

# Israel Must Bring Ultra-Orthodox Into the Fold

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - September 8, 2013

TEL AVIV -- Israelis enjoyed a fairly quiet summer. This was true even as Secretary of State John Kerry pursued another round of Washington-driven negotiations with the Palestinians, and as their part of the world was convulsing with violence -- from the Egyptian military's forcible removal of President Mohamed Morsi to Syria's civil war, which has not only claimed 100,000 lives but also produced a destabilizing flow of nearly 2 million refugees into Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq.

Despite the steady hum of people going about their business and getting away to the beaches, Israelis remained keenly aware that day-to-day routines in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Ashkelon, Jerusalem, and throughout the country could be interrupted at any given moment by regional tumult spilling over their borders.

The summer's relative calm also coexisted with long-simmering domestic issues. Among the most poorly understood and fateful is what is to be done about the Haredim (Hebrew for "the ones who tremble") -- the ultra-Orthodox Jews.

"Secular Israelis," an Israeli friend told me over lunch in the breathtaking Judean Mountains southwest of Jerusalem, "love to hate the Haredim." Hatred is an understandable reaction, she hastened to add, among those who rely solely on Israeli media for information about the ultra-Orthodox.

Not that the steady stream of grim reports reverberating far beyond Israel about the ultra-Orthodox world -- sky-high birth rates, confinement of women to the backs of buses, stoning of vehicles on the Sabbath, wide-spread poverty -- are untrue. But there is more to the story.

As it turns out, rigorous observance of traditional Jewish law and a determination to keep popular culture and contemporary moral sensibilities at bay needn't negate citizenship in a modern nation-state. Indeed, beneath the radar screens of the majority of Israelis, encouraging trends can be discerned. They bespeak a small, but noteworthy, Israelization of the ultra-Orthodox.

If you had strolled, say, 25 years ago through the Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim, home to some of the most extreme ultra-Orthodox sects, you would have been likely to hear nothing spoken but Yiddish -- the everyday tongue of Eastern European Jews before the Holocaust. Today, you will also hear Hebrew, particularly among those under the age of 35.

On Israeli Independence Day in 1988, the only residents of Mea Shearim you would have seen taking notice would have been those denouncing the presumptuous creation of a Jewish state before the advent of the Messiah. On Independence Day 2013, you would have observed, here and there, affirmations of pride.

In 1988, you would have seldom seen an Israel Defense Forces uniform hanging out to dry in an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. Today such sightings are not uncommon. Twenty-five years ago, it was rare for an ultra-Orthodox Jew to attend college. Today, private organizations cooperate with colleges to meet the increasing demand among the ultra-Orthodox for higher education.

Moreover, a significant majority of ultra-Orthodox citizens identify with the state. Teenage yeshiva students pray for the nation's security and admire Israeli soldiers. They enthusiastically follow Maccabi Tel Aviv, Israel's top basketball team.

Welcome as these markers of Israelization are, the ultra-Orthodox remain, and seek to remain, a community apart. They dress differently -- the men in various versions of the familiar austere black hats, black suits and white shirts; the women in modest long sleeves and loose-fitting dresses. And they generally live in separate neighborhoods -- not only in Jerusalem but also in the Tel Aviv suburbs, along the Green Line (which separates Israel from the West Bank, which it seized in 1967 in the Six Day War), in the Judean Mountains, and elsewhere.

Last year the Israeli Supreme Court struck down the Tal Law, which exempted the ultra-Orthodox from military service, but the government has not yet enacted a new conscription law. The ultra-Orthodox maintain their own schools, which place boys and girls in separate classrooms, concentrate on religious subjects, and for the most part ignore the state-mandated core curriculum taught in public schools. And a majority of men do not work, instead devoting themselves to religious study throughout their adult lives.

While the ultra-Orthodox vote and have their own political parties, their priorities are narrow: safeguarding the flow of state money to support their religious schools; maintaining their right not to teach their children English, science, or math; and preserving as wide an exemption as possible from the draft, which they justify on the grounds that they pursue the higher task of fulfilling the religious command of studying Torah.

This status quo is not sustainable. Currently, the ultra-Orthodox number about 700,000 out of Israel's population of 8 million (almost 21 percent of Israeli citizens are Arab). If current trends continue, by 2020 50 percent of Jewish first-graders in Israel will be ultra-Orthodox. The state cannot allow so large a segment of its citizenry to avoid responsibility for the nation's defense and opt out of economic life.

To remain a free, democratic and Jewish state, Israel is obliged to hasten the process of Israelization. Yet it must do so, in accordance with the state's promise of religious freedom to all citizens, in a manner that does not infringe on the right of the ultra-Orthodox to preserve their distinctive religious life.

Because of Israel's parliamentary system of government, multiple parties, and frequently fragile coalitions, the politics are complicated, but the public policies are straightforward. Military service or some form of national service must be enacted. The top priority, though, should be reforming the education delivered by ultra-Orthodox schools so that it also equips students to take part in the common life of the country and crafting incentives to increase ultra-Orthodox participation in the workforce.

The government must encourage ultra-Orthodox schools, on pain of losing their generous state subsidies, to teach mathematics, science, literature, history, and the liberal, democratic, and Jewish principles on which the state is founded. The government should provide generous subsidies for college and vocational education to impel more ultra-Orthodox men to acquire knowledge and skills valued in the market place.

Israelization of the ultra-Orthodox redounds to Israel's benefit. It enables the ultra-Orthodox to understand, enjoy, and defend the blessings of freedom in the Jewish state. And it has indirect benefits as well. Not least, greater participation of the ultra-Orthodox in the economic life and defense of the country can contribute to the emancipation of enlightened Israelis from their reflexive contempt for a community whose passionate religious observance provides a counterweight to those dangerous tendencies -- aimless drift, restless materialism, and indiscriminate leveling -- to which free and democratic societies are prone.

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