



Haredi Disaffiliation: Risk, Potential and Social Policy

Executive Summary

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Part 1: Former Haredim: Risks, Needs and Unique Potential

A. Social Background

Disaffiliation from ultra-Orthodoxy is not a new phenomenon. It has, historically, been a one-directional process that has shaped various strategies of Jewish existence for over two centuries. The past several decades, however, have seen profound social changes that have caused this process to expand and even become multi-directional, as many Israeli Jews and Jews in the Diaspora seem to move more easily between the increasingly fluid boundaries between different identity groups. Yet the departure from Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society is still traumatic to the individual, their family and the Haredi community itself, and poses significant challenges to the welfare state and Israeli society in general. It also has significance beyond the individual, particularly with regards to the symbolic relations between different forms of Israeli Jewish identity, and is thus a sensitive sphere of social policy and social service development.

B. Definition

A former Haredi is someone who no longer considers themselves part of Haredi society, does not observe the practices associated with the Haredi lifestyle, and has physically left their community. The transition to non-Haredi society requires a complex transformation of identity, and presents a significant challenge with regards to the integration of the individual in all aspects of their new life.

C. Historical Perspective

Historically, the phenomenon of disaffiliation was more of an individual act and less a movement between modes of secular and religious collective identity choices, and, as such, it generated heated debates in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora over the course of the past two centuries or so. In its current manifestation, disaffiliation is not as embedded in these debates but still generates some of the old secularization discourse, as a reaction to the departure from Haredi society and in light of a somewhat romanticized expectation that it will generate an explosion of creativity similar to what took place during the period of widespread secularization that occurred at the turn of the 20th century.

D. The Identity Dilemma: Between Departure and Becoming a Modern Haredi

Another significant development reflected in the findings of this paper is the channeling of the discontent felt by a large number of Haredim into a new identity option, that of becoming a “modern Haredi.” This option enables individuals to lead a

more open lifestyle within the broader Haredi social periphery, rather than becoming secular. Strongly supported by the State through social economic policy, this new alternative might explain the gap between the numbers of Haredim who express discontent in the virtual and social world offline and the numbers who actually disaffiliate. The interplay between modern Haredim and former Haredim is further complicated by the phenomenon of Haredim who are secretly secular, and known as "marranos" or Anusim in Hebrew in reference to the Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity but practiced Judaism in secret.

E. Causes and Motives

The causes and motives, as reported by those who choose to leave Haredi society, tend to fit into one of several main narratives:

1. Religious crisis: this takes two forms, usually divided along gender lines. Young men experience a theological religious crisis that manifests in the early stages of their departure from Haredi society. Women tend to experience religious doubts earlier (during childhood) that remain latent for a longer period and are largely unaccompanied by theological debates. Some members of this group can be defined as "strategic" former Haredim because they plan their departure meticulously and are well aware of the risks that accompany their choices.
2. A quest for freedom and individualism: this narrative often represents a quest for self-fulfillment and choices that cannot be made within Haredi society. While the popular opinion tends to attribute this kind of departure to the lure of open attitudes toward sexuality in secular society, in fact many in this group are attracted by the opportunity to express themselves creatively in dance, sports, music and other forms of individualist expression. The internet plays a significant role in this category of departure.
3. Haredi society is perceived as broken: this narrative was given as the impetus and first cause for departure by the largest number of those who participated in the research and was also evident as a contributing factor in all of the narratives. It is at the root of the increase in the number of those leaving Haredi society. This narrative views Haredi society as having many social problems and experiencing significant social disintegration.
4. Individual trauma: in this narrative, many of those leaving have suffered physical or sexual abuse, have mental health issues, or identify as LGBTQ. Haredi society is unable to cope with any of these phenomena, leading to marginalization and further trauma for both the individual and their family.

These then become strong push factors propelling individuals out of Haredi society.

F. Variations within Haredi Society

Haredi society consists of many distinct groups, which all share a common ethos and attitude towards religious observation that, taken together, constitute a political, educational, institutional, and social whole. Yet they are distinguished by their different historical contexts, their various ethnic roots, and the desire of each to differentiate their version of ultra-Orthodoxy from all the others. These differences affect the nature and experience of those of their members who leave Haredi society. Therefore any policy with regard to the needs of former Haredim must take into account the specific identity of the group of origin.

