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Interview

Asaf Malchi interviewed by Asaf Darr

Asaf Malchi received his master's degree in political science specializing in urban planning from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Malchi is currently a doctoral candidate in the Department of Public Policy and Administration at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev. His research subject is the Institutions and Occupations Rewards of Minority Groups in Military Service. Since 2008, Asaf has been managing the ultra-Orthodox employment research study for the Research Department at the Ministry of Economy. He has been examining and focusing on employment trends of the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel and has been assisting decision makers in formulating their public employment policy. Also, in 2012, Malchi partnered with others to establish and manage the "Haredi Society Research Seminar" at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies which provides a platform for various scholars studying the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel. He is also a research colleague in the Israeli Democracy Institute.

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1 How do you define an Ultra-Orthodox [or Haredi] Jew?

The Ultra-Orthodox population in Israel is a very heterogeneous sector, but it has some common characteristics and basic values. Its main characteristic is that it is an "enclave society" that stands apart from the main culture and modern society (Sivan, 1991). The second unique characteristic of this population is the fact that most of the men spend most of their time studying the Torah and the Talmud and therefore this society can be defined as a "scholar society" (Hevrat Hlomidim) (Fridman, 1991). In terms of a broad spectrum we can say that the Ultra-Orthodox population in Israel has several main attributes. They see studying the Torah and the Talmud as their main value. They have a radical and rigorous interpretation of the Jewish law that is combined with total faith in God. The individual is subjected to close social supervision by the community. They share a conservative and puritanical way of thinking and an entirely segregated education system for boys and girls. Finally, Ultra-Orthodox Jews have special customs, norms and dress codes and they live in separated neighborhoods and towns, which is another indication of an enclave society.

2 What percentage of the Israeli population do Ultra-Orthodox Jews represent?

Although there isn't one single acceptable approach that all demographers use regarding the most accurate way to define and measure the size of the Ultra-Orthodox population in Israel, according to one recent estimation it accounted for 11 percent of Israel's population in 2013. The Ultra-Orthodox population among all Jews is roughly 14 percent and growing. At the beginning of the millennium (2002) the Ultra-Orthodox population made up only 9 percent of the total population.

3 What percentage of Haredi men participate in the labor force?

During the past decade the labor market participation of Haredi men in Israel has increased. Officially, in 2000 only 38 percent of Haredi men were employed. Thanks to current internal trends in the Haredi sector (such as the pragmatic attitude of several leading Rabbis) and a proactive government policy that includes large budgets for employment centers catering specifically for this sector, the percentage of Haredi men who participate in the labor market has increased to 44.5 percent (last quarter of 2014).

4 What percentage of the Haredi women participate in the labor force?

Haredi women's labor market participation in 2014 is 69 percent. In the year 2000, the figure was only 46.5 percent. It is important to emphasize that in the Haredi population in Israel, it's very common to find Haredi women supporting their husbands, while the latter invest most of their energy, efforts and time in Torah studies (in yeshivas). This is the social norm in most Haredi communities, and the main reason why Haredi women work much more than their spouses.

5 Historically, why have Haredi men refrained from joining the labor force?

There are several reasons why Haredi men have tended to refrain from joining the labor force, something that distinguishes this sector in Israel from other Ultra-Orthodox

communities all over the world, and from previous periods in the modern history of the Jewish nation. It would be fair to say that key to understanding this unusual phenomenon is the unsolved relationship between military service in Israel, which Haredi men tend to avoid, and the labor market. In May 1948, in the first days of the young Israeli state, in the middle of the terrible battle between the Arabs and the Jews, the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, met the leader of a small and fragile Ultra-Orthodox enclave community in Israel, Rabbi Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz (a.k.a. The Hazon Ish). They decided to release 400 young yeshiva students from recruitment to the army, on condition that they only study the Torah and not work or acquire other skills. Today, there are two main reasons that Haredi men refrain from the labor force: first of all, the higher value given to studying the Torah rather than to skills that would improve their labor market position and their employability, together with the entitlement to avoid military service. Secondly, they fear losing the high social status of the Talmud scholar, which is highly valued in their community, as well as being exposed to norms and values of the secular and modern labor market that are very different from those of the Ultra-Orthodox way of life.

6 Do you see increasing willingness among the Haredi population to integrate more into the Israeli economy?

In the past decade, and especially since 2002, there has been a strong and consistent tendency among the Haredi population in Israel to better integrate into the economy and the labor market. This is because of great internal and external changes in Haredi society, as well as in the Israeli economy. The main reason for this change is the new government policy of cutting welfare budgets and encouraging employment, especially among Haredi men. The second reason is internal changes within Haredi society, including a more pragmatic Rabbinic leadership, as well as consumer changes and the rise of marginal groups in this society (modern Haredi) that put more emphasis on the Haredi contribution to Israeli society in general, including recruitment to the IDF.

7 How does the Haredi population envision their role in the Israeli economy?

The rhetoric and traditional attitude of most of the Haredi society and the old Rabbinic leadership view their role for the Jewish people as protectors and custodians of the Torah and its ancient traditions. This is one of the main reasons why, for many years, most Haredi women, but especially men did not take an active part in the flourishing Israeli economy.

8 What are the greatest obstacles to integrating them into the labor force?

I believe that the main obstacles to full integration of Haredi men in Israeli society is the absence of fundamental skills and knowledge, such as having the ability to read and write English, computer skills, coping with schedules and deadlines, as well as other skills that are not taught in the yeshiva (employability skills). Another obstacle is negative stereotypes or stigma among non-Haredi employers, who don't really know how to deal with Haredi men, and most of whom don't believe that Haredi men can be efficient workers.

9 What strategies do you recommend in order to facilitate better integration of this population?

The main thing that the Israeli government should do to increase the integration of Haredi society into the mainstream economy is to provide tools and opportunities for those wishing to take academic courses or technical and engineering courses. In addition, young Haredi men must be given access to learning general reading skills and basic secular education alongside Torah and Talmud Studies. Only in this manner can future generations of Ultra-Orthodox Israelis become better integrated in the mainstream economy and society of the country.