in the mainstream institutions of conservative Haredi society. Today he is involved in educating and integrating Haredim in the academic world and in employment. He describes a reality that will seem alien to graduates of the Israeli state education system:

This reality isn't something that you have to hunt for in jungles or caves – it's present in everyone's lives. Some groups of people sit and study Torah... I also admire people who study, and I'm even willing to pay for them, because my inner faith truly accepts that there is nothing like Torah study, which is important and critical to the existence of the world. The problem is that this is a very small, elite, and special group – a philosophical cadre. But all the others should combine the world of Halacha (Jewish religious law) with the big world. They should be committed citizens of the State of Israel as well as strictly observing religion and studying Torah, and they should be normative people... Basically, the division is clear and stark: people who don't have an education or a degree have low capabilities, and this influences their economic potential, their ability to maintain the home, and so on... You could say that what will happen to him (the student who did not learn core studies – T.R.) is that he will get

married, have children, participate in a little religious study in the Kollel, and his self-image will be very much impaired, as someone who is unaware of his capabilities, leaving him with a strong sense of frustration and a feeling that he has failed to make the most of himself and express himself. It will be very hard for him to provide for his family. His children will be very poor and he will buy them shoes once every two years and feel sad about it – just sad. He can't meet his children's basic needs.

Some graduates of the Haredi education system will make a living within the community in which they live. Those who wish to go out into the academic world can expect to encounter numerous difficulties. Yaacov (not his real name) lives in the Haredi city of Elad and also works in education and in integrating Haredim in the employment market:

There are a few options here. He might work inside the community, as a meat slaughterer, mohel (ritual circumciser), a teacher in fields that don't require any specialization, a shop attendant, or as a merchant, if he has a good sense for commerce. Or he might live a life of poverty, staying in the Kollel for his whole life, whether because he wants to do this or because he has no alternative. At some stage he might start a pre-academic course, but the dropout rate there is enormous... By a certain age, when he's already married with children, even if he is talented and capable, the objective difficulties will prevent him making progress... Some people say about core studies, "He [the boy] will manage later when he grows up – if he wants to, he can go off and do courses then." But it doesn't work like that. The percentages show that it doesn't work. And then what? Again – either he'll go back to miserable jobs or work inside the community, or he'll stay in the Kollel.

The dropout rate in pre-academic courses for Haredim is over 50 percent. At the Technion, for example, 65 percent of Haredi students drop out of

the preparatory course, compared to 30 percent of students in the course intended for Jews and Arabs from the national system who did not complete their matriculation examinations. Even those who complete the preparatory course can expect to encounter numerous difficulties before they acquire the much-desired bachelor's degree. Dropout rates during undergraduate studies are also around 50 percent.²

One of these dropouts is Neta Katz. He was born in Tel Aviv but grew up in Bnei Brak, attending the academic institutions of the Hasidic dynasty to which his family belongs. He attended a Kollel until he was 22, and then participated in a special course in advertising for Haredim, working in this field for five years. He later directed the Shachar program, which integrates Haredim in the IDF, and he was responsible for forming Haredi companies in the Givati and Paratrooper brigades. Today he runs a family business. Neta describes the numerous difficulties that eventually led him to abandon his dream of getting a degree after he had already completed the pre-academic course:

I don't remember exactly when I began to realize that it wasn't normal that I didn't know anything apart from a little math... Even as I child, I started to learn English on my own and could read a few words at a very basic level, and slowly I could understand a bit... I had a little bit more than the minimum. A few years ago, we opened a family business that has grown since... We traveled around the world, to China and Turkey, and there it really struck us hard that we don't know English. Even today my English is superficial at best, but I get by... I can read words and even reply with a little help. But as far as core studies are concerned, then firstly, on the most basic level, the fact that I don't have a matriculation certificate means that I won't be able to being academic studies, because there's a real barrier. I'm

² "The Myth that Haredim Who Learn How to Study in Yeshiva Has no Basis in Reality," Merav Arlozorov, TheMarker, 27 July 2016 (in Hebrew).

truly happy and grateful to God that I have very strong skills, but even with these skills, when you need to raise three children, make a living, and pay a mortgage... then it's impossible to devote at least two years to core studies or a preparatory program before even beginning the degree...

I started to study for a degree. I had a three-month preparatory course as the first stage before even beginning. Somehow I managed to make it through, and I got an excellent grade – I was successful in my studies in that respect. But it was impossible: three days a week, loads of hours, alongside work and children – it wasn't possible. I quit. Now I'm planning to go back to academic studies again, but the whole time there's this need to complete core studies. Even my own internal anger about this situation really makes me not want to get into academic studies. With my experience, in terms of my capabilities, I could be accepted to all kinds of positions in the civil service or the private sector, but because I don't have a degree, I don't even bother to send a resume. I'm not looking for work – that's not where I am now, but even if there were jobs I could compete for and I'd want to take on as a challenge, then the fact that I don't have a degree works against me.

Neta describes the reality that faces his contemporaries in the area where he grew up. His comments confirm Yaacov's description of the situation above:

In Gur [one of the largest Hasidic dynasties], the "Shtibelech," the small synagogues, are organized by age. There's no-one there who works in the civil service, there's no-one who works somewhere like a bank or hi-tech that requires an education. There's one guy who works as a Kashrut supervisor, another is the head of a Kollel, another works in a supermarket... All kinds of meager jobs, working from door to door – jobs for people who don't have an education. Maybe about 10 out of 70 people in my age group are involved in academic

studies. I imagine that those who complete academic studies will move far away from those who didn't... Those who studied will get a profession and develop in it, and those who don't will stay in the same situation and be religious scribes or Kashrut supervisors."