1. The smallest group of former Haredim originates from the historical core of Lita'im (Lithuanian Jews, also known as Mitnagdim) and Hasidim. Despite their relatively small numbers, this group of former Haredim is highly visible and is viewed as the most threatening to the Haredi community. They are well represented in the new active self-organizing leadership of the former Haredim population. A cautious evaluation suggests that up to 3%-5% of every age cohort in these core historical communities will depart from Haredi society.
2. From the 1960s on, there have been a large number of people from the Anglo-Saxon Diaspora, Israeli Tshuva (return to religion) movement and religious non-Haredi periphery who "immigrated" into Israeli Haredi society. The children of these "immigrants" make up a relatively large group of former Haredim. In fact, up to 25% of this second generation have left the fold.
3. The largest group of former Haredim are from impoverished families on the periphery of Haredi life, such as the marginal Breslov and Chabad groups, as well as other small, predominately Sephardi, communities. Presumably this is because social mobility into mainstream Haredi life through the yeshiva and seminars is very limited for them. Although the needs of this marginalized youth are the same as that of mainstream former Haredim, their culture is quite different.

G. Stages of Departure

Leaving Haredi society is a long process, which in some cases is even reversed after a period of leading a non-Haredi lifestyle. The process can be divided into three phases, each of which have their own particular risks. These phases are: the period up to the decision to leave, in proximity to the departure, and the long-term absorption into non-Haredi Israeli society.

H. Scope of the Phenomenon

A cautious estimate suggests that there are currently around 8,000 former Haredim, between the ages of 14-24. This number is likely to increase gradually over the next decade.

These include a large group of single men and women (with an estimated ratio of 60/40), and a relatively small group, in the low hundreds, of families or single parents with complex needs.

I. The Organization of Former Haredim

Most former Haredim, not including those on the periphery, take part in various formal and informal groups, with the virtual world functioning as the main gateway to participation in activities or networking. The landscape is changing as new grassroots self-organizing network groups evolve. The first of these was the Hillel organization, which has been helping former Haredim transition into non-Haredi Israeli society for over two decades. The second is Out for Change, which emphasizes advocacy and delivers services geared towards a wide array of needs. A substantive number of former Haredim can be defined as ‘individual agents’ who are not affiliated or associated with any organization but who are obviously exposed to them online.

Part 2: Strategic Policy: Towards a Safety Net and Supporting Services

A. Social Rights and Group Needs

Former Haredim are unique in terms of the services they require in their transition into non-Haredi Israeli society. In Israel the majority of social services for young adults are geared either to Haredim or to secular/non-Haredim. The former Haredi young adult fits into neither category, and confronts a choice between services designed to meet the very different needs of secular young adults or receiving these services within Haredi settings that demand that he or she act as though they are still practicing Haredim. Many have little choice but to opt for the latter, unpleasant, option.

The needs of former Haredim in terms of compensating services to enhance employability or prepare them for higher education and vocational training are similar to those of Haredim.

The state provides significant support and subsidies for Haredim based on the understanding that these young people did not receive the relevant education necessary to participate in the labor market. In this sense, former Haredim should be entitled to all the services Haredim receive. Unfortunately, whether as a result of administrative difficulties, political sensitivity, or the erroneous assumption that former Haredim would be able to manage on their own, this was not the case. However, as a result of lobbying on the part of Out for Change, the state now recognizes this right and no longer conditions service provision on the level of religious observation or practice but rather on the educational institutions in which the individual studied as a youth.

Not only do former Haredim have the same needs as Haredim (stemming from the shared educational limitations) but they also deal with the additional challenges and risks inherent in leaving Haredi society. As a result, their unique needs require that services be developed that are designed specifically for them. Up until now this has been complicated by the moral dilemma experienced by the State with regard to identity transition of minors. For this reason, services for Haredi youth-at-risk have no provision for dealing with issues of religious observance, despite the fact that this is a crucial element in the challenges these individuals face. It is not surprising that where such services exist, they were developed and are provided by Hillel, an NGO, whose cooperation with the State was, until recently, latent and limited.

