

Barbara Kay: An educated approach to Israel's ultra- Orthodox dilemma

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REUTERS/ Ronen Zvulun

An ultra- Orthodox Jewish leader encourages boys to pray during a protest against a new conscription law requiring ultra- Orthodox Jews to serve in the army

Today, August 1, marks the implementation of [Israel's new draft law](#) that will end 60 years of sanctioned draft- dodging for thousands of Ultra- Orthodox men in the Haredi community.

The exemption of the Haredim from military service has long been a sticking point with secular and mainstream Orthodox Israelis. But the political clout of the escalating Haredi population, now estimated at 12% of the population and growing rapidly because of their high birth rate, ensured their privilege. Israel's Supreme Court has ruled that the blanket exemption cannot continue, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed that the draft will proceed. Haredim leaders insist there must be compromises.

Let us hope that the compromises will be few and insignificant. The Haredim live a life of extreme segregation from the rest of Israel's diverse population. It is unnatural and unhealthy that one whole swath of society should consider it normal not to support their families and not to defend their country, but to spend all their time sealed off from the realities of everyday life studying religious tracts.

The army has traditionally been the great melting pot for the integration of Jews from many lands and cultures who otherwise would never mix socially. But the Haredim need more than social interaction with other Israelis. They have been intellectually sequestered from secular learning. The gap between them and their fellow citizens is enormous – it is fair to say that the Enlightenment has totally escaped their notice. Today one in four Grade One students in Israel is Haredi. It is critical to bridge that gap.

But that won't happen if the only options available are secular – or even mainstream Orthodox – institutions. Even Bar Ilan, the Orthodox university where Jewish Studies is obligatory, has mixed- sex classes.

Fortunately a third, more palatable option has emerged for them: the Haredi College of Jerusalem, an academic centre for Haredi young men and women, where they may live life according to their religious tenets (separation of sexes foremost, but also super-“glatt” kosher food), but pursue studies that will lead to careers in mainstream professions.

Haredi College was founded by an extraordinary woman, 67- year old Adina Bar- Shalom, one of the ten children of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Israel's former chief Sephardic rabbi and current spiritual head of Shas, the Haredi political party. Yosef is not the “ugly Haredi” the press loves to cover. He does not identify with Haredi radicals who insist on segregated public buses or who spit on girls whose knees are exposed. He is sympathetic to ideas that will help Haredim get along with and interact with their fellow citizens.

For many years Bar- Shalom had brooded about her community's relative poverty and educational self- immuration. The Haredi College was her solution. Her husband, a judge and a rabbi, supports her unconditionally, not the typical Haredi domestic paradigm perhaps, but encouraging all the same.

I interviewed Bar- Shalom at my home two months ago. She is a warm, attractive woman who is eager to put to rest secular fears of a Haredi “takeover” of the state, noting that the Haredim do not share the wish of the Ultra- Orthodox Zionist contingency (those who serve with vigour in the IDF), whose aim is to impose Halacha (the Jewish version of Sharia law) on the state.

The Haredi College of Jerusalem opened a decade ago with 23 students, and today accepts 750 out of 5000 annual applicants. Men and women live and study apart. At first the Haredi rabbis were sceptical, but most are now on board. Bar- Shalom says that by the end of the program, their intellectual life has progressed dramatically, but she sees no dilution in their religious commitment. This spells success for her. She takes particular pride in a young Haredi woman who studied law and is now clerking for ultra- liberal Dorit Beinisch, president of Israel's Supreme Court.

Students there earn academic undergraduate degrees in subjects like social work, computer science, business management and psychology. Their course work is affiliated with other universities like Ben Gurion, Bar Ilan and Hadassah College. This halfway house between secularism and fundamentalism offers Haredim a life in public service with dignity, and benefits society by encouraging normal interaction with other Israelis.

Ninety percent of Haredi College of Jerusalem graduates find jobs inside and outside the Haredi community. All political parties are onside with this positive rather than punitive approach to integration. Yasher koach to the Haredi College of Jerusalem. May it go from strength to strength.

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