When we asked Neta whether he feels angry toward anyone, his reply was relatively forgiving. He is not interested in pointing an accusing finger at anyone in particular:

I don't feel angry toward any one person. I can't blame my parents – they were part of the community, part of a society where this was the default. They couldn't imagine anything else. I am very critical of my community... You could pretty much say that I've left it. It isn't easy – not many people manage to leave it but remain Haredim and stay normal... But when it comes to core studies, I'd say this: It's part of a Haredi approach that no-one manages in a conscious way. There's no prior planning, no positive planning – everything always happens as a reaction to all kinds of actions by the government. So yes – I have plenty of criticism, but I couldn't define it as anger. I'm not angry. I don't have anyone to be angry with – there's no-one who is doing this that I can point to.

Over two years ago, 52 people who had left the Haredi world after being educated in its institutions submitted a claim for damages in the sum of four million shekels against the State of Israel. The court rejected the claims of most of the plaintiffs due to obsolescence, but the case exposed the damage caused and the difficulties faced by people who have never participated in core studies, as well as the damage caused to their earning potential.³ In their suit, the plaintiffs clearly blamed the state for their condition.

³ "Haredim Who Did Not Study Core Studies Claim Compensation; State Threatens to Sue Their Parents and the Yeshivot," Or Kashti, Haaretz, 24 April 2016 (in English).

Yoel (not his real name) grew up in Haredi society, though he is no longer part of it. He is also angry with the state, which he feels is responsible for the difficulties he continues to face, even though he has left the Haredi community. He explains that after completing his education in Haredi institutions, he knows “seventy percent of the times table:”

“In my opinion, it is the state that is to blame. It has the power to stop all this. The parents can't stop it. It's just not acceptable that someone passing through the Israeli education system does not receive Mathematics or English. The state is funding a school system that leaves it's pupils unprepared for the modern world. You can blame the parents for how they raise their children, and maybe they do bare some responsibility, but the basis of an Israeli Citizen's education lies with the State. The State is failing. It has the power to change this, if they were to act the religious would start learning core subjects – it is as simple as that.”

Yoel tries to describe the difficulties that face anyone who wants to integrate in work and in society in general without any knowledge of English, and with only a limited knowledge of basic mathematical operations. His comments also highlight the despair that leads to the very high dropout rates at a later stage:

When someone goes out into the world without core studies, that affects lots of things. The first main aspect is the social sphere. Even if you want to come into contact with other societies and to have some kind of interaction with other people and societies, often you can't do it because you don't have core studies. You can't do all kinds of things to realize your potential. You can't go to university, you can't be accepted to many jobs that as an absolute minimum require 12 years' study; you lack basic skills, even how to calculate a tip by percentage – the simplest things. So it's a barrier that's manifested in all kinds of areas of life – not to mention your self-confidence. You

can't read a letter in English. Imagine going out on the street and the English written on a sign looks like gibberish to you!

The second main aspect is the academic sphere. It isn't simple to make up the matriculation examinations from scratch. You know that you don't want to work for the minimum wage – you want to make what you could of yourself, but it isn't possible. In my case, this actually made me want to do it [to study] even more, because I'm not someone who lets myself sink down. But it took me many hard years to study. I sat down and studied for 12 to 14 hours a day and completed four study units in mathematics, which is the minimum for what I wanted to study at university and for the psychometric, and the same for English – and I do all that starting from zero... It took a lot and I paid a heavy psychological price to realize my potential. It would be very hard for me to do that again, now that I know exactly what it involves.

2. The Origins and Causes of the Fierce Opposition to Core Studies

The language used by Haredim in discussions about core studies reveals the strength of the opposition to the inclusion of these studies in the Haredi education system. When Yair Lapid served as Finance Minister and opposed the transfer of funds to Haredi institutions unless they taught the core studies, a column in the Haredi newspaper Yated Neeman compared his remarks to a speech by Hitler. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, the leader of the Lithuanian section of the Haredi world, urged school principals not to surrender to the demands of the Ministry of Finance: "In every generation they stand up to annihilate us, and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from them... We must strengthen ourselves and be willing to pay with our lives for the sake of Torah study."⁴

⁴ "Haredi Leader: We Will Stand Firm against Core Studies," Nati Tucker, Haaretz, 6 May 2013 (in Hebrew).

The Haredi self-image revealed in Rabbi Kanievsky's comments, of a society that feels itself to be under constant threat and attack, is also apparent in Neta Katz's explanation of this phenomenon:

Haredi behavior is almost always a reaction, and never an initiative. There is almost nothing proactive about Haredi society, apart from the prohibitions and bans that the rabbis produce. The whole pattern of conduct is one of war. The perception is of a war against the flood of secularization and enlightenment. We are fighting against those who come to annihilate us, and we are preserving the embers of Judaism. And when that is the perception, you are constantly preoccupied with responding to attacks – both on the subject of education and of military service. You'll never hear the Council of Torah Sages say: "Okay, what's our position on the different issues? We have a state and we live in it – what's our position about this subject? We can't ignore it." The approach is always that we have to fight against those who are persecuting us.