In the face of increasing numbers of those seeking to leave Haredi society over the past few years, and as a result of grassroots advocacy groups, there is growing programmatic support for former Haredi young adults. This is complicated by an

inherent tension between sympathy for former Haredim, felt in all avenues of Israeli society, and the political sensitivity that surrounds the issue of identity transition in the country.

This cohort is unique in yet another sense. While the risk of leaving Haredi society is severe, their ability to integrate successfully into non-Haredi society is very high. This group of motivated young individuals is a source of great creativity with the potential to be significant positive contributors to Israeli society. They are in many ways immigrants from within, which is a special position in Israeli society. The state would do well to devote resources to maximizing this potential.

B. Policy and Aims

This paper sets out a series of recommendations, based on the extensive research carried out. The primary recommendation is to develop a coordinated holistic policy that will provide a comprehensive safety net for former Haredim as they transition from Haredi society. This net will enable them to fulfill their potential with regards to their long-term integration into non-Haredi Israeli society. These services should be structured around acute needs, such as livelihood, as well as social and cultural needs. Such a policy demands action in three spheres:

1. Promoting a structured formal policy category within government ministries, in which the identification of unique needs is reflected in rights and services provided.
2. Granting the group equal rights to those of Haredim with regards to government support.
3. Building a public-private partnership to ensure that the needs of this group are met.

C. Spheres of Need

The response to the needs of former Haredim should be designed around the phases of the process of transition from Haredi to non-Haredi society, but should also reflect a combination of practical needs, such as housing, education, and employment, with those of psycho-social support, legal counseling and leisure. Beyond the needs of the individual, former Haredim should be viewed as a group with the potential to constitute the foundation for a social movement. This movement or network can be organized around their identity, experience, and success in advocacy on behalf of the group.

1. Employment and Housing

As a result of their departure from Haredi society, most former Haredim lack family support. They tend to have no financial assets and often struggle to support themselves. Most former Haredi men lack basic skills or military experience that can serve them in the labor market. In many cases they are forced to take low entry jobs with minimum wage that is inadequate to cover their basic needs and expenses. In the longer term they are less available for vocational training and higher education, and those who, despite the obstacles, take part in such training or academic studies find it hard to make ends meet. Former Haredi women have some advantages, as they received a broader education and often have a marketable skill set. In the case of women who are married or divorced, the issue of employment is less acute although there are growing economic pressures and impediments on mobility or promotion.

As a result of advocacy efforts on the part of Out for Change, over the past two years there has been a growing understanding on the part of policymakers that the specific needs of former Haredim must be met with programs designed especially for them. These are still being developed. In the meantime, former Haredim can participate in training courses for the general or Haredi populations, neither of which, as was mentioned earlier, are well suited to the needs and challenges of former Haredim.

Hillel and Out for Change have also developed employment support services, such as courses in computer skills and literacy and basic English and math. Both organizations also offer job seeking services that encourage employers to recruit former Haredim. Yet the woeful inadequacy of state services and the lack of job centers to deliver support in job seeking, vocational training, and other employment needs remain exceedingly detrimental.

The issue of housing is also acute. Unlike impoverished households or welfare recipients, former Haredim are not entitled to public housing or rent subsidies. Yet, unlike their non-Haredi peers, who for economic reasons often live at home during the transition to independent adulthood, in most cases they are unable to do so and are left without a place to live. The few instances where housing solutions are offered to former Haredim are usually cases of severe risk of homelessness or that of Hillel's support for single parents. Housing costs thus constitute the largest expenditure for former Haredim and accounts for nearly half of their modest earnings.

Recommendations:

- a. One-stop employment center: establish a center for occupational assessment, guidance, and job placement, similar to those that exist for Haredim and Arabs, tailored to the needs of former Haredim.
- b. Human capital: promote skills training and basic math, language, and technology literacy.
- c. Soft skills: provide training to improve communication skills, resume preparation, labor market orientation, and job search.
- d. Accreditation: create a set of accredited vocational courses, suited to the needs and potential of former Haredim.
- e. Promotion in the labor market: support retention and mobility of former Haredim participating in the labor market.

