Can Baalei Tshuva Change Haredi life style in Israel? I doubt it

Motti Inbari, Dr., University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Can Baalei Tshuva Change Haredi life style in Israel? I doubt it

Many challenges are facing Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel, and poverty is the major source of concern. Several attempts to address this issue were made, and people with good intentions had initiated several programs to bring this society above poverty line, mostly by introducing revisions in Haredi schooling so that it would include modern education. Some proposals offered incentives like pushing a draft threat to the IDF (Israel’s army), where in Israel all men above the age of 18 are supposed to join for three years, but Haredi men are exempt (later I would explain the complexity of this problem). However, so far, all of the above plans have failed, due to Haredi leadership refusal to allow change.

Aharon Ariel Lavi’s December essay in Mosaic argues that baalei tshuva, newly converts into the Haredi life style in Israel, are the key to the modernization of the Haredi world and that they can serve as a bridge to secular Israel. Thus, he initiated the Netiot project as an incubator that would be led by baalei tshuva and would draw young adults from the haredi households, train them in useful vocations, and lead a change. I admire his approach and I wish him all the best. However, I am skeptical that this plan can actually work on a large scale. In this article I wish to explain why I don’t believe baalei tshuva can become agents of change in the Haredi world. But first some background in required.

Orthodox Judaism is the product late eighteenth century as a counter reaction to modernizing movements within the Jewish world, like Haskala (enlightenment), Reform and Zionism. The mainstream Orthodox response to modernity, embodied in the actions of Agudat Yisrael prior to World War II in Eastern Europe, was to oppose it on the principle level, however to allow some pragmatic accommodations, like teaching children some core skills besides Torah study like math and languages and to use secular modern politics in order to promote the interest of Haredi society at large.

After the outcomes of the Holocaust made clear, it was revealed that all of the Haredi communities of Europe perished, and this life style had almost completely disappeared. Holocaust survivors found their way to Israel, and joined the small community that was there even before the war. After the establishment of the State of Israel, an agreement was made between the State and the rabbinical leadership which allowed young Haredi men to defer military service in order to study Torah. At the signing of the agreement, it was intended to serve 400 men. It allowed study to become an alternative to participation in the workforce and the state has permitted this sector to enjoy this special arrangement, provided the Torah students saw their studies as their vocation. This arrangement led to a practice whereby all the men of recruiting age (from 18 through to their forties) were placed in institutions for Torah study that focus exclusively on religious studies. This led in turn to the trend that has caused the impoverishment of the Haredi community, whereby most of its male members do not work. This situation is reflected in the large number of educational institutions that in practice are willing to accept almost any male Haredi adult, effectively serve as “babysitting” services for adults who are incapable of joining the job market.

These educational frameworks for youths and adults were intended to serve as a defensive shield against acculturation, but in practice they have become institutions that encourage educational mediocrity in a premeditated attempt to prevent the students from acquiring vital professions in the job market and as a shield against military service. Many young Haredim drop out of these frameworks and live on the margins of Haredi society. According to figures quoted by the researcher Yohai Hakak, between seven and eight percent of all Haredi students under the age of 18 in Israel drop out of school every year. This is
equivalent to some 20,000 youths in each year class. A contemporary example of the severity of this problem came with the recent kidnapping and murder of the Palestinian teenager Muhammad Abu Kader which was done by some juvenile delinquency Haredi dropouts.

In addition to these two profound processes, a further potential crisis faces the Haredi community in Israel, although its ramifications remain unclear at this stage. I refer to the issue of military service. The Israeli Knesset passed a law in 2014 that will impose the draft on the majority of Haredi men each year, while 1,800 men defined as “geniuses” (ilu’im) will be permitted to continue the current arrangement providing an exemption from the draft for those whose “Torah study is their vocation.” The law is supposed to be enforced from 2017; it remains to be seen whether it will actually be implemented. The forced and mass drafting of young Haredi men would constitute a turning point in the relations between the Haredi community and the State of Israel and could have dramatic repercussions.

The way in which Haredi leadership dealt with these pressing challenges is by manipulating their political power for the advantage of their community. The belief that men need to study the Torah as their prime vocation is the foundation ethos of this society, therefore it is understood that the role of women is to go to work. Haredi leadership has done all that it could to preserve this situation at all costs. The Haredim had offered their complete loyalty to any Israeli prime minister for exchange of transfer money and social security, a control over the religious courts and a promise to defer military draft for men. This is the only solution Haredi leadership is willing to practice, and I believe that after the forthcoming Israeli elections, these would be their conditions for joining any coalition government (which most likely they would join).