Although Moshe works now to integrate Haredim in core studies, he understands the concerns of the Haredi leaders about the processes that are liable to develop among the public if changes are made to the curriculum. He acknowledges the problematic nature of this issue:

You have this group of rabbis and activists who lead the conservative Haredi ethos, and who – as they see it, of course – preserve the ethos. And in order to do this, they are careful to speak in the old language: We mustn't change anything, we must preserve the Torah world. Many of them act genuinely, not as a form of manipulation but out of a real desire to preserve society, and a great fear of processes of secularization and enlightenment. They know full well that they have to rebuild the world of Torah following the Holocaust, and that's the task. And that really exacerbates their fears... Many people are genuinely afraid that they might lose their Haredi religious

identity... The Haredi narrative is different from the history you teach your children... When a child is exposed to this content, it can destabilize them. And that's not the only issue. Try to touch almost any issue –for example, take the case of biology. In our community, we don't really talk about the body and anatomy. There's a fear here about children being exposed. This is a society that is afraid.⁵ Or in the case of civics, Haredim oppose it because there may be a clash of values and questions of religion and state... Mingling with general society can influence who you are and the positions you hold.

Yaacov, however, is unconvinced by the declarations of the Haredi leaders. He recalls his own childhood as a Haredi boy in Tel Aviv, when he studied at Haredi institutions that combined religious and secular studies and constituted the norm at the time. The “Independent” Haredi education stream, which he attended, provides classes in mathematics, nature, grammar, geometry, and English. At this time, the number of “Cheder”-type institutions was insignificant – there were two in Bnei Brak (for the Lithuanian and Hasidic communities) and the same in Jerusalem. He explains that the trend changed in the 1980s, as the Haredi world came under the unchallenged leadership of Rabbi Shach, who headed the Lithuanian-Haredi community, Shach originally served as president of the Council of Torah Sages of Agudat Yisrael, but he later formed the splinter Degel Hatorah movement. Yaacov claims that it was Rabbi Shach who emphasized the model of the ideal Torah student as someone who is particularly strict in religious matters, introspective, and separatist. “**Nohr Toyrah**” (“Only Torah”) was Shach’s battle-cry in Yiddish. The status of Torah students in the Haredi world soared, while those who worked alongside their studies suffered a loss in prestige. As part of the adulation of Torah students, the belief spread that they have no need for secular studies, since their destiny is to be scholars who devote all their time to Torah study, rather than work.

⁵ The word “hared” in Hebrew literally means afraid or fearful – i.e. fearful or in awe of God (trans.)

Rabbi Shach's followers established "Cheder" institutions that devoted a dwindling number of hours to secular subjects such as mathematics and English, on the grounds that these constitute "**bitul Torah**" – the "wasting" of time that could and should be used for Torah study. Each new Cheder was determined to prove itself more pious than its predecessors, Yaacov continues, and accordingly secular studies vanished completely from the curriculum. The current situation is that there are some 300 Cheder institutions in Bnei Brak and Jerusalem, compared to just 15 Haredi schools in the whole of Israel that include core subjects such as mathematics and English.

Yaacov suggests that the desire to avoid secular subjects is motivated not only by the reluctance to "waste" time that could be devoted to Torah studies, but also reflects an attempt to maintain the balance of power between the leaders and activists in the Haredi community and its rank-and-file members:

If you let a boy learn core studies, you're telling him, "Choose what you like – I'm giving you the tools." Basically, they only want the boy to see a single track ahead of him. That's what it's all about. They want the public to be busy with Torah. From their perspective, that's the world – the world revolves around Torah... When you give a boy options, then first of all you're sending him the message that he has the right to choose. Secondly, you're giving him tools – you're giving him English... That means opening up the world to him... It's important to them to keep the Haredi world bent over pages in the Talmud in the Kollel, and to keep the women as pre-school or school teachers and assistants. Apart from the spiritual values involved, there's another goal: to keep this community in abject poverty, dependent on the mercy of the political activists who can get them another 14 shekels in some benefit... It's all part of the system. No-one will say this out loud, and if you talk to the [Haredi] Members of

Knesset they will deny it vigorously and pretend to be very offended. But in the final analysis, when you look at the system as a whole, this is part of the story.

It is important to explain that girls and young women in Haredi society study core subjects and acquire meaningful tools that later enable them to find their place in the job market and provide for their families. This situation creates a significant gulf between the women and their husbands, who remain cooped up in the Kollel without any real ability to find work and to manage in the wider world. This gulf undermines the structure of the Haredi family.

When asked to explain the opposition to core studies, almost all the interviewees mentioned the desire of the Haredi leadership to prevent free choice and exposure to the outside world. Yosef (not his real name) is a Haredi man from Jerusalem who has served in senior public positions in the Haredi world. He used harsh imagery to explain the nature of Haredi education as he sees it:

Haredi society is built in a very insular manner, because that's the only way to maintain this framework. They don't want people to get to know the outside world or to be exposed to it in any way... No-one can raise Haredi children once they've been exposed and opened up to the world at large. You can't combine it. Haredi society is based on the very strict protection of a particular style and way of life in every matter. The world outside is very different, so Haredi society can't let children be exposed... Without core studies, without knowing math and English, you're like a disabled person without arms and legs. You can't do anything, you're a complete cripple. But that's the goal. The goal of Haredi society is to make everyone a cripple in general society, so that they can't manage and they can't even say "good morning" outside their little world. That way they will stay Haredi... In Haredi society if you aren't insular and if you expose

your child to options – then you can say goodbye to the child... They have to prevent the child from being exposed and from learning about different options out there in the world. That's what keeps him Haredi. That's the essence of Haredi education, and that's why there's a massive war against technology, the internet, and phones.