2. Higher Education

The government of Israel is heavily invested in a policy aimed at opening higher education to Haredim as part of their strategy to increase the number of Haredim participating in the labor market. This policy created a culturally sensitive and generously subsidized mixed market of institutions and platforms. While some former Haredim have pursued academic degrees through these avenues, they were tolerated only so long as they “acted Haredi.” There has also been a growing discontent and increased pressure in some programs to enforce standards of religious observance. In light of this situation, Out for Change has lobbied the Council for Higher Education to institute programs and support systems specifically for former Haredim. As a result, two universities have set up preparatory programs that provide student aid and have adapted admission requirements.

Despite academic subsidies, former Haredim are still hard pressed to support themselves financially given their lack of family support. The findings from interviews and target groups reflect the difficulties of older former Haredim who often choose stability over the potential for mobility. This choice is more prevalent among women and married former Haredim. Hillel attempts to address this issue through its scholarship program, but faces ever-increasing demand.

Recommendations:

- a. Pre-academic programs: develop a variety of preparatory programs that enable former Haredim to bridge educational gaps.
- b. Special academic programs: design unique academic programs for former Haredim, in a number of academic institutions, which will

include eligibility for admission under special conditions, tutoring, and academic support.

- c. Financial support: establish a significant scholarship program, covering both tuition fees and living expenses, particularly during the preparatory stage.

3. Military Service

The position of former Haredim with regard to military service is complex. In most cases their legal status is that of a Haredi exempt from compulsory military service because of enrollment in a yeshiva. Some of them maintain this status vis-a-vis the army even after their departure from Haredi society. There are also those who come from troubled backgrounds, who are dealing with challenges in terms of livelihood, or lack motivation, and thus are likely to receive an exemption from military service. Others choose a different strategy and seek to serve in the Haredi units of the IDF, which function as a transition phase enabling them to maintain some sort of relationship with their family and the community. They tend to depend on their military service to help them achieve a smoother transition into non-Haredi society. Those who decided to leave Haredi society out of deep conviction usually opt to serve in regular units, in which case this decision comes to represent the symbolic act of becoming non-Haredi.

Target groups and interviews revealed two hotly-debated approaches to military service: those who served saw their service as a stabilizing element that provided them with insight into the non-Haredi world and facilitated their entry into mainstream Israeli society; and those who did not serve felt it was unrealistic to expect them to carry out full military service while in the process of a complex and demanding transition.

While military service is challenging for anyone, the situation is more acute for former Haredim, who join the army with relatively little preparation, lack the familiarity regarding the military that others have gained from their parents, relatives, and friends, and are often physically unready for the demands of service. One of their biggest challenges is coping with loneliness and the lack of family support that is the heart of the military experience in Israel. Almost all the interviewees who served described the ceremonies and other festive occasions, when families were invited to participate, as tremendously painful. The cases of suicide among soldiers with no support can be understood in this context.

Hillel provides former Haredi soldiers with assistance, as does Out for Change, which has begun working with the IDF on the formation of a policy towards former Haredim. This policy encompasses the recruitment and classification of former Haredi soldiers, the criteria for courses and training, the status of lone soldiers, and the meeting of their basic needs.

Recommendations:

- a. Drafting process: the procedures of the drafting process should be adapted to take into account the unique characteristics of former Haredim.
- b. Lone soldiers: former Haredim should be accorded the status of lone soldiers and receive all related benefits.
- c. Preparation for civil life: former Haredim should be provided with educational courses and vocational accreditation during their military service, and be accorded the same benefits that Haredi soldiers are entitled to.

4. Legal Assistance

Former Haredi divorcees and single parents represent a relatively small group of a few hundred individuals who left Haredi society after they were already married and often already parents. The challenges experienced by this group are severe as individuals, as well as with regards to their families and communities, and vis-a-vis welfare services and family courts. Each of these cases is a complex battle over financial arrangements and the custody and education of the children, and further exacerbated by the involvement of rabbis, Haredi community leaders, and occasionally even the press, as they often become symbolic clashes between conflicting values.