Haredi society may look form the outside as united and egalitarian; however, it is a highly divided. It has social divisions between Ashkenazim (European decants) and Spharadim (Middle Eastern decants); Hasidim and Mitnagdim; old-timers and new comers. Their social ranking is that old-timers Ashkenazim (Hasidim and Mitnagdim) have higher ranks than Spharadim, many of whom are also new comers, baalei tshuva.

This ranking system has several effects: Spharadim and baalei tshuva can get into only low level Yeshivot (religious institutions) and prestigious Ashkenzi yeshivot will admit students from their ranks but only in small quotas. It is rare to see a shiduch (match) among the divided groups, and you will not see a baal tshuva’s child marring a prestigious Ashkenazi family, unless there is a problem with that Ashkenazi child. Associating with baali tshuva is considered “bad influence,” therefore you will rarely see social connections between Ashkenazi elite and Spharadim and baalei tshuva. In playgrounds, you will see kids playing with their social peers, and fist-fights between Ashkenazi and Spharadi kids are also common. The situation had become so pressing, that the Spharadim had to unite into political power, with the establishment of Shas in 1984, an acronym for Spharadim Shomeri Toarh (Torah Observant Spharadim). Shas’s political power didn’t serve to unite the Haredim and to bridge tensions, but to establish separate institutions for their voters inside Haredi ranks.

---

If we will look deeper into the motivations of baali tshuva, we will have to understand that they decided to depart from the secular society, and to join an anti-modern enclave. They understand their low status. By joining such a society, baal tshuva has to accept the founding ethos, which is – Toarh study for men is above all considerations. Men will join yeshivot intended for new comers’ adults, and their wives will go to work. They will try to integrate into their new society, hoping that in time, their commitment for their community would bridge the suspicions towards them, as modern and educated people.

In the free market of religious affiliation in Israel, other options were open for them. However, they decided to turn into Haredim. This speaks volumes of their intentions. They didn’t join Haredi society in order to become agents of change. On the contrary; they joined it in order to confirm to the codes of the society. They want to become “real” Haredim, and as new comers, they are the most vulnerable piece that combines the Haredi world. If Haredi leadership will identify them as “trouble makers,” they would dispose of them with no hesitations. It might be that financial constraints will push men, baali tshuva, to go to work. But this is a must, not an ideology. Therefore, I don’t believe that this social sector can lead a big movement that will reshape the Haredi world. This is not why they joined the enclave.

There are other sectors of the Haredi society that can lead such a change from grassroots. It is the growing number of school dropouts who are locked in a situation that can’t be continued much longer. From one hand, they don’t fit a Yeshiva life-style, but they can’t study a trade and go to the job market, from the other hand, because if they will do so, they must first be drafted to the army, something they don’t desire in most cases. Haredi leadership doesn’t want to solve this problem out of fear that any change or relaxation they will allow will shake the foundation of the greater society. They prefer to “buy time” with their political maneuvers, without addressing social problems, hoping that more transfer money would bring a resolution. Any solution to the Haredi crisis, in my opinion, has to start with this social condition. In addition, women might also revolt against their status as second grade members, which have to carry the entire burden of maintaining a family but without any rights. A hint for women uprising was witnessed with the controversy around the “Taliban Women” who decided to disobey male authority and to dress up in a “Taliban” style Burka.

Haredi society in Israel is at the brink of a major crisis. It has grown too big, and many don’t fit into this hard life-style. Israeli secular public has become less tolerant for Haredi lack of contribution for the greater good. A change can come either from above, by the draft law of the shut of state funds, or from grassroots, by youth and women rebellion. These two scenarios would lead into an explosion, a major crisis. I appreciate Ahron Ariel Lavi’s attempt to prevent it by using small steps, but as long as the rabbis will oppose any change, this plan is doomed to fail. I also don’t believe this change can be led by baali tshuva. Still, change has to come, one way of another.

Motti Inbari is an assistant professor of religion at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. He is the author of *Messianic Religious Zionism Confronts Israeli Territorial Compromises* (Cambridge 2012) and *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount* (SUNY 2009).