Yoel, who as mentioned is no longer part of the Haredi world, is very critical of the Haredi leadership, which he feels is interested only in gaining control:

I think that the better educated someone is, the more they study and know, then the less they like to be controlled, and the more they want to express their own abilities and desires. And that's something that contradicts the religious ideal, where the rabbi speaks and you do what he says. If you know more than your rabbi, how can you obey him? If you learn English and math, you can suddenly leave Haredi society. Once you start getting a salary in a hi-tech job, why should you listen to some rabbi who you see as less knowledgeable about the world at large? So there's an element of control of Haredi society here, in my opinion. It's much easier to control an ignorant community than a smart one. I don't think that Haredi society is dumb or unintelligent – it's excellent! But all their wisdom is contained within Haredi society and directed internally, without any integration with the secular world. That's how they preserve the element of control.

3. Private and Commercial Initiatives to Improve English-Language Studies

As our interviewees noted, the absence of English from the Haredi curriculum creates enormous difficulties, including the need to learn the language at a later stage. This difficulty is also reflected in the dropout rates in pre-academic programs and in academic studies themselves. This situation has led many people in Haredi society to find solutions through

private initiatives that enjoy enormous popularity, exceeding even the founders' expectations. The high level of demand for English studies reveals a thirst for change among the Haredi public, at least as far as English studies are concerned, although so far this phenomenon is taking place quietly, privately, and in an almost surreptitious manner.

In 2013, a service was launched offering English lessons over the telephone. Thus learners could appear to be engaged in a regular phone call, while actually they were acquiring a foundation in English and enriching their vocabulary. This initiative was launched by someone who grew up inside Haredi society and later experienced the difficulties caused by the lack of knowledge of English and the need to learn the language as an adult. As a result, he decided to make the dissemination of English to Haredim his mission and his business.

It is doubtful whether Haredim would have signed up for English courses, whether because of a lack of time or because of the problematic image of such an activity. Accordingly, the founder decided to operate telephone lines that are readily available, and above all maintain the anonymity of the users, who do not have to expose themselves or come to a particular location where they might be seen by someone from their community.

Users could register for the service over their phones. An individual study track was prepared for each user, and progress was assessed in tests that required the user to enter the answers on their phone. The content was prepared specially for the Haredi market – all the speakers are male, and the words and subjects studies are drawn from the Haredi world. The words “cat” and “dog,” for example, are not studied. The founder of the initiative described his surprising experience:

I learned from lots of people that this is a good solution, because they don't have to be exposed. They can stay at home or just walk along the street. And then I started to see that my list of customers includes

rabbis and Kashrut supervisors. My first customer came from Meah Shearim Street. At first, when I was in the trial phase, I expected that my target population would be more modern Haredim. But to my surprise, I found that it was the opposite: Meah Shearim is actually my target population, because they don't have any other options. They don't use the internet and they won't go to an English course, because what would people say? So the advantage here is that no one knows about it.

The phone numbers for the English study lines were advertised in miniscule print in a few leaflets, but this was enough to create a flood of hundreds of applicants interesting in signing up for the service. It was also enough to create opposition: graffiti scrawled on a billboard advertising the phone line numbers included the word "boycott" and the declaration "it is prohibited to study English in the Land of Israel." Other advertisements were torn down or defaced.

The advantage of anonymity explains the dramatic success of this initiative. After registering, the learner also receives a package to their home containing several English textbooks. Once again, careful attention was required:

I had a courier who would take the booklets to people's homes, and I put the booklets in a bag. I wasn't sure whether I should use transparent or opaque bags. To start with I used transparent bags, but then the courier told me that one person was really alarmed that the booklets arrived in a transparent bag and took them quickly, so that people wouldn't see that these were English books. That's when I realized that people really want to keep this a secret.

The customers who sign on for the English studies are very diverse. Most of them are aged 30 and above, and explain that they want to begin academic studies or work in various functions, such as Kashrut supervision in Jewish

communities overseas. The service currently has several hundred users and has been adopted by many employment centers. The cost ranges from NIS 700 – 1,800, thereby creating an unfair gulf between Haredim who can afford this considerable sum and those who could not take the course even if they wanted to. This is a common experience for people responsible for supporting large families and who barely manage to make a living. Thus a glaring distinction is created between those who are able to move ahead and gain a basic command of English, serving as an entrance ticket for various purposes, including the academic world, and those who cannot do so and must continue to make a living from meager and casual employment.

This English learning service costs a considerable amount and is intended for adults, but another initiative launched less than two years ago within Haredi society targets the young generation of Cheder students. The new service offers English studies in small groups at a very reasonable and subsidized cost. The service was launched by a Haredi entrepreneur who identified the need and demand for English classes at a low cost.

The studies are held after the official study hours of the Cheder, and last for 60 to 90 minutes. They are intended solely for Cheder students aged eight through 12 who are not learning any English. The classes are held in the home of one of the students or of the teachers, who themselves come from the Haredi community and complete a short training program. Each participant pays just NIS 18 for each lesson, so that even children from large families, whose parents cannot afford private lessons, are able to enjoy the advantages of learning English at a young age.