Former Haredi divorcees, especially men, find themselves in inferior positions legally and with respect to the welfare administration. This is the result of multicultural bias, policy towards children, and fear of the Haredi community. It is not uncommon to file false complaints against former Haredi divorcees describing abuse, violence, or mental illness in the battle over the divorce arrangements. In most Haredi communities, especially Hasidic families, the cause of saving a child's "religious wellbeing" justifies the often extreme measures taken. In some cases there is an attempt to "purchase" the children's future as Haredim by offering financial compensation. The treatment meted out by the Haredi communities in these cases also serves to deter others and

reflects the community's sense of betrayal and the very high price the families pay.

The imbalance between the former Haredi and his or her former spouse, family, and community is also felt with regards to the supposedly neutral social workers. Some of the social workers lack training to address the unique circumstances, others try to avoid conflict with Haredim, and in any case almost all have no real sanctions to call upon when arrangements are breached. Haredi strategy in these cases is to opt for rabbinical over civil courts in order to gain time. In some cases the Haredi family will alienate the children from the former Haredi in a way that erodes the relationship between the former Haredi divorcee and his or her children.

Former Haredi women divorcees might get custody over the children but the terms and arrangements will reflect the Haredi effort to keep the children under their sphere of influence and education. The mother might have to agree to demands that she will lead some form of Haredi life and appearance. Her relative freedom will cost her a financial compromise with her ex-spouse, who often is hastily remarried.

Hillel and Out for Change aim to provide support to single parents and divorcees with regards to their legal and welfare needs. Hillel focuses on providing a safety net for single mothers consisting of legal, financial, and housing assistance. Out for Change provides some legal support and carries out advocacy vis-a-vis social workers and family courts.

Recommendations:

- a. Legal support: legal support services should be provided to former Haredim in family disputes with an emphasis on custody litigation
- b. Child contact centers: a meeting place should be established where children of separated former Haredim can meet with their parent in a safe and neutral environment
- c. Professional development: social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and judges should be educated regarding the social phenomena of former Haredim.

5. Mental Health and Wellbeing

The metaphor of immigration represents one source of risks inherent in the transition from Haredi to non-Haredi society, in terms of adjusting to unknown

norms and codes of behavior and forming new social ties. It is accompanied, in many cases, with a severing of family ties, alienation and loneliness. Former Haredim in fact believe that the instance of suicide among members of their community is higher than that of Haredim or Israelis at large, although there is no data available to either support or refute this position. The Haredi press portrays every instance of the suicide of a former Haredi as a cautionary tale.

Some former Haredim come from troubled backgrounds and are traumatized by physical or sexual abuse and dysfunctional families. Others suffer from mental disorders or have been in treatment and care prior to their departure from Haredi society. For these individuals, support and therapy is critical for their daily functioning. The therapeutic and care practices of former Haredim must address new needs that arise from the process of departure itself while also attending to their ongoing wellbeing.

While supporting their mental health is a basic need for some former Haredim, others feel these services infringe on their liberty and fail to represent their choice as a sign of strength. In both groups, wellbeing is also dependent on social ties with former Haredim and with non-Haredim. Former Haredim have informal networks and support groups, either via online or in face-to-face interactions. It is common for a former Haredi to be approached by someone from his or her community who is in the first stages of departure from Haredi society. In many cases the newcomer will ‘couch-surf’ between the apartments of former Haredim for the first few weeks. This need for social ties with former Haredim also reflects the ongoing need for support and empathy from those who understand the pain of departure and have shared memories. At the same time, former Haredim are also eager to form social ties with non-Haredim. All these complexities emerge in the choice of a spouse and the establishment of long-term relationships. Loneliness and isolation pose a serious risk to the wellbeing of these individuals and are, in some cases, increase the potential for clinical depression.

Since the State does not define former Haredim as a group or a social policy category entitled to particular services, they are referred to general welfare departments or health authorities for their therapeutic support and services. Only those with dire needs, or in crisis, will become clients of the welfare departments. The extensive services available to youth-at-risk in Israel are not open to former Haredi youth-at-risk, since the State is reluctant to classify minors under 18 as former Haredim. This is compounded by the fact that Haredi communities often address issues of religious doubt with therapeutic

tools including controversial psychological treatments and psychiatric medication.