The initiative was inaugurated about 18 months ago in key Haredi strongholds – Elad, Kiryat Sefer, and Telz-Stone. Due to the high level of demand, the service soon expanded to some 15 cities around Israel. As many as 700 Haredi students are currently learning English in this framework, and as many as 1,200 have so far used the service. The details of the service are spread by word of mouth with almost no advertising, in order to avoid

arousing opposition. Many parents who send their children to these classes are Haredim who only studied English as adults and are now engaged in academic studies, but who still send their children to Cheder institutions that do not teach English. Recognition of the importance of learning English, on the one hand, and their financial inability to pay for private lessons for several children, on the other, have made the new project a resounding success.

These two projects – the telephone study line for adults and the classes for children – highlight the gradual recognition among the Haredi public of the vital need to learn English. Some Haredim seek to make up for what they missed as adults, while others seek to ensure that their children acquire the language at a young age, hopefully saving them the difficulties that the parents themselves have experienced. However, only those families that manage to find a place in the subsidized groups can enjoy English studies at a cost that can be met by a Haredi family with a large number of children and no breadwinner. Others are forced to find the considerable sums required in order to learn English – a vital necessity to gain access to academic studies and employment.

Dr. Lotem Perry-Hazan is the head of the Education Systems Management track at the University of Haifa. She notes the problematic nature of such initiatives and of the private acquisition of English, which requires resources that are not available to all families:

When Haredim complete their education in private afternoon classes, this damages equality between those who can afford these classes and those who cannot. This phenomenon is connected to the global trend toward “shadow education,” whereby the state is retreating from its function as a provider of high-quality education, forcing parents to finance complementary after-school studies for their children. In the case of Haredim, however, the ramifications are critical. For this population, shadow education does not just

reinforce the standard of studies – it provides an education that is not given at all in the schools.

Perry-Hazan explains that state subsidies for these study frameworks, and for after-school complementary programs in general, could solve the problem of inequality. However, the danger is that such courses will come to be seen as the norm, diverting attention from the need to include core studies as part of the curriculum:

Inequality can be overcome by means of the funding or significant subsidizing of private lessons. In accordance with international law, every person and child has the right to complete basic studies. However, we need to be careful about transforming the “right of completion” into an alternative tool for realizing the right to education during the period of compulsory schooling... Private lessons could become an institutionalized alternative legitimizing the cessation of efforts to promote core studies in schools as a norm. The private groups are a welcome solution, if the state contributes to the cost, but we must be careful not to make this an alternative diminishing the legitimization to continue to promote core studies in schools.

4. Potential Solutions

At present, the average Haredi family faces two main alternatives for their children's education: to send them to the Cheder, where they will study religious subjects, and perhaps a very modest level of core studies, later continuing to yeshiva; or to send them to the small number of Haredi institutions where they will have a chance to participate in full core studies. However, this choice comes at a cost, as the latter group of institutions charge high monthly tuition fees – something that is very problematic for a Haredi family with a large number of children. A social price may also be involved – some Haredi communities frown on parents who choose to

provide their children with a more open education, including core studies and a full matriculation certificate alongside religious studies.

Many of the interviewees blamed the state for situation and criticized the lack of help for Haredi parents who want their children to learn core studies. They advocate the opening of schools in the State-Haredi track, with full state funding, thereby significantly increasing the number of parents who will choose these studies. Yaacov, who as noted works in the educational field, commented:

The Ministry of Education must facilitate this option. Once it provides this option, many people will flood to it. I have no doubt at all. The Ministry of Education should appeal to the public over the heads of the activists, politicians, and mayors. It should declare that anyone who wants their children to study in State-Haredi education is welcome to sign up anonymously. Once they reach a certain number of students, they'll open an institution, with teachers, a building – everything.

What happens at the moment is that the Ministry of Education says, "You establish a school and I'll help you". Since any education system has to pass through the local authority, the mayor has to approve this. Do you really imagine that Haredi mayors are going to okay something like this?! They'd lose the support of the rabbis! We need to take the matter out of their hands. The mayor shouldn't decide what institution my child will attend. We should take the decision away from him and change the law. The Ministry of Education should start to initiate the establishment of institutions!... The ministry likes to talk about five study units, but when it comes to the Haredim – nothing! They aren't even in the game, they've abandoned it completely. Even without a State-Haredi track, these schools are flourishing. It isn't a situation where the train is about to leave the station – it's already

got to the fifth stop. The train is rushing ahead: More and more Haredim will want to learn core studies.

The educators we spoke to explain that many parents who went to Cheder and yeshiva themselves, and did not participate in core studies, want to ensure that their children have a different future. They want to make sure that the next generation receives the tools that they had to acquire as adults, with great difficulty. Despite this, the state is not doing anything to help them. Aharon (not his real name), the director of a Haredi institution that teaches core studies, discusses the difficulties he encounters, and notes his surprise that the state does not offer him any assistance, despite the national interest involved:

For example, I have to work very hard to maintain my institution. This isn't only my dream – it's the dream of the Jewish people. That's where the effort needs to come from. Because if they help me, I can prove that I can dramatically increase the number of children, institutions, and programs... So the energy has to come from there – how to take Haredi educational entrepreneurs, nurture them, help them, and give them what they need to do their job. Because their job is the State of Israel – it's thinking about the State of Israel in a few years... I don't know whether people understand the scandal here. There's going to be a catastrophe in a few years. And by the way, it will also harm Haredi identity, because people aren't stupid. In the end they realize that what they grew up on can't be put into practice on a daily basis... The state is very empathetic, they see me as a nice guy – but that really doesn't help me... Thank God, there are people who try to help, we have some partners. But it still demands a lot of work and investment from me, and I find myself devoting most of my time to philanthropy, and that's not easy. I don't see that as my destiny – I see my destiny in education.

Teachers and principals in the Haredi institutions that teach core studies report that they face harassment, both against their institutions and personally against their leaders. The result is that those who want to change the reality for Haredi children pay a heavy personal price without any support from the state. But Aharon says that he isn't deterred, even by the violence directed against him:

I think it's the exact opposite: they give me the reason to do it, because you see how people can behave when they don't have any tools. When you don't have tools there is violence. I must emphasize that the people who do this don't represent Haredi society – they represent the margins of society. I don't think the masses engage in violence – indeed, I think they identify with what I'm doing. There are also many rabbis who very much approve of what I'm doing and call me to say this – but they can't say it in public, and I totally respect that. I'm not put off: I'm a determined soldier and commonsense will win in the end. Violence doesn't move me. It's unpleasant, but I say that the task is greater than anything else.

Neta Katz is also astonished and furious at the silence of the state regarding the establishment of Haredi institutions that include core studies, for those who wish. His bewilderment and anger are very clear:

Prime Minister Netanyahu understands this subject very well. In 2002, when he was finance minister, he changed the whole area of the benefits. He made a huge change in Haredi society – all the dramatic changes in the Haredi world began in 2002. He understands it all very well, so it amazes me that he isn't personally committed to this struggle for core studies and Haredi employment. He hardly deals with it at all – you don't hear him mention it. Politically, I imagine it's hard for him, because his coalition relies on the Haredi parties. But I can't understand why he doesn't do anything about it... We raised a practical suggestion that they should have jumped on: not to fight

against the mainstream, but to allow the more moderate streams to provide a clear option for each age group of schools that teach the core studies. Not through coercion, but just by creating the option. It might require a significant investment of resources, but relative to the cost the government and the country pay later, it seems to me that it would be a smart and wise move that would create change. I'm not supposed to create public policy by myself. My role is to shout out to the government: there's a real problem here and you know about it – so what are you doing? What is the present government doing on this subject?!"

Another person we spoke to, who teaches English to Haredim, claims that the main problem is the inadequate training of teachers from within Haredi society to teach English and other core subjects. He calls for the broad-based training of Haredi teachers who can move into the existing study institutions:

There's a shortage of teachers –there's no-one to teach, and no appreciation for teaching. So people don't go into this field, and then we have to bring in people from outside. And that's a danger: I'm not only introducing English, but I'm also bringing in outsiders, which is an even bigger fear. Because who knows how to teach? Someone who has studied themselves. So why should I bring them in? The result is that those who can come in and teach for me haven't studied themselves. In the morning they work stocking shelves in the convenience store, and it shows. Basically, teaching isn't a profession – it's just an option for people who can't find anything else. There's just as much concern about who teaches the material as about what material is studied. Part of the solution will be to train teachers inside the [Haredi] sector. In my opinion, that's more important than anything else... My vision is to open a training track for Haredi male teachers.

Rabbi Betzalel Cohen is the principal of the Haredi high school yeshiva Hachmei Lev in the Bayit Vagan neighborhood of Jerusalem. The students at the yeshiva study all the core subjects and complete a matriculation certificate. Rabbi Cohen proposes a different solution, as someone who is involved in Haredi education, a field he came to due to his involvement in the integration of Haredim in employment and academia. He suggests that we should stop referring to the concept of “core studies” as a single unit comprising several subjects. Instead, he explains, it would be better to isolate the different components of the “core basket” and begin with English as the first step:

We shouldn't talk about core studies as a basket. We need to isolate the different components and start with English... Even outstanding yeshiva students regret the fact that they don't know English. Even heads of yeshivot need to know English in order to raise funds – it's definitely something for which there's a high level of demand inside the community. Instead of campaigning for the whole basket, we should start with English. There will be a much better response, and it won't lead to outright war, because the Haredim themselves recognize this interest. Moreover, we can find ways to teach English within this world, for example we can teach using religious literature in English, which is something that exists... If we isolate this subject we could do a great deal.”

Rabbi Cohen also reports personal attacks and attacks against the institution he directs because of the inclusion of core studies. He could not receive an allocation of land for the institution because he threatens the adjacent Haredi yeshivot. Demonstrations were held against him and wall posters were displayed in all the neighborhoods where he recruits students. Neighborhood rabbis published letters against him, and families who registered their children at his school have faced threats to expel the younger siblings from the institutions they are attending.

Another solution proposed by Rabbi Cohen relates to literacy, a subject that does not form part of the core studies in its own right. He explains that Haredi students have poor learning skills that need to be corrected before they can even begin core studies. Changing these learning habits will also enhance the students' ability to acquire an academic education at a later stage:

As I see it, the thing we need to devote most attention to is literacy, and no-one talks about that. I argue that they don't even teach the religious subjects properly... Even students who learn Gemara well and enjoy it often lack basic skills in summarizing, writing, and answering questions. Their written and oral self-expression is appalling. Most of the yeshivot don't give out homework and most of them do not have examinations or written tasks. Gemara is taught book against book – the rabbi has a book and the student has one. In the vast majority of yeshivot there isn't even a board, let alone other aids... If they studied Gemara properly, that would solve a lot of problems. If they learn all the subjects but keep on studying the way they learn Gemara now, we won't have achieved anything and we won't gain anything. The fact is that many Haredim drop out of academic studies because they didn't know how to write a paper, answer questions, prepare, and meet deadlines. I think this is much more important than the core studies, but no-one even mentions it... I receive students and before I can teach them subjects, I have to teach them what it means to come to school with a textbook, exercise book, and pencil case, how to come on time, and how to prepare for an examination or do homework. You can find lots of partners for this in the Haredi world, because what the yeshiva students are lacking more than academic subjects is literacy.