This has left Hillel as the only psychological therapeutic service geared towards the particular needs of former Haredim. Recently, for the first time, Hillel received support from the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Affairs for emergency services for this community. Hillel also provides programs that develop social networking and community building, and the need for social ties is further answered by the social networks and leisure activities initiated by the new grassroots organizations and outreach to thousands of former Haredim.

Recommendations:

- a. Emergency shelter: expand the existing housing services for former Haredim and set up emergency shelters in new locations.
- b. Community center: establish an “open house” – a community center that will provide social support, group activities, and public information for former Haredim in a safe environment.
- c. Therapeutic services: provide therapeutic services and individual counseling to help former Haredim cope with the complex challenges they face.

6. Cultural Literacy and Leisure

The metaphor used by former Haredim, who see themselves as immigrants, is indicative of how immigrants coming to a new country and former Haredim share many of the same struggles. They are indeed coming to a new culture, and it is one they are eager to learn more about.

Their enthusiasm derives from the dialectical relation between Haredi norms, the age cohort, the lure of reading as forbidden fruit, the manifestation of individual freedom, and the mastering of Hebrew. Intellectual, and seeking to express themselves creatively, many former Haredim embrace reading, cinema and the arts. Their consumption of culture, high and low, also serves as a form of creating social ties and networking, especially over the internet, yet it is hampered by lack of resources that channels them only to certain free or subsidized forms of cultural activities. It was surprising that many of the former Haredim interviewed reported that cultural literacy issues were fundamental to their social ties, quality of life, and wellbeing. In general the former Haredi “library” is far more rich and diverse, in both content and the mediums it uses, than that of any other group of young Israelis.

In recent years, Hillel and the grassroots organizations of former Haredim have initiated many cultural activities. In Hillel there was an emphasis on the social needs of those who receive assistance from the organization, who were allocated “rush” tickets and given invitations by various cultural institutions. The new grassroots organizations have been active on the street level in pubs, parties, tours, movie screenings, and encouraging cultural institutions to donate tickets. They have also had literary activities, online and offline, in partnership with various, primarily Jerusalem-based, organizations.

Recommendations:

- a. Community building: establish a social center that will provide the infrastructure for community building, and will bring together former Haredim who identify themselves as part of a movement.
- b. Cultural literacy: expose former Haredim to universal literature, arts, creativity, and leisure; and non-Haredi Israelis to the unique former Haredi experience and its artistic manifestations.

Part 3: Conclusion: Towards a Government Policy and Partnership with Civil Society

The tragic suicide of the late Esti Weinstein has bought public attention to the challenges faced by young former Haredim. It has also put their needs on the agenda of the Knesset, the courts, and the government welfare, housing, employment, health and education agencies.

During the last few months, the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Affairs, together with the National Insurance Institute, in dialogue with the Schusterman Family Foundation and former Haredi organizations, has put forth a general master plan to reduce risks among former Haredim. This plan aims to provide a wide range of services, delivered within a designated center, and to support services for those in crisis. The center will assist former Haredim by providing services and advocacy, and thereby serve to improve the accessibility of education, employment, military service, community building, leisure and culture. The center will also refer individuals to the therapeutic and other professional services including legal aid and a children's family center that will serve single mothers, and married and divorced former Haredim. As the main partnership between the State and civil society with regards to former Haredim, this center also aspires to become the hub where social workers and others seek professional development or research on the needs and potential of this community.

This unique endeavor in these times of dramatic change for Israelis in general and Haredim in particular opens up avenues for philanthropy, broadening its scope in terms of the traditional social risk agenda. The advantages of philanthropy, with its flexibility and experience in developing new services, can shape the safety net for former Haredim and improve the chances of these unique young adults to fulfill their huge potential. Their cultural literacy needs can also be better met by civil society rather than the State. The government is only beginning to recognize the needs of this growing community and the Haredi community – rabbis, educators, and leaders – have yet to pay attention to the changes in policy and the growing phenomena of departure from within Haredi society.