Unlike our other interviewees, Rabbi Cohen does not place all the responsibility for changing the situation at the door of the state. He also

seeks to address internal processes in the Haredi community that must take place in order to ensure that Haredi education as a whole changes, thereby enabling core studies in independent and well-established institutions:

What needs to happen here is a total system change. It will happen if this group (Haredim interested in core studies – T.R.) have power, and at the moment they don't have any power. The Haredi representatives ignore them, and so do non-Haredim. This isn't something the state can do... There has to be a growth and organization of leadership within the Haredi community... They are still weak and restricted. They don't have their own institutions. They need educational independence – as long as we don't have our own institutions, they've got us by the throat. Because they can tell us that if we don't behave in a particular way, they won't accept our son or daughter to their institution, and so on... We will only be able to make a revolution when we have our own good institutions and we no longer have to be dependent on them... As long as we do not have any real political power to help us by providing budgets so that this group can establish independent institutions, this won't happen. I hope it will happen after people realize that the good of the nation depends on it and that there is an electoral potential here. I can't predict exactly how redemption will come, but at the moment there is a catch.

As we have seen, our interviewees raised a long series of solutions: establishing a State-Haredi education track, government support, training Haredi teachers, inculcating basic study skills, and strengthening the group interested in pursuing core studies. However, all the interviewees without exception agree that imposing core studies through legislation or court rulings will not achieve anything, and will actually cause serious damage to the progress that has already been made. Yaacov, who is involved in education and in integrating Haredim in employment, explains:

We are against the imposition of core studies by force, making people do something they don't want to. But we are equally against the Haredi Members of Knesset telling us that we cannot study. That's my position: to let people who want to study to do so. And that is a big and growing population, and the more of them there are, the more others will have the courage to do the same. That's how it works. A public is a flock. Most people aren't brave and won't sacrifice their lives and lie down on the tracks for it. That's just the way the world is. But when someone sees that other people are doing it, they think: "Okay, so I'm not alone. I don't have to lie down on the tracks. Other people have already walked through the minefield, and now I can follow." These are clear social processes, and Haredi society is undergoing them in enormous leaps. Another society would go through this in 30 years, but here we're talking about just 10-15 years... Heaven forbid! It would be a terrible mistake to impose core studies... Human nature means that when you try to force someone to do something, they curl up like a hedgehog. That's what happened to Haredi society, and suddenly they got more seats in the Knesset. How did they do this – because there was an enemy at the gate, so all of a sudden we all work together... No-one likes to be forced to do something. Even if someone wants something, if they are forced socially to go along with it, they don't want to be there. It would be a strategic mistake to impose anything by force... We can certainly have a discussion about the good of the country, and whether the state should provide subsidies or not, and whether each individual has the right to educate their children as they see fit. That's a debate. But from the standpoint of benefit, coercion would be a terrible mistake."

5. Conclusion: Looking to the Future – From a Minority to a Firm Majority

All our interviewees shared the same optimistic position regarding the future of core studies and academic education in the Haredi world. This trend will continue to grow, until a day when the interviewees – who currently prefer to remain anonymous due to their fear of harassment – will become the majority and will no longer have to be afraid and hide their identity. Yaacov describes the processes that are taking place in Haredi society and that can be expected to change its character:

It's true that we are not the majority. We are a minority, and I don't know when we'll become the majority. But the interesting thing is that the dominant dynamic on the Haredi street now is "core studies or not core studies, academia or not academia, army or no army?" If the rabbis are organizing massive rallies against academic studies involving all the Torah sages, what does that mean? That they are threatened by it! This is their response to the internal processes within the Haredi world. It isn't directed at all at the secular public, but internally, to the Haredi public. The [Haredi] public is in a state of foment and dynamism... The pendulum is starting to shift back and correct itself. The working Haredi public, which has been oppressed and maligned and silenced... is starting to realize that it isn't alone. And this is because of the internet revolution. The rabbis are not fighting against the problem of indecent websites – after all, normative people are repulsed by such things and do not go near them. What scares them is the information and forums – the interaction between people. People can realize that they are not alone, there are thousands more out there like them. The internet has brought down the walls. People have begun to demand things for themselves and their children. They say: "I don't know whether or not my son will want to study for his whole life, but I want to give

him tools because I see some people who have gotten stuck behind in the Kollel because they have no alternative... Even die-hard Torah scholars send their children to English study groups, because they realize that the [Haredi] population has grown and grown, and we can't go on like this. Eventually, the community has also gotten poorer and poorer. Once the parents worked and they could support their scholar sons. That's gone now. Today's generation is one of Torah scholars raising other Torah scholars, so how can they provide for them? They can barely manage to maintain their own home... More and more schools teaching the core subjects will open – I have no doubt at all about that.

Yosef, who filled public roles in Haredi society and now observes the changes it is undergoing, says that change is slowly but surely filtering through to the very core of Haredi society:

Haredi society is constantly undergoing changes. Take the simple fact that there is Haredi academia and Haredi military brigades now... It's true that this is still on the margins, it's obviously not the mainstream yet. Not everyone goes to the army and not everyone studies. But in my day, when I got married 20 years ago, it was unheard of that a man would get married and not go off to study in the Kollel – it was built in, there was no other option. Today, it's absolutely not like that. Today it's totally legitimate for someone to study a bit, but also if someone turns to practical work like the rest of the world, it's absolutely legitimate now in the Haredi world. This will definitely continue... There's no other option. People have to provide for their children at the standard that is normal today. The accepted standard of living in the world also applies in the Haredi community, whether they like it or not. Today people in Haredi society also go the supermarket – when I was a child they went to the neighborhood convenience store... Today you very rarely find people with 16

children anymore – people plan their family much more. The birthrate in Haredi society has fallen sharply and consumption has risen, and ultimately all this is translated into money. In order to pay for it, people have to earn money; in order to earn money you have to work; and in order to work today you have to gain a profession. It can't work any other way. Now it's true that this is a world that moves slowly. They are pushed along and dragged behind society at large, at a slower pace, and there are some people who try to dig their heels in. But even so, things move forward. Everything in Haredi society happens slowly and cautiously.

Neta Katz, however, believes that the words “core studies” still pose a significant threat. However, he is convinced that they will become – and are already becoming – an essential component of a society that is acknowledging the need to make a living and to accept change:

I'll give you the simplest analogy to explain my position within Haredi society. The analogy I always like to use for myself relative to Haredi society is the position of Breaking the Silence in Israeli society. In other words, I present an extreme voice. I can't claim that this is a commonly-held position... My approach is firmly at the extreme end of Haredi society. I imagine that at least 10 percent of the Haredi public think the same way, whether openly or secretly, whether they can speak out or not. Along the spectrum of core studies and army or no core studies and no army, my position is a critical one. If we put my position at one end of the spectrum, and at the other end we put the traditional and official position of the Haredi community as presented by the Members of Knesset... then I believe that the Haredi community is actually closer to my end of the spectrum. The attitudes on these matters are changing. There are already a lot more people who think like me; a lot more people who don't understand why they don't learn English; a lot more people who

realize that the problems of making a living are really serious and cannot be ignored; a lot more activists who are trying to think of new approaches and solutions. It's a process... If you talk to people about core studies, you'll find that a lot of them associate it with historical edicts and persecutions: the expulsion from Spain, the anti-Jewish edicts in seventeenth-century Ukraine, the Holocaust, and core studies – they actually see it as a continuum. The words "core studies" are frightening. But when it comes to making a living and integrating in employment, and anything that can help in that field, there is a real change going on. And this change will ultimately influence the content of the Haredi education system."

Neta also identifies processes that are penetrating Haredi society in front of his eyes:

I'm optimistic – not because I know how things will work out, but because I think the arguments in favor of innovation, development, and an end to idleness are too strong. There's no real logical way to refute them. And as soon as good ideas get out in the open air, it's very hard to stop them. So I think that it will develop gradually. And when I suddenly see one of my neighbors or friends, I realize that this idea is catching on. The criticism of the behavior of the Haredi community is seeping among us... You can see it take some unexpected directions, and that's why I think things will change... I'm pretty sure that in 15-20 years the situation will be much better than it is now.

Closing Words

The testimonies presented in this report highlight the process of change that is taking place among the Haredi public in terms of the attitude to core studies. Although leaders and public figures from this community continue to thunder against the “wasting” of time that should be devoted to Torah study and against English and math lessons, on the ground things are changing. A substantial part of both the parents’ generation and the younger generation, together with the educators, are gradually recognizing that the community can no longer ignore the need to provide basic skills and tools.

As noted, most of our interviewees – people who devote their time and energy to encouraging core studies among the Haredi public – asked to be quoted anonymously. Their concern shows that being perceived to break the strictest prohibition of all – “the Torah prohibits innovation” – is still a serious matter that can have harsh consequences in the community. But the flourishing of the English-language courses shows that this fear is being set aside due to the need and desire to look outside the walls of this closed, conservative community and escape from a fate dominated by poverty and want.

The interviewees’ comments about the harassment and threats they face should serve as a wake-up call for the State of Israel and its leaders. The state must stand alongside those who are courageously struggling to promote core studies from inside the heart of the Haredi community. The authorities should adopt the range of solutions that have been raised here: Strengthening the State-Haredi stream and offering it uncompromising support; training English teachers; focusing on English and on inculcating the learning skills needed by Haredi students. These solutions can create real change and cut the high dropout rates from academic studies and pre-academic courses among graduates of the Haredi education system who have found the courage and hope to shape their own destiny.

When asked about his dreams for his own little boy, Yaacov's reply may provide the clearest indication of the future of part of Haredi society, at least. The concept of the "Torah scholar," which is a key foundation of this society, will not disappear or be harmed. But other descriptions will be added alongside it.

I will certainly be happy if my son becomes a Torah scholar. But I'll be even happier if he is something else as well. A few years ago, my son told me: "I want to be a Torah scholar, an ambulance driver, and an engineer." A Torah scholar because he wants to study Torah; an ambulance driver because he wants to save people's lives and perform acts of mercy; and an engineer because that's the field that appeals to him... That's what he wants to be. And I'll be really happy if he can be all these three things. Much happier than if he is just a Torah scholar.